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Actions and Conceptions: Exploring Initial Literacy Teaching Practice for Adults

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ABSTRACT
Given that it is a delicate task to meet the educational needs of adult emergent readers in a second language setting, this study serves to explore the teaching practice of teachers working with learners of initial literacy and second language. Based on a situated learning perspective, data from 16 lesson observations of nine teachers is analysed. The findings show that teachers initiate and negotiate learning activities, strive to get the students to understand words and other symbols, facilitate participation within and outside the classroom and negotiate the acceptable student behaviour. These findings suggest that Literacy Education and Second Language Learning for Adults (LESLLA) teaching and learning is a particular practice, where the teachers’ actions are intertwined with those of the learners and with the teachers’ conceptions of the learners. In that way, the teachers’ actions do not only speak of the learners, but also of their own professional identity.

KEYWORDS
Communities of practice; initial literacy; second language teaching; teacher identity

Introduction
There is a substantial body of research on second language acquisition of adults, since a large number of immigrant adults are enrolled in post-compulsory education in Western society. A majority of the studies focus on people who already have some education in their first language. Less research deals with Literacy Education and Second Language Learning for Adults (LESLLA), with learners with little or no previous experience of schooling (LESLLA, n.d.), and with the teachers of such groups. Due to migration from parts of the world where people have had less access to basic education, the number of adults without print literacy has increased in Sweden, where this study is located. This puts pressure on schools and policy-makers within adult education to understand and meet the educational needs of a relatively new group of learners, whose particular learning needs must not be neglected.

To acquire literacy as an adult is often a challenge. Watson (2010) describes the distance between the lifeworlds of orality and print literacy as a semiotic abyss, which the learner has to cross. Teachers of LESLLA learners are key people in such a process, but they are seldom trained to teach learners who have little or no previous education, and they often lack training on how to teach a second language (L2) without the support of print literacy (Bigelow & Vinogradov, 2011).

As teaching LESLLA learners is a relatively new and little researched practice, this study will pay specific attention to it. This paper is about LESLLA teachers in the Swedish for Immigrants (SFI) educational setting. The aim is to explore the teaching practice of the teachers in regard to the learners. To address this, three questions are of particular interest: What are the significant actions of...
the teachers’ teaching practice? How do the teachers respond to the learners’ actions? How are the teachers’ actions related to their conceptions of the learners?

Even though the study focuses on the teaching practice, it is inevitable that the analysis also includes the learning practice. These two practices are intertwined.

Teaching initial adult literacy in a second language setting

The study is located within the research field studying the teaching of LESLLA learners. Within the research on literacy teaching, there are three different main approaches to literacy: cognitive, socio-cultural, and critical. From an individualistic, cognitive standpoint, alphabetic literacy acquisition in general is seen to change the human brain and the way it processes oral language (Tarone, 2009). LESLLA learners are used to an oral literacy tradition. As a consequence, it has been claimed that they need a contextualised form of tuition adapted to their age and level, and the instruction should focus on word recognition, phonics and phonemic awareness in a methodical and explicit way (Bigelow & Vinogradov, 2011).

The cognitive and individual perspective of literacy is often connected to a functional approach. In this sense, literacy is viewed as a technical skill, necessary for societal participation and development. In the acquisition process, universal characteristics and semiotic sign systems are focused upon. However, the perspective has been criticized for being narrow and for blaming the individual for lacking education or ability (Tett & St. Clair, 2010).

The socio-cultural perspective offers a broader view on literacy. It stresses that literacy is more than a skill and is not an individual activity. Literacy, in this perspective, comprises the activities of reading and writing on the one hand, as well as social practices on the other. There are multiple literacies, which vary depending on how a group of people uses literacy in a certain context (Street, 1984). What readers bring to the reading depends on their background, values and experiences (Williams & Snipper, 1990).

