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## **An Early Look into Leveraging the Home Language for Biliteracy in the LESLLA Context**

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### **Abstract**

Situated in a pilot project exploring biliteracy teaching and learning with adult L2 learners with emergent literacy, this practitioner paper describes what the home language literacy lessons of a Nepali learner, Renuka, looked like in an early phase of the pilot. SLA has recognized the value of strategic L1 use in target language learning (Wrigley, 2003), and LESLLA researchers have identified a biliteracy pedagogical approach as an important area for future research. In the micro-context of the present study, this paper considers the potential for a biliteracy approach to promote crosslinguistic transfer (particularly metalinguistic skills), and to support teacher awareness of learners' funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992). It further explores the promise of an in-depth intake process, and increased teacher observational skills to support practitioner-learner conversation about literacy and learning. By sharing our work, we hope to reignite discussion around the potential of a biliteracy approach with LESLLA learners.

**Keywords:** adult L2 learners with emergent literacy, LESLLA, home languages, biliteracy, funds of knowledge

## **Introduction and Background**

As a field, LESLLA has grown in its understanding of teaching and learning with adult L2 learners with emergent literacy. However, while teaching practice with LESLLA learners has evolved, print literacy development continues to be laborious and uneven with such learners. Kurvers (2015) noted a striking variance in the study load, or contact hours, needed to attain the next level in Dutch as a Second Language. Some learners remained at the pre-beginning level (pre-A) after 850 hours, while many took 1,000–2,000 hours or more to advance to beginning levels (A and B). Tammelin-Laine & Martin (2015) have posited that the 1,400-hour course LESLLA learners access in Finland is insufficient for learners to learn to read at a functional level. As these studies demonstrate, there is considerable effort needed to pass the beginning and functional levels of literacy, suggesting a need for a revised approach to teaching literacy.

Condelli and Wrigley's (2002) 'What Works' study found use of learners' home language with LESLLA learners particularly helpful when introducing new or complex concepts. However, as Wrigley (2003) notes, such usage should be judicious. Engaging home languages can be viewed as a means to building on learners' existing resources. And yet, as Peyton (2012) has discussed, little research exists into the use of LESLLA learners' home languages to support target language and literacy development. Despite research which shows the value of home language use in other bilingual contexts (Bajt, 2019; Cummins, 2021; Makulloluwa, 2016; Zaidi, 2020), this lacuna in the LESLLA context remains. Peyton (2012) suggests the LESLLA community consider the role of home language and culturally responsive teaching and asks whether we might work to develop "bilingual oral proficiency, biliteracy and multicultural competence" (p. 150), with a recognition that there is value to a both-and approach. Kurvers et al. (2015) echo the call for further inquiry into home language development prior to introducing print literacy in a target language with adult L2 emergent literacy learners.

The smattering of documentation on the topic of home language literacy to support dominant language literacy with LESLLA learners includes a study in the New York City metropolitan area (Burtoff, 1985). In that study, learners with up to two years of prior schooling who had not yet developed print literacy skills in their home language of Haitian Creole were placed in one of two types of class: 1) a class with 12 weeks of home language literacy learning followed by 12 weeks of home language and literacy classes, or 2) a class with 24 weeks of English language and literacy learning. Learners in the former class made greater literacy gains than peers in the English-only class. Comparable to the aforementioned US-based model, similar models are exemplified in Hyllie Park Folk School's established biliteracy classes in Sweden (Mörnerud, 2010), a Dinka and English literacy class pilot in Australia (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009), and Farsi and Arabic literacy classes in support of Icelandic language and literacy instruction (O.M.A.H.A.I., n.d.). With LESLLA learners, an approach where home language literacy is developed before, or alongside, target language and literacy development, shows promise. However, only one of these programs appears to be established and sustained. Little attention has been given to the potential ongoing benefits of such an approach. I (Theresa) have observed the promise of home language use in dominant language and literacy learning with teachers and learners in my sphere. At a time when many Dinka-speaking learners were accessing literacy classes in the program I worked in, a colleague shared a poster of the Dinka alphabet that was later used to demonstrate letter-sound correspondence. Another colleague created a learner mentorship program where beginning literacy learners were each paired with an upper-level language learner who spoke the same home language in their multilingual target

language classes once or twice a week. The bilingual student mentors provided invaluable support explaining language and literacy concepts.

The pilot project presented here, *Biliteracy Learning for ESL Literacy Learners*, was guided by the experience, research, and recommendations described above. It was further predicated on the work of researchers who have worked to promote home language use with children in Canada, both to support target language learning and to elevate home language use and development. Cummins (2021) argues that the use of children and youth's home languages in schools allows for crosslinguistic transfer. Particularly relevant in our context are the transfer of phonological awareness, and "metacognitive and metalinguistic learning strategies" (Cummins, 2021, p. 32). Additionally, strategic use of home languages can promote multicultural and linguistic identity (Cummins, 2021; Zaidi, 2020). If such benefits exist for young learners, adult L2 emergent literacy learners might experience similar benefits.

