

Case study—Language or Literacy? Stories of Second Language Learners in Adult Basic Education

by Linda M. Phillips and Karen L. Vavra

■ Case study is a common method of inquiry in qualitative research and, although less common, is also used in quantitative studies. Many researchers argue that case study is “not a methodological choice but rather a choice of what is to be studied” (Stake p. 435). What is to be studied is the crucial decision to be made in the conduct of case study research. The most important word is “the”—that is, what is of interest in “the” specific case to be studied, what is unique about “the” case selected to be studied, how “the” case is selected, and other similar considerations.

Medicine and law are two disciplines that provide numerous examples of what makes a good case study. In medicine, a patient may present with all of the symptoms of the influenza virus. The patient’s condition worsens and does not respond to treatment for influenza. Doctors begin to see the patient’s condition as unique, and so, as the condition deteriorates, the patient’s condition becomes a case study. Doctors set about detailing and profiling the condition in pursuit of deviant considerations or emerging patterns. The patient continues to worsen and the case study intensifies until such time that doctors determine the patient has HIV. In law, precedent-setting cases are those where a case comes before the courts with similar issues or facts, but as the case is studied and analyzed it is seen to be exceptional to all similar and previous cases. In 2003, the city of Toronto passed a bylaw banning the use of pesticides on lawns and gardens. The lawn-care industry appealed the decision challenging that the protection of health and safety already existed within provincial and federal laws, thereby making it redundant for Toronto to establish its own bylaw. Many municipalities watched the case with interest and concern about whether they could pass their own bylaws. The pesticide bylaw in Toronto was the first of its kind in Canada, and thus became a precedent-setting case when it was upheld by the Supreme Court of Canada.

Case study research has been used extensively in other disciplines including anthropology and sociology (Hamel, Dufour and Fortin). However, case study methods have been the subject of much debate on the conflict of methods and the role of case studies in theoretical validation and generalizability. Notwithstanding the debates, the most relevant and enduring features of case-study research are of interest here.

Several strategies of inquiry obtain in case study research. Identification, type and purpose are among the most important. Specific articulation of the identification of a particular case is pertinent in terms of whether it is an illustrative or deviant case. The identification process is practical because it allows for consideration of each of the three types of case study: *intrinsic* (greater understanding of the particular case is sought by the researcher), *instrumental* (insight is

Research Practice

Our focus in this column is **case study research**. A recent collection, *Language or Literacy? Stories of Second Language Learners in Adult Basic Education*, reveals important insights and information.

sought into an issue or generalization) and *collective* (may involve a number of cases in order to investigate a phenomenon, population or general condition) (Stake). According to White, casework in the social sciences may serve three purposes: identification, explanation and control. Many decisions about the case selection, how long and how much to study are affected by the contexts and situations in which the case study is set and how the study evolves. How to focus on and interpret the case observations into the report requires further decision-making guided by the goal or purpose of the case study and what is distinctive about “the” case.

There are numerous examples of case study research in education. Of interest to *Literacies* is a collection of case studies in *Language or Literacy? Stories of Second Language Learners in Adult Basic Education*, edited by Robin Millar in 2008.

Research purpose and methodology

In 2006 and 2007, the Centre for Education and Work in Winnipeg conducted a case study of adult second-language learners. The purpose of the study was to examine the range of programs, languages and cultural backgrounds, methods of learning and barriers for second-language learners in various adult basic education programs in Canada. Eight language and literacy researchers from across Canada under the direction of Robin

Millar conducted ten case studies in rural and urban sites including Halifax, Montreal, Toronto, Winnipeg, Calgary and Vancouver. Nine of the ten case studies were conducted in English and one was carried out in French. The research engaged an ethnographic approach with three specific purposes stated: (1) to examine the ways that adult second-language learners develop and acquire reading, writing and communication skills in English or French, (2) to begin to “define the landscape of learners in a variety of programs and learning situations,” and (3) to describe the “rich and complex learning histories of new Canadians” (p. 16).

The case study participants were selected from a range of literacy and adult basic education programs including: college, community-based, workplace and

employment preparation, tutoring, and ESL outreach. The study focused on English-speaking (ES) and French-speaking (FS) literacy learners who had sufficient communicative competence in English or French to participate in mainstream adult literacy or basic education programs rather than English as a Second Language (ESL) language learners, defined as “students with low oral skills and little or no literacy in their first language” (p. 14). The selection of case study participants was guided by the following inclusion criteria:

- Participants have resided in Canada for a minimum of five years.
- Participants exhibited conversational competence in English or French.
- Participants have not attended post-secondary education in their country of origin or in their first language.
- Participants have actively participated in literacy learning in Canada.