Critical literacy, which expands upon the concept of cultural literacy, implies that some groups’ literacies are dominant at the expense of others (Street, 2003). It strives to analyse the power relationships behind a text and empower people to reclaim their community, culture, and beliefs (Freire, 1970). A pedagogical consequence of a socio-cultural perspective is that the teacher should allow the students to be active and autonomous learners, and should facilitate a two-way dialogue between the everyday world and the formal content. The boundaries between these two domains must be blurred if the contexts are to be understandable (Tett & St. Clair, 2010). If the life experiences of the participants are not involved in the literacy acquisition, there is a risk that the literacy activities in the classroom will not be linked to those outside school (Perry & Homan, 2015), and will therefore be irrelevant or discouraging for the learners (Franker, 2004). The pedagogical view of critical literacy, on the other hand, stresses the importance of reflection, where the teacher, apart from encouraging a critical review of the text itself, also has to inspire the learners to question their assumptions and values and to support them in developing social awareness for social change (Minott, 2011). Nevertheless, these approaches do not have to be contradictory. One can teach individual reading skills, but still be cognizant of the social and critical nature of literacy. Being a LESLLA teacher, however, is not just a matter of teaching literacy to emergent readers. It is also about teaching a second language, and doing so without written support. Moreover, it means being a teacher of adult learners. Research indicates that a social commitment (among other things) is considered important for adult educators (Andersson & Köpsén, 2010) and that concern about the relations and communication with the learners is more important among experienced teachers than less experienced ones (Andersson, Köpsén, Larson, & Milana, 2012). Such tendencies are echoed in studies on LESLLA teachers in particular. The literacy teaching practice is regarded as a social task, rather than a technical one. Teachers stress the importance of being empathic and sensitive (Chandler et al., 2008) and of having a personal commitment and authentic relationships with the students (Sanguinetti, Waterhouse, & Maunder, 2005). One reason for this is probably that the
LESLLA learners are immigrants and refugees. A study of adult learners from war-affected countries illustrates different types of barriers to learning. These include poverty, loss of close family members and professional identity, and difficulties balancing parenting with work and studies. Consequently, the teachers come to act as counsellors, mentors and/or cultural guides and co-learners, etc., taking roles and responsibilities in addition to teaching (Magro, 2008). In a study of Kurdish refugees in Sweden, Mojab (2006) points out that the refugee and immigrant experience does not imply that there is a homogenous group of learners. Individual differences in factors such as culture, religion, and social background exist, and must be acknowledged.

Given the assumptions of literacy as pivotal to being knowledgeable in many societies globally, LESLLA teachers must work to balance this assumption with the conception that their learners also are knowledgeable adults. A study of LESLLA teachers in Sweden (Franker, 2007) illustrates that teachers, although unintentionally, often underestimate the learners’ cognitive and creative capacity for interpretation. The extensive use of pictures, which to a large extent are authentic and are used to facilitate the communication between the learners and the teachers in the initial literacy teaching and learning, risks infantilising the learners if the material is too simplified and/or adapted to children. Likewise, there is a tendency for teachers to view the learners as a group that lacks the ability to understand the Swedish society (Franker, 2007).

To combine the outlook on the students as both adults and LESLLA learners, Franker (2004) argues for an extended initial literacy teaching model, where the different literacy practices of the school domain and the everyday life domain meet and are integrated. The everyday life domain includes all situations where reading and writing are involved outside school, in one’s home, in work life, and in the society. In such a model, the learners are seen as resourceful people. Their life experiences are used as a starting point at the same time as they are challenged with a variety of new tasks. Key elements in initial literacy teaching are mutual respect and a dialogue of all actors in the educational settings, and that reciprocal participation and shared responsibility exist between them. Also, the teaching should centre on what is useful and meaningful for them, for example by using authentic material. By doing so, “teachers can create interest, maintain high levels of motivation, engage students’ minds and through this process build literacy skills that have importance in the lives of adults” (Condelli, Wrigley, & Yoon, 2008, p. 153).

The literature presented here stresses that teaching LESLLA learners is a complex activity that requires reflection from teachers on what it means to be an adult emergent reader in a new society and in a second language setting. It highlights particular approaches to initial literacy teaching which result in different preferable teaching techniques. There has been less research, however, on how LESLLA teachers approach their work with LESLLA learners, and the current study aims to close this gap in the research.

A situated learning perspective

This study draws on a situated learning perspective to analyse the LESLLA teaching practice within the SFI system. The teaching and learning practices are intertwined and are regarded as a social practice set in a particular context. Such a Community of Practice (CoP) is “a set of relations among persons, activity, and world, over time and in relation to other tangential and overlapping communities of practice” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 98). It is therefore vital to consider the relationships within the community; in this case, the relations between the teachers and the students, in addition to the teachers’ actions. We argue that these relations make up a joint practice since both the teacher and students, through reciprocal engagement in different activities, strive to attain the mutual goal of students’ literacy and second language acquisition. The actions and the activities initiated within the community are not isolated phenomena, but reveal something about the reciprocal positions of the members. In a CoP, members define themselves and are defined by the relations to other members and their participation and position. By participating in the practice, the identity of the members is formed in regard to these relations (Lave & Wenger, 1991).
Moreover, the relations are compared to the relationship between newcomers and old-timers, where the former become the latter by learning to master the practice. Through participation, newcomers are absorbed into the culture of the practice. Little by little, they will learn about matters such as what to do, how to talk, and what is approved of and disliked (Lave & Wenger, 1991). This learning also includes an understanding and use of the different resources of the CoP-implicit phenomena such as relations and values, and artefacts like language and objects (Handley, Sturdy, Fincham, & Clark, 2006). In this process, learners often learn mostly in relation to peer-learners, rather than in the more hierarchical relation with the teacher/master. Among the learners are the relative old-timers, who cannot yet be seen as masters, but are familiar with the practice in comparison with the newcomers (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Participation in a joint practice is a metaphor for learning. Such a process is not always smooth and without conflict. Meaning in a situated perspective is always negotiated (Lave & Wenger, 1991), where the mutual engagement in an activity requires negotiation inside and outside a community (Fuller, Hodkinson, Hodkinson, & Unwin, 2005). Individuals either affirm or reject opportunities to participate in the community, depending on how the required participation corresponds with their current identity. Handley et al. (2006) argue that people maintain a sense of agency through the trajectories in different communities. They bring a personal history of membership in other communities, whose norms may balance or contradict each other. Attempts to adjust will therefore create tensions both within individuals and the community they participate in, as these conflicts need to be negotiated if a coherent sense of identity is to be achieved.

