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Towards the adoption of a balanced approach to literacy instruction in LESLLA classrooms in Québec, Canada

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The current study reports on an action research project taking place in two Quebec adult education centres and aiming to create learning opportunities for LESLLA learners of French to pursue their literacy development journey beyond the advancement of their technical skills. More specifically, our research objective was to highlight the challenges and affordances faced by the participating teachers during the study in order to show how instructional change in favour of a more balanced approach to literacy instruction can occur during an action research project involving close mentoring for teachers. To do so, we first described the participating teachers' meaning-focused literacy teaching practices during non-participant observation sessions in four teachers' classrooms over the course of 6 weeks, totalizing 25 hours of observed teaching practices. Although the vast majority of all practices observed were code-focused, some instances of meaning-focused teaching practices were identified. During two training sessions, these practices acted as a starting point for exploring new meaning-focused practices that were then piloted with their students. We observed that, in the course of an action research project consisting of iterative cycles of reflection, action, and evaluation, implementing activities aligned with a more balanced approach to literacy instruction seems possible among teachers who typically rely on code-focused activities.

Keywords: LESLLA classrooms, Balanced literacy instruction, action research, teacher professional development, instructional change

1 Introduction

A significant number of newcomers have entered the adult education system of the Canadian province of Quebec in recent years. Upon their arrival, many did not know French, the sole official language of the province, and had had limited or interrupted schooling. In fact, more than 25 % of all adult immigrants welcomed to Quebec between 2016 and 2020 reported 11 years of schooling or less prior to their resettlement, and almost half of these reported between 0 and 6 years (MIFI, 2022). Literacy Education and Second Language Learning for Adults (henceforth LESLLA) courses are offered to them when they arrive so that they can develop basic oral and written communication skills in French (MIFI, 2023). Offered by the Ministry of Immigration and the Ministry of

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Education in community centres or schools, these courses cover various general topics (e.g., health, lodging, work; MIFI, 2023) to support LESLLA learners in meeting their immediate language needs. Based on a large-scale needs assessment survey, Fortier et al. (2022) documented the reported instructional practices of 42 LESLLA teachers in this context and showed that their basic literacy practices were largely code-based (Snow, 2017); i.e., they focus on the development of mechanical and technical skills mainly through decontextualized activities. These findings regarding teaching practices in Quebec LESLLA classrooms mirror those of observational studies conducted in various LESLLA contexts worldwide (Choi & Ziegler, 2015; Malessa, 2021; Moore, 1999; North, 2017; Ollerhead, 2012; Winlund, 2021). Though code-focused activities are considered the building blocks of literacy development, they should be used in combination with meaning-focused activities to better support LESLLA learners (Choi & Ziegler, 2015; Vinogradov, 2010; Piccinin & Dal Maso, 2021).

In order to support these teachers towards a sustainable change of practices in favour of a more balanced approach to literacy instruction (Vinogradov, 2010), we designed the current action research study which unfolds in two main phases. The first phase focused on describing the everyday literacy teaching practices of LESLLA teachers as a basis for the professional training sessions taking place throughout the project. Based on this initial state, the second phase involved the implementation of a new meaning-focused literacy activity akin to the production of multilingual and multimodal identity texts (Cummins & Early, 2011) along with iterative cycles of reflection with the research team. In this paper, we aim to highlight the challenges and affordances faced by the participating teachers during the study in order to show how instructional change can occur during an action research project involving close mentoring for teachers. With the goal of transforming practices, we hope to contribute to the participating teachers' sustainable use of such literacy teaching practices so that they can become teacher leaders, encouraging peers to follow suit.

2 Background

In this section, we first present instructional change informed by the theoretical framework of teacher cognition. We then focus on basic literacy skill development in LESLLA classrooms and envision a change in practice associated with the implementation of a meaning-focused instructional activity: the production of plurilingual and multimodal identity texts.

2.1 Action research, instructional change, and teacher cognition

In order to incite a shift toward a more balanced approach to literacy instruction in Quebec LESLLA classrooms, it is essential to introduce instructional changes in this teaching community. Since teaching is a human behavior, it follows then that sustainable change of practices must first be initiated at the individual level, i.e., that top-down imposition of change is ineffective (García-Martínez et al., 2021). Focusing on teachers at the individual level, Borg (2015)'s teacher cognition model describes "what language teachers think, know and believe" (p. 1). It shows that reciprocal influences are found between teachers' beliefs, their previous schooling experiences, contextual factors (e.g., group size, group absenteeism, absence of funding for school outings), the classroom practices they typically adopt and their professional coursework (i.e., their pre- and/or in-service teacher training experiences). This interdependence between different factors is also noted by Fives and Buehl (2012) in their review of the literature on teacher beliefs, while these researchers also point out that the programs used in schools are among the contextual factors to be considered.

