English Language Learning Magazine

CONTACT

August 2025

"Bringing themselves into their writing":
Centering learner voice in the age of AI
PLUS Applying the Four Strands Framework in
LINC classrooms AND MORE...

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IN THIS ISSUE

Articles

Krusenstjerna, Chad. [Photo]. Sunsent moon. Retrieved from https://pixabay.com/photos/sunset-moon-beach-landscape-sky-905601/

Calendar of Events

Editor's Note

Hello all.

Like the smell of fried goods on the Gardiner Expressway in Toronto as you approach the Exhibition grounds at this time of the year (if you know, you know), the August issue is a sure sign that summer is coming to an end. The *-ber* months are ahead of us, sweater weather, and falling leaves…that also means the TESL Ontario Annual Virtual Conference is around the corner; *Igniting the Future, of Language Education*, Vicky Saumell and Dr. Christina Gkonou are this year's keynote speakers, and with over 70 sessions to choose from, there is lots of learning to be had. We hope to see you there, November 19-21, 2025.

Seven salacious articles make up the August issue – but first, an interview with a long-time friend and colleague, Jennifer Hutchison. Jennifer discusses her thoughts and feelings on government cuts, closing ESL programs, and being versatile in a time of precarity. Language teachers making a difference – if you would like to Spotlight someone, I would love to hear from you.

Mercedes Veselka and Mary Ott open the issue with their article on learner voice and artificial intelligence. Juyeon Lee follows with her article on the Four Strands Framework and LINC classrooms. Asiqur Rahman writes about rapport-building and the language classroom. Marijke Geurts, Matthias Sturm, and Anita Premkumar discuss best practices for blended teaching and online learning. Zohreh Salaribaghsangani explores code-switching in Persian-English bilingual children. Diana Lombardi's personal essay takes on language learning like a sport. And Tetiana Yaremchuk closes the issue with her thoughts on supporting learners through their language journey. Thank you to all the writers for sharing what are sure to be great reads. As always, if you are intereted in publishing an article, have questions on the process, or want to float some ideas, do not hesitate to get in touch. Until the Fall issue…

Thank you for reading. Take care.

-Nicola Carozza
editor@teslontario.org

TESL Ontario Annual Virtual Conference
November 19 - 21, 2025

Featuring the return of our in-person event
TESL Ontario Connect: Networking, Awards and Fireside Chats

Mark your calendars for three days of exciting and innovative professional development at the 53rd Annual TESL Ontario Virtual Conference, taking place virtually from **November 19-21, 2025!**

This year, we're thrilled to offer two keynote addresses by Vicky Saumell and Dr. Christina Gkonou, over seventy sessions to choose from, our Research Symposium, TechKnow and Career Connection sessions, and the highly-anticipated 20th Annual Panel Discussion featuring ministry representatives.

Don't miss the return of TESL Ontario Connect: Networking, Awards, and Fireside Chats at the Toronto Metropolitan University, on November 19, 2025, from 4:30-9:00 pm EST.

Click Here to Register online today and join us for this incredible opportunity to learn, connect, and grow with your peers in language education!

STUDENT	MEMBER	NON MEMBER
One Day **$85 CAD**	One Day **$120 CAD**	One Day **$170 CAD**
Full Conference **$130 CAD**	Full Conference **$175 CAD**	Full Conference **$215 CAD**
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Registration is NOW open!

Tickets for TESL Ontario Connect are available as an **add-on** or **separate purchase**

CONTACT

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TESL Ontario

TESL Ontario is a supportive community empowering educational professionals to help English language learners to thrive.

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Spotlight — Jennifer Hutchison

Jennifer's passion for language led her to become a translator, writer, and editor in the private sector. She then used these skills to build a career at George Brown College, where she works in ESL and Communications as a sessional instructor. Jennifer is also a blog writer for TESL Ontario and just finished a three-year term on the Executive of TESL Toronto. In her spare time, she writes short stories, goes on long walks with her dog, and hangs out with family.

Your blog post, [Why We Need to Keep Our ESL Departments Open](), struck a chord with many people. How has this situation affected you? What can people do?

How has the closure affected me? Well, I'm sad because I love the school and I love teaching EAP. There are few jobs as gratifying as this one, where you get to work with students from all over the world and can genuinely see the difference you make to their lives.

And I feel sick for my colleagues. Some permanent instructors successfully filed grievances and were able to transfer to the Communications department. But remember that they are leaving the field that they love and have built their careers on.

Plus, I'm worried about the rest of the staff. They are the ones who run things, who connect with the students every day, and who organize the many activities and events that bring magic to the place.

I also feel let down by the college, for not recognizing how invaluable the school is and not fighting for it enough, and by both the provincial and federal governments, whose policies and funding reductions have brought us to this point.

We have to remember that the school has been many decades in the making. It is steeped in the talent, experience, and compassion of not only those who work there now, but those who came before them. They are uniquely positioned to understand the myriad challenges faced by newcomers, not just with respect to language and academic skills, but with respect to housing and daily living. Consequently, to see all of this dismantled is like a slap in the face, not only to me, my colleagues and predecessors, but to the countless domestic and international students who depend on us. And what kind of message are we sending to them?

In terms of what people can do, they can shout and scream and get their voices out there. Here's a [petition]() they can sign. They should also reach out to their federal MPs, urging them to review the decision to cut funds and cap

international student permits. And they should also appeal to their provincial MPPs to lift the government's freeze on funding tuition for domestic students. Simply put, we rely on the province's funding to deliver Ministry-mandated programming and services that are tailored to the unique and eclectic needs of our students. Students who bring with them a wealth of skills, passions, and talents to boost our job markets and economies.

You wear many hats – teacher, author, blogger, and more. I think many feel stuck in a rut right now, but you are an example of versatility. In changing and uncertain times, what else can teachers do to adjust?

Hmm. Good question. I'm lucky I'm not the sole earner of the family, that's for sure. I can't imagine being a single parent and being thrust into this new reality. Those who are particularly vulnerable are sessional college instructors and others who are paid by the hour since funding cuts mean fewer hours across the industry. For example, the TDSB has now closed five of its twelve LINC programs.

I'm lucky that I teach Communications for GBC, so I can hopefully get hours there, and since I've worked as both a writer and an editor, I may find something in those areas.

I encourage my ESL colleagues to remember that they share these skills too, that they have tremendous talent in academic and creative writing. They edit their students' work all the time, and they sure know their grammar! I recommend that they stand proud of these skills and promote them on their resumés. I've seen quite a few ads on LinkedIn for copy editors and writers.

As someone who has just finished a three-year term on the TESL Toronto Executive and as a blog writer for TESL Ontario, you are contributing to the ESL community. What have you learned during this time and what are the takeaways for people who want to get involved?