By using the concept of CoP for LESLLA teaching and learning, this article strives to clarify how this practice can be understood. The analysis demonstrates the actions of the teachers and their conceptions of the learners in a practice where a number of particular artefacts and their reciprocal relations are crucial.

Teaching LESLLA learners in the SFI

Mandatory schooling has a long history in Sweden, and thus there are no natives who are officially regarded as LESLLA learners. Consequently, all formal initial literacy and second language education for adults is part of, or equivalent to the SFI system. There is a national curriculum and the government funds all SFI courses, but the organisers can be public, private or part of the civil education sector. Students with no or little educational background are offered “study track 1.” This includes the beginners’ course A, and continuing course B. The rate of study is slow. In SFI, new students are continuously enrolled. Every second week there may be newcomers to the classes. The absolute majority of the teachers are employed as SFI teachers, but as the teaching of initial literacy can be given in the mother tongue of the students (The Swedish National Agency for Education [SNAE], 2012), there is the opportunity to employ mother tongue teachers as well.

The SFI policy on L2 teaching and learning reflects a socio-cultural perspective, but there is also an emphasis on functionality. The aim of the SFI education is to give adult immigrants basic knowledge of the Swedish language. The education should equip the students so that they can take part in private, social, and working domains of life, and even if most goals primarily concentrate on the language skills necessary for oral and written communication, there is also the idea of explicitly raising students’ awareness of cultural differences/similarities. Furthermore, the education must be adapted to their experiences, knowledge, interests and goals, and the students themselves should influence the planning and the design of their education (SNAE, 2012).

Less is said about initial literacy teaching and learning in the SFI curriculum. However, it is stated that SFI must provide an opportunity to students who are not print-literate in any language or in the Latin alphabet to acquire adequate initial reading and writing skills, even if no particular goals are stipulated. Such activities can be run parallel to or be included in some of the courses (The Swedish National Agency for Education, 2012). In short, the local school communities follow the same national curriculum, but have chosen different ways to organise the teaching.
Method

To explore the teachers’ actions, their response to the learners’ actions and the conceptions behind the actions, this study is built on lesson observations of nine female teachers in three SFI schools in different locations. One of the teachers used the mother tongue of the students as the main language of instruction. The teacher had immigrated to Sweden as an adult herself. The others, who were native Swedish speakers, used Swedish. All teachers had a teaching degree allowing them to teach in the pre-school, the primary school or the upper secondary school. Their experiences of LESLLA teaching ranged from about a year to over 15 years.

The 16 lessons observed included a number of students, ranging from four to 30 (with an average of about 12) in each class/group. The learners were aged from about 20 up to 60 years. The majority were women and many were refugees, who, generally, had been in Sweden less than two years. The most frequently spoken mother tongues were Arabic, Pashto-Dari, and Somali. It was significant for the lessons analysed in this article that a single teacher carried them out.

This study is part of a larger research project, including observations of other working tasks and teachers, and interviews with teachers and principals. The selected observations, therefore, are interpreted in the light of the larger collection of data. During the observations, field notes were constantly taken. An observation guide with some focal points targeting e.g. the physical conditions of the lessons and the type of actions, activities and objects applied was used as a base (see Appendix). In some cases, the teachers got the opportunity, either more informally, directly after the lesson, or as an additional part of the interviews carried out for the larger study, to give their response on why they had chosen to do something in a certain way. This served to triangulate the data and to verify the interpretation of it.

The schools had different types of organisers, namely a municipality, a private company, and a folk high school. The latter is an independent and non-commercial type of school for adults. One school, with about 1,300 students, was considered to be large, while the other two were relatively small with fewer than 300 and 400 students respectively. Even though all teachers within SFI share the same national curriculum, there are differences in how this is interpreted at a local level. Firstly, the schools have to follow the outlines of the municipality they belong to. Secondly, the schools’ own vision, strategies and practice influence the organisation of the work. For instance, two of the schools stressed the role of the mother tongue in second language and literacy learning processes. Thus, mother tongue teachers, contrary to the practice in most SFI schools, worked there too. These teachers taught particular mother tongue groups in the most common students’ languages, e.g. Arabic, Somali, and Pashto-Dari. But they could also teach Swedish in groups of students with different mother tongues as well.