Substantial evidence indicates that the professional learning experiences of in-service teachers, particularly their involvement in action research studies, hold the potential to stimulate instructional change and the implementation of evidence-based teaching practices (Fullan, 2010; Manfra, 2019). Action research is increasingly recognized as transformative due to its emphasis on inquiry into everyday practices, placing teachers at the forefront of research-into-practice initiatives. Through iterative cycles of reflection, action, and evaluation, teachers develop, implement, and refine their instructional practices in a systematic and intentional manner. Essential to teacher inquiry is the notion that knowledge to transform practice arises from the questions and implicit theories (i.e., general beliefs about how one best learns) generated by teachers in the inquiry process (Stern, 1983), drawing on the day-to-day work of teachers as a valuable source of knowledge to inform change. In this sense, teacher professional development seems particularly conducive to change when it takes into account teachers' current beliefs and practices, allows for testing out new classroom practices (Giglio, 2016), and is supported by "safe, trusting, and empathetic" mentoring (DeCapua et al., 2018, p. 21).

Still, sustaining changes, even within action research, proves challenging for teachers without adequate support or encouragement (Martell, 2016). Collaboration with university-based researchers offers intellectual support and resources, fostering the development of communities of inquiry (Manfra, 2019). This is well illustrated in DeCapua et al.'s (2018) case study of a novice English as a second language teacher involved with LESLLA learners for the first time, which shows that transformation of teaching practices does not happen spontaneously. Indeed, alignment with evidence-based findings requires confronting one's "apprenticeship of observation" (i.e., years spent in a classroom as a learner-observer informing one's implicit theories, cf. Lortie, 1975) and beliefs about teaching and learning additional languages (Lx); change is a long-term process involving affective, conative and cognitive factors.

Therefore, work on teachers' cognition and transformation of teaching practices benefits from being part of a "participation paradigm" (Kubanyiova & Feryok, 2015, p. 438). By adopting an evolutionary and dynamic perspective rather than a static one, this paradigm provides a better understanding of teachers' practices. This then requires going beyond one-off observations of teachers and instead adopting research practices more akin to "discourse analytic, narrative and ethnographic approaches" (p. 438). An action research project involving ongoing follow-ups with teachers provides favourable conditions for adopting such a posture and, in so doing, supports the sustainable implementation of new teaching practices associated, in our case, with a more balanced approach to literacy.

2.2 A balanced approach to literacy instruction in LESLLA classrooms

The process of acquiring basic literacy skills in an Lx as an adult may present distinct differences compared to children's first language (L1) literacy acquisition, mainly because older learners are required to develop reading and writing skills in a language they are often just beginning to learn (Pettitt et al., 2021). The extent to which adult immigrants have had the opportunity, through schooling or other informal learning experiences, to process print and written codes before their resettlement likely influences their literacy development journey (Bigelow & King, 2015). In order to accompany all LESLLA learners in the development and strengthening of solid literacy bases, regardless of their prior formal or informal experiences with print, literacy instruction for LESLLA learners must provide both code-focused and meaning-focused learning opportunities that foster the development of print semiotic resources from which to draw to communicate (Vinogradov, 2010). On the one hand, code-focused learning opportunities concentrate on the mechanics of reading and writing (e.g., teaching grapheme-phoneme correspondences, copying letters, sighting words) as well as activities supporting the

development of the motor skills mobilized during the act of writing (Lee & Newsome Irvan, 2015). Meaning-focused literacy development activities, on the other hand, emphasize the use of language and print in context and target receptive or productive skills (Vinogradov, 2013).

The main aim of receptive meaning-focused activities is to enable learners to actively extract and construct meaning from oral and written texts, and to experience the pleasure of engaging with extended texts (Snow, 2017). Typical instructional activities include shared book reading (also called dialogic reading), extensive reading or viewing or moments dedicated to reading/listening alone (LaScotte, 2020). The sources of input for these receptive meaning-focused activities can vary from all written-based (e.g., a postcard from a friend) to oral-based (e.g., a podcast) to multimodal (e.g., a narrated picture story). These varied sources can in turn be the object of awareness-raising tasks where learners are led to discuss the role of the different modes and media of expression to convey meaning (Bigelow & Vinogradov, 2011). Meaning-focused literacy activities can also involve the production of extended (oral, multimodal, written) texts whose content is drawn from the learners' own experiences and communicative intentions (i.e., learner-generated texts such as picture stories, class posters, texts for wordless books; see Vinogradov, 2010, p.6 for other examples). Though meaning-focused activities appear to be less frequently observed in LESLLA classrooms worldwide (Choi & Ziegler, 2015; Ollerhead, 2012; Strube, 2010), some studies report instances of successful implementation of such practices (e.g., extensive listening in LaScotte, 2020; extensive reading in Laymon, 2015). Another promising type of learner-generated meaning-focused text could be plurilingual multimodal identity texts.

2.3 An example of learner-generated texts: plurilingual and multimodal identity texts

When producing identity texts (Cummins & Early, 2011), learners are encouraged to express themselves about different aspects of their personal history (e.g., their family, immigration journey, dreams). Not only do these texts draw on their life experiences as a basis for meaningful learning contexts, but they also help learners embrace their multifaceted identities. The use of all languages in the learners' repertoire is encouraged, both in the production process and in the final product, taking advantage of skills developed in languages other than the target language, following the example of translanguaging pedagogies (García & Wei, 2014; Cenoz & Gorter, 2020) or plurilingual approaches (Armand et al., 2008; Auger & Le Pichon-Vorstman, 2021). Furthermore, different modalities (written texts, oral recordings, photos, collages, etc.) can be used for the creation of plurilingual identity texts. This makes it possible to capitalize on the various semiotic resources available to LESLLA learners, developing new ones in the process.