LESLLA research to date has shown us how LESLLA learners develop reading and writing skills in the target language and indicates that target language reading, writing and oral skills are all influenced by home language print literacy. We as a field now know that learning to read and write in a language whilst learning to speak that language takes an extraordinary amount of time and effort, even with best practices in place. What we are doing still is not working well enough, but with our collective knowledge of how print literacy is developed with LESLLA learners, we are well-positioned to take what we know so far and apply it to developing a literacy foundation in the home language and determine additional best practices to support our practitioner work.

The biliteracy pilot project seeks to address calls to investigate the value of home language literacy development with adult L2 learners with emergent literacy. At the time of writing, we are in the early stages of working with such an approach, with home language literacy being introduced. This phase of the project may not provide many answers to bigger questions posed by Peyton (2012) and Kurvers et al. (2015). However, this descriptive paper offers insights into four aspects that stood out for us: 1) how one learner, Renuka, responds to home language literacy teaching and learning; 2) how connecting literacy learning to a learner's interests and goals might influence engagement in the challenging tasks at hand; 3) how a comprehensive learner intake process can highlight a learner's funds of knowledge (see Moll et al., 1992) to guide the teaching and learning process; and 4) how teacher reflection might strengthen our capacity to promote metalinguistic strategies in a meaningful way.

In this paper, Theresa provides an overview of a multiphase pilot project. Next, Sangita describes her experience and observations working with the project to support Nepali literacy development with one learner in Phase II of the project. We conclude with questions for the field and directions for future work.

### **Project Overview**

After extensive work with LESLLA learners and some promising experiences working with home language use in literacy learning in Canada, Theresa sought out interested organizations and potential funding sources to pilot an approach similar to that described in a report of a Dinka-English literacy pilot project in Australia (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009). A local organization offered to support such a project's application for funding. When the project was awarded a grant in 2019, a small team of consultants joined the project to conduct needs assessments with potential learners, consider literacy development in included languages, and

create resources for learner intake in Farsi/Dari, Nepali, and Tigrinya. Sangita joined the project team at the onset. While new to working with adult L2 learners with emergent literacy, Sangita had worked to support adult basic literacy learners whose home language was English in the past.

As shown in Table 1, the project team has obtained a series of small grants to conduct a needs assessment, develop teacher resources, and pilot a curriculum framework for biliteracy learning with LESLLA learners over a multi-year, multi-phased approach.

| <i>Year</i> | <i>Activities</i>   |
|-------------|---|
| 2019–2020   | Community needs assessment<br>Curriculum framework  |
| 2020–2021   | Pilot project: Home language literacy lessons<br>Reflective practice<br>Teacher handbook                    |
| 2021-2022   | Pilot project continued: Home language and dominant language literacy lessons<br>Teacher training resources |

Table 1. Biliteracy Pilot Project Activities by Year

### **Year 1: Laying the Groundwork**

In the first year of the project, community interest in biliteracy classes was established. The project team reached out to community organizations and to community members with LESLLA backgrounds who speak Farsi/Dari, Nepali, and Tigrinya. We conducted two focus groups: one in Farsi/Dari, and one in Tigrinya. Participants reported up to two years of prior schooling and were mainly new to print literacy. When asked whether they would be interested in biliteracy classes, participants' responses ranged from 'I'm too old' to 'When can we start?' (Wall, et al., 2020). It was determined that there was enough interest to pilot biliteracy learning with adults the following year.

Year 1 of the project also involved the development of a Curriculum Framework (Wall, et al., 2020). This document includes a literature review, a description of the teaching philosophy, a brief overview of the features of each of the home languages included in the project, and parallel intake assessment tools in Farsi/Dari, Nepali, Tigrinya, and English (see Figure 1 for an example of the tools).



Figure 1. Front cover of book used for Nepali reading assessment

The Curriculum Framework is grounded in whole-part-whole (WPW) teaching methodology (Trupke-Bastidas & Poulos, 2007) and the 5 essential components of reading instruction, as outlined by a report on the science of reading: phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension (Learning Point Associates, 2004). Within the WPW model, fluency and comprehension fit naturally in the ‘whole’, where the focus is on making meaning of text. Explicit instruction of phonemic awareness, phonics, and vocabulary (or word knowledge) was included in the ‘part’ segment of literacy lessons. Because this population of learners is new to print literacy, pre-reading skills such as directionality and letter formation have also been embedded into the Curriculum Framework.

### **Intake Assessment Tools**

A set of intake assessment tools in Farsi/Dari, Nepali, Tigrinya, and English are also included in the Curriculum Framework. The package begins with an intake interview, in which a teacher asks the learner about their prior schooling, literacy practices, availability, and what they want to learn. It may seem counterintuitive to conduct an extensive intake assessment with learners new to print text, however, skills have been broken down into discrete steps. For example, to explore a learner’s understanding of print concepts, they are shown a book and asked where they would start reading and where they would go next, before being asked to point out a word, and then the first and final letter in that word. This all takes place before learners are asked to attempt to read at the word or sentence level. This incremental approach enables teachers to see what a learner already knows, and what existing skills and knowledge about print literacy the learner has—even when a learner may report that they are unable to read and write at all - and offers more opportunities for learners to experience success during the assessment.