The field notes were read through in order to tie up loose ends and make clarifications of the context. Then, a preliminary exploratory analysis (Cresswell, 2008) was carried out to acquire familiarity with the data. In the following step, the data were coded and the codes were sorted into preliminary themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This analysis process generated a large number of codes and themes, which were reviewed a number of times in the light of the concepts of CoP, negotiation, newcomers and old-timers. Finally, some particular themes crystalized. The NVivo software 10.1.0 was used to code the data as it enabled an overview of the codes and themes. To illustrate the four themes that recurred in the data, excerpts were selected from the field notes and translated from Swedish to English.

The data from the three schools were analysed together thematically to better comprehend the CoP of initial literacy teaching. Only in cases where a school stood out against the others was it discussed separately. However, the study does not claim to generalize from the “cases” but to conceptualize them in a transparent way. It will be up to the reader to judge if the interpretation corresponds to other contexts (Larsson, 2009).
Local teaching context

The lessons lasted between 1 hour 30 minutes and 3 hours 45 minutes. The longer lessons included a short break. In the schools, which offered mother tongue teaching, certain lessons were reserved for this. Of the lessons in Swedish, some had a certain focus, e.g., on literacy activities; meanwhile, others were more general with a mixed focus on language and literacy. Since there was hardly any use of standardised textbooks, it was up to the teachers to choose the teaching content. Most teachers used material either produced by themselves or by other teachers at the school. In one school, students in the more advanced SFI classes had written some of the printed learning materials and this was regarded as a motivational factor for the LESLLA learners. Far from all literacy material was in printed form. One teacher had transferred learner-generated texts to a film on the computer, and most teachers used other types of digital presentations. Standardised materials, such as exercise books or apps, were almost only used for the individual exercises, and even then there were some different options to choose from.

Findings

The findings answer the questions of what the significant actions of the LESLLA teachers’ teaching practice are, how the teachers respond to the learners’ actions, and how the teachers’ actions are related to their conceptions of the learners. In short, the actions of the LESLLA teachers can be categorised into four different areas: one related to initiating and negotiation of general learning activities, a second to making efforts to help students understand the meaning of words and other symbols, a third to facilitating participation within and outside the classroom, and a fourth to negotiation of the acceptable behaviour of the students. Each of these areas is addressed in relation to the teachers’ response to the students’ actions and to the teachers’ conception of the students.

Initiating and negotiating general learning activities

The teachers initiated a number of learning activities and negotiated these with the students. A typical lesson that contained some elements of literacy teaching, started with a teacher-controlled conversation, where the teachers asked the class about the date and the weekday. This was commonly followed by questions and answers about the months, the time, the seasons and/or the weather. Later on, the teachers typically went through words related to a certain topic (such as a previous study visit or a theme related to the living situation of the participants, e.g., health or housing). When focusing on literacy acquisition, the teachers introduced letters, whole words or symbols to be read. In these activities, the learners often repeated words, sounds and letters a number of times. Once, a teacher explicitly said to the class that this was particularly helpful for the newest student, who only had been in the class for 2 weeks. But in several of the interviews, the importance of repetition for the general LESLLA learner was stated even if the progression was also seen to depend on factors such as age, motivation and previous experience.

After an extensive period, often consisting of many short, collective activities, during which the students could learn together, the teachers let them work individually using notebooks, workbooks, computer software, or iPad apps. In one school there was less time for individual exercises compared to collective ones. While this was going on, the teachers had the chance to go around among the learners and give individual instructions or take the opportunity to assess their reading progression individually. The students often, if not always, had some freedom in choosing the task to work on and sometimes they had the opportunity to choose whether to write by hand or digitally. This illustrates how the teachers regarded the learners as capable of taking some responsibility for their own learning.

Usually, the lesson also included some kind of physical activity such as stretching exercises, dancing accompanied by music, or movements connected to a certain letter. This part was
commonly carried out either prior to, or in a break during the individual tasks. In the school where there was less time for individual tasks, there were fewer such physical exercises, but games that required that the participants moved their bodies occurred in all schools. The use of physical exercises seemed to reflect the teachers’ conceptions of the students as emergent readers. As teachers believed that LESLLA learners had a short-term working memory, they initiated games that served to exercise it. Moreover, the exercises were a response to the fact that the students were unfamiliar with writing. Some teachers explained that the learners were tired of holding a pen and forming letters. Likewise, many suffered physical aches and pains. Thus, teachers regarded the physical exercises as a way of mitigating these issues and supporting learning. In this sense, the activities initiated by the teacher were a response to both their underlying conception of the learners and to what they saw as more concrete needs in the classroom, although there was a fine line between these.

Teachers usually initiated the learning activities. However, the learning contents were not often pre-determined by them. Teachers often asked open questions and let the students’ responses influence and decide the contents of discussed topic. Sometimes, as in the excerpt below, responses and comments from the students also guided the dialogue.