What I've learned is that ESL instructors love their craft and are eager to learn new skills. The heavy turnouts for our events and the high blog readerships make this easy to see. And I can't quantify how much I've learned from being on the board for TESL Toronto. It's just amazing to work with colleagues with this kind of talent and drive. I made real friendships there, even with people half my age. Plus, I soaked up lots of teaching tools and knowledge, not just from my fellow board members, but from the many presenters and attendees at our events.

I think you're a creative person, so if you could sum up your teaching career in the form of a metaphor or an analogy what would it be?

It wasn't until I started working in ESL that I fully appreciated how valuable it is to work with students and colleagues across languages and cultures. This experience has brought out a new side of me—a new awareness and texture that was dull or muted before. I suppose it's like bumbling around for a long time without seeing things properly until you get the right prescription for your glasses.

When it comes to teaching writing, what would be your go-to resource?

I think it's really important for second-language students to learn how to write more concisely. They often resort to clichés and wordy expressions that disguise what they're trying so hard to say. One tool that I use a lot is [Kim Blank's Wordiness List](). I get students to write wordy passages with elements from this list and then we work as a class to eliminate them.

What's coming up for Jennifer?

I feel the pinch of retirement, but I know for sure that I want to stay in the game. Every day, I tuck away something that students would be interested in, such as a news story, a video, or a piece of art. Whether it's teaching, researching, writing, advising, or volunteering, I'm not done yet!

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Thank you once again for your contribution, Jennifer!

"Bringing themselves into their writing": Centering learner voice in the age of AI

By Mercedes Veselka and Mary Ott, Canada

How do I stop my students from writing with generative artificial intelligence (AI) in a way that does not reflect their thinking and their voices? This is a question we have heard from many educators in workshops that we have shared on the use of AI in writing. Often this larger question comes wrapped in concerns about plagiarism. This new technology has highlighted the urgent need to reimagine academic integrity and assessment practices (Coffey, 2024; Furze, 2024; Higgs & Stornaiuolo, 2024; Mcknight & Shipp, 2024; Merod, 2024; Payne et al., 2024; Trevithick, 2024). While we can imagine a future where AI detection software offers us the answer to all our problems, this is not our current reality. Most available technological 'fixes' are not yet equipped to accurately detect AI in written work (Coffey, 2024; Elkhatat et al., 2023). How then can English language educators move forward now? How might they support multilingual learners to resist the allure of a technology which promises better results without the work? Multilingual writers have insights to share that can disrupt harmful assumptions about student cheating and support the development of voice in writing.

Why does voice matter?

Canada's educational system does little more than pay surface-level homage to cultural diversity and instead asks multicultural and multilingual people to assimilate (Olding, 2017). Whether the multilingual writers in our classrooms are children or adults, newcomers to Canada or naturalized Canadian citizens, are always considered 'other' (Olding 2017; Tajrobehkar, 2023). Language is one of the sign-posts used to indicate who can belong and who cannot (Skutnabb-Kangas, 1990; Olding 2017; Tajrobehkar, 2023). For those who can learn a language with 'native-like' proficiency, it is a source of social capital (Tajrobehkar, 2023). Multilingual educators in this study note the challenges both personally and for their students in achieving the authentic naturalness expected of them. One instructor stated:

> I'm not judging some of my coworkers or something, but if we're not all native speakers, sometimes it's hard for even us to do that because we're so trapped in how we have been writing … So you can't really provide the variety or you can't guarantee that what you provide is actually authentic or like feels natural when it comes to a native speaker … [We have to] measure up to this expectation of sounding authentic and sounding natural. (Participant 22)

For multilingual writers, their voices are contested spaces, not valued as integral and central to writing processes. Many process-oriented approaches to writing want nothing more than learners' 'voice' but for multilingual writers, they are first being asked to transform their voices into *the* voice acceptable to the dominant culture (Mahboob & Szenes, 2010; Skutnabb-Kangas, 1989). Generative AI, while promising to support multilingual writers, offers *fixes* to standardize their language and produce formulaic texts (Asad et al., 2024; Evmenova et al., 2024; Sasaki, 2023; Wang, 2024) robbed of learners' unique ways of languaging (Payne et al., 2024). While it is tempting to consider generative AI as a neutral tool, it is important to connect the tool to the world it has been introduced into (Mcknight & Shipp, 2024). Multilingual writers' voices are often more valued when they can conform (Mcknight & Shipp, 2024; Skutnabb-Kangas, 1989). With such an expectation, there is a real risk of generative AI only reinforcing rather than challenging this system.

In our recent study using an inductive, qualitative approach to data collection and analysis (Charmaz, 2017), we interviewed 39 language and literacy educators from a variety of secondary and postsecondary settings about their experiences, questions and dilemmas surrounding teaching writing post generative AI.

This paper shares findings from a subset of participants, 15 multilingual educators whose teaching contexts included high school, college, university, teacher education, adult community English language education, and tutoring at a writing center (see Figure 1). While not all these educators exclusively taught English language learners, all of them had multilingual learners in their classrooms who they were supporting. As multilingual learners and educators, they had been negotiating similar, English dominant educational systems for much of their lives. Their experiences challenge assumptions about why multilingual students often rely on tools like generative AI in their writing.

MULTILINGUAL EDUCATORS	
Total	15
Highschool	P8, P13, P15
College/University	Pi2, P18, P25, P29, P32, P34
Teacher Educator	P2, P33
Adult Community ESL (ie LINC)	P16, P22, P23,
Tutor/One-on-One instructor/Coach	P3

Figure 1: Contexts of Multilingual Educators

Findings

For multilingual educators, plagiarism is less an issue of laziness, and more related to the pressure learners are under to "hide" themselves (Participant 22, English language educator) in English-spaces. Fundamentally, English language learners are asked to make a choice between "between sounding better or sounding like me" (Wang, 2024, p. 15). Multilingual educators understand this choice on a deeply personal level, and as a result offer strategies and approaches for elevating learners' voices rather than reinforcing the damaging paradigms which suggest there is one correct way to 'do English' (Mahboob & Szenes, 2010; Tajrobehkar, 2023). While there are many variables outside their control in addressing systems of inequality, these educators shared two principles which oriented their practice. First, they focused on building community around writing practices. Second, educators found ways to reimagine assessment to point learners towards the importance of their voices.

Fostering relational writing communities

Fostering relationship between educators, learners, and the broader world was a central principle for these multilingual educators when responding to the complexities of generative AI and student voice. "I know my students, I know how they write and I know what their writing style or the skills that they have or they haven't had yet, either better or worse," (Participant 13, high school educator). Figure 2 illustrates a variety of ways in which these educators support developing writers: through focusing on learners' goals, modelling, providing feedback, and creating opportunities to practice critical thinking.

Figure 2: How educators fostered relational writing communities

Learners' goals: Multilingual educators were attuned to the social, cultural, and language-oriented goals and contexts of their students. For some, this looked like sharing religious, linguistic and cultural knowledge to support their understanding of student writing. Other participants focused on teaching genre or connecting classroom assignments to the future goals of their learners. One educator chose to become a licensed paralegal which "opened a new window to my teaching" (Participant 25) to address the questions and concerns of his learners, many of whom were newcomers to Canada. These educators prioritized learning about what their specific group of learners needed and finding ways to connect course content to these desires.

