

# Diversity, equity, and inclusion: Dialoguing with TESL Ontario members

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## Abstract

This article reports and comments on findings from a TESL Ontario membership survey and synchronous dialogue session inquiring about challenges and opportunities related to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) in English Language Teaching classrooms and workplaces. The findings reveal that TESL Ontario members have most frequently experienced ageism and ethnic and cultural discrimination in their interactions with colleagues and students. Member suggestions for enacting DEI principles and practices at work and in class included engaging in self-directed learning activities, linguistically inclusive teaching practices, and formal professional development opportunities.

## Introduction

Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) have become buzzwords within and beyond the field of language education, reflecting the ongoing need for social change, justice, and belonging. However, for DEI to move beyond a token buzzword or performative gesture, there needs to be continual engagement with and commitment to shared principles and actions in a given community. For this reason, the TESL Ontario community was asked to participate in a survey and dialogue session to shed light on DEI issues and insights. The survey was distributed to TESL Ontario members for a two-week period in April, 2023 and focused on the challenges and opportunities most frequently encountered by TESL Ontario members at work and in class. The dialogue session, which took place on May 9, 2023, invited members to discuss the survey results in relation to their workplace and classroom experiences. This article outlines the key findings from the survey and dialogue session, followed by a summary of TESL Ontario members' experiences, perspectives, and desired directions in relation to diversity, equity, and inclusion in the field of English Language Teaching. A glossary of key terms is included at the end of this article.



## DEI survey

In April, 2023, a survey was sent to TESL Ontario members to inquire about their experiences related to DEI at work and in class. Over the course of two weeks, 269 members responded to five survey questions which included a combination of closed and open-ended responses and focused on forms of discrimination experienced and DEI initiatives desired. The respondents shared valuable insights that shed light on common experiences of discrimination to be addressed in the field of English Language Teaching.

**Q1: What are the diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) issues and challenges that you have encountered most frequently in the language learning workplace? Please select all that apply.**

Answered: 266 Skipped: 3

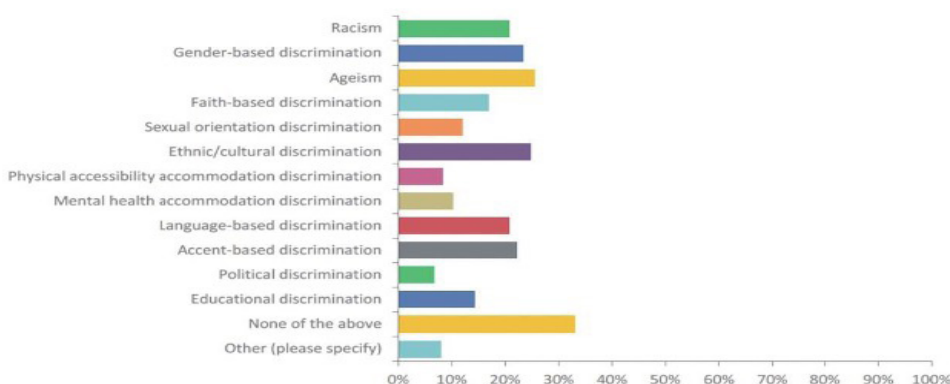


Figure 1: Results from Survey Question 1

**Q2: What are the diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) issues and challenges that you have encountered most frequently in the language learning classroom? Please select all that apply.**

Answered: 263 Skipped: 6

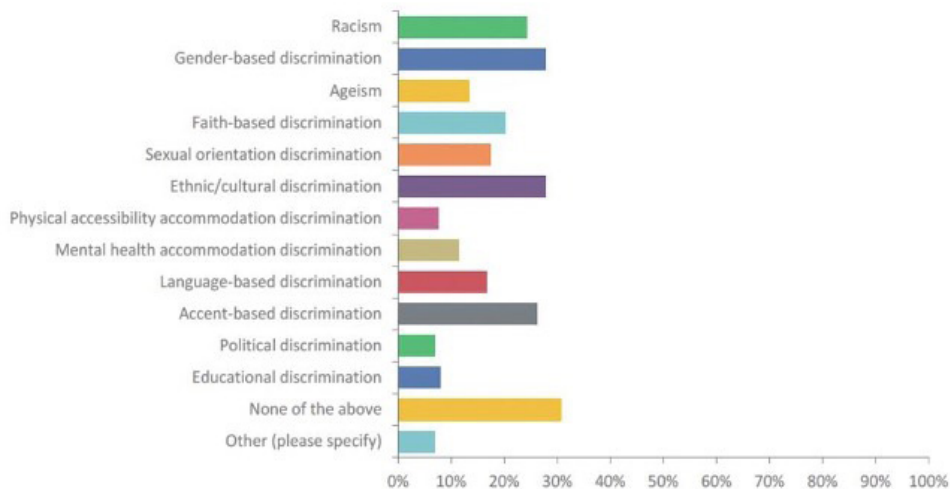


Figure 2: Results from Survey Question 2



As seen in Figure 1, 33% of the members chose the option “None of the above” for question 1, and 31% chose the same option for question number 2. Across both questions, frequent answers included ageism, ethnic and cultural discrimination, gender-based discrimination, accent-based discrimination and racism. Several members commented on the survey that, even though they have not experienced any of these forms of discrimination themselves, they have witnessed their colleagues experiencing it. Another comment provided insight into experiences of ethnic and cultural discrimination at work. One member mentioned that their home-country experiences and qualifications were minimized by the assumption that Canadian experience and qualifications were the only valid ones. Furthermore, in commenting on experiences of language-based discrimination in class, another member shared that their workplace cultivated an “English-only ideology” by excluding and punishing the use of any other languages.

