EAP teacher identity negotiation and its impact on our teaching practice: Research insight from the public college system in Ontario

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Rationale for research into EAP teacher identity

English for Academic Purposes (EAP) pre-sessional/pathway classes are a popular course offering at private and public institutions in Ontario (Kushkiev, 2022) as Canada ranks amongst the most popular study destinations for English language learning (Languages Canada- Bonard Research Report, 2021). Around 40 % of Canadian ESL and EAP programs are offered by institutions in Ontario (Languages Canada, 2020). International and domestic students opt to complete an EAP program as a pathway into their college or university studies without the need to write internationally administered English language proficiency tests to meet the admissions requirements of their institution of choice.

Due to the lack of a national or provincial institutionalized accrediting body similar to the British Association of Lecturers in English for Academic Purposes (BALEAP), EAP offerings across Canada tend to vary in program length, course structure, academic home within the institution, and teacher professional backgrounds. Both independent and bridging EAP programs (Fox et al., 2006) aim at developing learners' discursive and discourse competencies (Hyatt, 2015), transferrable skills, along with their developing language abilities to effectively navigate the Canadian higher education environment.

Despite the sudden and dramatic disruption to regular course offerings, caused by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021, the growing number of newcomers to Canada have further contributed to the socio-cultural diversity of both students and teachers, particularly in Ontario (Siefker et al., 2020). Against the backdrop of the published literature on students' perceptions, needs analysis, assessment and critical pedagogy, research into Canadian EAP teachers' perceptions of their practice remains scarce and fragmented (Kushkiev, 2022). Prior research has indicated the need to explore EAP teacher identity as it informs our philosophy of teaching, principles, pedagogy, and interaction with the learners.

Research aims

The ostensible lack of a systematic focus on and research into Canadian EAP teacher identity has informed an autoethnographic study, which I conducted during the sudden pivot to emergency remote delivery in March and April 2020 and a year into online teaching in May and June 2021. I engaged with the literature on second language and EAP teacher identity to establish a research niche and stake a contribution to knowledge and professional practice of pre-service and practicing EAP teachers in Ontario and across Canada.

Using a teacher learning journal (Moon, 2006), I explored how my perceptions of reflexive, projected, recognized, and imagined identity facets (Benson et al., 2013) influenced my pedagogical realizations, adaptation of course material, use of Web 2.0 tools and LMS, as well as developing interactional competence in the virtual classroom (Moorhouse et al., 2021). I generated reflexive accounts in my learning journal in two tranches and used Braun and Clarke's (2006; 2021) reflexive thematic analysis method to configure the data into codes, which I later collated into three themes. The analysis of the data and implications I created for my own professional practice may resonate with other EAP teachers in Canada and beyond. This study's results can also serve as a provocation for teacher researchers to reflect on the need to re-conceptualize our teaching approaches from the lenses of our shifting identities which can inform an EAP specific pedagogy (Morgan, 2004).

Research results and implications

Informed both by Ellis' evocative (2004) and Anderson's (2006) analytic forms of autoethnographic and reflexive writing, I constructed a narrative of my reflections, which I generated in my teacher learning journal after teaching the daily class during both research periods. I shuttled back and forth along the narrative many times, "making the familiar strange and the strange familiar" (Little & Little, 2021, p. 2) because I had to subject many of my tacitly held assumptions, biases, principles, and philosophies to a critical scrutiny to make sense of the effect that my developing EAP teacher identity had on my teaching. I had to expose many of my teacher vulnerabilities when navigating the online classroom to arrive at theoretical and practical implications that might add theoretical and methodological value to the community.

Autoethnographic research almost always implicates others (Sikes, 2004) and thus carries a heavy ethical burden on the researcher to ensure no harm will be caused by their research results. One's identity is not just a private matter "but is also a dynamic recreation of the elusive nature of social *reality"* (Kushkiev, 2022, p. 144, emphasis in original). The analysis of the data and collation of themes was an iterative process, through which I aimed to focus on the *ethno* aspect of my research. My purpose was to present study results which would not only inform certain transformative actions to my own practice but also highlight the need for EAP teachers to engage in a systematic, honest and self-guided reflection on their pedagogical realizations.

