

Professionalism in TESL

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Abstract

This paper presents a discussion of what professionalism means in the workplace and how it can shape the relationship between the employees and the employee-employer relationship. The paper also hopes to promote the professional attitude and the high standards of professional behaviour expected of employees in the multicultural and *highly-competitive* ESL environment. A multicultural ESL teaching environment, like the one in Canada, might create some unwanted and unwelcomed conflicts among ESL teachers. Unwanted because it does not make sense for the highly-educated professionals to voluntarily cause conflict. Unwelcomed because no employer by any stretch of imagination should be aspiring to create a toxic workplace. Assuming that all employers have the best of intentions, all employees might not necessarily. This is humanly possible due to the highly competitive nature of ESL positions. To avoid the hopefully unwanted and hopefully unwelcomed conflicts, there seems to be only one solution: *professionalism*.

Working in the multicultural environment of ESL, with all its undeniable benefits for ESL teachers, might sometimes bring about conflict. To deny this fact will only make matters worse; while learning how to deal with it could enhance the relationship between the colleagues and result in optimal output for the employers. To achieve this goal, it is essential to delve into the root of the issue and familiarize oneself with the key elements.



Conflict

Conflict, in Longman Dictionary, is defined as “a state of disagreement or argument between people, groups, countries, etc. (Longman). To shed more light on the issue of conflict, it would be a good idea to become familiar with Conflict Theory. “Conflict theory focuses on the competition between groups within society over limited resources. Conflict Theory views social and economic institutions as tools of the struggle between groups or classes, used to maintain inequality and the dominance of the ruling class” (Hayes, 2020). According to this theory, social order is maintained by domination and power, rather than by agreement and conformity. Therefore, a basic premise of Conflict Theory is that individuals and groups within society work in order to maximize their wealth and power. In this way, competition is the default. Being aware of the fact that laborers have little control in the economic system, their worth can diminish over time if the social and economic institutions decide to. When this happens, conflict is further aggravated.

Conflict in the ESL Market

The majority of ESL Teachers find it quite hard to get hired full time. It is a certainty. “Part-time-employed EAP practitioners reported balancing multiple jobs simultaneously, both within and outside the field” (Corcoran, 2021, p. 8). According to this research, only 50% of the instructors reported full-time employment. The research also mentions that the province of Ontario has “the highest rate of part-time, temporary contract, and partial-year employment of any region in the country” (Corcoran, 2021, p. 8). As a result, ESL Teachers find it hard to live on the amount of money they earn. This is enough to make them *potentially competitive* and unfriendly either when they are seeking a job or when they are in the workplace, after they have been hired. Unsurprisingly, this competitiveness can sometimes result in an antagonistic relationship between teachers in order to keep their job. For example, senior teachers, and sometimes even the juniors, might not welcome the newly-hired ones, or they might even resort to bullying and covert harassment in the workplace in the hope of making you quit.

“It is sad but true that the things people value most—good jobs, nice homes, high status—are always in short supply” (Baron, 2005, p. 166). Accepting the fact that resources are finite, it is a foregone conclusion that ESL Teachers must constantly struggle to get a full-time job. It is not surprising if this much struggle unlocks the potential for conflict. What makes matters worse is that history has proven that conflict is an unavoidable aspect of human nature; wars, violence, revolutions, discrimination, and injustice are the historical proofs. “As competition persists, the individuals or groups involved come to perceive each other in increasingly negative ways. Even worse, such competition often leads to direct and open conflict” (Baron, 2005, p. 167).



Functionalism

Unlike Conflict Theory that focuses on competition for scarce resources and how the elite control the poor and weak, which is hard to deny, functionalism focuses on the relationship between the parts of society. According to functionalism, “each aspect of society is interdependent and contributes to society's functioning as a whole” (CliffsNotes).

Functionalism believes that society is held together by agreement. Members of the society can work together to achieve what is best for society as a whole. However, functionalism does not encourage people to change their social environment even if it is not equitable. To put it simply, what functionalism encourages is *interdependence* with a clear understanding of power dynamics.