Modelling: Educators also focused on providing modelling to learners to ensure they had resources to meet the gaps in their own knowledge and skills. For some educators this involved editing checklists, notetaking, or oral language and reading. These educators provided modelling because they perceived learner use of generative AI as a learning gap. They understood learners might not have the skills they need to be able to represent their ideas or are simply afraid of making mistakes. While educators saw potential for generative AI to provide good modelling for their learners, they wanted to ensure students had options beyond generative AI to support their writing.

Feedback: Feedback for these multilingual educators was an opportunity for them to spend time getting to know their learners' voices. Feedback was more than just an opportunity to correct student work, it was an opportunity to connect. For some educators this meant refocusing their feedback on content and ideation, rather than penalizing grammatical mistakes. For others, conferencing or daily journals were used to provide those opportunities for direct feedback and connection. This not only supported a deeper familiarity with learners' voices but opened playful opportunities to discover misuse of AI during the process. For example, one participant described a playful approach to addressing student overuse of AI because he knew their voices well through his approach to providing feedback through writing conferences.

> So they sometimes would come with these texts or just pieces of writing. And I notice
> that the vocabulary is a little bit sophisticated. It's too serious, philosophical. I was like,
> Oh, when did you turn into a philosopher? And I start joking with them...My assessment
> is very often based on conferencing. (Participant 8)

Critical thinking: Finally, these educators understood writing as a process deeply related to thinking and found ways to facilitate and deepen learners' connections to their writing through collaboration around shared texts, reading and oral language. For example, Participant 23 used texts about homelessness in Canada to engage her class in a broader discussion about their perceptions of homelessness and to challenge

learners to engage with each other across differences. For Participant 16, collaboration looked like holding mock interviews where learners drilled interview questions with each other to prepare for interviews in the real world. Participant 33, a college instructor, discussed the importance of collaborative learning for de-centering the *device* and giving space for *both strategies* rather than relying on one way of acquiring information. What both collaboration and a focus on oral language and reading have in common is the way they facilitated a deeper connection between learners and between learners and educators. Through getting their learners thinking in and around their writing processes, they found learners were both developing as thinkers and writers.

Building in processes to support learners' voices allowed educators to know who their learners were and what they needed for their futures. These educators understood that any time spent getting to know the students in their classrooms was time well-spent. "I feel like with the students, that's the way that they learn best, is like having that conversation in a relationship piece and that part is what helps them to get better" (Participant 13, second language high school educator).

Reimagining assessment

Cultivating relationship with learners wasn't the only way educators centered the voices of multilingual writers. It was also necessary to align their assignments and assessment methods to reflect these values. Redesigning their assignments and assessments involved incorporating process-oriented approaches to writing instruction in ways that often included multimodal text making.

Multimodal Assignments and Assessment (P34, P32, P8, P3, P2)	Process-Oriented Approaches (P34, P33, P32, P29, P18, P16, P22, P8, P3)
Visualization (P8)	Focus on critical thinking in assessment criteria and assignment design (P34, P33, P32, P29, P18, P8, P3)
Graphic organizers (P2, P3)	Focus on structure (P34, P32, P18, P8, P33, P29, P16, P22, P23)
Connecting writing to images (P32, P34)	Building writing in stages (P8, P34)
Movement (P8)	Modelling their own thinking/writing process (P29)

Figure 3: Multimodal Assignments and Process-oriented Approaches

Multimodal assignments and assessment

A number of these educators talked about the need to shift assessments and assignments to include multimodal elements rather than focusing exclusively on writing (see Figure 3). Participant 8 used visualization as a brainstorming tool to support his high school learners: "So the visualization allows for that type of enriching of ideas before we … actually translate it into writing. And then the writing has to happen also in a gradual way". Graphic organizers were also helpful in supporting developing writers and helped learners to "get it [the writing process] better". Two of the multilingual educators talked about assignments which required learners to generate or connect to images. For example, participant 32 had learners create a social media campaign and create images with generative AI when they could not find the appropriate images without it. Participant 34 centered presentations instead of written assignments to increase engagement. "Even if they're not doing that [engaging] through writing, they have other ways that they can engage". Movement was also something participant 8 used to "activate the neurons". These examples point to the connections between writing and other types of texts. Research suggests multimodal texts allow opportunities to consider and reconsider the text to increase engagement (Kang & Yi, 2023; Liu et al., 2024). However, this translation between and across modes is best suited for slow and process-oriented approaches which allow time for revision and reconsideration (Jacob et al., 2023; Liu et al., 2024).

Process-oriented approaches

Process approaches to teaching writing were crucial to supporting the development of learners' voices. For these educators it meant focusing on critical thinking, teaching structure, building writing in stages, and modelling their own thinking and writing processes. To focus on critical thinking meant shifting assessment criteria to highlight the elements of an assignment focused on argumentation, reflection or problem-solving. Some educators focused on teaching genre and audience as a way to focus on structure. Critically, these educators found ways to slow down and build up to assignments. Participant 34 notes that post-generative AI "my teaching is a little bit more detailed because I want to make sure that they get it and I want to see a sample of what they can produce before they write the assignment." For another educator, writing is a gradual process: Teachers will tell students to write a short essay, a three-page essay on the following topic.

> That is a big mountain for them. So what I do is, for example, we start with the let's do an Instagram post. So they know that is very short. So they kind of draw it and so on in a small box. So they have a small paragraph there. And then we will expand that into how about we do a small paragraph and then a longer paragraph and we expand, expand until we get to the 1.5 pages that I need at the end. So it goes, it has to be gradual. (Participant 8)

Methods for breaking the writing process into manageable pieces were also explored by modelling the thinking process. In sharing their strategy for paragraph writing, participant 29 notes: "It's kind of like walking my students through my thinking process. So, I sometimes write as I talk to them". Through slowing down, educators point out all the elements which go into constructing a piece of writing and the time it takes to develop a clear writer's voice. Despite the constraints on their time, these educators articulated the importance of slowing down and supporting writing through multimodal elements to ensure all learners are supported and engaged in the writing process.

What does this mean for academic integrity?

Relational classrooms, multimodal assignments and process-approaches to writing instruction and assessment help to solve the problem of plagiarism that has been accelerated by generative AI and to support the development of voice and critical thinking in multilingual students. While there is no quick fix, what these strategies point towards is the need to address the root of the problem, not just the branches. The multilingual educators in this study teach us that plagiarism is not simply about laziness or learners not wanting to do the work. For multilingual writers, it is a symptom of a deeper sense of inadequacy and a byproduct of an educational system which teaches them their voices do not matter.

