

TWENTY YEARS OF *L1*

The journal and the research community behind it

THE *L1* EDITORS

Abstract

In 2021, the *L1* journal celebrates its 20th anniversary. The editors take this occasion to have a look back to its development and the development of the *L1* education research community behind it, and to reflect on prospects for the future. External scholars commented on the paper, and their comments have been published along with it (see Green 2021, Pieper 2021).

“Many countries have examples of promising research and development in mother tongue education... in splendid isolation. Hence, this *L1* journal aims to create an international forum for research and discussion on the education in language and literature.” This statement first appeared in a document about the mission of *L1-Educational Studies in Language and Literature* released by former *L1* editors on the journal’s website. Now, in 2021, the *L1* journal celebrates its 20th anniversary. On this occasion, the current editors want to take stock of what has been accomplished thus far, taking this quotation as a starting point to review what still needs to be done.

1. THE L1 PROJECT AND ITS HISTORY

When the first volume appeared in 2001, *L1* was a Kluwer journal. The first editors were Mary Kooy and Gert Rijlaarsdam. They gave the journal its focus on empirical research which still characterizes it today. Later on, the journal was transferred to Springer. In 2005, it became an independent electronic open access journal in order to better to serve the needs of the L1 research community. From that point, the publisher was the *International Association for the Improvement of Mother Tongue Education* (IAIMTE) which had been founded in 1996 with the aim of connecting L1 education researchers worldwide. In 2014, IAIMTE became the *International Association for Research in L1 Education* (ARLE), which is the journal’s publisher today.

The changes which the publisher underwent mirror societal transformations which have been a continued challenge to the journal’s project. Between 2000—when the *L1* journal first appeared—and 2020, the number of migrants worldwide increased from 173.2 million to 280.6 million.¹ Countries such as China and India, which traditionally have been multilingual, assumed increasingly important roles in the world. This means that for many people, the language you live your life in now (if there is one such language) may no longer be the one in which you were brought up. So, the traditional view that holds that a region’s dominant language is supposed to be the mother tongue of its residents has become obsolete. The concept of mother tongue loses its relevance and even its status as a well-defined idea. The term ‘L1’ (or ‘language one’) which replaced it when IAIMTE became ARLE, however, is no less fuzzy. This means the *L1* journal must continually renew and redefine its true domain.

The statement of aims on the journal’s website now reads as follows: “We aim to advance research that improves L1 teaching and learning, for the benefit of students, teachers, and communities across countries and regions. Specifically, we strive to connect individuals involved in the teaching and learning of L1 languages and literatures from different countries and regions. Studies in L1 teaching and learning are conducted in many countries, but often in splendid isolation. *L1-ESLL* offers an

¹ See https://migrationdataportal.org/?i=stock_abs_&t=2020 (accessed March 15, 2021).

international forum for research and scholarly discussion on current issues and pedagogical practices.” Despite the complexities described above, the concern of making connections between L1 educators across languages did not lose its relevance. Still, L1 education research all over the world is characterized by a high degree of compartmentalization. For instance, 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. Of course, inevitably in L1 education research local research communities will be characterized by specific threads of discourse. The reason is that any language is tied to a culture, and a culture sets the frame for people to define their personal identity. This, however, should not preclude opening up local research communities to transnational discourses. Doing so does not mean to neglect local specifics. Rather, it means to stop withholding the insights gained within the local communities from those outside them, and to share knowledge and learn with others.

The same remark can be made with respect to interdisciplinary debates. Under the first editors of *L1*, the journal committed itself to the standards of rigorous empirical investigation as established originally outside the domain of L1 education research. The empirical focus continues to characterize the journal’s work today.

