

THE CHALLENGE OF PLURALITY

A comment on the occasion of the journal *L1-Educational Studies in Language and Literature* being 20

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PRELUDE

Some 15 years ago I did parts of the coast path in the South of England with a friend. We came to a particularly beautiful spot: a miniature garden offering views along the steep coast. A bench was provided and a plate put up by which walkers were encouraged to “rest and reflect”. Back then I suggested a job sharing: my companion taking the reflecting, me the resting part.

When asked to offer a comment regarding the occasion of the journal’s first 20 years and the editors’ written account on the “journal and the research community behind it” this scene came up to my mind again somewhat unexpectedly. Though a surprising move of imagination to me, I wondered whether it has a story to tell. I certainly find myself in a privileged position again: A view to enjoy, an environment to appreciate—and a substantial reflective account by the editors at hand. From this account I take up three aspects to explore a little further: (1) The journal *L1* and its distinctive profile, (2) The dynamics of *L1* in a plurilingual environment (3) The specifics of *L1* research communities.

1. THE JOURNAL *L1* AND ITS DISTINCTIVE PROFILE

The editors draw our attention to the journal’s mission as it reads today. The key aim is to advance *L1* research for the good of improving teaching and learning across

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borders. It is still the only journal covering the various dimensions of L1 that clearly moves beyond local, national or regional contexts and strives for an inter- and transnational exchange of knowledge in the domain—at least to my knowledge.

Overcoming the “splendid isolation” of research in what used to be called mother tongue education has been central to the journal from the start. From a German point of view this can be considered an early move towards internationalization.

As the editors demonstrate, the journal gained ground over the years: The growing number of papers published shows that the journal is appreciated as a place to publish research for many experts from different areas associated to the domain. The fact that its metrics are improving shows that the journal’s audience is growing, too.

Being a reader of the journal myself, I appreciate the scope of *L1 Educational Studies in Language and Literature* and the variety of issues covered. It is indeed a place to read which offers new, often stimulating, sometimes surprising insights, also because of the richness of the local or regional, perhaps still national environments that are tackled. The garden mentioned above thus seems an adequate metaphor: a place which may not only ask for rather straight routes of searching what you may easily relate to, but also to stroll around and watch out for the familiar as well as the unfamiliar. You may well come across plants you would like to grow in your own environments—and you may sense that your garden’s local conditions might be different from the spot where you are gaining your inspirations from.

Part of the richness of the journal thus has to do with the inert plurality of L1 if you take it as a domain on an international scale—or with the “compartmentalization” (p. 1) of L1 if you look at the specific linguistic communities and countries. This is certainly a challenge for the development of L1 as a field of inter- and transnational research. The editors hint at this challenge several times and point to the potential of the journal to meet it by easing community-building and coherence: They state that the journal may give researchers “a sense of being involved in an overarching project” (see 2.2, p. 4). Besides, they point to a specific outcome of the peer review process which is probably most productive for the development of the field: “Interestingly, in the specific case of the *L1* journal, having reviews does not only serve the purpose of gatekeeping by sifting out papers with questionable validity. In addition to this, it functions to create coherence in debates across linguistic communities.” (see 2.3, p. 8). Of course, there is a presupposition in this statement: The debates must be accessible to the international communities of researchers; if published in a language other than English this usually needs some mediation. The special issues that offer insights into how L1 or aspects of L1 are dealt with in specific regions and across regions have a valuable contribution to make in this respect (e.g., the special issues *Early Literacy Research in Poland*, 2014; *Scandinavian L1 Research*, 2015; *Working on Grammar in L1 Education: Empirical Research Across Regions*, 2015). They help balancing the tension of addressing plurality on the one hand and potentially excluding it through using English as lingua franca. Also, designs as those of the mentioned special issues show that the journal *L1* can ease the ongoing reflection

on the broader frame of L1 education in an international context, particularly with regard to overarching educational aims of the subject, for example reflecting on relations between “Bildung” and literacies (Krogh 2020)—in my perception: paths to be followed in the future not the least for the sake of the distinctive profile of *L1*.