This is an interactive lesson. The teacher asks the students and the students ask the teacher and sometimes each other. For example, a student asks about languages and dialects— if it is the same in Stockholm as in their town. The teacher shows on the map where both places are located and she also shows where she comes from herself. Then, she brings up different minority languages in Sweden. Another student asks within the same subject if Swedish and German are similar.

Here, the students responded to the content of the conversation by actively participating in the conversation and the teacher encouraged that behaviour. She stimulated the students’ contributions by responding to their questions with visual aids and a personal example. In this way, she adjusted the content of the dialogue to the learners, rather than directing it herself. Thus, the meaning of the activities was a matter of negotiation for both the learners and the teacher.

In other situations, the students were the ones who maintained the routines of the lesson. They were able to negotiate not just the content but also the form.

The teacher tells one student to leave the classroom while the others hide something. The student is to return and say what is gone. The first student recognizes what is missing, but does not know what it is called in Swedish. The next student leaves. “You can see what is gone,” shouts the teacher. She points at the butter and pretends to butter a sandwich. … The students leave in turns. …. The one to my right shouts: “Come” to the woman who has left and when she identifies the mushroom and says it in Swedish, a classmate compliments her. … The teacher points and gives other clues by other gestures (e.g., she pretends to open a tin). One student says in Arabic what is missing to the last student in the exercise, another one whispers it in Swedish, and finally a third one says it aloud.

This excerpt illustrates how the learners, when the teachers had given the framework on their own accord, carried on much of the teachers’ work. They knew when it was their turn to leave and call each other back. Likewise, they supported a fellow student who had to find out what was missing and they complimented each other. The teacher’s significance diminished (even though she did not relinquish her supportive role) as the students reproduced her actions and the actions of each other. As this was not the first time a game like this had been played (the teacher said afterwards that she made use of games like this), there were also relative old-timers among the students, who the others could learn from. This illustrates how the students’ and teachers’ mutual engagement in a joint enterprise builds and strengthens a CoP by a shared repertoire of actions and responsibilities. Having relative old-timers among the students also guaranteed certain procedures. Sometimes they not only followed the instructions of the teacher, but adapted the pattern of a previous task. In this sense, the practice was reproduced, and the teacher allowed it. Once again, this is an example of how the teachers handed over some responsibility for the students’ learning. Consequently, the teachers alternated between different approaches: directing the whole class, giving individual guidance and letting the students influence the learning content and activities.
Making efforts to get the students to understand words and other symbols

This section describes teaching actions on a detailed level, focusing on their efforts to get the students to understand. To do this the teachers made use of a variety of explicit artefacts: objects, and visual and oral strategies.

The following transcript, taken from a teacher-controlled lesson on words related to housing, brings up many of these artefacts.

The next picture is a photo of a terraced house. The teacher asks what it is called in the mother tongues of the students... she interprets what one of the learners says—that there is a house with several floors. When a picture of a high-rise building appears, one student says that it is a house in the area where she lives and another says that he lives in that particular building. The teacher asks where and after a little he is to come forward and point it out. Also, the teacher tries to explain the word flat. She says that different families live in different parts of the house and points at different windows in the photo. She also says: “family, family, family”—that there is one family in each flat. ... The teacher tells the students how she lives herself: “I live in a villa.” The students have to say how they live. One says that she lives in a villa in Syria. ... “I live in a villa. Repeat.” The teacher holds up one finger for each word. The class is to repeat and repeat. Then it is the same procedure for “I live in a flat.” “Now,” the teacher points downwards with her middle finger, “here in Sweden, in X, how do you live here? I live in a ...” One student forgets the verb: “I in a flat.” The other students notice this, protesting and correcting.

Like this teacher, many based the review on photos shown digitally on the big classroom screen. Their main function was to help the students to grasp the meaning of a certain term, for example, a terraced house. The choice of pictures had implications. Firstly, photos were used, not drawn pictures. A common understanding among LESLLA teachers is that photos are preferable, as they are easier for the participants to understand (Franker, 2007). Secondly, the photos were of familiar objects, for example, of places where the students had been, of activities that they had participated in, or of logotypes of institutions with which they interacted. It is a common idea of teachers of initial literacy that a well-known object is easier to perceive for a LESLLA learner than an unknown one (Franker, 2007). The use of these photos is, thus, an example of a strategy directed towards the learners as emergent readers.

Apart from pictures and other concrete objects, the teachers also made use of their body. In the excerpt above, the fingers were essential. Pointing was combined with both the photo and a verbal utterance of the word, and later on, the pointing was used to clarify the tense; the students were to say where they lived at present. On the whole, two types of teacher body language were recognized. Most of the time, as in the previously given transcript, it was spontaneous and used to enhance the understanding of a word or an instruction. Teachers gesticulated and pointed at words and objects. They pretended to cough and sneeze, and they imitated other words and scenarios. There was also a subtler body language. For example, when a student pronounced a word wrongly, the look of the teacher was enough for the class to correct him. Overall, facial expressions appeared to be more prominent in the pronunciation and alphabetization activities. The extensive use of body language can be explained by the fact that the learners and the teachers in most cases did not have a mutual language. In addition to these spontaneous gestures, there were also some stylized gestures, which primarily appeared in the teaching of the alphabet. These may indicate the teachers’ awareness of that the students were emergent readers in need of a concrete tool for understanding and remembering the abstract principle of a letter.

