

# An ESL immigrant teacher's insight into languages

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As a recent immigrant to Canada, I involuntarily find myself in *between-situations*, driven by a set of choices that diverge me away while preserving bits and pieces of my natural *habitus* (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). As a native speaker of Arabic and an ESL teacher who mainly spoke English and French back home, I never realized how liberating it is to be given the choice to use Arabic, my mother tongue, until that choice was no longer an option. When I was still in Lebanon, I barely used Arabic, except with family and friends. Despite being one of the most complex languages to learn globally (Wahba et al., 2014), speaking Arabic is considered unprestigious in Lebanon. The Lebanese context clearly distinguishes between standard and prestigious languages. Though these terms are often used interchangeably, especially in dominant languages such as English and French (Milroy & Milroy, 2012), this is not the case with Arabic in Lebanon (Abdel-Jawad, 2017; Ibrahim, 1986).

First, it is essential to understand Lebanon's linguistic landscape. Lebanon is a small country in the Middle East whose official language is Arabic. There are two variations of Arabic in Lebanon, known as Modern Standard Arabic and Lebanese dialect. And within the Lebanese dialect, six regional registers and about ten sub-regional dialects depending on the geographical region involved (Al-Batal, 2013; Hout, 2017; Ibrahim, 2009). That is a total of one language, two dialects, and sixteen registers. Western powers have always been very much politically and socially involved in Lebanon. After World War I, Christians of Lebanon, mainly Maronites, favored the placement of Lebanon under a French military administration, whereas Muslims supported a British mandate (Salibi, 1990). The endemic debate resulted in France holding the mandate from 1920-1943. The French mandate has had a significant impact on the small country of 18 religious sects. At the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Catholic and Protestant missionaries founded schools and universities to teach western languages to Lebanese youth (Baladi, 2018).

Consequently, the educational system in Lebanon heavily relies on a second language (mainly English and French), with Arabic only used to teach social studies and Arabic language classes (Bacha & Bahous, 2011). Yet, discrepancies between the quality of education and students are prevalent, especially between private and public schools, and urban and rural schools (Baytiyeh, 2017). Moreover, national, and international



companies in Lebanon also use foreign languages in their professional correspondence (reports, emails, presentations). Additionally, given the ongoing deteriorating economic, social, and political situation in Lebanon, Lebanese youth have always considered pursuing their studies in Europe or North America or finding a job abroad, mainly in the Gulf. The different options mentioned above all share knowledge of English and French as a requirement.

Among the numerous lessons my new immigrant identity and professional experience have taught me, one remains the most valuable. There is more to language than the practical communicative use of words. The system, including people, always used the languages I speak as markers of my identity. In Lebanon, as a holder of a French Baccalaureate, I was always labeled as “French-educated” even though I learned both French and English simultaneously from a young age, and I completed both my undergraduate and graduate studies in English at an American affiliated institution. My choice of career did not make things easier. As an ESL teacher, my diverse linguistic repertoire was often used as a pretext for marginalization instead of being considered an asset. The system continuously undermined my language and teaching skills in favor of my *English-educated* colleagues. The current educational system adopts a monolingual approach to language education in which the language of instruction is always the target language, and native-speakerism is the objective. It is deeply rooted in monolingualism that I had to stick to the target language in class and one language variation (which I honestly was not always familiar with). When I tried to express my students’ concerns and mine to the concerned policymakers and stakeholders, they would tell me I am lenient and urged me to consider my students’ linguistic and cultural challenges as a lack of effort. I had to watch my students struggle with learning English when it could have been a much more enjoyable experience. I will admit that I still secretly prioritized students’ practicalities, including resorting to their diverse linguistic repertoire, yet I never reported it.

Growing up in the city, I had attended a prestigious American school where the use of Arabic (which I was very good at, by the way) was considered outdated. I also lived and worked for almost four years and had family members in a village in the South of Lebanon where foreign languages were deemed pretentious. So, by the age of 28, people, including the system, judged me professionally less competent than my peers because I received my primary education in French. In addition, they portrayed me as *uncool* because I frequently used Arabic in my interactions with people. Finally, they considered me showy because I also used English and French when I could not find a word in Arabic. So, I was all three, all at once, depending on my audience.