### **Year 2: Home Language Literacy Learning**

Year 2 of the project focused on three main activities: 1) home language literacy lessons, 2) a reflective practice approach to teaching, and 3) the development of a teacher handbook. The Curriculum Framework was piloted in two languages: Farsi/Dari and Nepali. Home language literacy lessons were mainly offered in one-on-one tutorials, though in one of the sessions, a learner’s sister joined the tutorials near the end of the pilot. While we had originally planned for face-to-face lessons at public libraries, tutorials were moved online due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Teachers worked with learners to find a learning platform that would work for them.

Learners spent two or three sessions developing the digital skills necessary to engage in tutorials such as making a video call, accepting a video call, and taking and sending a picture. Online learning was supplemented with a small package of printed materials consisting of a book, picture flashcards, a personal-sized whiteboard, and a dry erase marker.

Throughout 2020-2021, practitioners employed a reflective practice cycle that involved teaching, self-assessment, considering new ways of teaching, and putting these ideas into practice. (Cambridge Assessment International Education, n.d.) (see Figure 2). Using a reflective model supported practitioners to plan and modify content and approaches based on observations and learners' feedback. The project team read articles, attended LESLLA webinars, and participated in EU-Speak's *Bilingualism* module.

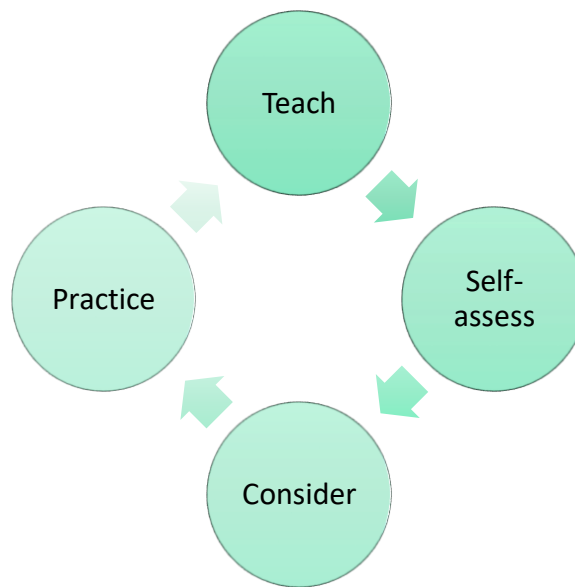


Figure 2. The Reflective Teaching Cycle (adapted from Cambridge Assessment International Education, n.d.)

This pilot project relied heavily on the expertise of bilingual and biliterate team members who have been engaged in every step of the project. Sangita joined the project in 2019 and was involved in the needs assessment in the Nepali-speaking community, Nepali intake assessment development, and identifying language and print features specific to the Nepali language. In 2020-2021, Sangita worked one-on-one with a learner to develop Nepali print literacy in the home language literacy teaching and learning phase of the pilot. As you will see below, Sangita's funds of knowledge (see Moll et al., 1992) were invaluable in this project.

### Introducing Sangita

I felt so honored to be a part of the LESLLA community as it was my first teaching experience with a LESLLA learner. I have over twelve years of teaching experience, from kindergarten to college-level, back in Nepal. I taught mathematics in junior and high school

when I was a student majoring in Math. Then, after completing my master's degree in Anthropology I started teaching Anthropology/Sociology. When I came to Canada, I changed my profession. I completed a diploma in Human Services and worked as a community resource worker with people with special needs. I supported clients to find a job, volunteer work and educational opportunities available to them. My responsibility was to support them in the class as well. Later I worked for a college as a program administrator. There I got an opportunity to work with basic literacy learners who were developing reading, writing, and digital literacy skills. In the biliteracy pilot project, we, the teachers were literate in our home language and second language, English as well. We were from the same country and spoke the same language as the learners we worked with. Culturally, we observed and practiced the same festivals, norms, values, and rituals. It was easy for me to understand my learner's tone and gesture in her responses during classes and in our conversation. As a student of Anthropology, I am always interested in observing such aspects of human behaviour.

In the next section, Sangita shares experience and observations working with the Curriculum Framework and the reflective practice model as she taught home language literacy.

### **Introducing Renuka**

Renuka is an emergent literacy learner who attended one or two classes in grade one before she stopped going to school. She was married when she was 14 years old. Renuka enjoys her life with her husband, three daughters, and one son. She moved to Canada with her husband three years ago, and has been living with her oldest daughter and son-in-law and their nine-year-old daughter. When she began Nepali literacy tutoring sessions, she was 55 years old. All of her three daughters are married, and her youngest son will be married later this year.

Renuka regrets declining the opportunity to go to school when she was young. At that time, she thought that she could not do well in school as she perceived herself to be a poor student. When she was young, it took time for her to learn math and the Nepali alphabet. She felt her teachers and her cousin brothers (who wanted to help her with her homework) would get mad at her because she could not learn quickly.

Now, however, she wants to read books, especially the holy books. Renuka shows curiosity about the information and the signs and print she sees in her Canadian community. She thinks that if she learns to read and write in her home language it will be easier for her to learn a second language. Her nine-year-old granddaughter is also learning Nepali language as a second language in Canada. Now that all of her children are grown up, and she does not have the responsibilities to take care of them, Renuka wants to go back to school. Her daughters and sons-in-law also encourage her to join the literacy classes. I worked with Renuka 3 times/week for one and a half hours for a total of 55 hours over the course of 14 weeks.

