Spotlight — Yaseen Ali

You're currently working for the University of Toronto – tell us about your role as a Learning Strategist at the Centre for Learning Strategy Support (CLSS) and the workshops you have developed:

In my role, I support degree-seeking students in their academic performance and learning development through one-on-one-appointments. When I connect with these students, I find that they are curious about practical elements related to their studies, such as studying more efficiently and taking effective notes. Yet there is another domain that speaks to their emotions and that affects their all around learning—for instance, addressing the roots of their procrastination and reducing stress-motivated productivity—that students are eager to unpack as well.

At our department, learning strategists facilitate workshops on popular topics throughout the academic year, such as critical reading strategies and how to practice energy management. Additionally, we design spaces that address the centrality and salience of their identities in education; as such, my programming focuses on the experiences of international students and/or English as an additional language (EAL) users. Alongside student peer co-facilitators, we engage in storytelling to foster trust and community with the participants as we address layered topics such as addressing linguistic discrimination and accentism.

Your career trajectory has gone from English for Academic Purposes to Learning Strategist. How did that come about?

In the midst of a career transition a few years ago, I was weighing whether to continue a path in EAP or to attempt and translate my teaching journey to align with other student-facing support roles in higher education. I was fortunate to move into a position with the Centre for International Experience (within Student Life at U of T), where I collaborated directly with international student communities by running co-curricular programs focusing on intercultural experiential learning and conversational English spaces.

Doing this work, I learned firsthand from these international

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students who generously shared anecdotes of joy, frustration, loss, vulnerability, bemusement, concern, and so much more. Of course, the term *international student* does not refer to an all-encompassing category and always benefits from an intersectional perspective, but I found that there were recurring themes around navigating complex cultural transitions, the hidden curriculum, and language-based gatekeeping that found their way into the curriculum that I have now developed at CLSS.

You mention the relationship between metacognitive learning strategies and enhanced academic performance. What exactly does this mean?

Learning strategy work is varied, nuanced, and covers a wide spectrum—and every practitioner has their unique voice—but to me, metacognition is about figuring out what works specifically for you and the task at hand, and then leveraging

that awareness to study in ways that are sustainable and encouraging. This is not so much about learning "styles" (i.e. visual vs. auditory), but experimenting with multi-modal practice, breaking down material into smaller chunks, and adding some intentional challenge (e.g., self-testing) to support academic performance. When students are encouraged to think tangibly about how they learn—e.g., within communities of support, changing up their study environments, adding accountability practices—we find that this can fundamentally alter the way they approach their studies, namely with more intrinsic motivation.

If folks are interested, the [The Learning Scientists](#) website offers concise reference guides to guide instructors and students on how they might apply some of these techniques in their teaching and learning.

Let's talk about fostering linguistic equality in English(es). What do language teachers, or teachers in general, need to know about this?

Over the last few years, I have been using the terms Englishes and Englishing instead of English. This is meant to describe multiple and ever-evolving languaging practices alongside what we might call standard or academic English. I'm inspired by the writing of numerous scholars in applied linguistics, but particularly Suresh Canagarajah in his book *[Translingual Practice: Global Englishes and Cosmopolitan Relations](#)*, who has argued that communicative success hinges on dynamic negotiation strategies, not a shared vocabulary and/or grammar of *English* alone.

Sometimes the words *linguistic equality* can seem lofty or even abstract, but I pose that small actions and gestures can set a welcoming tone for EAL students. This can start with framing their additional languages as resources in their learning, as opposed to interferences. For example, this might be critically questioning the effectiveness of *English-only* policies in the classroom, an approach I once too used in my teaching. Another strategy might be to validate the many English dialects and accents that meaningfully contribute to a space of learning, perhaps even explicitly in a course syllabus or community agreement.

On this topic, I can't recommend Yukio Tsuda's *[The Hegemony of English and Strategies for Linguistic Pluralism](#)* highly enough.

On your [LinkedIn profile](#), you mention advocating for "racialized, international, and/or EAL-identifying students to see themselves and their needs richly reflected in the curricula, campus programs, and services that they interact with" —how does your work do this and how can others participate even on a small scale?

When I was introduced to the concept of [cultural humility](#) in teaching, it was a total game-changer. This paradigm asks practitioners to consider their cultural and social locations, not (solely) their students', and how these considerations might unconsciously shape their pedagogy. This process can prompt discomfort, because one must readily admit the gaps in their knowledge and model uncertainty in front of their students. However, I also find it freeing because students can support us in deepening our intercultural awareness and commitment to lifelong learning.

How does this work in practice? I strongly believe in approaching racialized, international, and/or EAL-identifying students as co-partners, co-facilitators, and co-researchers in our work. This can be in formal roles such as work-study positions and internships, but also in terms of holding regular focus groups with students and inviting them to share feedback at professional development events. And in the latter cases, if possible, it's important to acknowledge their time and efforts with honoraria or gift cards.

Please tell us more about your current research and your PhD studies:

I recently conducted an action research study that examined the impact of my workshop Overcoming the Messaging that Your English "Isn't Good Enough" on EAL-identifying graduate students' language beliefs and practices over the course of an academic semester. Using frame theory and interpretive phenomenological analysis, I consider how critical language awareness can offer the participants ways to address – and even challenge, if they choose to – the impacts of harmful language ideologies (e.g., native-speakerism) on their Englishing.

After completing the study, many participants now share that they are actively practicing self-compassion and kindness, resisting suggestions that they need to reduce or eliminate their accent, and re-examining their "native English user" learning goals. But beyond the parameters of my research, I personally have learned the tremendous value in creating judgment-free forums for EAL-identifying students to

engage in meta- and translanguaging activities. In doing so, we can have better insights into their agentive and conscious negotiations of language discourses and societal messages both within and outside of their formal learning contexts.

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Thank you once again for your contribution, Yaseen!