Conclusion

Generative AI is here to stay. For multilingual writers who are already facing the pressure to write in *correct* ways, it is important to consider how generative AI builds confidence and agency instead of diminishing it (McKnight & Shipp, 2024; Payne et al., 2024; Smith, 2024). These multilingual educators challenge us to question why multilingual learners (mis)use generative AI and inspire us to facilitate relationally rich classrooms. The good news is the practices shared by these educators are not revolutionary. Many of these educators have been using these strategies to support their learners well before the introduction of generative AI. For those of us working in classrooms to support culturally diverse and multilingual writers, these educators remind us that while AI certainly introduces new complexities, slowing down and building relationship with our learners remains at the core of our work. With these principles grounding our hopes for our students, we may see them "bringing themselves into their writing" (Participant 13), playing with their knowledge of both cultures (Participant 8), and using generative AI to help elevate their voices, rather than hide them.

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Applying the Four Strands Framework in LINC classrooms

By Juyeon Lee, Canada

Teaching the foundation: Reflections from a LINC practicum experience

During my three-week teaching practicum in Ottawa, I had the unique opportunity to work with LINC (Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada) Foundation 1 level students. The experience was both challenging and eye-opening, as it required adapting to the needs of learners who had little to no prior formal education. For many, this program marked their first experience with holding a pencil, recognizing numbers, or learning to write.

These students faced the dual challenge of acquiring English while also developing basic literacy skills, often for the first time. Teaching even simple words like safety proved difficult, as many of them had not learned to read or write in their native language. While they could speak and understand Arabic, their lack of literacy in their first language created an additional layer of complexity. Despite my best efforts to use gestures, body language, and contextual examples, it took an entire class to convey the meaning of this single word effectively.

One particularly memorable challenge occurred when my host teacher asked students to gather in the classroom after break so we could move to the seminar room. Unfortunately, miscommunication led some students to believe the class was over, and they left for the day. Such moments highlighted the difficulties of teaching foundational language learners, particularly when traditional methods—such as grammar drills or reading comprehension exercises—proved inadequate.

This experience reinforced the importance of helping students develop all four language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) in a way that is both practical and meaningful. Authentic materials and real-life contexts are essential for learners to adapt successfully to life in Canada.

How can we teach more effectively in such contexts? Paul Nation's (2007) Four Strands Framework provides a practical and research-backed guide to creating balanced and effective language learning environments. By integrating meaning-focused input, meaning-focused output, language-focused learning, and fluency-building activities, this framework can help educators address the unique needs of learners at the foundational level.

Understanding the Four Strands Framework

The Four Strands Framework categorizes language learning into four key components: meaning-focused input, meaning-focused output, language-focused learning, and fluency development. Each strand is essential and should receive equal attention in a well-balanced curriculum (Nation, 2007).

Meaning-Focused Input: This involves listening and reading activities where learners understand messages in the target language. Krashen's (1985) Input Hypothesis highlights the critical role of comprehensible input in acquiring language. For adult learners, this could include simplified texts or listening to authentic yet accessible audio materials.

Meaning-Focused Output: Speaking and writing fall under this strand. Swain's (1985) Output Hypothesis argues that producing language helps learners notice gaps in their knowledge and refine their skills. Adult ESL learners benefit from practical exercises like writing emails or role-playing real-life scenarios, such as job interviews or doctor visits.

Language-Focused Learning: This strand emphasizes explicit instruction in grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation. Nation (2001) underscores that deliberate focus on high-frequency vocabulary and grammatical structures forms the foundation for more advanced language skills.

Fluency Development: Fluency activities involve using familiar language quickly and confidently. Schmidt's (1992) research on automaticity and fluency shows that repetitive, meaningful practice solidifies learners' command of the language. For adult learners, fluency can be developed through timed speaking exercises or quick reading tasks.

Why use the Four Strands?

The Four Strands Framework is widely recognized for its holistic approach to language learning. By addressing all four components equally 25% of the course time—meaning-focused input, meaning-focused output, language-focused learning, and fluency development— it ensures that no single skill is neglected. This balanced methodology is particularly beneficial for foundation-level students, as it provides a structured and comprehensive pathway to language acquisition.

One of the key advantages of the framework is its emphasis on comprehensive skill development. Foundation-level learners often struggle with basic literacy and communication skills, so it is crucial to provide equal opportunities to develop listening, speaking, reading, and writing. For example, while traditional teaching methods may focus heavily on vocabulary memorization or grammar drills, the Four Strands ensures that these foundational elements are paired with opportunities to practice language in meaningful contexts. This holistic development prepares students to engage in real-world communication, an essential goal for those adapting to life in a new country.

Another significant strength of the Four Strands is its focus on authenticity. For students in foundation courses, learning language through practical, real-life applications can be particularly motivating and relevant. For instance, activities like reading a simplified bus schedule (meaning-focused input) or practicing a doctor-patient conversation (meaning-focused output) directly relate to their daily lives. This practical focus not only builds linguistic skills but also equips learners with the tools they need to navigate their new environment more confidently. Authentic materials ensure that learners see the immediate value in what they are learning, fostering engagement and reducing feelings of frustration or disconnection.

Finally, the framework is highly adaptable, making it suitable for the diverse needs of foundation-level learners. Many students in these courses come from varied educational and linguistic backgrounds. Some may have minimal formal education or literacy skills in their native language, while others might possess conversational proficiency but struggle with writing. The Four Strands allows teachers to tailor activities to the specific needs of their students. For example, language-focused learning may involve more explicit instruction on phonics for pre-literate learners, while fluency development might focus on repeated practice of survival phrases for those needing to build confidence in speaking. This flexibility ensures that all students, regardless of their starting point, can progress effectively.

In a foundation course, the Four Strands Framework offers a balanced, practical, and learner-centered approach that directly addresses the unique challenges faced by these students. By integrating all four components thoughtfully, educators can create an inclusive and supportive environment where learners not only acquire language skills but also gain the confidence and tools they need to thrive in their new communities.

Applying the Four Strands in the classroom

Applying the Four Strands Framework to a LINC program requires thoughtful planning to meet the unique needs of learners, particularly those in foundation-level courses. Rather than trying to address all four strands in a single lesson, educators can achieve a balanced approach by integrating these components

across a series of lessons. This allows students to gradually build skills in a way that aligns with their pace and literacy level.

For meaning-focused input, teachers can use materials like graded readers, simple audio recordings, or illustrated guides tailored to learners' proficiency levels. Pre-teaching key vocabulary is essential to help students comprehend the content. For example, when introducing a unit on fire safety, instructors can provide visuals of terms like smoke alarm and fire extinguisher before having students read or listen to instructions about emergency procedures. This strand ensures students are exposed to language in context, building their understanding while connecting the content to real-life situations.

Meaning-focused output can be encouraged through interactive activities such as role-plays or group discussions. For instance, students could practice making a phone call to emergency services or describing their symptoms to a doctor. Writing tasks, such as composing simple sentences or filling out forms, can also allow learners to actively use the language in practical ways. The emphasis here is on communication rather than accuracy, helping students gain confidence in expressing themselves.