There were recurring themes suggested by the TESL Ontario members for questions 3 and 4: “What DEI initiatives are you aware of that you think would be relevant to the TESL Ontario membership?” and “What DEI initiatives could be implemented or addressed by TESL Ontario and its DEI committee that would be most valuable to you?” Among these, the need for training and professional development was suggested through multiple answers submitted by the members. One of the members noted the need for more “talks, chats, workshops on topics such as microaggression, mental health, and intercultural competence”. Another recurring theme was the lack of awareness of different cultural and religious holidays and their celebrations. One member commented, “education is most important e.g., observing DEI-related Holidays, Remembrances, etc.”. The resistance to using correct pronouns as a form of microaggression was also among the themes that TESL Ontario members wish to address more in the future. Another member added that initiatives of “avoiding instances of non-inclusive language, and using the proper pronouns that people select for themselves” needed more attention.

## DEI dialogue session

Following the survey, an online dialogue session was organized by TESL Ontario’s DEI Committee and took place on Zoom on May 7th, 2023, from 7:00 pm to 8:30 pm. The dialogue was hosted by Dr. Laureta Valva and facilitated by Committee subject matter experts, Rebecca Schmor, PhD candidate and Dr. Mario Guerrero. 41 members attended.

The dialogue session started with a guide of definitions of key DEI terms and was followed by a presentation of the survey results and discussion thereof in breakout rooms. During the discussion session, our subject matter experts and participants warmed up with a question about how we can address feelings of discrimination among learners as educators who hold a perceived position of power. Dr. Guerrero



emphasized the important role of instructors in modeling vulnerability and transparency, especially in engaging with emotion and mental health in the classroom, as these are key factors in DEI experiences.

Once in the breakout groups, participants were asked to discuss the key findings of the most recent DEI survey and were encouraged to share their takes on the results. Several participants expressed their surprise at the fact that most members chose the option “none of the above” in responding to questions 1 and 2 about experiences of discrimination. Some Dialogue participants suggested the reason for this being that revealing discriminatory acts can be challenging as it requires someone to be vulnerable, even on a survey. Others suggested that some forms of microaggressions are so common that they are not regarded as discriminatory behavior. Attendees agreed that these experiences are complex and intersectional - differing for individuals along lines of race, gender, age, and other identity markers, and not limited to one element of discrimination.

DEI dialogue participants also discussed the practical ways we, as educators and classroom facilitators, can cultivate a learning and working community and environment that values, appreciates, and incorporates the diverse backgrounds, experiences, and needs of all members. The most prominent view in this regard was to foster a space where learners as well as colleagues can express their chosen identity freely. Being authentic and practicing active listening were deemed as keys to understanding our differences and acknowledging them. This part of the session ended with the conclusion that believing the receivers, “victims”, of any sort of discrimination from microaggression to blatant acts of discrimination was a key step in building trust and creating space to be vulnerable in our communities.

## **Experiences, perspectives, and directions for DEI at work and in class**

Together, the survey and dialogue session revealed members’ experiences, perspectives, and desired directions for DEI at work and in class.

### **Experiences, perspectives, and directions for DEI at work**

At work, TESL Ontario members have different experiences depending on who they are. In the survey, one member shared an experience of being denied physical accommodations to access their second-floor classroom after a knee injury. During the dialogue session, another member told the group how she has not received training to update her technology skills in order to teach effectively online, expressing that this technology gap worsens the ageism she has experienced at her workplace. Another dialogue session participant disclosed how colleagues gaslighted him after he told them about a race-based microaggression he experienced.



The different experiences of members influenced their diverse perspectives on DEI. Throughout the survey and dialogue session, several members expressed how various microaggressions made them feel Othered. In particular, members found that when colleagues asked them the question “where are you from” or made comments (even positive ones) about their accents or English proficiency, this made them feel questioned and like they did not belong at work. Other prominent views included the idea that people are not aware that their colleagues experience discrimination or lack the vocabulary to explain their own experiences of discrimination.

Members’ experiences and perspectives at work suggest that English language professionals can contribute to more inclusive and equitable workplaces by listening to, believing, and learning about their own and others’ experiences of discrimination. To avoid possible microaggressions, colleagues and allies can also learn from online resources rather than relying on individuals of historically marginalized communities to teach them. Colleagues can also contribute to more inclusive interactions by not making assumptions or explicitly asking about linguistic, cultural or religious affiliations, and waiting for this information to emerge naturally instead as relationships are built at work.