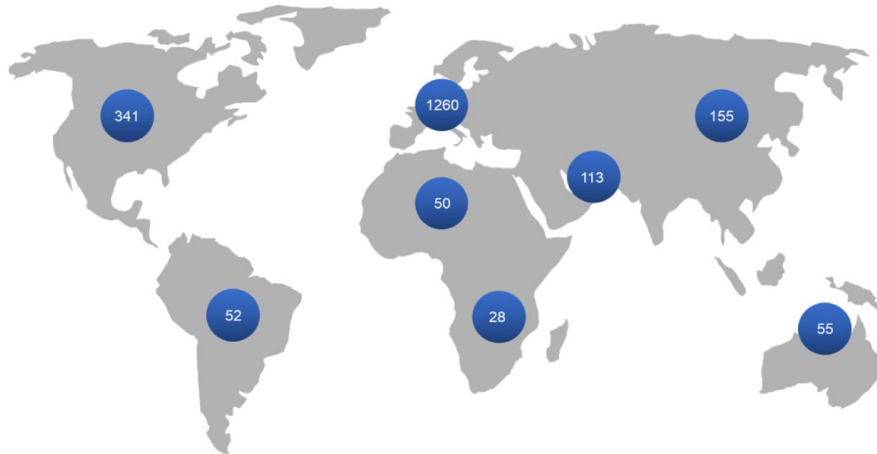
2. THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE *L1* JOURNAL

2.1 *The audience and impact of L1*

By the end of 2020, *L1* had 1630 registered users. It is not possible to abstract a reliable statistic from the user database because in many cases information on the institutional affiliation is lacking. As a proxy, one may use the statistics of ARLE members (Figure 1).² Based on its data, one may assume that the *L1* audience mainly comes from Europe with an additional substantial share of it residing in North America and Asia. It is likely this distribution arises from the fact that the *L1* journal originated in Europe. However, it should be emphasized that the idea behind *L1* is to be truly international without being restricted to a specific region.

² <http://www.arle.be/members.html> (accessed January 14, 2021).

Figure 1. ARLE members.



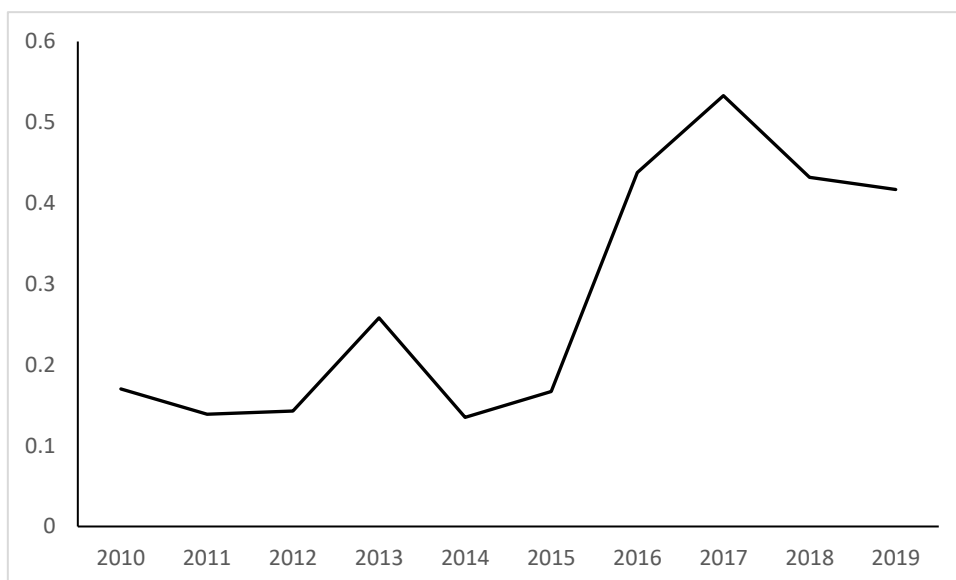
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Not all registered persons are active users; also, registration to the journal is not required to read *L1* papers. In other words, the *L1* audience must not be equated to the group of registered users. More reliable information about how often *L1* papers are read may be inferred from data about the journal's impact.

Since 2010, the SCImago two-year citation rates have clearly increased (Figure 2).³ According to the SCImago website, this indicator "is equivalent to journal impact factor™ (Thomson Reuters) metric".

³ <https://www.scimagojr.com/journalsearch.php?q=145569&tip=sid&clean=0> (accessed January 14, 2021).

Figure 2. SCImago two-year citation rates 2010-2019.



Note. The metric displayed “counts the number of citations received by documents from a journal and divides them by the total number of documents published in that journal” (<https://www.scimagojr.com/journalsearch.php?q=145569&tip=sid&clean=0>).