In language-focused learning, explicit instruction plays a crucial role in building foundational skills. Teachers might focus on teaching the alphabet, phonics, or basic grammar structures, tying these lessons to real-world applications. For example, a lesson on prepositions could involve practicing phrases like the fire extinguisher is under the sink, reinforcing both grammatical knowledge and vocabulary relevant to the fire safety unit. Such targeted instruction helps address specific gaps in learners' linguistic understanding.

Finally, fluency development can be integrated through repeated practice of familiar material. Activities like reading short, simple texts multiple times or engaging in timed speaking tasks (e.g., describing their daily routines within a set time) can help learners use language more confidently and automatically. For foundation-level students, these activities should focus on content they have already learned to ensure they are reinforcing their existing knowledge.

By thoughtfully incorporating these elements into the LINC program, educators can provide learners with a well-rounded and practical language education. This balanced approach not only builds linguistic proficiency but also equips students with the skills and confidence they need to navigate daily life in Canada.

Balancing the Four Strands in foundation teaching

While the Four Strands Framework provides a comprehensive approach to language teaching, it is not without its challenges, particularly when applied in foundation-level courses. One of the primary difficulties lies in balancing the strands effectively, especially within the constraints of limited class time. Teachers often

find it challenging to allocate equal attention to all four components. Among these, fluency development is frequently overlooked due to misconceptions about its importance, as educators may prioritize more immediate needs, such as grammar or vocabulary instruction.

This challenge is amplified in foundation-level courses where students often have minimal literacy skills. Explaining concepts or designing activities that engage all strands can be time-intensive and demanding. For instance, ensuring that students understand both the meaning and the practical application of new vocabulary may require additional steps, such as pre-teaching, scaffolding, and repetitive practice. The effort to strike a balance among the strands while also addressing learners' basic literacy needs can feel overwhelming.

However, during my practicum experience in a LINC Foundation program, I observed an effective approach to overcoming these challenges. My host teacher demonstrated how careful planning could integrate the Four Strands seamlessly into daily lessons. Rather than attempting to cover all strands in a single session, she allocated specific strands to different days. For example, one day focused on meaning-focused input through reading simple texts, while the next day emphasized listening to related audio materials. This allowed students to encounter the same language content multiple times, reinforcing their understanding and retention.

This structured approach had several advantages. By exposing students to the same material through different strands, they naturally encountered language repeatedly in varied contexts. For instance, after learning vocabulary related to fire safety through a reading activity, students revisited the same terms in a listening exercise the following day and then practiced them in role-plays. This repetition helped reinforce language that might otherwise have been forgotten, providing multiple opportunities for students to internalize and use the expressions. Furthermore, by dedicating time to each strand, the teacher ensured a holistic development of all four skills without overwhelming students.

The key takeaway from this experience is that balancing the Four Strands, while challenging, is achievable with thoughtful planning and flexibility. Using tools like lesson planning templates to track time spent on each strand, integrating multiple strands within a single activity, and continuously assessing student progress can help educators maintain equilibrium. Additionally, spreading strand-specific activities across several lessons allows foundation-level learners to process and retain language more effectively, making the learning experience both manageable and impactful.

Conclusion

The Four Strands Framework provides a comprehensive and adaptable approach to language teaching, especially for foundation-level learners in programs like LINC. By balancing meaning-focused input, meaning-focused output, language-focused learning, and fluency development, educators can create inclusive and effective learning environments that address the unique needs of their students. While challenges such as time constraints and resource preparation may arise, thoughtful planning and strategic implementation can overcome these hurdles.

As seen in my practicum experience, a structured approach to integrating the Four Strands ensures that learners are exposed to language in varied and meaningful contexts, allowing for repeated practice and deeper understanding. This balance not only enhances linguistic proficiency but also equips students with the confidence and skills necessary to navigate real-life situations. By embracing the Four Strands Framework, educators can support their learners in building a strong foundation for long-term success in both language and life.

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Author Bio

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The magic of rapport in language teaching: A review of rapport-building strategies from in-person to virtual classrooms

By Asiqur Rahman, Canada

One of the indispensable elements of education in general, and language teaching in particular, is building good rapport in the classroom. A classroom with strong rapport promotes a learning environment through friendly relationships, trust, respect, and mental engagement between the teacher and students, as well as among students. Senior (2006) stated that the rapport teachers develop in their classes seems to them as significant as the pedagogy itself. Harmer (2015) identifies the ability to build rapport as one of the essential qualities of good teachers. He states: "In classes with good rapport, anything is possible because the students believe their teacher is a good teacher" (p. 114). He refers to this as the magic of rapport. The interactions between teachers and their students significantly influence both the classroom environment and learning outcomes (Wang, 2023).

Numerous studies have identified effective techniques for building rapport in in-person language classrooms, where physical proximity and immediate interactions foster connection. While methods for establishing rapport in physical classrooms have been thoroughly explored, the recent transition to online language classes raises questions about whether these strategies can be effectively replicated in a virtual setting or if the dynamics of rapport-building differ in online teaching. In this paper, I will first outline the theories that underpin the importance of rapport; then, I will draw on recent and seminal literature on rapport in language teaching to define rapport and review strategies for building and maintaining rapport— including their challenges and adaptability in virtual classrooms, and finally, I will discuss the findings of the literature review in relation to my own experience as an English language teaching professional.

1. Theoretical underpinnings

The concept of rapport in the language classroom aligns with several theories and concepts of second language acquisition. Vygotsky's (1978) concept, known as the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), emphasizes the importance of social interaction in learning. The ZPD suggests that learners can achieve more with appropriate support from teachers or peers. In other words, learning occurs within a social context rather than in isolation; it happens through scaffolding instruction by teachers and other knowledgeable individuals' contributions to the learner's growth (Zhang, 2023). Building rapport in the

language classroom enhances mutual support and trust between students and the teacher by engaging learners in collaborative tasks and encouraging them to maximize their learning potential within the ZPD.

The role of rapport in language classroom rooms also aligns with Krashen's (1982) affective filter hypothesis, which claims that language learners can take in more input if their affective filter is lowered. Krashen argued that the affective filter is a psychological barrier preventing language learners from fully understanding available comprehensible input. He examined how affective factors act as a filter, reducing the amount of language input learners can grasp. These factors include emotions like anxiety, lack of motivation, and self-confidence. A positive and encouraging learning environment through good rapport can help reduce this affective filter and maximize learning potential.

Moreover, motivational theories in L2 education align closely with the concept of rapport. According to Dörnyei and Csizér (1998), the pace and success of language acquisition are significantly influenced by L2 motivation, which initiates learning and sustains efforts throughout. Without sufficient motivation, even the most capable learners may not achieve long-term goals, as effective teaching alone cannot guarantee success. One of the ten commandments of L2 motivation outlined by Dörnyei and Csizér (1998) is to cultivate a positive relationship with learners, emphasizing the importance of rapport in the classroom. This principle is widely acknowledged among teachers: A substantial portion of students' learning efforts is driven by the motivation to please their teacher. Establishing a positive connection between teachers and students (rapport) greatly enhances their motivation, making learning a more rewarding experience.