Functionalism in the ESL Market

Apparently, corporations are the advocates of Conflict Theory; they tend to dominate and make profit. Interestingly, at the same time, they expect their employees to pick functionalism and avoid conflict. It seems that they want their employees to agree that this is the best possible way for both to benefit. This is because employers would like to make huge profits by controlling the labourers' wage and expect the workers to be satisfied and pay more attention to contribution to the business and society as a whole. In other words, to be functional.

In a nutshell, employers do not like complaints. Labourers, on the other hand, try to earn as much money as possible to be able to live on the salary. However, this will cause conflict if the labourers do not adapt to the employers' financial policies. Consequently, they will either end up losing their job or end up making constant departures and arrivals in the career. So, to stay and work in the competitive and multicultural market of ESL, teachers are required to be professionally functional or functionally professional.

Professionalism

To be professional, from the researcher's point of view and personal experience, means to put the *rules and regulations* of the profession first. Every profession has its own ethics and principles. Following these principles will definitely bring about mutual benefits for the employer and the employees.

It is very easy for each one of us to be affected by personal biases when we are at work. These personal biases that derive from our earlier years when we were raised in our family and influenced by our society could easily affect our decision-making process at work. For example, in interacting with a colleague, these prejudices could make us react, and not *respond*, in a way that is not considered professional. According to Realistic Conflict Theory, “prejudice stems from competition among social groups over valued commodities



or opportunities. In short, prejudice develops out of the struggle over jobs, adequate housing, good schools, and other desirable outcomes” (Baron, 2005, p. 166).

Professionals should learn to manage their *emotions* and gain awareness of their emotional triggers so they can manage their reactions and respond positively and productively. Unconsciously, a decision is usually likely to be made based on personal beliefs and experiences rather than on the principles of the workplace. Thus, a professional is someone who can overcome their biases and regulate their feelings at work and decide instead to perform according to the professional musts. “In an office environment, it’s important to be thoughtful when it comes to your interactions” (University of Massachusetts Global, 2020).

To avoid conflict, professionals should try practicing *respect*. As mentioned by Herrity (2020), respect is “treating people with appreciation and dignity”. As stated by Baron (2005), in the book titled *Frustration and Aggression*, it is suggested by several psychologists that “aggression often stems from frustration—interference with goal-directed behaviour” (p. 167). “Team members will not necessarily like or admire the personalities of their supervisors or coworkers, but they still need to act respectfully on the job to achieve their goals and be professional” (Herrity, 2020). To practice respect, professionals are always aware of their words and actions in the workplace and how they might affect their teammates.

A professional should know that people have the right to have different opinions. In other words, “we cannot predict an individual’s identity, beliefs, or values based on categories like race, gender, sexuality, religion, nationality, etc.; instead, we must recognize that individuals are capable of claiming membership to a variety of different (and oftentimes seemingly contradictory) categories and belief systems regardless of the identities outsiders attempt to impose upon them” (Purdue Online Writing Lab). If workers, and employers, reach this understanding, the result would then be respect, which in turn can lead to *collaboration*.

Professionals can enhance the output of a profession by collaboration. Nobody can ignore that two minds work better than one. This understanding can also result in building relationship with colleagues. Professional workers are those who have reached the maturity that let them mute their personal biases and care for the feelings of their counterparts while displaying their self-confidence. In other words, a professional is someone who has their self-confidence but at the same time show concern for the *feelings* of their colleagues and does not try to make others look bad.

Conclusion

To avoid conflict, a professional worker can focus on one important principle at work: *respect*. Living and working in a multicultural society requires a great amount of respect if we all want to work as a *functional team* without conflict.



Professionals respect the rules and obligations that are nothing but the principles that aim at benefits for the business and the workers simultaneously, even if these benefits might not seem proportional to the latter's hard work.

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Author Bio



Upon arrival in Canada, Mostafa started working as a security guard to make ends meet. Having an MA in English Language and Literature and 15 years experience in teaching EFL, he worked his way up and got into the ESL market to follow his passion professionally. After losing his job at the outbreak of COVID, he took the opportunity to do vocations including working as an enumerator for Statistics Canada, working as a dock helper, and working as a grocery clerk for Loblaws to make contributions to the community. Mostafa is currently a nursing student at George Brown College.