### **Learner Intake Process**

The intake interview and assessments helped Renuka and I get to know each other and to establish a teacher-learner relationship. Conducting the intake assessments gave me an idea of both her literacy and language levels, and her metalinguistic awareness. It made it easy for me to develop the lesson plan. I made it clear to Renuka that the intake interview and assessments were not tests that could give her a passing or failing result. Instead, they were part of a discovery

process to know *how* and *where* to begin learning sessions. Renuka and I developed the topic/context of the text and the content of each lesson plan, but the assessments led me in the direction of our biliteracy teaching and learning journey.

In the learner intake process, my learner went through a series of steps. She showed a couple of the print concepts such as how to hold a book, the top and the bottom of the book, the front and back pages of the book, and words in a sentence. She was able to say and write the first 12-15 of the Nepali alphabet letters in order, even though she missed a few and several she said randomly. The assessment of every step gave an idea of the skills in print literacy. She learned to read and sign her name. The teaching strategies and development of the lesson plans were based on the learner's knowledge and skills shown in every step of the intake process.



## Writing in Nepali

To contextualize the teaching and learning shared in this paper, here we describe a few language features key to Nepali literacy. The Nepali writing system reads left to right. It uses the Devanagari script and is alphasyllabary (Nepali Language Resource Center, 2021). Each unit consists of a consonant and vowel symbol, and each word is joined by a line, a *shiro rekha*, which runs across the top of the symbols. A *purna biram*, or vertical line, marks the end of a sentence. The Nepali orthographic system is transparent, meaning the letters and sounds correspond consistently.

**Intake interview and assessments:** I used the intake assessment tools that our biliteracy pilot project team created to know the learners' strengths and to have an idea of making a lesson plan for the literacy class. We were not able to work together in person because of COVID-19 restrictions, so I dropped off the intake assessment in a package that had the storybook of Maya, a fictional Nepali character, intake assessment worksheets, a whiteboard, and a marker. We split the intake assessment over three sessions via Messenger. The following paragraphs provide an overview of Renuka's intake assessment results.

### *Print Concepts and Reading Fluency*

For the print concepts and reading fluency assessment, the learner was given a book about a character named Maya. Each page of the book had one simple sentence of text supported by a photograph with one sentence stem repeated throughout. The main purpose of this assessment was to determine the learner's familiarity with print concepts, such as directionality, word boundaries, and letter identification, in Nepali.

During the assessment, Renuka could tell me the front and back pages of the book when asked to identify them. She knew which way to hold the book, and which direction to turn the pages. When I asked her what she saw on the front page of the book, she was able to describe the pictures. When she was reading the book 'Maya', I observed that she could recognize some consonant letters. She did not have any idea of the vowel letters and vowel signs attached to the consonant letters. She just read the consonant letters but missed every vowel sign and letter. She was not aware of the signs attached to a letter (e.g., the *shiro rekha* and *matra*). She also could read some of the letters in words but could not decode them. Thus, when asked comprehension questions about the story, Renuka referred to the pictures, not the print text.

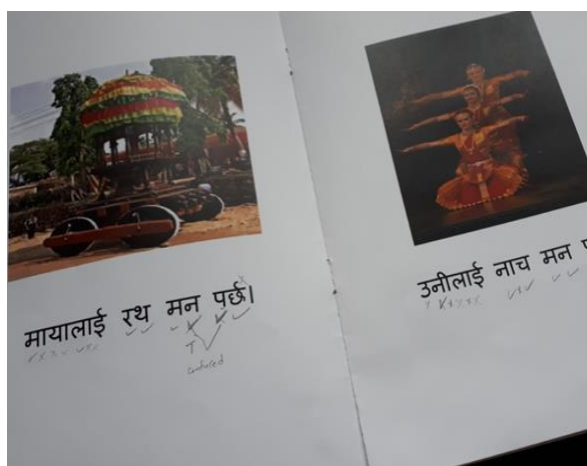


Figure 3. Renuka's reading assessment

### *Pre-emergent Literacy Skills*

In this portion of the assessment, I asked Renuka to write as many Nepali letters and words as she could. She could read and write some of the alphabet letters. She wrote the first 10-15 consonant letters (see Figure 4). As observed in her print concepts and reading fluency assessment, Renuka had not learned how to read vowel letters and vowel signs. Similarly, she could not write the vowel letters. She was not able to write any Nepali words, apart from her name.