2. Defining rapport

According to the Cambridge Dictionary (n.d.), rapport means "a good understanding of someone and an ability to communicate well with them." In the context of language teaching, rapport retains the same fundamental meaning; however, a language teacher must go above and beyond this definition to cultivate and maintain genuine rapport in the classroom. Although the significance of rapport in language teaching is widely acknowledged, its definition remains complex and elusive. Scrivener (2011) noted that defining rapport is neither simple nor straightforward; it is instead "notoriously difficult to define or quantify" (p. 15). While a commonly accepted definition of rapport involves being friendly toward learners, it is essential to view it from a broader perspective.

Most definitions found in the literature are related to two common aspects of rapport: relationships within the classroom and teachers' qualities to achieve that. Scrivener (2011) describes rapport as the "quality of relationships within the classroom" (p. 401). Harmer (2015) also defines rapport as a positive relationship between learners and their teachers, as well as among the learners themselves. Likewise, Brown and Lee

(2015) state that "rapport is the relationship or connection you establish with your students, a relationship built on trust and respect that leads to students' feeling capable, competent, and creative" (p. 306). According to Scrivener (2011), rapport refers to how students feel in the presence of their teacher, the relationships learners have with the teacher, the connections learners share with each other, and whether teachers' roles encourage students to excel or make them feel shut down. In other words, depending on the quality of the report in a classroom, people may be defensive and anxious, or they may feel empowered to be honest and take risks. From the perspective of psychology, rapport contains both emotional and behavioral aspects, including mutual attentiveness, positivity, and coordination (Hamilton, 2021).

3. Ways to build rapport

As mentioned in the definition section above, good rapport primarily refers to relationships within classrooms that promote a positive learning environment. Ensuring this environment largely depends on the qualities of the teacher. Therefore, building rapport in a language classroom heavily relies on the quality of the teachers' characteristics. Now, the question is: What qualities of a teacher can build rapport, and what contributes to this quality? This section will outline essential strategies that educators can implement based on the literature regarding rapport building in language classrooms.

3.1 Teachers' rapport building attributes

Although building rapport is not an easy task, some teachers establish it the moment they enter the classroom, indicating that these teachers are born, not made (Harmer, 2015). However, research on rapport building recommends multifarious strategies teachers can adopt to build rapport in their classrooms. Senior (2008) emphasizes the importance of the teacher's attitude, proposing that teachers should be with their students rather than against them. It is vital to view our students positively and give them the benefit of the doubt when problems arise. Senior (2008) also advocates rewarding students by adopting a *generous-minded* approach. According to Scrivener (2011), a good starting point for rapport is creating a positive relationship and learning environment in the classroom. He outlined several key traits teachers should have for building good rapport in the classroom, including showing respect, being fair, listening to one another, providing clear and constructive feedback, possessing a good sense of humor, demonstrating patience, inspiring confidence, being authentic, empathetic, and organized, exhibiting enthusiasm, building trust, being non-judgmental, and approachable. Among all these, Scrivener emphasizes the importance of being welcoming, encouraging, and remembering the positive aspects of our students.

3.2 Respect, empathy, and authenticity

Rogers and Freiberg (1994) identified three characteristics of teachers that can promote an effective learning environment: respect, empathy, and authenticity. When a teacher develops these three qualities, the classroom environment strengthens individual relationships and communication. Respect entails the teacher's nonjudgmental and positive attitude. Empathy is the ability to view situations from others' perspectives, and authenticity means being genuine rather than hiding oneself behind job titles, roles, or positions (Scrivener, 2011, p. 17). Rogers and Freiberg (1994) regard authenticity as the most crucial of these attributes. They argue that being oneself, being human, vulnerable, and honest is essential for building rapport rather than simply acting as a teacher. Similarly, Houston (1990) stresses that to be authentic, one must know one's own style and be truthful with oneself, as this forms the basis of authenticity.

3.3 Being an enabler rather than an explainer

Underhill (1994) classified teachers into three categories: i) Explainer, ii) Involver, and iii) Enabler. While an explainer teacher only knows and examines the subject matter, an involver teacher is aware of both the subject matter and teaching methodology. Enabler, on the other hand, goes above and beyond the subject knowledge and methodology and enables the learners towards autonomous learning. Of these three types, enablers are best suited for ensuring good rapport in the classrooms because this type of teacher is not only an expert in both the subject matter and teaching methods but also is sensitive to the thoughts and feelings of students, both individually and collectively. They incorporate this understanding into lesson planning and techniques, fostering strong working relationships and a positive classroom environment. Their personality and attitude actively promote a conducive learning atmosphere (Scrivener, 2011).

3.4 Sustaining rapport through genuine interest

While the above-mentioned techniques can improve communication, authentic rapport extends beyond simple methods. Even though there are practical strategies that one can learn to enhance interactions, sustaining rapport requires teachers to possess or cultivate genuine qualities such as respect, empathy, and authenticity—not merely for professional purposes. In other words, rapport-building traits cannot be faked or mimicked; they must arise from a sincere interest. As Scrivener (2011) noted, "real rapport is something more substantial than a technique that you can mimic. It is not something you do to other people. It is you and your moment-by-moment relationship with other human beings. Similarly, respect or empathy or authenticity are not clothes to put on as you walk into the classroom, not temporary characteristics that you take on for the duration of your lesson" (p. 17).

By the same token, Nguyen (2007) states that rapport is not just formed through sporadic small talk but is seamlessly woven into the lesson's flow; for example, how teachers intentionally build rapport at key moments in a lesson, especially during potentially confrontational situations like getting students' attention, correcting a student, or providing instructions. Therefore, maintaining a strong rapport is challenging. Occasionally, students' misbehavior can threaten this connection, and how we respond in these circumstances will influence whether the rapport we have established lasts (Harmer, 2015).

3.5 Engaging the learners through emotion and tasks

Engaging learners in classroom tasks rather than keeping them passive helps create a friendly environment. Sang and Hiver (2021) outlined several dimensions of student engagement, including i) emotional engagement, ii) behavioral engagement, iii) cognitive engagement, iv) affective engagement, v) social engagement, and vi) task engagement. Among these types, emotional engagement significantly contributes to rapport building in the classroom. It fosters connections and enhances learning (Zhang, 2023). Emotional engagement pertains to the feelings learners experience in response to learning activities and their classroom environment. By nurturing these emotional connections, educators can create a welcoming and supportive space that encourages active participation. In this context, facial expressions can enhance communication, convey emotions, and cultivate an engaging learning atmosphere. Senior (2008) emphasizes that a friendly manner through supportive facial expressions influences students' perceptions of their teachers and the classroom environment. Smiles and nods communicate approval and curiosity, fostering connections and clarifying instructions. These gestures promote emotional involvement and nurture trust and motivation among learners.