2. THE DYNAMICS OF L1 IN A PLURILINGUAL ENVIRONMENT

Interestingly enough, the name of the journal remained the same since 2001 while its publisher underwent not only the transformation from a network (IAIMTE) to a registered association (ARLE), but also from mother tongue education as key field of interest to L1 languages, literatures and literacies. When founding ARLE we reflected both on changes with regard to the notion of mother tongue and on relations between L1 and L2 in the sense of a second language or on FL as in foreign language. One may hold that the differences are not clear cut and that there is much to be learned from the three fields and their permeable borders. The editors refer to China and India as traditionally multilingual countries and also to migration processes that characterize today’s societies worldwide. The “fuzzy” construct L1 (see p. 1) thus may well refer to a language of schooling that is the second language to many of its students or at least the L1.2 in comparison to an L1.1—both acquired in parallel. Much of what is known on foreign language learning has inspired L1 didactics when it comes to situations of formal schooling in L1 in linguistically heterogeneous environments. Still, FL has its own disciplinary frame—a frame with specific dynamics, too.

Looking into the last 20 years of the journal *L1* it is evident that the relationship between L1 and L2 cannot be ignored since L1 as the major language of schooling may be an L2 to most of the learners. Thus, the related conceptual shifts have been taken care of, partly via interdisciplinary endeavours: The special issue on *Plurilingual and Intercultural Education* (2012) can be mentioned here, which besides takes up the issue of language across the curriculum (with the example of mathematics). Such activities should not hinder further reflections on what can be considered the core of L1 but rather stimulate it. Perhaps the most thorough account of the changing dynamics of L1 in an international frame has been provided recently through the international volume “Rethinking L1 Education in a Global Era”, edited by Bill Green and Per-Olof Erixon (2020)—which among other questions reflects on the historical notion of monolingualism and its far-reaching arms that may still influence conceptions of the subject.

Given the editors’ statement that “whereas in L2 education research there are, in addition to language-specific work, extended international debates about how L2 learning evolves across languages, there has hardly been any attempt to tackle this question with respect to L1 education” (see part 1, p. 1) it seems to me research in *L1/L1* should take up this thread more actively.

Stepping back for a moment and looking into our neighbours’ gardens I imagine the journal would be an ideal platform for encouraging the transdisciplinary

discourse between L1 and the other 'Ls'. Though their starting points differ, their aims and procedures may be much more related to each other than 20 years ago. A special issue could be an inspiring contribution not only, but also to today's L1 discourse and its prospect.

3. THE SPECIFICS OF L1 RESEARCH COMMUNITIES

The garden spot I mention in my prelude was a secluded one, but not a lonely place, reached after a few miles of walking in company. Much of what is published in L1 is achieved by teams, it derives from shared research activities. The editors reflect on what kind of cooperation shows in the journal: Often the articles are submitted by two or more authors from the same regional and linguistic environment while special issues may well be brought about by an international team of editors. It is obvious that this suits the specifics of the L1 community which to a large extent consists of researchers and teacher educators who form their research teams on local level and may well mingle on the occasion of conferences such as the bi-annual conferences of ARLE or the SIG-seminars of the same association. The fact that there is a lively association with an increasing number of Special Interest Groups shows that this is a promising way of developing the field. The flow of articles submitted to and published by *L1* as well as initiatives for special issues indicate that research output is benefitting from these structures (this also holds true for publications that bring back international insights into more regional contexts and significant book projects).

Unlike other fields of research, L1 experts are often strongly involved not only in research, but also in development: teaching materials, teacher training etc. These activities may somehow compete with research initiatives since time is a limited source. Rightly, the editors point to the fact that in some areas L1 is not even an academic field at all. Reflecting on disciplinary developments over the last 20 years of course also means to acknowledge the respective restrictions. They exist although insights into the need of a solid internationally informed basis to develop teaching should have been gained—not the least through activities such as PISA by the OECD.

However, since local research teams usually find (and seek) their funding on local, national or regional level rather than on an international level a further internationalization of L1 empirical research may come to limits which show in the journal. Options for international research programs that fit the key fields of L1 research and the research ambitions of the communities should be explored further. Perhaps it is not only the question whether the respective programs exist, but also the question whether they are looked for with the right amount of determination and institutional support. I would expect that the "regionalese principle" the editors coined—which may hinder the respective initiatives—will be counterbalanced by university policies aiming at internationalization and setting up the respective expectations as goals for their members in the future.

In the meantime, the journal will serve in developing and stabilizing L1 research on an international level and thus assisting its communities in relating to each other

and cultivating the soil. Let's see where we are in 2031, take a seat on the garden-bench then and enjoy the views.

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