A comparable development is found in the Scopus four-year citation index which have been assembled since 2016 (Table 1).⁴

Table 1. Scopus four-year cite scores 2016-2020.

Year	Scopus Cite score
2016	0.7
2017	0.7
2018	0.8
2019	0.9
2020 ^a	1.2

Note. The metric displayed “counts the citations received in 2016-2019 [...] published in 2016-2019, and divides this by the number of publications published in 2016-2019” (<https://www.scopus.com/sourceid/145569>). For more details, see https://service.elsevier.com/app/answers/detail/a_id/14880/supporthub/scopus/

^a Score updated February 22nd, 2021

⁴ <https://www.scopus.com/sourceid/145569> (accessed January 14, 2021).

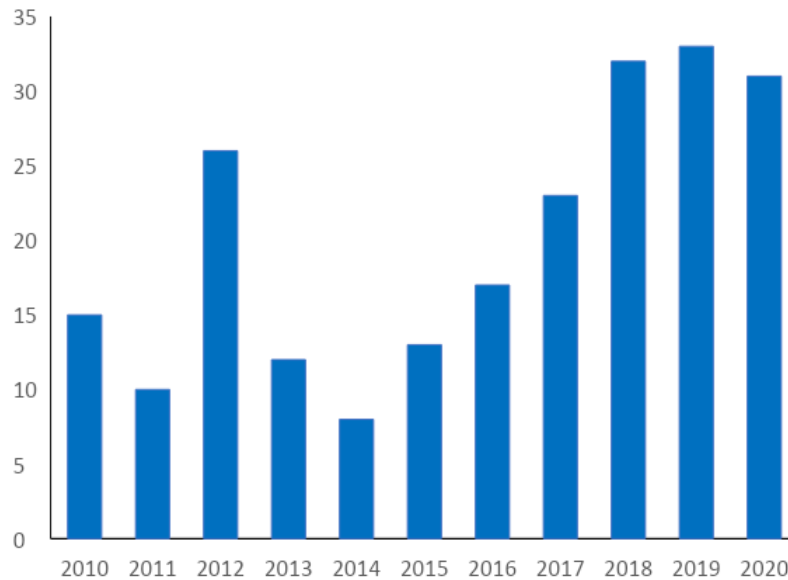
L1-Educational Studies in Language and Literature is at present ranked by SCImago in the first quartile of journals in the domains of 'Literature and literary theory' and 'Language and Linguistics'. With respect to how *L1* compares with other journals in other categories, a clear improvement since 2016 can be observed, amounting to at least a 5% rank increase in every category from 2016 to 2020.⁵ Notably, the journal is number 39 in a list of 823 journals in the *Literature and Literary Theory* category. The journal's recent improvement in the area of 'Language and Linguistics' is likely related to three special issues on grammar education published in the journal between 2018-2020 (see Boivin, Fontich, Funke, García-Folgado, & Myhill, 2018; Rättyä, Awramiuk, & Fontich, 2019; Fontich, Van Rijt, & Gauvin, 2020) which others have also recognized as an area of emerging scientific interest (see Myhill, 2021).

The 2019 SCImago two-years indicator, as displayed in Figure 2, was .417. This may seem low at first sight. However, it is well known that citation rates are highly discipline-specific. It is unlikely that journals dealing with a specific school subject will ever reach citation rates comparable to, say, journals on psychology or pharmacy because the community of L1 education researchers is small when compared to others. Nevertheless, we believe that this is not the whole story. When an author from a region with a language other than English publishes in English, their paper will become internationally visible, but paradoxically, by the same token, it may become nationally invisible. This results from a maxim followed by some L1 researchers which one might call a 'Regionalese principle' according to which a paper that is not written in Regionalese is not expected to offer relevant information about L1 education in Regionalese, and consequently, one neither reads nor cites it. The Regionalese principle is likely to prevail in local research communities to various degrees, but we believe that it exerts a considerable influence on L1 research in many countries. The following paragraph will offer evidence for this.