### **Experiences, perspectives, and directions for DEI in class**

In class, TESL Ontario members were found to draw on a variety of strategies to enact DEI principles. Members suggested classroom practices such as asking learners to share their preferred names and pronouns; playing music in different languages to create a welcoming atmosphere; and explicitly expressing the value of different languages and cultures. They found that practices like these can normalize diversity, help learners to find commonalities, and foster empathy and vulnerability in the classroom. Members also shared challenges of responding to discriminatory views on areas such as gender and religion in class, and expressed the importance of explicit instruction around values of tolerance and inclusion. One dialogue participant suggested introducing stereotypes as a way to reflect on and respond to some of these challenges in class.

Member experiences in the classroom also reflected important perspectives. Two of the most commonly shared perspectives were the importance of fostering respect and the desire to create a safe space. Members also shared their views on the need to respectfully navigate different norms and beliefs while continuing to prioritize the inclusion and safety of all students through their classroom materials and discussions. While some members preferred a non-political teaching stance, others argued that teaching is inherently political and it is part of a teacher’s responsibility to identify their own political beliefs and recognize how they influence their teaching.



Members' experiences and perspectives in the classroom suggest that English Language Teaching professionals can contribute to more inclusive and equitable practices by valuing and responding to the diversity of their learners and colleagues. Possible approaches include plurilingual and translanguaging practices, multimodal strategies, identity-based materials, and the integration of critical theory. These approaches can be complemented by intentional and consistent incorporation of DEI-related resources and vocabulary as part of theme-based or task-based lessons. For teachers to integrate more DEI principles in their teaching, their commitment to personal learning is essential, and should be supported by educational institutions, federal funding agencies, and professional development organizations.

## Conclusion

The DEI survey and dialogue session revealed several takeaways for TESL Ontario members and other English Language Teaching professionals, representing a variety of distinct challenges and opportunities at work and in class. While perspectives on DEI varied across the membership - from resistance to curiosity to advocacy - there was a strong overall desire to enact DEI practices in workplaces and classrooms, despite the perceived vulnerable nature of the topic and practices. While TESL Ontario members expressed fears of saying or doing the wrong thing, they also showed an eagerness to share and listen to each other's experiences and to engage in learning, unlearning, and relearning. In this messy process of community growth, one member suggested an approach of "calling in" instead of "calling out"; of meeting and supporting colleagues wherever they are in their DEI learning journeys, just as we do with our students.

Other members called on TESL Ontario to provide more DEI-related professional development and learning opportunities. One way TESL Ontario has responded to this call is through a custom workshop at the 2023 annual conference, entitled "Beyond Buzzwords: Enacting Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion at Work and in Class." This workshop, led by members of TESL Ontario's DEI committee, engaged English language teachers in a series of case studies and classroom materials from English Language Teaching workplaces and classrooms. Participants were invited to apply the concepts of microaggressions, intersectionality, heteronormativity, and neurotypicality in analyzing and brainstorming possible challenges and solutions related to the workshop tasks. The feedback from this workshop, along with the experiences and perspectives shared in the survey and dialogue session detailed in this article, will be leveraged to continuously inform the future directions of TESL Ontario's DEI work.

For TESL Ontario's DEI committee, the experience of conducting this survey and dialogue session reinforced the importance of eliciting and responding to diverse member voices in order to co-create DEI learning experiences with and for the membership—a key takeaway for TESL Ontario and other organizations wishing to enact DEI principles and practices.



## Glossary

**Gaslighting:** A covert type of emotional abuse where the feelings and experiences of the victim are dismissed leading them to question their reality.

**Heteronormativity:** Implies that only straight and cisgender identities are the norm; an assumption that privileges these identities over any other type of sexual orientation.

**Intersectionality:** The ways in which systems of inequality based on various forms of discrimination overlap to create unique dynamics and impacts.

**Microaggressions:** Everyday, subtle, intentional or unintentional behaviors or actions that include biases toward marginalized groups. The “micro” in “microaggression” does not suggest that these actions cannot have a big impact on the receivers.

**Neurotypicality:** A way of describing the state of having a brain that functions similar to one’s peers during the different stages of skills development.

## Further reading

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**Author Bios**

Rebecca Schmor is an English for Academic Purposes instructor, graduate research assistant, and PhD candidate at the University of Toronto. She has taught and conducted research with higher education institutions, ministries of education, and private language schools in Canada, China, Cuba, Germany, and Italy. Her research on plurilingual teacher identity and inclusive language education has received provincial and national awards. Rebecca is the current chair of TESL Ontario's Diversity, Equity and Inclusion committee.



Nisa Akdemir is a language educator who has spent almost 15 years teaching French, EFL, EAP, and recently LINC. She taught in the U.K. and Turkey before moving to Canada where she now teaches at Western University, English Language Center, and College Boreal. Nisa is also a PhD candidate at Western University; her research interests include language, culture, identity, and immigration. She is a current member of TESL Ontario's Diversity, Equity and Inclusion committee.