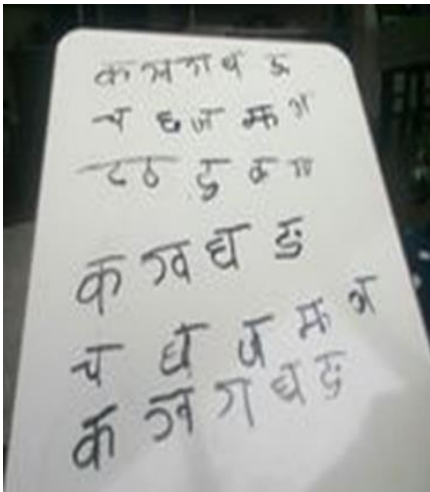


Figure 4. Renuka's writing assessment: Renuka wrote as many letters as she could

It was just three years ago that Renuka learned how to write her name. She had been motivated to do so when she was in the process of coming to Canada because she did not want to sign documents with an inked finger. Thus, Renuka's daughter taught her how to write her name. She is also comfortable writing her name as a signature. During the intake assessment, I noticed that Renuka held her pen and whiteboard marker comfortably.

During the intake assessment, Renuka was not able to recognize most of the environmental print and symbols. Since she arrived in Canada just six months before the start of the pandemic, she did not get a chance to go around the community. A common supermarket logo and the hospital sign, for example, were unfamiliar to Renuka. She was, however, able to recognize two sight symbols but was not sure what exactly were those for. When I showed the sign 'Exit' and asked what it was for, she said that she had seen that in the hospital, but she thought that was just a blinking light. She knew the 'Stop' sign was related to driving but did not know what it referred to.

### *Phonics*

In the phonics assessment, Renuka was asked to write the missing letters of the name of the pictures. The missing letters were with and without a vowel sign. She found the missing letters in some of the pictures. She wrote the missing letter that did not have the vowel sign. But she was not able to write the letter with a vowel sign attached to it. In her work (Figure 5), we can see that she wrote the missing letter of the picture of a lotus but not of the picture of a banana. From this we see that Renuka was able to complete a word with a missing consonant, but not with a missing consonant and vowel symbol.

### ***Phonemic and Phonological Awareness***

During this part of the assessment, the learner was asked to identify rhyming words and initial and final sounds. When I read a set of words like पानी बग्यो नानी, she was able to name the rhyming words from the set. She could also tell the initial and final sound of two letters words किताब /क/, पंखा /ख/ but she found it hard to identify the initial and final sounds of three-letter words. As a beginning literacy learner, Renuka was unable to hear beginning and final sounds in longer words. Here, the assessment tool helped me identify the learners' skills that might not be visible in other assessments.

### ***Other Notes about the Intake Assessment***

During the phonics assessment, Reunka could not follow my instructions to figure out where to write the missing letters. She wrote somewhere close to the picture, not in the designated place (See Figure 5). The intake assessment was online, and it was her first-time doing assessments.

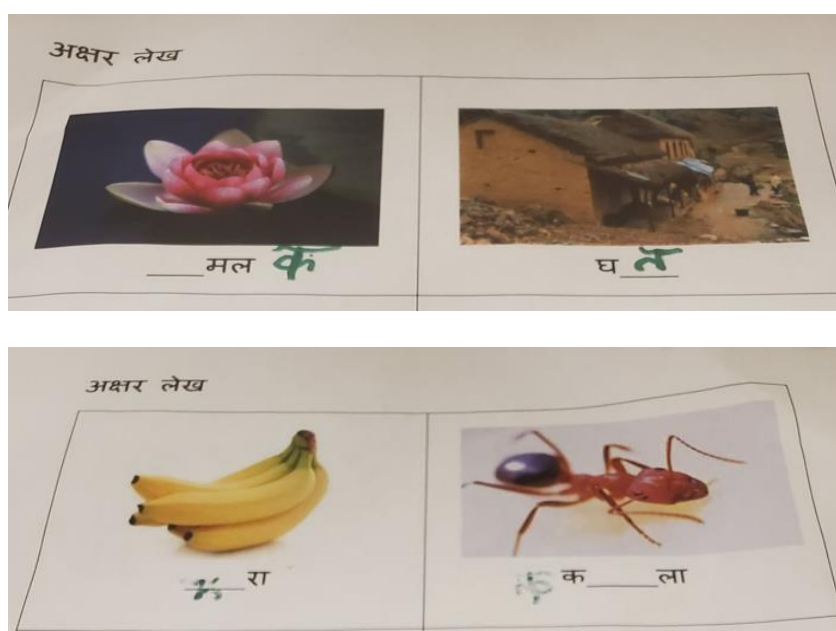


Figure 5. Phonics Assessment: Learners are asked to fill in the missing consonant (top) or vowel sign (bottom).

### **What Teaching Looked Like**

#### ***Context and Content of the Literacy Classes***

As part of our learner-centered approach, lesson content was based on Renuka's interests and goals. In the intake interview, I found that Renuka was family-oriented and loved cooking Nepali food. She also let me know that she was learning how to write both her husband's name and the family's name. So, we developed two stories for her to practice literacy on. In the first story, we picked one fruit from her fruit basket, one food from the freezer, etc. To supplement

her learning, and to use her funds of knowledge, I suggested picking fruits and items that had at least one letter or any vowel signs that her name had. For the second story, we focused on introducing her family. This helped her to practice writing the names of people she knew, a personal goal of hers.

### ***A Whole-Part-Whole Approach***

In this biliteracy pilot project we applied the whole-part-whole approach. Each day's lesson plan was based on the whole-part-whole model. During each lesson, we worked on new words. If the words had letters and vowel signs new to her, she practiced reading and writing those words, letters, and signs a lot. After learning to read and write a new word, we looked for some rhyming words for more practice with the same vowel signs and some new letters. This way she built up her sight word vocabulary as well as got time to practice phonics and phonemic awareness.