2.2 *L1* publications

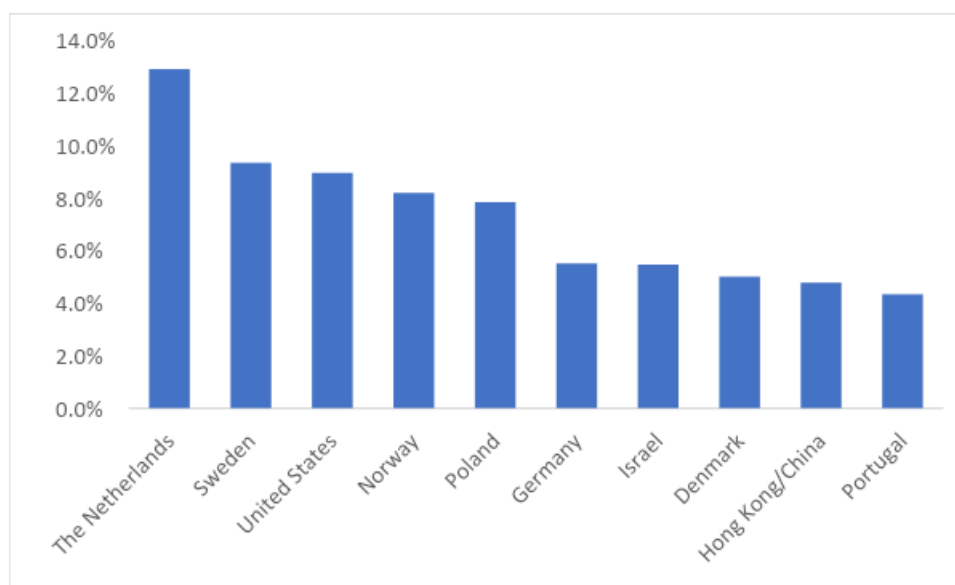
During the past decade, the number of papers published in *L1* increased markedly (Figure 3). This development accompanies the progress in citation rates described above. Note that it is statistically independent of it. So, both trends independently attest to a favorable development of the journal and give good reason to be optimistic with respect to the future of the journal and the project it serves. Having the *L1* journal as a widely accepted outlet for publication and as high-ranking a source for information will contribute to strengthen L1 education research worldwide because it gives researchers a sense of being involved in an overarching project.

⁵ <https://www.scimagojr.com/journalsearch.php?q=145569&tip=sid&clean=0> (accessed January 14, 2021).

Figure 3. *L1* publications 2010-2020.

The favorable development of publications in total should, however, not obscure a persistent imbalance with respect to the geographical representation. First, *L1* publications are distributed unevenly across countries. During 2010-2020, authors from 41 countries published in the journal. The ten countries with most publications are displayed in Figure 4. From the figure, it becomes apparent that relatively small countries (e.g., the Netherlands, Sweden, Norway, Israel, Denmark, Portugal) contributed much to the journal. In comparison, the US contributed less relative to its population size. The same applies to Germany, while countries like the UK, France and Italy do not even appear in the top ten group. To date, Russia and Japan have never been represented in *L1* publications, though both countries have well-established traditions of *L1* education research. As an aside, one might add that all countries which had a representative in the *L1* editorial team during 2010-2020 figure among the top ten. To generalize, when one looks at the figure, one wonders whether working in a relatively big linguistic community may give authors a feeling of being involved in a self-sufficient local discourse whose audience offers enough resonance to their work. If so, one might say that, paradoxically, living in a big linguistic community may make your horizon shrink. Given these findings, we would like to greatly encourage authors from all countries to submit to *L1*.

Figure 4. Countries with most frequent L1 publications.



Second, as can be seen from Table 2, the bulk of L1 publications (70%) come from Europe with another significant portion coming from North America (12%) and Asia (14%). No change in this pattern emerged during the past ten years. In particular, the number of publications from developing countries continued to be small. Note that contributions from Asia mainly came from Hong Kong, China or Israel; papers from South Asia or from Arabian countries have only rarely appeared in the journal. The reason is not that submissions from these regions were lacking. Though only 3% of all L1 publications came from Islamic countries in the Middle East and North Africa between 2016 and 2020, 14% of all submissions to the journal came from these countries. However, many of these submitted papers did not fit within the scope of the journal. Typically, they dealt with the teaching and learning of an L2 instead of that of an L1, or they presented analyses of literary works without connecting them to educational issues. The mismatch between the journal's profile and the profile dominating in these submissions should be a main concern to be addressed in the journal's future work.