The creation of plurilingual and multimodal identity texts has been the object of empirical studies conducted with different immigrant background learner populations (Bernhard et al., 2006; Prasad, 2016; Vatz Laaroussi et al., 2015). Closely related to our context is Flint et al.'s (2019) ethnographic study focusing on two teachers working in a summer literacy program offered to 12 youths between the ages of 15 and 18 who reported between 5 and 13 years of previous schooling experience. Though the two participating teachers were monolingual English speakers, their teaching practices included the use of plurilingual and multimodal modes of expression (e.g., heart maps, *All about me* presentations, and graffiti boards). The findings suggest that the immigrant youths developed strong bonds with their peers and teachers over the summer and showed increased and sustained academic engagement.

Even more closely related to the current sociocultural context, Armand and Maynard (2021) and Maynard and Armand (2021) studied the production of plurilingual identity

texts by immigrant adolescents with limited schooling experience who were learning Lx French in welcoming classes[1] in the province of Quebec. In their action research project involving 133 students, they found that the students who took part in the production of plurilingual identity texts were more cognitively and emotionally engaged in writing tasks than the students in a control group where such a practice was not implemented. They also found that the students who took part in the intervention showed greater development of their writing skills; they wrote longer texts with better-developed ideas, using a greater variety of high frequency French words and expressions that they could spell correctly.

The use of plurilingual and multimodal texts to promote expression of identity has also been explored with LESLLA learners in various contexts with the use of participatory digital visual methods (e.g., Photo-elicitation, PhotoVoice, VideoVoice, Community Filmmaking; Kendrick, et al., 2022), although LESLLA teachers may be reluctant to tackle sensitive subjects related to one's identity in the classroom (Waterhouse, 2017). In her review study, Lypka (2022) argues that combining oral, written, visual and digital semiotic resources to discuss emotions and identities provides the differentiated scaffold for learners to successfully engage in meaning-making with emerging literacy skills while allowing them to gain better insights into the communicative purposes of the different semiotic resources at their disposal. These, in turn, provide rich experiences of authorship and literacy use for (inter)personal purposes. Encouraging LESLLA teachers to implement activities which involve learner-generated content such as plurilingual and multimodal identity texts may thus provide an ideal context to initiate a change of literacy practices towards a more balanced approach to literacy instruction.

3 The current study

Generally recognized in the field of education for its contribution to change and adoption of sustainable teaching practices (Madsen et al., 2023), action research is the general research methodology used in our study. Operationalizing the idea that "practice always forms and transforms the one who practices" (Kemmis et al., 2014, p. 25), this action research aims to encourage teachers to adopt more meaning-focused practices, in this case through the integration of plurilingual and multimodal identity texts. To this end, our study consisted of documenting the meaning-focused activities present in the participating teachers' practices and accompanying a reflection on their practices to initiate any possible changes in favour of a more balanced approach to literacy instruction. More specifically, adopting an inquiry reflection model (Manfra, 2019), we followed a four-stage process:

1) an initial portrait of the meaning-focused literacy activities used by the four participating teachers;
2) a group discussion on new practices to consider, based on existing practices;
3) the implementation of a new meaning-focused practice suggested by the research team;
4) a group discussion to provide feedback on this implementation.

Through stages 1 to 4, we sought to answer the two following questions:

1) What are the initial meaning-focused literacy activities used by the four participating teachers?

1. In the province of Quebec (Canada), immigrant parents are required by law to enroll their children in the French-medium public school system. When children do not speak French or are behind grade level for their age, they often attend "welcoming classes" before being partially and gradually integrated into regular classes with the rest of the student body.

2) After discussions with the research team, how do the collaborating teachers respond to the implementation of a new meaning-focused literacy activity?

Answering these questions will allow us to highlight the challenges and affordances encountered by the participating teachers while adopting new practices associated with a more balanced approach to literacy instruction in LESLLA classrooms.

3 Methodology

3.1 Participants

Our action research project involves four LESLLA teachers working in two adult education centres in Quebec, Canada. We chose to recruit teachers with diverse backgrounds working in different contexts. Rachel[2] and Mélissa teach in a centre located in the second largest city of the province. This centre welcomes on average 30 full-time groups of adult newcomers learning Lx French, including 10 LESLLA groups. Both teachers have degrees in French Lx education and have had experience teaching LESLLA learners for 10 and 5 years, respectively. The other two participating teachers, Gabrielle and Élisabeth, work in a much smaller education centre in south-central Quebec. This centre had only recently welcomed enough low-literate newcomers to create groups composed solely of LESLLA learners. Gabrielle holds a bachelor's degree in French Lx education and has 11 years of experience teaching LESLLA learners (previously in a context where LESLLA learners were in the same group as their literate peers, and more recently in a LESLLA classroom). Élisabeth had studied French philology before she was hired as a teacher when LESLLA classrooms were opened in that centre three years ago.