Figure 6. Renuka's Book (cover above) included foods with letters found in her name.

### ***The Five Components of Reading***

For each topic, I used the five essential components of reading: phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension. When I introduced a new word, Renuka practiced reading and writing that word. She learned to sound it out (phonics), write with right vowel signs attached to it, and read pointing to the corresponding letters and signs when she was reading that word (phonics). Once she was able to read and write all of the words in a sentence, she was asked to read the sentence. When reading the sentence (fluency), she was able to understand what the sentence said (comprehension). Because of the implicit and explicit instruction, she had ample time to practice. I also tried to find words rhyming with content words within her knowledge (phonological awareness). As far as possible, I also introduced new words from her surroundings and the famous landscapes of Nepal. The purpose of choosing words from her surroundings and the famous landscapes of Nepal was to teach her reading and writing with familiar words so she would not need to apply extra effort to learn reading, writing, and new concepts.

### ***Literacy Classes***

In the first two weeks of class, Renuka tried to copy the text of her story of likes and dislikes (Figure 7). I asked her to notice and write the signs and symbols attached to every letter, even though she was not familiar with them. We worked on each word of a sentence and each letter and vowel sign belonging to that word. She practiced reading and writing more if a letter or

a sign was new to her (every vowel sign was new to her at that time). She learned to read and write the content words and the rhyming words of the words. This way she had more practice with the vowel signs as well as an idea of phonics and phonemic awareness. I describe Renuka's progress over the following 12 weeks below.

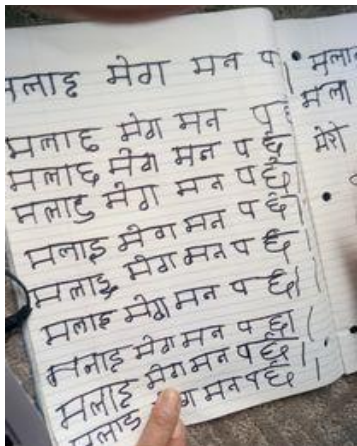


Figure 7. Renuka copied a line from her story.

### Renuka's Progress

After learning to read and write each word of a sentence, Renuka could arrange the words to make the sentence by herself. By the end of the term, she was able to recognize over fifty words including content words and rhyming words. All the words were within her knowledge and experience. The words were not new to her, the new thing she was learning was to read and write with an awareness of vowel signs. She learned to decode and encode words and the meaning to it. In the term-end assessments, she was also able to write over 20 words of her story without any help (Figure 8).

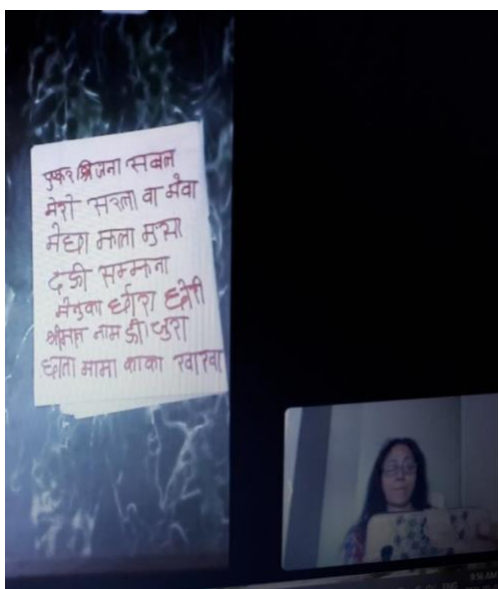


Figure 8. Renuka's wrote over 20 words after 55 hours of instruction.

She could copy sentences with an awareness of the vowel signs and symbols. She was also able to arrange words to make her story. When we began working together, Renuka drew on her knowledge of the sentence stem and the pictures in the book about her family, pointing to different words as she read. After learning to read and write the words of her story, she started to point out the right word when she was reading. Still, she needs to work on phonemic awareness to learn to point out the right letter and vowel sign attached to it when she is reading a word.

## **Observations**

### ***A Biliteracy Approach with LESLLA Learners***

I have experienced the importance of the home language in the beginning when you are learning a second language. In my home country of Nepal, I started learning English as a foreign language when I was in grade four. At that time, our teacher used to give us the foundational concepts of the English language in our home language. It made it easier for me to learn the distinctive features of the two languages when the teacher explained them in my first language.

When I learned about the biliteracy pilot project from the biliteracy pilot project team lead, I was excited to be a part of this project. I thought, in the future, this type of program would be in high demand with LESLLA learners, who had not yet developed literacy in their home language but were compelled to learn a second language after migrating to a second country.

### ***Renuka's Funds of Knowledge***

During the sessions, I came to know that even though Renuka did not attend formal education herself, she was exposed to print literacy and formal schooling in her life. When her brothers used to go to school and do homework, she listened to them and watched how they read and wrote. She used to look at their books. Her grandfather used to chant the holy book. After getting married, Renuka saw her husband read daily magazines. When Renuka's children started school, she would watch them doing their homework and listen when they read the Nepali and English alphabets aloud. This exposure to literacy and schooling unknowingly helped her to acquire a few pre-emergent literacy skills, reflected in her intake assessments as well.

