

Spotlight — Shahriar Mirshahidi



Shahriar is an applied linguist and language educator whose pedagogy and research focuses on translingualism and transcultural approaches to meaning making in creative and academic contexts. He champions centering language learner identities and lived experiences while pushing against normative structures that perpetuate deficit views towards multilingual students. Shahriar is the interim manager of English for Art and Design (EAD) Program at OCAD University in Toronto. Before his academic career in Canada, he taught and researched in Pennsylvania, Oklahoma, and Iran.

Congratulations! You received the OCAD University Employee Equity Award. Talk to us a bit about that award and what it means to you.

I am deeply honored to receive the 2023 Employee Equity Award for my work as an English Language Learning Specialist at OCAD University’s English for Art & Design Program and the Writing & Learning Centre. This award highlights the importance of fostering an equitable, diverse,

and inclusive learning and work environment, a mission I am passionately dedicated to.

My commitment lies in empowering racialized and multilingual students by providing them with an equitable pedagogical space through amplifying their unique resources and knowledges. I advocate for translingual approaches to teaching English as an Additional Language and creating more accessible curricula that cater to multilingual students’ needs to ensure their success. I’m excited to continue this important work, making a meaningful impact on our art and design community. That said, I could not do it without the people that I work with; I am grateful to be working alongside colleagues who share the same commitment. I specifically would like to thank the director of our Teaching & Learning, Susan Ferguson, our English Language Learning Manager, Emilie Brancato, and my teammates in the English for Art & Design program, Adrienne Reynolds and Elaine Munro.

I think many people, especially in times like these, are interested in your work and contribution to decolonizing English for Art Design. How did you get acquainted with this topic and could you tell us more about it?

As many of our colleagues across the sector know, there exist deficit views towards English Language Learners (henceforth, ELLs) both in and outside classrooms. These views often characterize ELLs as deficient or disadvantaged compared to English L1 speakers, focusing on what they cannot do rather than their potential and strengths. A decolonizing lens would equip language educators,



curriculum specialists, and language program decision makers with a critical understanding of and a tendency to value the diverse perspectives and lived experiences that ELLs bring to our teaching and learning contexts.

During my doctoral studies, I worked closely with international teaching assistants, which made me acquainted with their biggest pain points: Pushing against deficit views about them as well as developing the courage to argue for their outstanding academic abilities. Later on, I was privileged to engage with the scholarship on translanguaging and decolonization from scholars such as Suresh Canagarajah. I'm lucky that I currently work in a setting in which decolonizing education is not only an embraced value, but it's also a mandate in our multi-year Academic Plan. On top of that, art and design open up new and inclusive possibilities for ELLs to communicate with their environment. Art and design can facilitate the expression of thoughts and feelings, enabling individuals to navigate and negotiate language and communication challenges.

Our initial conversations included your involvement in institutional practices that try to forge a commitment to access for English Language Learners and multilingual students in post-secondary contexts. Can you expand on this?

Absolutely! As a post-secondary institution, OCAD is committed to fostering a learning environment that recognizes difference as a social reality! Our students (and I'm emphasizing that this applies to many educational contexts across Ontario and Canada) join our spaces from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds as well as with diverse ways of knowing and being. My colleagues and I, in line with our institutional commitments, try to nurture this understanding among faculty that access is a fundamental

right that needs to be incorporated from the get-go in our pedagogical praxes. In other words, accessible teaching and learning materials need be developed as intrinsic and included components of our approach; through adopting a supportive pedagogy, we will not wait for our students to seek accommodation when there are access-driven needs. Access should be anticipated and incorporated in the course design from the beginning.

We usually do this in the form of faculty-facing workshops or individual consultations in which we advocate for accessible pedagogy. When it comes to language and communication, access becomes even more nuanced. If I could think of an example of advocacy for accessible language for ELLs, I would talk about controlled use of metaphoric language in our instruction, unless if we teach a course on English metaphors for sure! Unnecessary use of idioms, passive or complex vocabulary when it is not the learning objective of the course, and metaphoric expressions could limit the understanding of our ELL and multilingual students, and therefore, promotes an imbalanced power dynamic between the instructor and the students. Another example could be [over]using pop culture references in a class that enjoys a large number of international, refugee, or newcomer students without breaking down these references thoroughly.

Your article, “*I find you attractive but I don’t trust you: The case of language attitudes in Iran,*” not only has such an appealing title but also touches upon something important: accents. What’s your connection with this topic?

First off, I have to say that I’m an ELL myself, and despite living in North America for a long time, I’m an accented educator...and I’m proud of it! Therefore, this topic really hits close to home and is directly connected to my lived



experience both as an immigrant in an L1 English context and a language educator.

There are a lot of normative beliefs and dispositions about accented speech in our teaching and learning environments. I would like to circle back to the “deficit views” that I mentioned earlier in the interview; some of the deficit-based assumptions about ELLs pertain to their accent. Regrettably, at times, having an accent is equated with lack of fluency in oral speech or even perceived as lower overall language proficiency. In my conversations with faculty from other disciplines, I strive for this conceptualization that it is intelligibility that needs to be foregrounded as a communicative concern rather than accentedness. Research shows that intelligibility is directly associated with potential breakdowns in communication, while being accented does not impact comprehension if the speech is intelligible. Put simply, one could be heavily accented but highly intelligible. I dream of a day that, in addition to helping ELLs produce intelligible academic speech, we also train responsible listeners who are actively tolerant of different accents.

How do language and art intersect? What future projects are you working on or hope to work on?

Language and art intersect in various ways, with both serving as forms of communication and expression, and often complementing each other to convey complex and meaningful ideas. Art, as a form of non-verbal communication, uses colour, form, texture, and composition to convey meaning and evoke emotions or reflections. I’m a language educator who firmly believes in the power of translanguaging as an effective communicative strategy; thus, I view art and design as forms of communication that transcend language boundaries. Unlike words, art or design are not bound by syntactic or semantic structures.

Regarding future projects, we are currently reforming our curricula in the English for Art & Design Program at OCAD aiming at more inclusivity, access, and decolonization. We have already started to share the fruits of our work with the language teaching and learning community in Canada, and I’m looking forward to introducing our work to my TESL Ontario friends in the near future!

If you would like to know more, please visit [Dr. Shahriar Mirshahidi’s LinkedIn](#).

Thank you once again for your contribution, Shahriar!