The language was another artefact used to facilitate understanding. The Swedish language of the teacher was simplified and shortened, both in terms of the vocabulary and the grammar, and the teachers spoke slowly. Even though Swedish was the target language, the mother tongue of the students also played a certain role. The mother tongue was used to support the development of the Swedish language, for example by letting the students discover their own mistakes instead of explicitly telling them the right word, and to help them develop literacy skills in their own language. However, the students’ mother tongues were present in the lessons of the SFI teachers as well. Rarely did the teachers tell the students to speak in Swedish when they used their first language, and here
and there, teachers used words in the students' first languages (mainly Arabic) to communicate the meaning of a particular Swedish word or to facilitate the understanding of a context. Likewise, the students were often encouraged to use their mother tongue, either to translate something for a classmate or to find the closest equivalent to a Swedish word. This shows how the teachers made use of the knowledge of the group, another artefact of the practice.

Facilitating participation outside the teaching and learning community

The content of a lesson activity often included recommendations when it came to matters related to life outside school, and how to get around in the Swedish society. A teacher told her students that they could go to the police if they needed, as the police in Sweden were “good.” Another example of how other parts of life are involved in the teaching and learning practice can be seen in the following transcript:

The teacher shows a photo of a family member, who passed away from breast cancer. She talks about the importance of going to medical check-ups. As teaching and learning material she had brought her own invitation to a medical examination. The students were to read it and look for answers to certain questions. “What women have received this type of a letter?” “What day will I go, at what time?” “What am I to bring? What else? Will I bring perfume?” (Here she pretends to sprinkle perfume on her body). “… What else is written?” She answers the last question herself—to not delay with the check-up. “What does it cost? Look for it.” At the end of this section of the lesson, the teacher asks which students have had mammography. She asks them to come forward. There are five women standing in a row with the teacher between them. The teacher says to the rest: “Look, now you've got six women you can ask about the examination.”

Here, the concern about the students’ health situation became integrated with the literacy activities. This demonstrates how the teacher brought her own private domain of life, the experience of the loss of a family member, to the teaching practice. In doing so, she placed herself on an equal footing with the students, presenting herself as one of them, stressing her role as a woman and a family member, not a teacher. Moreover, this case shows how a literacy practice from the everyday life domain was brought into the teaching and learning practice by means of an authentic text, a letter about a medical examination, which here was used as an artefact in the teaching practice. This kind of teaching was seen in other lessons too, for example, in how photos of the logotypes of the Public Employment Service and groceries were used as teaching and learning material. In this sense, the teachers transformed material made for other purposes into teaching artefacts.

The everyday life was not just brought into the classroom. Sometimes the lessons were located outside the classroom. In all schools, the students spent some time in the kitchen. This was not to develop their cooking skills, but rather to relate the school language to a more familiar domain of life. The students then had to actually use kitchen utensils and groceries at the same time as they learned the Swedish words for them. Study visits were undertaken as well, to places such as museums, recreational areas, and town districts. The teachers brought the students to public domains. In the one observed, the teacher stopped several times to read street signs with the class and to tell them about her personal experiences of the area. Later on, words and pictures from these study visits and the kitchen lessons were brought into the lesson and integrated into the explicit language and literacy teaching. In line with what previous research on LESLLA prescribes (See Franker, 2004; and Condelli et al., 2008), this reflects an ambition of the teachers to connect the school literacy with the everyday life domain, and to facilitate the students’ participation in everyday life outside school by teaching them functional skills.

Negotiation of acceptable behaviours of the students

The teachers’ actions were also intended to keep order in the classroom. Even though the students generally followed the regulations set by the teachers, there were situations where the student behaviours were not seen as acceptable and were thus negotiated. These exceptions displayed the
teachers’ conceptions of the learners and how these came to influence their actions. Situations where this happened were, for example, when students were late, when they did not pay attention to the conversation between the teacher and the class as a whole, or when they laughed at a fellow student. The teachers tried to set boundaries for such undesired behaviour by, for example, pointing at a watch to indicate that someone was late, or by explicitly telling the students that they should not talk when others were speaking. In one school particularly, teachers also reacted against the frequent phone calls that their students received during the lessons:

A cell phone of one of the student’s rings. The student answers, runs out and comes back in a little while. When it rings again, the teacher asks: Problem with the boy? (Earlier that lesson, the student has told the teacher that her son was sick). … When the student returns to the classroom and the phone rings a third time and a fourth, the teacher says that the phone must be switched off. Prior to that she had asked if it was the husband (who was at home with the boy) who was calling. “No, not the man, the boy,” the student said. “Aha, it is the boy who calls. You will talk during the break” was the teacher’s reaction then. When it rings a fifth time the other students support the teacher by telling the woman to reduce the volume or switch off the telephone. The student returns after a while (after she had left the classroom for a third time). “Switched off now?” the teacher asks. The student nods.