As I was developing my analytical sensitivity (Braun & Clarke, 2013), I actively configured three main themes: A) constructing reflexive and projected identity facets through language; B) EAP teacher learning; and C) EAP teacher role

identity. Theme A indicated a reversion to a more teacher-focused classroom and deductive approach to conducting fully virtual EAP classes. I was struggling to *become* and assume an identity of an online EAP teacher who could facilitate the classes as communicatively as I could prior to the onset of the pandemic. Adopting pre-pandemic lesson frameworks and adapting them for online delivery while developing my own e-interactional competencies crystallized as a conflict between the reflexive (how I viewed myself) and projected (the image I presented to the learners) facets of my identity.

Reflecting on my own teacher learning under Theme B, the adoption of certain Web 2.0 tools to engage the learners and facilitate the online lessons resulted in deskilling of my pedagogical and technological competence, compared to my realisations in the in-person classroom. This theme also highlighted my previous disinterestedness to integrate technological tools and affordances to diversify the methods of presenting information and evaluating learners' performance before the sudden pivot to emergency remote delivery in March 2020.

Under Theme C, I decided to analyze the effect of certain socio-political values on meso and macro levels as they percolate into my own practice and influence my teaching performance. I explored my perceptions as a part-time and sessional faculty whose insecurities during the unplanned pivot only became exacerbated due to the precarious employment conditions that many other educators also had to navigate. I was constructing an image of my teacher self as a college professor who facilitates their learners' induction into the community of the institution, helps them develop their transferrable skills for success and prepares them to satisfy the learning outcomes of the EAP program to achieve success in their college studies. All three themes highlighted a conflict between the projected, reflexive, and ascribed facets of my teacher identity, obliterating the image of my imagined identity as an EAP teacher in both virtual and hybrid classrooms.

Several important implications for the professional practice of teaching EAP in Ontario and across Canada can be suggested. EAP teachers constitute a diverse body of professionals who hail from different educational and socio-cultural backgrounds. Their prior academic and pedagogical experiences, which are commonly related to ESL teaching, present a valuable source of lived experiences and perspectives that require systematic and critical research on identity roles. Conceptualizing teacher identity as pedagogy after Morgan (2004), there arises the need for future studies to centre around EAP specific pedagogy and EAP digital pedagogy. ESL teachers bring a rich variety of insight, skillsets, pedagogical repertoire, and communication skills, but these resources require careful reflection on how to be adapted to cater to the specific needs of EAP learners in Ontario.

Pre-service and in-service EAP preparation courses are largely missing as professional development opportunities for faculty who should join the teaching community as qualified EAP teachers rather than become ones after being employed by an EAP program provider. Research has indicated the need to explore the effect of EAP teachers' perceptions of their shifting and developing identities, continuously and systematically, and their influence on our teaching realisations, assessment, and interaction with the learners. Due to the lack of a professional accrediting body with an established competency framework, EAP teachers' development remains at their will and department's discretion. The precarious nature of the profession poses another challenge to teachers' commitment of time, effort, and emotional investment with their own learning while often navigating several teaching assignments simultaneously.

Final thoughts

This research study has been instrumental in understanding the need to critically analyze my philosophy, principles, beliefs and values, and specific ways in which they colour my perceptions that guide the theoretical and practical aspects of my EAP teaching. Teacher narratives can be "powerful vehicles for introspection, reflection, and transformative action" (Kushkiev, 2022, p. 155), particularly for pre-service and less experienced EAP teachers who come from an ESL teaching background. Practicing teachers bring a wealth of knowledge and experience to their practice but may require a continuous and honest reflection on how to adapt their pedagogical realisations to meet the specific needs of EAP learners. More EAP teacher experiences in reflective narratives can strengthen our collective voice and suggest specific ways how to make our EAP teaching more learner-centred, humanistic, and inclusive.

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