Another strategy to engage learners and build rapport involves task design in class. Scrivener (2011) suggested that if rapport is lacking, teachers should prioritize tasks that enhance relationships and interaction over mere language instruction. This approach is vital, as learning quality diminishes without friendly classroom dynamics. Harmer (2015) emphasized that sustaining learner motivation requires activities that promote rapport, where teachers show interest and personalize lessons. Authentic group tasks based on communicative approaches can strengthen rapport. Gamified activities, particularly early in the course, can significantly enhance rapport and teamwork (McLellan, n.d.).

3.6 Knowing the learners personally

Connecting with each student personally can be an effective way to build rapport in the classroom, although having many students in a class often makes it challenging for teachers. A great method for establishing personal connections with students and fostering rapport is to remember all learners' names and address

them accordingly (Harmer, 2015; Scrivener, 2011). When students hear their names called by teachers, they feel valued and motivated. Various techniques can assist with name recall. Harmer (2015) suggested specific strategies for remembering students' names, including assigning designated seating arrangements, using name cards on desks, having students wear name badges, noting learners' names along with details about them, reviewing the name roster before each class, and taking a class photo with names tagged on each image.

Another effective way to understand and relate to students personally is by engaging with their lives beyond the classroom. This can involve asking learners questions like: How was your day? What activities did you do over the weekend? (Sharpe, 2019). In this regard, Harmer (2015) highlighted the benefits of one-on-one teaching, noting that individual lessons offer clear advantages over group classes. In one-on-one teaching, both teacher and student can tailor the curriculum to personal needs, aligning it with the student's interests and learning styles. Ultimately, it provides valuable opportunities for mutual learning and collaboration, which are essential aspects of rapport.

Learning about students' cultures and finding common ground could be another way to personally understand and connect with the learners, creating strong rapport. Culture is the foundation of human interaction, shaping community connections and identities. Harmer (2015) noted that emotions and meanings vary across cultures. For example, many British and American people nod for yes and shake their heads for no, but this is often reversed in Greek and Indian cultures. Brown (2000) stated that when learning a second language, one must transcend the boundaries of their first language to embrace a new language, culture, and ways of thinking, feeling, and acting. In a heterogeneous classroom, it is crucial to find common ground, appreciate cultural differences and shared experiences, and demonstrate empathy and mutual respect.

3.7 Building rapport through feedback

Another way to build rapport in the classroom is by providing multilayered feedback from several sources, such as self, peer, and teacher. Harmer (2015) highlighted that while teacher feedback aims to facilitate language learning via implicit or explicit correction, it can also help build rapport. He also stated that rapport significantly depends on how we respond to our students' words and actions, meaning how we provide feedback and how we correct them. In this context, Brown & Lee (2015) emphasized the importance of providing feedback on each student's progress, seeking students' ideas and feelings, and valuing and respecting what they express. They also highlighted the genuine sense of shared joy that arises when students discover something new or achieve success. Also, engaging in laughter with them, rather than at their expense, is encouraged. Collaborating with them as a cohesive unit, rather than in opposition, is

beneficial. Fostering a welcoming and encouraging environment is essential, alongside recognizing and reflecting on the students' positive attributes (Brown & Lee, 2015). By the same token, Katz (2021) also notes that constructive and supportive feedback is key to fostering trust and community in the online classroom. Among other types of feedback, work-specific feedback, or the reaction to the content of what the students have said or written (as opposed to saying typical *good* or *very good),* can help build better rapport because this kind of feedback makes the learners feel that they have been listened to with interest (Harmer, 2015; Scrivener, 2011).

4. Rapport building in online classrooms

In recent years, especially post-COVID-19, online language instruction has significantly expanded due to technological advancements. Online language teaching varies widely across platforms, featuring real-time classes on Google Meet, Zoom, or Microsoft Teams, as well as AI-based applications like Duolingo and YouTube lessons. For this paper, online language classrooms refer mainly to live instruction on platforms like Google Meet or Zoom, where learners and teachers engage in real-time rather than recorded YouTube lessons or AI-based preprogrammed apps.

4.1 Challenges of rapport building in online teaching

Scholars have raised concerns about the effectiveness of online language teaching in various aspects. One key issue in online classrooms is the lack of rapport. There are several obvious reasons for having a weaker rapport in online classrooms compared to in-person classrooms. Fattore (2022) notes that online courses often experience a digital disconnect, leading to student dissatisfaction and feelings of isolation from their peers and the instructor. This makes it challenging to build relationships without the physical proximity experienced in face-to-face interactions. In online classes, learners are physically separated from one another, which complicates the application of Vygotsky's (1987) Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) concept.

4.2. Strategies to maximize rapport in online Classroom

The lack of rapport in online language classes can be minimized in certain ways, specifically by replicating the rapport-building strategies as much as possible. Katz (2021) identified the need to integrate characteristics from the face-to-face classroom into the online environment. These include fostering a more personal experience, enhancing the ability to connect, simplifying the process of asking questions, ensuring timely feedback, and promoting a greater sense of engagement and interaction. Fattore (2022) emphasizes the use of care and authenticity to connect students in online classrooms. This approach bridges the gap of physical proximity and heals the trauma and fatigue resulting from COVID-19. In the same vein, essential teacher

qualities mentioned above, such as being authentic, respectful, and empathetic, can be maintained in online classrooms if the teachers choose to do so.

The practical steps to maximize rapport in online language classes include utilizing state-of-the-art online classroom features. One of these most compelling features is breakout rooms, which are available on both Zoom and Google Meet. Breakout rooms allow learners to interact with each other through pair work or group work, which can be nearly as effective as in a traditional classroom. Many activities based on Communicative or Task-based Language Teaching methods already tested in physical classrooms can be seamlessly applied in online classrooms by utilizing breakout room technology (Katz, 2021). Some research shows that many students tend to feel more comfortable engaging in breakout rooms than in traditional in-person settings, and by extending the time and frequency of pair and small group activities in breakout rooms offers teachers greater opportunities to provide feedback and creates a more personal connection in the learning environment (Katz, 2021).

In addition, it is essential to learn to use certain online tools like microphones and webcams skillfully. Peachey (2020) emphasized that in online teaching, certain practical steps can boost engagement and strengthen rapport. These steps include but are not limited to positioning the webcam at eye level, connecting with students by looking at the camera instead of the screen, and maintaining a comfortable distance from the computer to utilize gestures and body language (e.g., facial expressions) effectively. As educators become more skilled with online tools, new strategies will arise to enhance rapport in these digital learning settings. Another way to enhance online classrooms is by utilizing multimodal communication, such as an interactive whiteboard and Google Docs, where all participants can collaborate on writing.