The teacher’s attitude to the behaviour of the student in the example above seems to be mixed. She is negotiating with herself and not just with the student. The general (informal) policy of the teachers in the actual school was that the cell phones should be switched off during the lesson. One teacher said this in the introduction to her lesson. Others brought it up when a phone rang. In this case, the teacher, to begin with, did not react at all. When the second call came, however, she asked for the reason for the call, and this indicates that some calls may be regarded as necessary. After a lesson with a similar problem, another teacher explicitly reflected on this and on the difficulty of balancing between the learning needs of the students and their private responsibilities, treating the students as adult learners. In this case, when the private matter did not seem to be urgent, the teacher was clear in her response. The phone must be switched off.

It is also interesting to consider how the student responded to the teacher’s actions. She answered the teacher’s question, but continued to take the calls and did not switch the phone off until other students took the teacher’s side. Only then was the classroom order re-established. This implies that it was more important for her to answer the phone calls from her son than to participate in the lesson activities and follow the instructions of the teacher. Her identity as a mother seemed to be stronger than her identity as a student. Her memberships of two different communities clashed with each other. Also, the whole situation may have been due to an unfamiliarity with what “doing school” means and that the teacher, by setting limits for the student’s behaviour, tried to help students with that (see Bigelow & King, 2015).

Moreover, teachers and fellow students acknowledged that the students’ private situation could intrude on their ability to study:

A student, who has nine children, will be without accommodation in two days. The teacher says that, because of that, the student has difficulty thinking today. Another student agrees: “X is at home today,” she says. “He is not here.” (She means it symbolically).

As refugees, many of the students were in a difficult position. Apart from personal losses of family members, homes, and a certain status in the society, they faced the challenge of getting proper accommodation and becoming familiar with the procedures of the new society, and many had health-related problems. Some of these issues were frequently mentioned in the lessons, where the teachers, either on their own initiative or without asking for it, obtained information about the students’ private situation. The awareness of the learners’ situation meant that they could allow a student’s behaviour, which might go against other teaching principles. Some teachers explicitly said that there was no point in trying to learn when there was a lack of favourable conditions for learning.

Teachers were also aware of other conditions which could affect students’ participation. Students with physical disabilities could join the physical exercises from their chairs and there were reading
glasses for the students to borrow when the teachers discovered that they were in need of them. In some lessons, teachers also paid attention to how students with physical problems were sitting or writing in order to prevent them straining an injured part of the body. In that way, teachers demonstrated that it was legitimate for students to participate to a lesser extent and/or to join the mutual activities based on their abilities.

In short, the teachers chose what and how to learn, considering the learning needs of the students as adults. Understanding their students as adult included the teachers’ need to consider that the students were members of other CoP, and to negotiate their multiple identities, responsibilities, and needs. Even though it was an educational setting, the learning goals did not have a priori importance in all the situations. However, the judgement of which needs were most important was also linked to the needs of the entire group. A student that disturbed the others was usually given a rebuke.

Discussion and conclusion

In this article, we have explored the teaching practice in the LESLLA context. The focus has been on the teachers in regard to their learners. The main findings say that teachers are (a) Initiating and negotiating general learning activities, (b) Making efforts to get the students to understand words and other symbols, (c) Facilitating participation outside the teaching and learning community, and (d) Negotiating acceptable behaviour of the students.

In spite of the different pedagogical visions and approaches of the schools and teachers, a majority of the class activities followed a certain pattern. The study depicts the teaching practice of initial literacy as multi-level. The unique conditions of the practice, and the fact that the teachers mainly developed their teaching from their interactions with their learners (since, despite of a national curriculum, there is much freedom for the teachers to choose the content and the methods of teaching), form the background against which the teachers’ actions should be judged. Moreover, the teachers’ actions were not completely based on an immediate response to the learners’ actions. The specific features of the practice were also due to the teachers’ different and parallel conceptions of the learners. Thus, the study illustrates the reciprocal nature of the relations in a CoP, showing that actions are not isolated phenomena, but are related to other people and other actions (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

There are four significant features of the LESLLA teaching practice. The first is that the teachers do not use and follow any standardised material in their teaching. Instead various materials are employed. Some teaching resources are produced in the local schools by teachers. Additionally, already existing materials, either teaching materials directed at other groups of learners or materials used for other purposes, become teaching artefacts. In these cases, teachers choose the materials for their relevance to the learners, including the authentic texts. This indicates an ambition among teachers to support the learners’ orientation in the new national society, for example to facilitate students’ encounters with societal institutions and to create awareness of how to use the health service. They may also choose reading content based on students’ everyday life domain, for the motivating effect. The material used reflects that a socio-cultural as well as a functional perspective influence the teachers, underlining that literacy skills belong not only to the school situation, but also to the everyday life domain—in private, professional, and societal contexts (see Franker, 2007). Moreover, a contextualised situation is seen to facilitate LESLLA learners’ learning in particular (Bigelow & Vinogradov, 2011). Consequently, many different needs of the students are considered in the choice of the teaching and learning materials.