In both centres, LESLLA groups were composed of adult newcomers to the province of Quebec who had reported having attended less than 9 years of formal schooling prior to their resettlement. Since Quebec's Ministry of Education has yet to adopt a framework of reference to guide LESLLA practitioners, both centres use custom-made programs and adopt their own placement procedures. The program used in Rachel and Mélissa's centre is organised around the realization of communicative intentions (e.g., to introduce oneself, to fill out a simple form), loosely resembling the content and organisation of Literacy and Second Language Learning for the Linguistic Integration of Adult Migrants (LASLLIAM) reference guide (Minuz et al., 2022). In comparison, the program used in Gabrielle and Élisabeth's centre is code-oriented and lists technical skills to develop such as "trace capital letters E, F, H, I, L, T" and "answer a question formulated with the verb *faire* [to do] by substituting the subject with a pronoun".

Rachel and Mélissa taught LESLLA learners enrolled in the same level, which roughly corresponds to a Level 2 on the technical literacy scales LASLLIAM (Minuz et al., 2022). The majority of students in their groups had been enrolled in that level for more than one term. Rachel's group was composed of 17 learners, and Mélissa's of 13. In both groups, learners were between 30 and 67 years of age. Their L1s were Kayah, Kinyarwanda, Swahili, Spanish, and Arabic.

In the small education centre where Gabrielle and Élisabeth taught, students were generally attending a LESLLA classroom for the first time. They shared the same L1s as the learners in the other centre, except that no one had Kayah as an L1 and some learners' L1 was Haitian Creole. Learners were between 18 and 73 years old, with the majority being in their forties. Gabrielle taught 7 LESLLA learners who were at various entry points in their literacy development journey, which loosely translate to Levels 1 or 2 on the LASLLIAM technical literacy scales. Élisabeth taught 11 learners who all corresponded to Levels 3 or 4 on the technical literacy scales of LASLLIAM.

The teachers and LESLLA learners all consented to taking part in the study (approval

2. Pseudonyms were given to participants.

no. 2022-339/19-10-2022, Université Laval ethics committee). The teachers' consent was obtained in writing, while the learners' consent was obtained verbally. To this end, the project was explained in class by the teachers and the research team, and a list of participating students was compiled. Explanations were given in French, the only language shared by all present. However, students were encouraged to talk to each other in any language they felt comfortable to make sure they understood the nature of the project and could give informed consent. As proposed when the project was presented and consent obtained, some students asked for their face to be blurred in the video recordings.

3.2 Data collection and analysis – Research question 1

To document the participating teachers' literacy teaching practices, we visited them at their regular class time during periods they had identified as being dedicated to literacy instruction. We chose to observe the teachers' practices rather than access them through interviews to better understand what actually happens in the classroom, knowing that teachers' declared practices sometimes diverge from their actual practices (Borg, 2015) and that teachers' beliefs about literacy development and meaning-based practices are not always aligned with research findings. Non-participant observation sessions were held in each of the four teachers' classrooms over the course of 6 weeks. Several periods of one or two hours were videorecorded. Field notes were also gathered by the research team members present. In all, 25 hours (between 5 and 8 hours per classroom) of observed teaching practices were collected and analyzed.

To analyze the 25 hours (1,500 minutes) of observed teaching practices, we first provided a general description of the activities. We then coded the main aim of each activity (technical skills, comprehension or transmission of meaning). This allowed us to determine whether the activities were code-based or meaning-based. Meaning-based activities engaged learners in meaning comprehension or in meaning production. These activities involve the contextualized comprehension of written or oral text or the production of learner-generated texts; they are thus distinct from code-based activities focusing on the decontextualized development of technical skills (e.g., reading isolated syllables, words, and sentences, as opposed to reading the same words in a short text while discussing its content). We tallied the number of activities and calculated their associated duration in minutes. Our aim here was not to compare teachers, but to identify a pool of existing teaching practices on which to base new practices leading to the production of plurilingual and multimodal identity texts by students.

3.3 Data collection and analysis – Research question 2

Following analysis of our classroom observations, we planned two training sessions with the participating teachers. In the first training session, we presented them with the results of our first research question. We explained the way in which the classroom observations were analyzed, focusing on the identification of meaning-focused activities. We then shared examples of meaning-focused interventions that have been the subject of empirical work (e.g., Photo-elicitation, PhotoVoice, VideoVoice, Community Filmmaking; Kendrink, et al., 2022) and that closely resemble the production of identity texts. At the end of the session, we suggested that the teachers themselves try out a teaching practice involving the production of learner-generated texts based on personal photos. Finally, on the second training day one month later, the teachers reported on the intervention they each had tried out.

The data used to answer our second research question thus come from the recordings of the two training sessions and the field notes taken by the research team during these sessions. For descriptive and exploratory purposes, we analyzed these data to highlight how the new practices piloted by the teachers correspond to meaning-based activities and learner-generated text.

4 Results

In this section, we first present the teachers' meaning-focused practices we observed before the two training sessions (1st research question). We then describe how the collaborating teachers respond to the implementation of a new meaning-focused literacy activity after the training session (2nd research question).