### ***Motivation to Each Other***

Renuka was an enthusiastic and committed learner. She always practiced after class. She used to show me her work in class or sometimes sent pictures of her work on Messenger (see Figures 9 and 10). Sometimes she brought new words to our lessons and asked me how to write them. The learning was all about her. So perhaps what is significant is that Renuka was motivated to learn because her learning was contextualized, and because she was making progress. One day she said to me that she felt proud that now she was able to read and write her family members' names.

### ***Transferable skills she acquired***

Renuka developed skills that will likely support her English literacy development in the future:

- **Directionality and Spatial Awareness:** Since beginning Nepali literacy tutoring sessions, Renuka practiced printing with paper and pen and with a whiteboard. In the beginning, Renuka sometimes put her notebook upside-down when writing. Now she is aware of which way to hold her notebook. I also noticed that she used to write in her

notebook wherever she saw some blank space, but now she turns over pages in order and keeps writing with the pattern of two lined paper.

- **School skills:** She engaged in the learning process by attending sessions on time and regularly, following the instructions, and completing classwork and homework. She also initiated learning content by bringing new words and ideas for writing.
- **Print Concepts:** She became mindful of the direction and order of words in a sentence when reading and writing. She acquired the concepts of a letter, a word, and a sentence, and she is able to talk about them (metalinguistic skills). She began to build reading skills to decode and encode words. Before joining the literacy class what she knew was that a book gives information about something, or it tells a story. But now she knows that every sentence of a book has meaning.

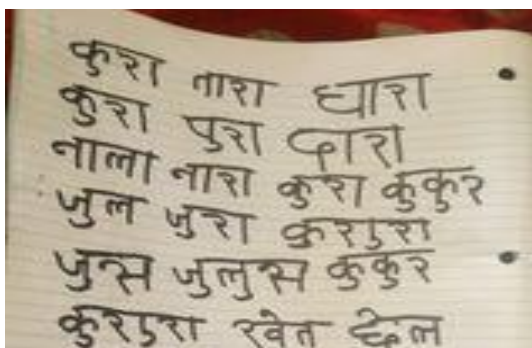


Figure 9. Renuka sent photos of her writing to Sangita

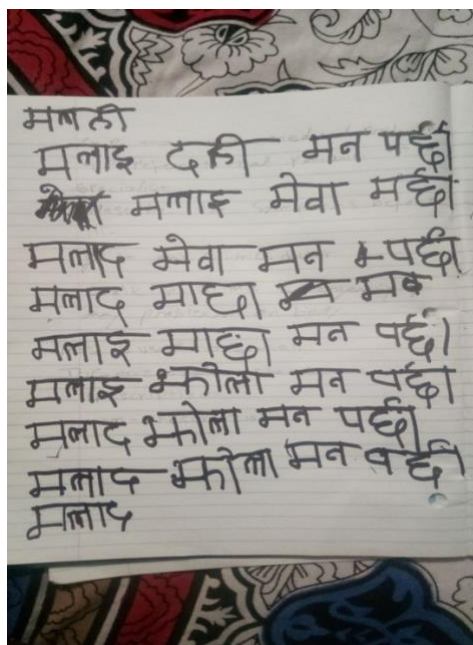


Figure 10. A sample of Renuka's writing which demonstrates her awareness of writing conventions

### The Role of Reflective Practice in my Teaching

The reflective teaching cycle helped me evaluate my teaching in each step of the biliteracy project. I think back to the class when I introduced two vowel symbols in one class, Renuka felt overwhelmed. I expected she would compare the shapes of two vowel symbols, making it easier for her to learn the shapes and sketch and remember those two symbols. But this strategy did not work. In the next classes, I introduced one vowel symbol at a time. She practiced using that symbol until she felt confident enough to read and write the symbol with other different letters.

To learn to read and write a word, Renuka needed to know more than one vowel symbol, sometimes she was confused with the shape of the symbols, so we gave funny names to each symbol. It helped her to remember the symbols when she needed to use them in a word. The reflective teaching practice convinced me to go back and think about my teaching strategies and assess whether they needed any modifications before bringing them back into practice. It also helped me to apply the teaching strategies according to the learner's learning style, funds of knowledge, and interests.

Additionally, the reflective practice cycle became helpful to see whether the whole-part-whole approach applied in the biliteracy class was appropriate or not. In each lesson plan, if applicable, I reflected on how I included the five components of reading and whether I applied it in the right way or not.

## Reflections

Teaching and learning in the biliteracy project was a learning journey for both of us. I think Renuka's decision to show a willingness to come back to school was a brave one. As an adult learner with emergent literacy, she built up some beginning literacy skills.

This teaching and learning journey was an opportunity for me to learn and apply the whole-part-whole model. When I started to teach her using the model, I was reluctant to apply it. I thought the traditional way of teaching (first the alphabet, then the vowel signs, and then words) was better. But after two or three classes, I found the whole-part-whole model was effective for adult learners.