The second feature is the need to use various types of artefacts. Primarily, this is because the teachers and learners can neither rely on a mutual oral language nor make use of a written language for communication. However, the artefacts they use, besides the written materials, also give a picture of the learners as in need of concrete input in terms of photos, gestures etc. Moreover, the instructional language is adjusted to their basic knowledge of Swedish and the communication is supported by the group and with words in the students’ mother tongue. This reflects the learners’ status of being emergent readers and emergent Swedish speakers.
The third distinctive feature is the learning strategy of repetition, seen both in how teachers urge the students to repeat, e.g., the sound of a letter or a word in a particular lesson, and in how the average lesson starts with a similar set of questions. This can partly be explained by the fact that new students are continuously enrolled and thus have not learned what old-timers in the class already have. But also, teachers believe that the LESLLA learners in general need much repetition to learn. Additionally, they refer to individual biographical, psychological, and cognitive differences among the learners when it comes to the speed of learning progression.

The final significance of the practice is a negotiation based on the different communities the students are members of. By being allowed and sometimes encouraged to influence the content of the lesson, the learners get access to the practice (see Lave & Wenger, 1991). This access is facilitated by the artefacts, which they can relate to and which inspire them to join the conversation in the classroom. Moreover, the space for negotiation extends their possibility to influence the content and the teachers’ actions. Acceptable behaviour is also something that can be negotiated. The students’ various identities; their status as parents, refugees, and newcomers in a society, with all that this involves, are present in the classrooms, and the teachers, as well as fellow learners, are indulgent towards divergent and sometimes disturbing behaviour. These facts imply that there might be understandable and legitimate reasons behind a certain conduct. Even if some of these perspectives on the learners, at first sight, may contribute to the picture of LESLLA learners as vulnerable, they are, at the same time, a sign that the teachers respect the learners’ ability to decide whether they should participate in an activity or not. In fact, this is an acknowledgement that the students are members of other communities than the teaching and learning practice, and therefore, they may have other, more pressing needs which must be handled instead (see Handley et al., 2006).

As has been exemplified, many of the teachers’ actions are directed towards the learners as both needy and autonomous. Accordingly, the learners need to develop their memory capacity, and for health and learning reasons should take part in physical exercises. They need guidance about the society and must be cared for in the classroom. Also, their literacy and Swedish language acquisition require many teaching artefacts. On the other hand, the students are allowed to be autonomous learners e.g. by using their mother tongue and getting the opportunity to influence the lesson activities. In this sense, they participate in the production and reproduction of the teaching and learning community (see Lave & Wenger, 1991), and this reflects the learners as resourceful, acknowledging that they have knowledge and experiences on which learning can be built.

Since members define themselves and are defined by their relations to other members and their place and participation in a community (Lave & Wenger, 1991), the teachers’ actions do not just speak of their understanding of the learners but also of their own identity as professionals. The LESLLA teachers in the SFI setting hold an autonomous professional position. They are the ones who decide how to teach and what material to use. This freedom, however, must be balanced against the teachers’ responsiveness to the learners’ needs, both in terms of what the learners articulate themselves and/or what needs the teachers believe them to have. The teachers are instructors of Swedish and literacy, but in addition, their actions and the conceptions they have of the learners, show them to be both carers of the students and bridge builders between them and the Swedish society. This illustrates the complexity of the profession. Being a LESLLA teacher implies careful consideration of who the LESLLA learners are in a more holistic sense, and the ability to act accordingly. It means an ongoing shift between different professional sub-identities.

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References


Appendix: Observation guide of the teaching practice

Main questions:
What do teachers do?
In what environment are these actions located?
What does the teacher need to know in order to act as s/he does?

Point of departure
Focus on the actions in the lessons. Describe, do not judge. Ask yourself (and the teacher) why s/he is doing what s/he does. What surprises you?

Focal points
a) The physical environment of the teaching practice
   The room, the ways of sitting, the number of participants, etc.
b) Time frames: Lesson time, actual time of the teaching, times for break and changes of activities
c) The actors: The relation between the teacher and the students. How the teacher approaches and responds to the learners and vice versa?
d) Actions: What are the general activities and single actions as part of these activities?
e) Physical objects that are of significance for the actions: What objects are used, and how?
f) The way of teaching initial literacy: Reflected in speech and activities (functional, cultural, critical?)
g) Overall pedagogy: E.g., teacher-centred or learner-centred?