4.1 Meaning-focused literacy practices observed before the training sessions

We should mention that few meaning-focused teaching practices were observed in the four classrooms at the outset, while decontextualized work on technical skill development was very much present (≈ 1,200 out of 1,500 minutes). For example, in many instances, we observed syllable reading or spelling activities, or activities in which students had to order words into grammatically correct sentences. These interventions tended to always include words or word parts that were familiar to the learners, while, however, showing no connections to how these technical skills could be useful in real-life communicative situations. In addition, daily language routines accounted for a significant proportion of class time. Although these routines often made use of authentic materials (e.g., a website for the local weather forecast), their focus was on technical skills (copying down the words describing the following day's weather, e.g., *nuageux* [cloudy], *venteux* [windy]) and rarely on production of meaning with print. Indeed, such routines did not allow learners to generate text themselves or to understand the overall meaning of a text in line with an authentic communication intention.

Our analysis revealed that the four participating teachers adopted few meaning-focused teaching practices. We identified a total of ≈181 minutes (out of 1,500) involving activities where either global listening or reading comprehension was the target and ≈85 minutes (out of 1,500) involving activities targeting oral or written learner-generated production. It is important to note that these two broad categories (i.e., comprehension and production) are not mutually exclusive, as the same instructional practice may have required both comprehension and production of meaning. In all, six meaning-focused teaching practices, described below, were identified:

1) *Writing questions about an apartment advertisement.* After having completed code-focused activities aiming to review vocabulary on housing and question formation, students were asked to write questions of their choice regarding an apartment they would be interested in renting from a selection of authentic advertisements displayed on the board and on individual handouts. Comprehension of these authentic texts had previously been the subject of group activities (which we did not observe, however). This was the only code-focused activity that integrated some time for learners to communicate, in writing, their own meaning. This activity was observed only once (≈42 minutes).
2) *Answering questions about a recent class volunteering outing.* Following a volunteering activity at the local community kitchen, students were asked to freely answer questions about the activity. The teachers used photographs taken during the outing to question the learners about the duties they had performed. The questions covered language forms that had previously been explicitly taught (i.e., specific question words, action verbs typically carried out in the kitchen, common food items; focus on language). This activity, which included a focus on code within a predominantly meaning-based activity, was observed twice, in two different participating classes (total of ≈75 minutes).
3) *Writing greeting cards.* As part of the unit on "Writing simple greetings and thanks" (MELS, 2015), students were invited to work with the teacher to discuss the language useful for writing a greeting card to a hypothetical interlocutor.

This communicative intention was further contextualized by referring to events recently encountered by a learner whose sister had given birth a week earlier. This activity was observed only once (≈28 minutes).

4) *Reading a text about someone who is ill.* We found two examples of meaning-based reading activities in our data, in two classrooms (total of ≈29 minutes). For example, in a whole-class activity, a text about a man suffering from flu-like symptoms was used (*Colin a la grippe* [Colin has the flu]). In this activity, following a whole-class reading of the story, students were asked to freely answer questions about the text. The questions followed a model used by the teacher with different texts on similar themes.
5) *Individually read a book of your choice.* Short periods of independent reading of books chosen by the LESLLA learners themselves were observed in two classes (total ≈17 minutes). On these occasions, learners chose a book from a selection made available by the teacher and read independently at their desks. This selection includes, for example, short books in which color pictures/photos are accompanied by a few sentences. They might have to do with subjects such as means of transportation, children's stories, or professions. According to our observations, these readings were not subsequently discussed in class.
6) *Initiating spontaneous classroom discussions on diverse topics (e.g., marriage, birthdays, transportation).* At certain points in our observations, all teachers but Mélissa spontaneously initiated a classroom discussion on a given topic, without apparent prior planning (total of ≈47 minutes). The topics stemmed from other classroom activities (e.g., talking about seasons, bus commutes, emergency calls). These discussions were usually very brief, often less than a minute, and only three times did they last over two minutes.

4.2 Meaning-focused teaching practices implemented by the teachers after the training session

The results shown in 4.1 were presented to the participating teachers, who received them warmly. They were eager to explore how to integrate more meaning-focused activities while still respecting the objectives prescribed by their respective programs. They discussed two main limitations in regard to the production of plurilingual and multimodal identity texts that could occur in their context. On the one hand, they feared their learners might be confused by the tasks or require intensive guidance throughout the project, as they are not used to writing freely on topics of their choice. On the other hand, the teachers were also uncertain about how to manage their class when most of their students would be writing on different topics, as they usually favored highly structured and whole-class activities. These initial reactions reveal, as Borg's (2015) conceptual model suggests, that beliefs about learners' capacities as well as current teaching practices may hinder the process of instructional change.

Among the different options presented to the teachers during the first training session to prompt learner-generated texts, the use of photographs and objects belonging to the learners was the most compelling to them, although they reported on past experiences in which they had to remind students to bring the material daily for weeks before they could start the activity. When we asked them to test out any activity inspired by the content of the training session in their classes, the participants quickly had ideas. One month later, the second training session began with a moment dedicated to sharing and describing the activity they had tried. We present the results of these implementations for each teacher below.

