**Report on “LEAD Retreat, April 9–11, 2025”**

**1. Introduction**

LEAD (Learning, Educational Achievement, and Life Course Development) is a graduate school and research network based at the University of Tübingen, Germany. It brings together a diverse group of scholars whose research focuses on learning and development across the lifespan. As part of its ongoing academic engagement, the LEAD Retreat is held every semester and serves as a vital forum for LEAD members including doctoral researchers, postdocs, faculty, and international guests to present their current projects, receive critical feedback, and explore opportunities for collaboration.

The most recent retreat took place from April 9 to 11, 2025, in the scenic town of Schwäbisch Gmünd, Germany. The setting provided an ideal atmosphere for scholarly exchange, reflection, and discussion. As a participant, I had the opportunity not only to attend keynote talks and poster presentations as the audience but also to contribute by organizing and hosting a Special Interest Group (SIG) session. My SIG took place on the morning of April 10th and is focused on the use of digital and traditional tools in language learning.

**2. Summary of the Event**

The retreat offered a rich and diverse program, including keynote speeches from distinguished scholars, poster sessions by PhD candidates, and multiple Special Interest Groups happening at the same time. The keynote sessions were particularly illuminating, highlighting innovative research with real-world implications. Below are some key highlights:

“M-Powering Teachers: A Machine Learning Tool for Instructional Measurement and Feedback” by Heather Hill.

Her work explores how machine learning technologies can be used to evaluate classroom instruction and provide teachers with real-time feedback. Her presentation focused on the development and implementation of tools that assess instructional quality, with particular attention to mathematics education. She shared insights into how automated analysis can support teacher development more efficiently and objectively.

“Problems With Personalizing Education” by Garvin Brod.

Dr. Brod, who leads the Individualized Interventions Laboratory, examined the challenges of implementing personalized learning models, especially those mediated by educational technologies. His talk emphasized that while personalization holds promise, it also introduces risks related to equity, learner agency, and technological feasibility.

“Harnessing Research and Innovation to Address Global Teacher Shortages” by Robert Klassen.

His keynote addressed the global crisis in teacher recruitment and retention. He discussed how evidence-based strategies, supported by digital innovation and motivational theory, can help address these systemic issues. The presentation was highly relevant for anyone studying teacher education or workforce development.

“Screen Savers” by Amy Orben.

Her research investigates the psychological and social impact of screen use among adolescents. Her keynote challenged common assumptions about screen time and offered nuanced insights into how digital media can both help and hinder mental health, depending on context and usage patterns.

“Supporting Student Success with Learning Analytics-based Feedback” by Ioana Jivet.

Dr. Jivet focused on learning analytics and how feedback mechanisms in higher education can be enhanced through digital dashboards and intelligent systems. Her session explored how to present data to students in ways that support self-regulated learning and academic achievement.

In addition to these keynotes, several poster presentations by PhD candidates stood out to me, particularly those aligned with my own research interests. These included:

“Supporting AI Literacy Learning: Scaffolding Utility-Value Interventions for Deeper Processing” by Jana Boos.

This poster illustrated the role of digital interventions in improving literacy through AI-driven scaffolding. It introduced design principles that could inspire similar approaches in my own project, especially in structuring engaging learning experiences.

“Improving Perceptual Skills in Secondary School English Learners through a Game-Based Environment” by Kate Derkach.

This research explored the effectiveness of game-based learning in enhancing students’ perceptual and linguistic abilities. The findings aligned with my interests in educational game design and provided strong evidence for the value of gamified approaches.

Throughout the retreat, six Special Interest Groups were held concurrently. I was honored to host one of them

**3. My Special Interest Group**

My SIG session, titled “Exploring Digital and Traditional Tools in Language Learning: Motivation, Comprehension, and Anxiety”, focused on the dynamic interplay between digital and traditional tools in second language acquisition. The session attracted ten researchers who actively participated in an open and engaging discussion.