Then I immigrated to Canada, where I finally thought things would be easier because I am fluent in both the country’s official languages. Well, guess what? I was wrong. People tell me my French is *different*, which



is true. I use English more frequently, which has been working so far, albeit with a Lebanese accent. But I can no longer use Arabic in my daily interactions with people. I miss it. I miss who I am when I can express myself freely in Arabic. I miss always finding a way to express my ideas even if I cannot find the exact word for it. I miss switching between Modern Standard Arabic, Lebanese dialect, Beirut, and Southern registers. I miss who I am with Arabic. It is most frustrating during the second half of the day. There is a 7-hour time difference between Montreal and Lebanon, so after 5pm local time, everyone I know back home is probably asleep, and their social media accounts are inactive. Arabic is asleep. There is more to language than the practical use of words. There is more to language than communication. Within language, there is a life of our own. There are memories. There are feelings. And most of all, there is nostalgia. Language triggers nostalgia.

I do not intend this article to be a personal essay, but I believe it is crucial to build on personal experiences to enhance our professional skills. Not only that, but I am also sure some of my experiences are common to other teachers as well. I share below some of the critical beliefs that drive my professional practices:

### **Pronunciation and accent are two different notions**

I recently attended a CEFR teacher education workshop delivered by Dr. Enrica Piccardo (2021). During the seminar, Dr. Piccardo spoke about embracing students' different accents. However, she also explained how this would not interfere with teaching correct pronunciation. So, I asked her: "As an ESL teacher, how do I differentiate between accent and mispronunciation?" And she answered plainly that pronunciation is technical while accent is personal; it reflects one's identity. But what does that mean, and how do we translate this into practice? The answer is simple. Pronunciation deals with the correct articulation of letters and the production of sounds. As long as your students correctly associate a letter to its standard sound, then that is correct pronunciation; whatever particular feature sounds they add, that is their accent. So, accept it and embrace it.

### **Aim for intelligibility, not *native-speakerism***

As a teacher, you teach a language so that your students can use it to communicate. If they can communicate, thus make meaning, then the purpose of language is attained. Education aims to improve the making meaning process, yet advancing a conformity model by which all students need to abide is not the answer. This conformity model not only favors languages over others but also favors variations of the same language.



## Provide opportunities for linguistic exchange

There is a common misconception about addressing multilingualism in a class by allowing the use of different languages. Some argue that this linguistic diversity limits the use of the target language. Based on my experience both as a student and teacher, this claim is inaccurate. Students resort to other languages, through translation, for example, to facilitate their understanding of the target language. In other words, explaining a word in a language the students are familiar with will help them easily retain the word in the target language. The objective will remain the target language. It is the process that is evolving.

## Provide opportunities for cultural exchange

The latter does not only refer to students of different nationalities. Students of the same background can also have cultural differences that are worth sharing in class. For example, during my years of experience in Lebanon, my undergraduate students were born and raised in Lebanon. Yet, they still had distinct cultural characteristics (i.e., family traditions, regional differences). It is also important to note that, cultural awareness increases students' cultural understanding of words, thus their contextual meaning.

Our personal experiences expand our views of language and consequently shape our professional practices as teachers. My experiences as a student, teacher, and immigrant have all impacted my identity, be it the identity I choose for myself, or the identity others decide for me. The languages I speak *labeled* me. I was once an uncool city girl, then an arrogant suburbanite, then a less-competent English teacher, then an immigrant. I am a proud immigrant, but the term immigrant is often used to refer to *the outsider*. Instead of being considered an asset, my linguistic repertoire has been used as a pretext for marginalization. It all led me to a sincere and critical introspection of why I chose education in the first place. It made me reconsider my passion for teaching. I always knew I wanted to be a teacher. As a young girl, I had imaginary classrooms and made-up exams. I would take them all, fail some, and ace the others. Then as I grew older, I grew fonder of teaching, of the unimaginable influence that teachers have on students. I did succumb to the discriminatory monolingual and monocultural system all my life, not anymore. As a dear professor once said to me, “You can never be neutral as a teacher; you are either with or against the system.”



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Lana F. Zeaiter is a third year PhD candidate in Educational Studies at McGill University. Her research focuses on second and foreign language teaching, plurilingualism, and immigrant identities. She was the recipient of the prestigious 2021 Emerging Scholar Award at the Department of Integrated Studies in Education at McGill University, which recognizes excellence in language education research. She currently works as a lecturer in the BEd TESL program at McGill University. She also has extensive experience teaching English at primary, secondary and university levels, mainly in Lebanon and Canada.