First, Élisabeth reported that she had not found the time to plan and implement a new activity. She had had multiple commitments at her learning centre and ended up not being in class for an extended period. She said feeling overwhelmed by her responsibilities

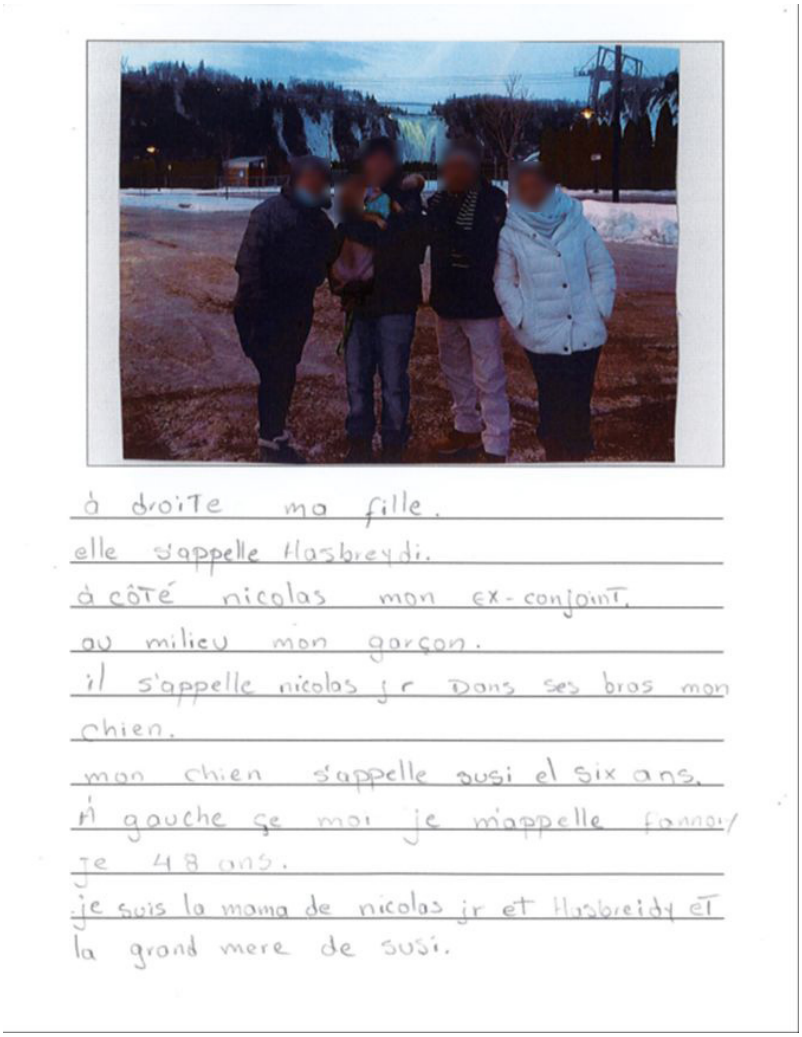
and rushed to teach all the skills required by her program. Still, she mentioned looking forward to having the chance to try out activities involving learner-generated texts.

Gabrielle reported that she had implemented a pedagogical sequence on the topic of food and on the development of the accurate use of determiners, as per the objectives listed in her learning centre's program. To begin, she first made banana bread and asked students to taste it and guess the ingredients, leading to an exploration of different banana bread recipes. She then asked students to bring pictures of meals they liked or frequently ate, which, to her surprise, required fewer reminders than she had expected. The whole class looked at the pictures brought in by their classmates and guessed the ingredients, searched online for recipes and pictures of the ingredients, and talked about their culinary customs and habits. Learners did most of the activity orally, without writing, and Gabrielle mentioned that they did not use determiners, even if it was one of her objectives.

Mélissa decided to work on family descriptions, a communicative intention found in her program which, unlike Gabrielle and Élisabeth's, is not code-oriented. She first showed a picture of her own family and described the relationships between the family members, leading to her drawing her genealogical tree. She reported that the learners understood its content more easily than she had expected. Then, Mélissa asked them to send her pictures of their family members, which involved several reminders given in class orally and on social media. She showed the students' pictures to the class and asked the students to name the people and relationships in their photos. She noticed that the learners did not use the grammatical forms she had targeted and modeled in her activity, making her ambivalent about the effectiveness of the activity, but she was still enthusiastic about its potential. She was particularly impressed by the larger number of vocabulary words she could cover (e.g., *ex-conjoint* [ex-husband], *bru* [daughter-in-law]). Students then started writing texts following Mélissa's example, but had not finished at the time of the second training session, as the sequence lasted more than three weeks. Mélissa was extremely enthusiastic about the new learning affordances she discovered with the use of learner-generated texts and reported she would continue integrating this practice with future groups of LESLLA learners.

Rachel proposed a similar theme and final task as Mélissa did; this is not surprising since her students were at the same level in the same centre. She showed her own family photo to her students and then wrote a short text about her family members while asking comprehension questions and adding information that students wanted to know. Afterwards, Rachel helped the learners copy a vocabulary list of family members and asked them to bring their own family pictures to class. Some learners did not bring any pictures, but each still wrote a text about their family (text length varied from two sentences up to a full page), mostly independently or by consulting Rachel with specific questions. It was the first time Rachel had witnessed her group writing freely; she was impressed by their autonomy and by the texts they wrote (see Figure 1), highlighting their length and textual cohesion, as well as their lexical and syntactic creativity. She enthusiastically reported that this experience allowed her to better access what each of her learners was capable of writing compared to her usual structured writing activities. She still wondered how to effectively teach grammatical objectives when learners' needs vary.