Second-language learners are highly motivated and persistent...but it can be difficult for them to find appropriate and effective programs to serve their particular needs because they have diverse literacy levels, work schedules and life circumstances.

The researchers relied on program coordinators to recommend participants who matched the criteria. The case studies included structured interviews of program coordinators, instructors, tutors and case study participants. Where permissible, the researchers carried out observations of the programs, classes or tutoring sessions. Interview and observational data at each site provided insight into program composition and the

experiences and perspectives of the adult second-language learners and their program coordinators/instructors/tutors.

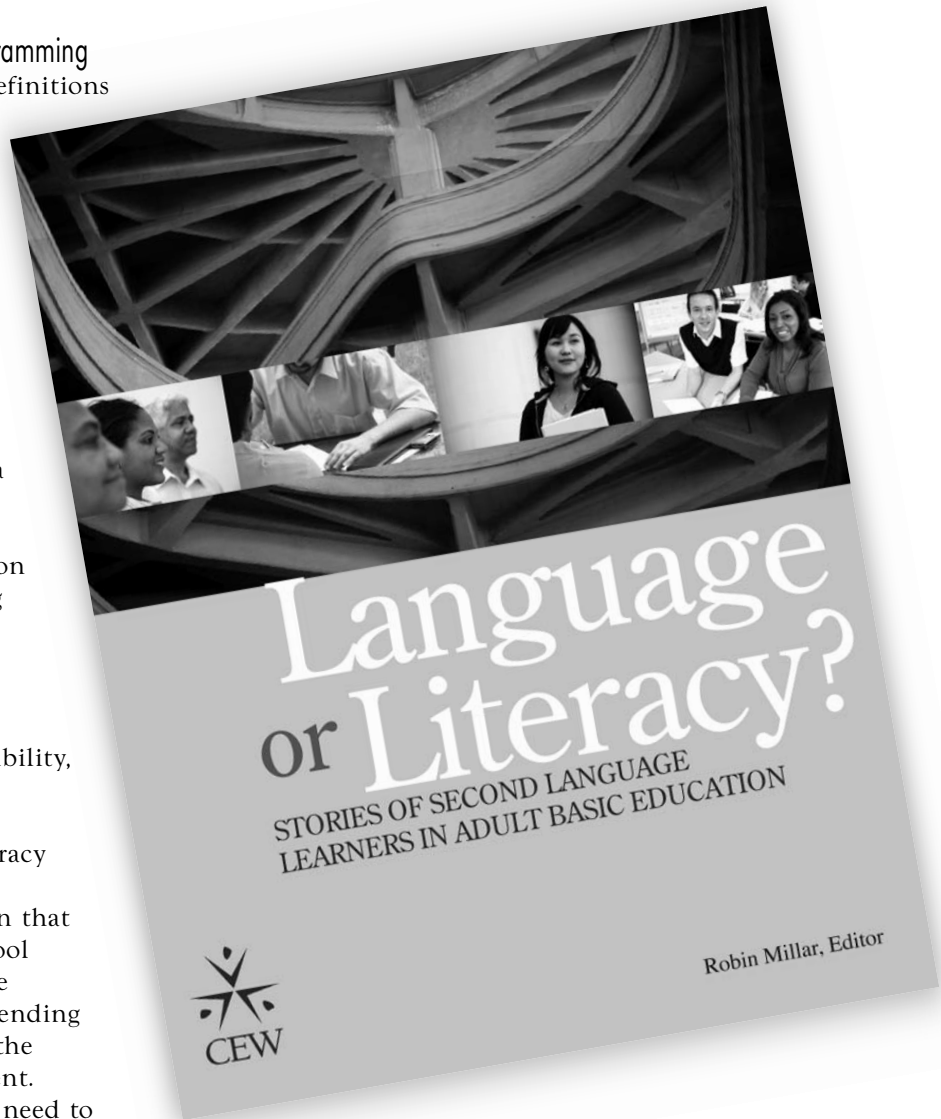
Analysis

The analysis reported by the researchers is summarized under the following three headings: ES/FS literacy learners’ profiles and programming; observations; and recommendations for research, policy and practice. A section on literacy teaching and practices was also included in the book by Millar. However, since it was not part of the original three purposes of the case studies and because of length restrictions, it is not included here.