Table 2. Origin of L1 publications.

	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	Ratio
Africa	0.0	0.0	1.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.0	1.0	0.0	0.0	1.4%
Asia	3.0	1.0	4.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	3.0	6.0	5.0	4.0	5.0	14.1%
Australia	2.0	0.0	1.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.4%
Europe	4.0	8.0	17.0	11.0	7.0	10.0	9.7	15.0	22.8	26.0	23.3	69.9%
Northern America	5.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	3.0	4.3	1.0	3.3	3.0	2.7	11.9%
Southern America	1.0	0.0	2.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.4%

Note. Publications were classified according to the authors' institutional affiliation. So, the statistics do not necessarily reflect the authors' nationality.

Table 3 gives an overview over the thematic focus of published papers. It appears that, on the whole, the journal kept the promise expressed in its title, to combine inquiry into L1 language learning and L1 literature education. The emerging topic of media instruction figured less prominently during the period under review. However, it has attracted growing interest in recently or soon to be published papers.

Table 3. Thematic focus of papers 2016-2020.

Topic	Ratio of papers
Literacy and reading/writing skills	34.8%
Literary understanding and literary reading	20.0%
Language understanding and language skills	14.8%
Oracy and oral skills	7.8%
Language policy in school	5.2%
Digital literacy and digital skills	4.3%
Classroom discourse	3.5%
Other	9.6%

Coming back to the concern about the lack of publications from developing countries, it is worthwhile to add an observation which may seem peripheral at first sight but which is actually instructive: from the total of seven publications dealing with linguistic diversity and language policy in educational settings listed in Table 3, six relate to L1 education in South Asia or Africa. To illustrate, Manan (2018) describes the effects of language policy in schools in Pakistan as “silencing down” students’ voices. Zaid & El Kirat El Allame (2018), focusing on Morocco, and Bakshi (2020), focusing on India, report that students’ true L1 is not given space in L1 education, though it should be according to the respective regulations and laws of each system. Zelime & Deutschman (2019) note that in the Seychelles L1 education in the local Creole is offered to students only after the end of primary school, whereas

alphabetization is conducted in French. From this a picture emerges where the teaching and learning of L2 is considered to be a prestigious endeavor but teaching the L1 of students would be viewed as wasting time on a 'dialect'. If so, it does not come as a surprise that when authors from developing countries submit papers to *L1*, they tend to focus on L2 learning instead of L1 learning. Possibly, they never had an opportunity to become familiar with the teaching and learning of L1 as a relevant issue. This leads us to reflect on the extent to which L1 is established as a discrete research domain in all countries, and in what research cultures L1 is explored.

Crosscutting the classification according to topics, one may categorize papers according to the viewpoint they take when dealing with their topic. The most frequent aspect under which authors looked at their topic was the knowledge and the beliefs of teachers and preservice teachers (13.0 %). This holds true for all topics and all regions from which papers were submitted. It indicates a shift in L1 education research worldwide which happened smoothly and silently but is effective nevertheless. Instead of relying on complete curricula or ready-made instructional packages, researchers now tend to focus on teachers' practices, beliefs and qualifications as a leverage to develop teaching and learning. This is a plausible approach to L1 education.

Whereas in 2016-2020, 73% of all L1 publications had more than one author, only 8% of all co-authored papers were authored by scholars from different countries. In contrast, 91% of all special issues published in 2016-2020 had more than one guest editor, and in all these cases the guest editors had mixed nationalities. This observation is ambiguous. It reveals what could be achieved with respect to international cooperation through the efforts of the *L1* journal (and by those of ARLE). At the same time, it points to the limits of these achievements. In L1 education research, it seems to be hard to establish international cooperation at the level of a specific research project. In comparison, it seems to be much easier to arrange for such cooperation at the level of subsequent research communication. If so, one might hope that the successes reached at the latter level will, at some time, percolate to the former.