Figure 1. Example of a text written by a student in Rachel's class



5 Discussion

In this section, we discuss the results for both research questions in light of previous empirical studies.

5.1 Discussion of research question 1

Our first research question aimed at drawing an initial portrait of the meaning-focused literacy activities used by the four participating teachers. To answer this question, we analyzed the extent to which the teaching practices adopted by the four participating teachers promoted meaning comprehension or production with the goal of developing literacy among LESLLA learners. Overall, we found that only a small proportion of class time was dedicated to meaning-focused learning activities as there was an overwhelming focus on the development of technical skills in a decontextualized manner. Still, it should also be noted that the participating teachers had adopted some meaning-based practices which could be used to help learners produce plurilingual and multimodal identity texts. Indeed, the practices we observed revealed that the implementation of new, meaning-centered literacy teaching practices related to plurilingual and multimodal identity text production activities would involve certain challenges, but could also be supported by affordances on which to build (Cummins & Early, 2011). It is also worth mentioning that

our results reflect the periods in class when the four teachers had told us they would be working on literacy development. It may be possible that they use more literacy teaching practices than we were able to observe; this is a limitation of our study.

When taking a closer look at the six meaning-based activities documented before the training sessions, we found some commonalities between them. First, we noted that they were all structured, whole-class activities (except for 6 - *Initiating spontaneous classroom discussions on diverse topics*), where teachers and students have clear roles and responsibilities. Second, all observed meaning-focused activities but 5 (*Individually read a book of your choice*), involved students answering or asking questions. To engage students in freely asking and answering questions, the teachers tended to use some kind of prompt (e.g., a picture, an outing, a written text). Third, opportunities given to learners to produce extended texts were limited, especially when print semiotic resources were involved. We indeed note that students only produced short sentences. The fact that few meaning-focused activities were observed was expected, as Fortier et al. (2022) in their large-scale study on Quebec LESLLA teachers' reported teaching practices had documented that they relied heavily on code-based practices. In turn, this finding is not entirely surprising since French Lx classrooms in Quebec largely adopt code-based instruction (Jean & Simard, 2011; Zuniga & Simard, 2016). In addition, the observed meaning-focused interventions were typically teacher-led whole-class activities. This finding resonates with previous studies carried out with LESLLA teachers in Quebec (Fillion, 2021) and in other contexts (Benseman, 2014; Colliander et al. 2018; Ollerhead, 2012), which reported favouring teacher-centered activities based on the belief that LESLLA learners lack the autonomy to engage in more student-centered activities. Thus, the significant gap existing between the teachers' initial practices and those needed for supporting students' production of learner-generated texts constitutes a major challenge in the implementation of this kind of meaning-focused practice.

We used these findings to prepare the content of the next training session with the aim of discussing the means of facilitating a transition towards a more balanced approach to literacy instruction in the four participating LESLLA classrooms. To achieve this goal, we noted that LESLLA learners needed to gain more experience a) producing (plurilingual /multimodal) extended text and b) discussing aspects of their identities. To address a), we used the greeting card/apartment advertisement activities as an affordance. We posited that the participating teachers could replicate this kind of activities with other genres of text, and with the possibility of addressing them to real interlocutors so that these texts could have meaning beyond the classroom: postcards for relatives, questions for a home owner renting a room, recipes for a neighbour, poems to be read at a celebration, or photo exhibition for classmates in other groups (for other ideas, see Vinogradov, 2011). In addition, the participating teachers could also involve groups of real interlocutors composed of monolingual speakers of French as well as speakers of other languages known by the learners to allow them to experience using all of their semiotic resources, including their multilingualism, in a variety of meaningful contexts for (inter) personal purposes (Wall & Thapa, 2023), thus basing meaning-based practices on translanguaging pedagogies or plurilingual approaches (Armand et al., 2008; Auger & Le Pichon-Vorstman, 2021; Cenoz & Gorter, 2020; García & Wei, 2014).

To address b) and offer opportunities for LESLLA learners to experience discussing aspects of their identities, we drew on another affordance in the participating teachers' initial practices: they often used meaningful prompts (i.e., real-life events recently or commonly experienced by the learners) to foster their students' ability to convey their own meaning. As suggested by Kendrick et al. (2022), this type of practice, drawing on aspects of learners' life experiences (e.g., the most important people in their lives, their favourite area of their neighbourhood, things they enjoy doing at work), could be scheduled more regularly. Waterhouse (2017) demonstrated that not all LESLLA teachers feel at ease discussing more sensitive aspects of their learners' lives, such as the possible

hardships experienced during their pre-, peri- and post-migration journeys. One way to navigate this seemingly uncomfortable space could be to propose to learners, as Lypka (2022) suggests, to bring their own prompts to class (photos, videos, meaningful objects) to discuss aspects of their identities they wish to disclose and discuss.

Despite the challenge associated with the significant gap between the teachers' initial practices and the meaning-focused activities targeted, we were able to identify affordances on which to capitalize. Therefore, we were positive we could encourage the participating teachers to build on the learning opportunities they typically offer and provide contexts for learners to gain firsthand experience of authorship and more confidence conveying their intended meaning, using print or other semiotic resources at their disposal.