The session began with an introduction to the theoretical frameworks and practical applications of digital versus traditional tools in language learning. I presented “Hungry Rabbit”, a digital reading game I developed, and compared its features and functions with traditional print-based learning resources. The discussion centered on how these tools impact learner motivation, comprehension, and learning anxiety.

Participants shared insights into the tools they typically use in their own research experiences. A consistent theme emerged: while each tool serves specific purposes effectively, there is still a significant gap in multifunctional digital tools capable of supporting multiple tasks simultaneously. Digital tools were generally seen as more versatile, especially for research purposes, although their limitations were also acknowledged, particularly when it comes to addressing affective factors like anxiety.

When comparing “Hungry Rabbit” with traditional materials, participants were able to try the game firsthand. Feedback was positive overall. Many participants appreciated the game's intuitive design and highlighted its potential to improve learners’ motivation and comprehension. However, when it came to anxiety reduction, most participants felt that the game’s impact was limited, it’s not due to flaws in the game design but because learners often do not experience significant anxiety when learning second languages. This feedback reflected the conclusions I had drawn from my earlier data and suggested consistency between independent observations and empirical findings.

Finally, we explored future research directions. Participants agreed on the need for more integrated tools that offer multifunctional support, combining features like personalization, scaffolding, feedback, and gamification to address a wider range of learner needs. This conversation sparked ideas about how to evolve “Hungry Rabbit” and informed my thinking about the design of future studies.

**4. Personal Reflection**

Participating in the LEAD Retreat is a deeply rewarding experience, both professionally and personally. I am particularly inspired by the range of innovative digital tools and research methodologies presented across the various sessions. As someone whose work centers on the design and application of digital learning tools, I found it energizing to engage with peers who share similar interests and face similar challenges.

The presentations and poster sessions broadened my understanding of what is possible with educational technologies. They also encouraged me to think more creatively about how to position my own research within the larger academic conversation. The retreat helped me connect theory with practice and provided concrete examples of how advanced technology can be meaningfully applied to real-world educational problems.

Facilitating the SIG session was another highlight. The thoughtful contributions of the participants led to rich discussions that deepened my understanding of the nuanced roles that digital and traditional tools play in language learning. I was especially encouraged by how closely their insights mirrored the data I had previously collected, as this affirmed the credibility and validity of my research findings. Their input also offered new directions for enhancing “Hungry Rabbit”, including suggestions on how to adapt it for broader use.

An unexpected yet encouraging discovery was that the experiences and opinions shared during the SIG were remarkably consistent with my earlier research. For example, during a discussion on YouTube as a language learning tool, participants echoed findings from my own study: that the platform’s effectiveness depends greatly on the type of content and the target learners. This alignment between personal experience and empirical data strengthens the foundation of my current project and reinforces its practical relevance.

**5. Conclusion**

The LEAD Retreat 2025 is a vibrant and meaningful academic gathering that left a lasting impact on my research and professional development. From groundbreaking keynotes to detailed poster sessions and in-depth SIG discussions, the retreat offered valuable insights into the present and future of educational science.

I left the retreat with a renewed sense of purpose, an expanded research network, and concrete feedback to guide the next phase of my work. The experience reinforced the importance of cross-disciplinary dialogue, peer exchange, and critical reflection in academic research. Most importantly, it confirmed the relevance of my research in the evolving landscape of digital education and language learning. The feedback on “Hungry Rabbit” affirmed both its strengths and its potential for future development, and the discussions on tool integration and learner diversity provided useful directions for innovation.

Moving forward, I intend to build upon the insights gained during the retreat, both by refining my current project and by exploring broader collaborations with other researchers in the LEAD community. The retreat not only strengthened my academic skills but also deepened my commitment to designing learning tools that are both effective and learner centered.

I am truly grateful for the supports from School of Education of UofG and I am truly grateful for the opportunity to participate and look forward to future retreats with great anticipation.