Table 4 displays the methodological choices prevailing in studies published with *L1*. It lists reviews of the research literature and papers reporting about the development of tests separately, though one might argue that these categories are related to content rather than method. The reasoning for separating these categories is that it would hardly make sense to classify papers subsumed to them as either 'quantitative' or 'qualitative'.

Table 4. Methodological choices in *L1* papers 2016-2020.

Method	All papers	Reading/ Writing	Literature education	Digital literacy	Language ^a	Oracy	Classroom discourse
Quantitative	44	26	4	1	5	4	0
Qualitative	32	7	10	3	4	1	4
Conceptual	24	7	6	2	3	1	1
Mixed methods	6	1	2	1	0	0	0
Review	5	1	0	0	4	1	0
Test design	4	0	1	0	0	2	0

^a The term 'language' is to refer to the acquisition of language skills and metalinguistic knowledge.

From the table, one can see that *L1* consistently maintained its focus on empirical research. This has been a characteristic of the journal from the beginning, and it shapes how the journal is perceived in the public. A detailed look at the table shows that in papers dealing with written literacy, oracy and the acquisition of language skills or metalinguistic knowledge, a quantitative approach dominated, whereas in papers dealing with literature education, digital media and classroom discourse, qualitative methods have more frequently been applied. Nevertheless, one might add that during 2016-2020, some groundbreaking quantitative studies on literature education have been published in *L1* (Janssen & Braaksma, 2018; Koek, Janssen, Hakemulder, & Rijlaarsdam, 2019; Schrijvers, Janssen, Fialho, & Rijlaarsdam, 2019). This may have contributed to the high visibility of the journal specifically in the domain of literature education which has been reported above. We would like to point out that Tanja Janssen, our former colleague who left the editorial team in 2020, made outstanding contributions to this success.

2.3 Peer review in *L1*

L1 has a base of dedicated and experienced reviewers who have been serving the journal for years. We also renew our reviewer database on a regular basis by inviting new reviewers, including reviewers with expertise in specific topics. According to the journal's standards, a paper should be reviewed by three or at least two external scholars in a fully blinded procedure. In 2016-2020, 65% of papers had three or more than three reviewers. *L1* reviewers are requested to fill in a form with some predefined questions, to offer a freely composed comment on the paper, and to give a final recommendation by selecting among the options of 'accept', 'accept with minor revisions', 'revise and resubmit', 'reject but encourage to resubmit', and 'reject'. A reviewer can, after submitting their review, inspect the other reviews by logging in to the journal's electronic submission system and going to the paper's entry.

In the period of 2016-2020, 131 papers were accepted and 153 papers were rejected. The journal's average rejection rate was 53.9%. The mean time to process

papers which were eventually accepted was 242.0 days ($SD = 152.2$), and for papers which were eventually rejected it was 80.7 days ($SD = 81.9$).

Traditionally, peer review is taken to be the backbone of validation procedures preceding publication. Nevertheless, it is contested. Indeed, in 2016-2020, the agreement of L1 reviewers in the final recommendations given in the first round of reviewing, as measured by weighted Cohen's kappa related to the final recommendations (see above), did not exceed $\kappa = .18$ with 95% CI [$-.16, .52$].⁶ This value is low; it does not even diverge significantly from zero. However, in a meta-analysis of reviewer agreement, Bornmann, Mutz, & Daniel (2010) found an average Cohen's kappa of $\kappa = .17$ for editorial reviews based on 26 studies.

It has been argued that measures of agreement or reliability do not capture a relevant feature of the review process. Notably, the list of options from which reviewers select their final recommendation does not constitute a one-dimensional scale. For instance, a reviewer might assess a paper's quality as good but nevertheless opt for 'revise and resubmit' because (s)he feels that the argument could be taken some steps further. So, maximizing Cohen's kappa must not necessarily be the path which leads to better reviews.