5.2 Discussion of research question 2

The answer to our second research question suggests that, in the course of an action research project consisting of iterative cycles of reflection, action, and evaluation, implementing activities aligned with a more balanced approach to literacy instruction seems possible among teachers who typically rely on code-focused activities. In this study, the teachers' existing practices act as a starting point for exploring new activities, which are then tested and discussed with a supportive team of fellow teachers and researchers (Kubanyiova & Feryok, 2015). At the same time, the resulting reflection sheds light, indirectly, on some of the teachers' beliefs regarding LESLLA learners' development of literacy. This type of in-service teachers' professional training experience makes it possible to take into account both these beliefs and the teachers' current practices, with the aim of developing new practices that are better aligned with research-based recommendations. That said, two challenges emerge from the results obtained.

Firstly, we observe, as shown in Fives and Buehl's (2012) literature review and Borg's (2015) model of teacher cognition, that contextual factors intervene in teachers' practices and their beliefs associated with these practices. For example, in Élisabeth's case, her multiple commitments at her learning centre limited her time with her students and prevented her from testing a new meaning-based practice in her classroom. In addition, the influence of the code-oriented program used in her centre can be felt in Gabrielle's experience, where the activity she tested explicitly included a grammatical objective, namely the use of determiners. Furthermore, Gabrielle expressed a mixed opinion about the outcome of the activity she piloted as she noticed that students did not develop the expected grammatical skills.

Mélissa and Rachel also reported a challenge associated with the integration of grammatical objectives within the meaning-based activities they piloted. However, they tested more elaborate activities than Gabrielle's, and they also allocated more class time to them. It may be that the program used in Mélissa and Rachel's centre, which is structured according to communicative intentions, allows the teachers more freedom to adopt a more balanced approach to literacy instruction. Rachel seemed particularly satisfied with her activity and was impressed by her students. In conclusion, it seems that teachers are not necessarily opposed to the use of meaning-based activities. Rather, their hesitancy is associated with contextual factors (Borg, 2015) such as external pressures they feel in relation to the teaching of grammatical content because of the curriculum used in their centre, which is also reflected in their teaching practices observed prior to the training sessions. Teachers' beliefs about programs and how to refer to them thus seem to act as mediators that lead to certain pedagogical choices (Fives & Buehl, 2012).

In this sense, the implementation of new meaning-focused activities by Mélissa and Rachel, encouraged by their program organised around the realization of communicative intentions, seems to have brought about changes in their views on their students' abilities. This can be detected in the enthusiasm they showed when reporting these prac-

tices to the research team and in their desire to replicate and further develop the activities they had tested. Thus, their beliefs about their students seem to have been influenced by the practices tested in the action research. The positive outcome emerging from the implementation of new meaning-focused practices constitutes in itself an affordance on which to build for more extensive implementation of such practices.

Moreover, in the case of the three teachers who piloted a new activity, we can also see that by choosing to use a student experience worth sharing as a starting point for writing, they already valued these funds of knowledge (González et al., 2005). Such positive beliefs about their students' experiences could be further exploited, particularly in terms of the use of all their languages in learning activities, as discussed below.

Secondly, while identity texts (Cummins & Early, 2011) are part of the trend towards plurilingual approaches (Armand et al., 2008; Auger & Le Pichon-Vorstman, 2021) or translanguaging pedagogies (García & Wei, 2014; Cenoz & Gorter, 2020), the implementation of such plurilingual activities appears to be a challenge for teachers. Indeed, the activities tested by the teachers did not explicitly incorporate the mobilization of the students' different languages. Moreover, the possibility of relying on their students' linguistic repertoire was not mentioned by the teachers in the second training session although they did not show resistance in this respect. We therefore conclude that it is a lack of training that prevents this practice from being attempted. That said, the three meaning-based practices tested out by Gabrielle, Mélissa and Élisabeth all involve a strong emphasis on modeling. The use of other languages in this modeling stage, whether by the teachers themselves or by other plurilingual speakers, could promote the use of plurilingual approaches. Furthermore, in the activities that were tested, the students shared their production, orally or in writing, with real interlocutors, i.e., the other students in the group. The use of languages other than French in these meaning production and comprehension contexts could thus be emphasized, whether to be better understood by certain persons, or to open students up to linguistic diversity while enhancing their skills in other languages.

6 Conclusion

The findings reported in the current study highlight challenges and affordances met by teachers in the implementation of meaning-focused activities akin to the production of multilingual and multimodal identity texts (Cummins & Early, 2011). These challenges emerge mostly from the scarcity of such activities in the initial teaching practices observed; implementation of meaning-focused activities thus implies a major paradigm shift on the part of teachers. However, affordances arising from these initial practices have been mobilized in discussing new possible meaning-focused activities, in iterative cycles of reflection, action, and evaluation involving close mentoring from the research team. It shows how instructional change can occur during an action research project taking into account teachers' cognition (Borg, 2015). Nevertheless, in order to facilitate a more extensive and sustainable implementation of such practices with the ultimate goal of promoting the adoption of a balanced approach to literacy instruction, longer-term support would be needed.

More broadly, our project offers avenues for action and reflection to other researchers and practitioners interested in the development of literacy among LESLLA learners. In this respect, supportive mentoring from a research team in the course of an action research study seems to encourage instructional changes towards evidence-based practices.

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