Thinking about the *whole*, the concept of relevant context and content within the learner's experience and interest inspired my learner to feel confident in learning. When we worked with the *parts*, explicit and intensive instruction gave her ample time to practice. It also helped Renuka to go at her own pace.

In the Nepali language, the basic concept of Consonant Vowel (CVCV) of a word (किताब) is a bit tricky for beginners. It took almost 12 weeks for me to give her that concept. Later, if I gave her a word to write, she was aware of the letters and vowel signs attached to each letter of that word. But she was confused about the vowel signs, which one is attached to which letter of the word. Sometimes she messed up the vowel signs as well. So, I taught her to go one step at a time. First, I broke one word into letters, and then attached the vowel sign to it. She practiced reading and writing the letter first, then the sign attached to it. After learning to read and write a word, we began to work with another content word. Reading and writing skills were contextualized using a whole-part-whole approach, so letters and vowel signs were always taught within meaningful words.

I learned that if word knowledge begins with what the learners already know, the learners enjoy the learning and are inspired and motivated to learn more. I also learned that teachers should go at literacy learners' pace instead of following a set curriculum schedule, and we should create the lesson plan that way. Some days, we cannot follow the lesson plan of that



day. We should go back to review the lesson again instead of moving forward. I followed Renuka's lead until she felt confident in her learning. I also realized that LESLLA learners are fellow travelers of the teaching-learning journey. We cannot move ahead of them until they are ready to move forward.

### Summary and Conclusion

The *Biliteracy Learning for Adult L2 Emergent Literacy Learners* pilot project was developed in response to increased awareness that building on learners' strengths facilitates literacy teaching and learning. By drawing on learners' prior experience and developing print literacy in a language that learners already know, we intend to work with all of the resources, or funds of knowledge, that learners bring to literacy learning. We also draw on the extensive funds of knowledge of bilingual and biliterate teachers.

In the case of Renuka, her knowledge of the Nepali language and her life experience as an adult in the world and contributor to her family were recognized as valuable assets by her teacher. Sangita observed Renuka's growth and challenges as she engaged in Nepali literacy lessons. Renuka learned 'school skills' such as the expected way to use a notebook. The learning materials Sangita created were accessible to Renuka, as she was able to practice reading and writing independently, outside of class time. Her growth in metalinguistic skills is evidenced in her understanding that letters represent sounds and words and sentences convey meaning. We expect that, as Renuka joins us in the next phase of the project, these skills will be transferred to her English literacy learning.

The value of an in-depth intake process is shown in multiple ways. First, the interview invites the learner to share prior experiences with print literacy and schooling. Renuka's limited experiences with formal schooling were not positive. With this type of knowledge in hand, the teacher may approach the teaching and learning process with extra care. Further, in an intensive intake assessment where skills are broken down into discrete steps and in a language the learner speaks well, the teacher becomes aware of what the learner brings to literacy learning and can plan lessons based on the specific skills and gaps identified during the assessment. This would not be possible if the intake relied on self-reporting alone, as many LESLLA learners will report that they are unable to read or write anything at all. Sangita learned that Renuka was able to write her name and some consonant symbols, and that she recognized some environmental print shown to her, despite having had little opportunity to explore her community. She also identified that Renuka was able to write some letters, but was unfamiliar with vowel signs. Notably, Sangita's knowledge of the Nepali language, culture, and her own prior experiences with language learning allowed for a rich understanding of Renuka's own experiences, skills and engagement.

A strategic, extensive intake process serves as a guide to teachers as they plan lessons and develop materials. Time taken to get to know the learner at the onset made it possible for Sangita to develop lessons that were responsive to Renuka's interests and skills. As a result, Renuka was fully engaged in the learning process. Importantly, they support teachers to develop the observational skills that are essential to working with adults who are learning to read and write for the first time. This aligns with Cummins' (2021) suggestion that, when L2 learners are only assessed in the target language, we are apt to miss what learners are already doing in their home languages. The approach we have taken may not work in multilingual settings, or where there are teachers and learners who speak the same home language. However, with a little research into

learners' home languages and their writing systems, teachers in multilingual classes can conduct informal home language assessments, too, by asking learners to write their name in their home language, or having class discussions about what letters, words and sentences look like in the languages learners speak at home and at school.

With an additional year of funding secured, the project team plans to implement another phase of the project with three main objectives. First, this additional phase of the pilot project will allow us to continue home language literacy teaching with participating learners, while introducing L2 language and literacy learning. Secondly, project team members will offer opportunities for teacher learning to community organizations interested in implementing biliteracy teaching and learning with adult L2 learners with emergent literacy. Thirdly, the team will develop a digital resource to be made accessible to teachers globally.

While we are unable to answer the questions posed by Kurvers et al. (2015) and Peyton (2012) at this time, our experience thus far shows that there are likely to be multiple benefits to a biliteracy approach with LESLLA learners in conditions fostered in this pilot. This includes crosslinguistic transfer, enhanced linguistic learner identity, and teacher responsiveness to clearly identified skills, interests, and goals. Finally, we hope this small contribution opens the door to further exploration of biliteracy work with LESLLA learners.

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