ES/FS literacy learners' profiles and programming

According to the research team, definitions and program options for ES/FS literacy learners vary dramatically across Canada and are thus problematic. Most second-language programs serve a diverse group of learners with a range of second-language backgrounds, literacy levels and needs. In contrast to previous practice, programs are no longer specifically designed and targeted to particular groups of learners. ES literacy learners attend a wide range of programs including conventional literacy, programs for immigrants, and adult basic education to improve their reading and writing skills in order to advance their qualifications, job prospects, and opportunities. The key factors that influenced the program the learners selected included availability, accessibility, cost and flexibility.

The ten case studies highlight the differing characteristics of ES/FS literacy learners, including varied levels of education in their countries of origin that range from no schooling to high-school education in their first language. The common motivation reported for attending language and literacy programs was the learner's desire for gainful employment. Specifically, participants expressed a need to improve their English or French reading, writing and communication skills in order to attain better jobs. They demonstrated interest and persistence in seeking out opportunities to learn more about Canadian culture and to improve their language and literacy skills. Researchers reported that media (including television, radio, newspapers and magazines) played an important role in helping ES/FS literacy learners to learn about Canadian culture and improve their English or French. Additionally, they observed that these learners capitalized on informal learning opportunities in daily life to improve their language and literacy skills by engaging in conversations with friends and colleagues. Furthermore, the collective case studies highlight that ES/FS literacy learners need flexible, low-cost programming that accommodates their work schedules and personal needs.



Observations

During the conduct of the case studies, the researchers made the following observations:

- Adult basic education programs serve a diverse range of language and literacy learners.
- ES/FS literacy instructors, learners and programs require additional resources and supports.
- The collective case studies showed that there is emerging evidence to support specific instructional approaches and practices for ES/FS learners. However, it was evident that instructors require additional training to effectively address the needs of ES/FS learners.
- ES/FS learners need support to establish realistic short- and long-term goals that focus

on "content (reading to learn) rather than process (learning to read)." (p. 109) Instructors need appropriate resources to support learners in goal setting.

- ES/FS learners need opportunities to develop their communication skills by conversing in English or French through small group discussions.

Recommendations and implications for research, policy and practice

Based on the observations from what we call the collective case study reported in Millar's book, the following recommendations for research, policy and practice were offered:

- Increase research funding for program delivery options, referrals, assessment approaches and placement in language and literacy programs across Canada.
- Continue to provide flexible, low-cost programming options.
- Add program options for ES/FS learners including tutoring, mentoring, or conversing.
- Be responsive to the fact that immigrants who attend ES/FS literacy programs require ongoing support for the complex language needs that affect their reading and writing skill development.

The Millar collection of case study research on Canadian adult second-language learners and programs provides an important foundation for understanding the needs of ES/FS literacy learners who have resided in Canada for more than five years but still require continued support in language and literacy development. Although the findings from case study research are not typically generalizable, these ten case studies contribute significant information about the diverse contexts of second-language programs for ES/FS literacy learners across Canada. More importantly, the case study approach allowed researchers access to important information and insight about second-language learners that likely would not have been acquired using alternative research methods. In all cases, the participants expressed that their first priority was to seek employment in order to provide for their families, and their second priority was upgrading their language and literacy skills. Nevertheless, the research by Millar and her colleagues provides clear evidence that second-language learners are highly motivated, persistent

and opportunistic when it comes to improvement of their speaking, reading and writing skills over the course of time. However, it can be difficult for them to find appropriate and effective programs to serve their particular needs because of their variant literacy levels, work schedules and life circumstances. Even though the ES/FS literacy learners primarily use their first language at home, they expressed a desire for more opportunities to converse and practice their English or French communication skills with people in their community and at work, and several participants aspire to tell or write their life stories in their second language. In sum, learning a second language is a long-term, lifelong endeavour. Second-language and literacy learning requires a significant amount of support and a range of programming and services over a lifetime. Second-language learners also need a great deal of encouragement from their families, friends, community members and instructors.

The case study approach is an effective research method to present information from a variety of perspectives and contexts that serve to illustrate the complexities of second-language and literacy learning and the programs currently offered in Canada. Language and literacy development are reciprocal processes and both are important to second-language learners in adult basic education. ■

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