This being said, we would like to emphasize that nevertheless there are good reasons for a journal's editors to be concerned about the quality of the review process. The process is intended to safeguard the validity and relevance of research published. However, studies suggest that not all reviewers consistently focus on these criteria (Campanario, 1998; Weller, 2001). In particular, it has been shown that they sometimes fail to address basic deficiencies in a paper's argument, e.g. cases where the paper's conclusions are not warranted by the data (Epstein, 1991). Whenever L1 editors felt uncomfortable about incoming reviews in the past, the most frequent reason was that reviews were sketchy or superficial without going into the matter.

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. It sometimes happens that papers get submitted which, in substance, offer promising insights but nevertheless receive very critical feedback from reviewers. Often, the reason is that the paper fails to contextualize its argument in international debates. In such cases, reviewers typically object that the research literature has not sufficiently been taken into account. Reviews of this type may bring authors down to earth with a bump even though their paper has the potential to contribute to

⁶ This statistic is based on 149 papers for which data could be extracted automatically. For each paper, two reviewer recommendations were used to compute Cohen's kappa. In cases where there were more than two reviewer recommendations, two of them were selected at random, and based on the selection, a kappa value was computed. This was repeated one hundred times. The kappa value reported above is the median value found in the one hundred selections.

international debates. We would like to encourage authors not to give up in such cases, especially if they come from research communities which have thus far existed in relative isolation from the international context.

3. AN EMERGING RESEARCH COMMUNITY AS MIRRORED IN A JOURNAL

As stated in the first section, the original objective of *L1* has been to counteract the 'splendid isolation' of L1 education research in diverse linguistic regions. In this anniversary review, we tried to give an account about how the journal has been able to reach that goal and what still has to be done. In the course of our report, besides the journal's work in the past, another topic surfaced that lies behind it: the developing community of L1 education researchers all over the world. We hold that the experience gained by the journal represents the specific potentials and weaknesses of this emerging community. In fact, this is what makes the experience gained by the journal a topic of public interest. We believe that this experience points to three questions related to that community.

First, L1 research across linguistic regions and across countries will differ to the same extent that L1 education in schools differs. What is considered to be L1 education in various regions may be diverse, ranging from instruction aimed at cultivating national and cultural identity to training functional literacy skills. In some regions, there will be no such thing as L1 education at all. So, whenever we meet, we should pose the question: What picture of L1 education has the person vis-à-vis in mind?

Second, L1 research originates from teacher education. It is shaped by institutions which set the frame for it. Again, this is likely to cause variation across regions. In some countries, L1 education researchers form part of a social sciences community, whereas in other countries, they mainly come from linguistics or literature study faculties. This may give rise to misunderstandings or to a lack of mutual esteem. Even worse, there may be countries where L1 education research is not firmly established in universities at all. Taken together, all this means that when engaging in discussions across linguistic regions, we must never fail to address this question: Did I understand what my fellow researcher is talking about?

Third, it seems that international cooperation in the domain of L1 education research rests, to a high degree, on personal relations and individual initiatives. Our report offers some hints which attest to this, e.g. the fact that collaborative projects flourish at the level of joint editorship but play a wallflower's role in joint authorship, and the fact that having a representative in the *L1* journal's editorial team seemed, in the past, to attract authors from a region to publish in the journal. Cooperation which rests on personal relations contrasts with cooperation rooted in structural settings. To illustrate, during the 2020 Covid 19-pandemic, vaccines were developed in transnational cooperation. This was not the result of arbitrary individual decisions but of pure necessity and, notably, of the existence of institutions and companies which act globally. So, through the pandemic, it became obvious to the public that, in the domain of pharmacy, research is international based on structural rather than

personal conditions. L1 education research still seems to lack such a structural basis for international cooperation. Researchers from diverse regions may believe that they can do without it. As a consequence, when trying to understand successes and failures of efforts to foster international cooperation in L1 education research, one should take an analytical rather than a programmatic stance, focusing on the question: Did we, when evaluating our efforts, pay heed to the conditions set for L1 education research?

We, the L1 editors, believe that a true international community of L1 education researchers is likely to emerge in the future though we still have to go some miles to get there. In the past, we received much support from authors, reviewers and readers to reach that goal. We owe them our gratitude. We also welcome scholars from communities that to date have stood apart to join us, though we acknowledge the pathway to collaboration may need careful navigation and mutually encouraging communication. Don't give up. The international research community needs all of us.

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