5. Implications

Rapport building is a crucial aspect of language pedagogy, and this paper presents several practical implications for teaching and teacher training. Language educators can adopt many of the rapport-building qualities discussed above, including being empathetic, respectful, authentic, and enabling teachers rather than merely explainers. Additionally, it is essential for language teachers to implement the rapport-building strategies mentioned previously, such as emotionally engaging learners, utilizing collaborative tasks, providing encouraging feedback, getting to know each student individually, and demonstrating genuine interest in each student's progress. The strategies for maintaining rapport in virtual classrooms, including the skillful use of advanced online tools, ensure that teachers can maintain the same level of rapport while smoothly transitioning from face-to-face to online instruction. This paper also offers implications for syllabus designers and textbook writers, considering the importance of rapport so that the syllabus

and course materials provide enough opportunity for teachers to develop rapport-building activities in the classroom.

6. Reflection

As an ESL teacher, I have always prioritized building rapport in every class to foster a positive learning environment. My rapport-building framework focuses on respect, empathy, and authenticity, along with rapport-orientated tasks like group work or pair work and being an enabling teacher. I also use a blended teaching approach, giving some hybrid classes seamlessly. However, with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, I had to transition all my classes to fully online, initially using Google Meet and then Zoom. Establishing rapport was quite challenging at first due to physical disconnection and students' unfamiliarity with online platforms. The absence of face-to-face interaction made it harder to read nonverbal cues, such as facial expressions and body language, which are critical in connecting students' emotions and responses. It was also challenging to connect with each student personally.

Nevertheless, I remained the same supportive teacher, maintaining the same empathy, respect, and authenticity. Over time, I gradually regained rapport. I also continued using rapport-oriented tasks such as pair and group work, utilizing online tools like breakout rooms on Zoom. This enabled me to recreate collaborative opportunities similar to those in a face-to-face classroom, allowing the learners to connect and engage meaningfully with their peers. This experience reinforced my belief that an authentic, empathetic, and respectful environment is not limited to a face-to-face classroom. It is equally achievable in the online classroom. It relies on teachers' willingness to stick to these qualities. If a teacher is genuinely authentic, empathetic, and respectful, they will exhibit these traits in both online and offline teaching seamlessly.

On the other hand, after arriving in Canada, I began learning French as my third language using a prominent AI-based language teaching app called Duolingo. While Duolingo offered an attractive interface and a gamified language learning experience, one crucial element was almost entirely missing, and that is rapport. Learning through preprogrammed software resulted in poor rapport due to the absence of a live teacher. This led me to conclude that in live online classes on platforms like Zoom or Meet, rapport-building strategies can be effectively replicated by having the same teacher with the same attributes. However, in a software-based, non-human online learning platform like Duolingo, rapport is sadly nonexistent. Essentially, strong rapport in a language classroom consistently calls for a human instructor who possesses the qualities mentioned earlier, regardless of whether the instruction is online or in-person. Therefore, AI-driven online language teaching apps that are preprogrammed and lack human instructors are likely to struggle or even fail due to the lack of rapport.

Conclusion

In conclusion, rapport remains necessary and possible both in online and face-to-face classes. It depends on teachers' willingness and effort to foster those qualities that help build friendly relationships in a classroom, regardless of whether they are in physical or online classrooms. Depending on the teachers' genuine interest in motivating learners and building rapport, an online class may achieve the same rapport as an in-person class. In other words, rapport in language classrooms largely depends on teachers' attributes. However, the findings of this paper are predominantly drawn from the existing literature and from my experiences of teaching and observing classrooms of adult ESL and EFL learners. Hence, these findings may not apply in all contexts. Further studies across different contexts and cultures, survey research on teachers' attitudes toward rapport, and studies on how rapport influences different types of learners could provide more complex aspects of rapport building in language classrooms.

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Best practices for online or blended teaching

By Marijke Geurts, Matthias Sturm, and Anita Premkumar, Canada

Background of the project

The delivery of instruction through an online platform is becoming more popular every year. While students are taking advantage of the convenience provided by online instruction, their teachers are grappling with how to engage students and approximate more closely the ambiance of a traditional classroom, which is still the most familiar environment for many. For many learners, online classes are places to learn at their own time and pace, where automated activities provide immediate feedback and learning. For many teachers, questions around assessment validity in an online environment are issues of concern.

Most language classes provided in the Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) program have the capability for learners and instructors to be online so that both can benefit from the affordances of synchronous and blended learning and teaching, meeting their different needs. However, utilizing platforms that allow for synchronous and asynchronous interactions requires a certain level of proficiency in technical skills both from the instructor and the learner.

For many instructors, shifting from teaching in a traditional, face-to-face environment to teaching through an online learning system means they need to make changes to their mode of delivery while still ensuring the quality of their instruction, resources used, and student assessments do not suffer. Through consistent synchronous and asynchronous interactive online instruction, teachers may engage students, enhance the quality of learning, and provide more flexibility. Another benefit of a consistent approach to synchronous and asynchronous interactive teaching can be improved teacher presence and increased student engagement.

In a rapidly evolving educational landscape, the pursuit of excellence in teaching and learning remains a paramount goal, particularly in the context of LINC and the Portfolio-Based Language Assessment (PBLA) framework. The intricacies of fostering effective synchronous and blended learning experiences in these settings demand a comprehensive understanding of strategies that truly resonate with learners, instructors, and organizations alike.

Research activities

ISANS together with research consultants from NLS and its community partners conducted field research into the effectiveness of LINC and PBLA approaches in synchronous and blended learning settings. After an initial environmental scan, which identified which approaches were used, the research phase was structured to yield robust, replicable, and holistic insights. Recognizing the influence of the very individuals for whom the educational experience is designed, the project integrated the voices of learners. Their perspectives, experiences, and aspirations formed a cornerstone, shaping the trajectory of inquiry and ensuring that the research was meaningfully grounded in the reality of those it seeks to benefit. The environmental scan indirectly included learner voices, through comments teachers left on the survey.

The field research employed a mixed methods approach combining quantitative and qualitative data collected and analyzed by independent researchers at each community partner organization participating in the study: ISS of BC, NorQuest College, Red River College, YMCA of Saint John, and ISANS. Findings from analyses of quantitative data from surveys were used to inform and design qualitative data generation protocols by way of semi-structured interviews and focus groups. Researchers at the community partners implemented the research protocols and provided a local analysis. They also supported the teachers participating in the field research and organized Community of Practice events. Data was collected from both instructors and learners at the five research locations. Through accessible surveys we heard from 758 learners, and 369 learners also participated in focus groups. Additionally, 61 instructors completed the Instructor survey, were interviewed, and participated in focus groups.

One major outcome of this project has been a best practice guide and professional development course for LINC instructors and program administrators. This article provides an overview of the research findings that shaped the development of these outcomes from the perspective of the research consultants overseeing the project in collaboration with the project lead. We present the guide and PD course to familiarise prospective users with its offerings and benefits to LINC and PBLA in synchronous and blended settings. Finally, we share some feedback from instructors and administrators who have completed the course.

Identifying and sharing best practices

First, let us look at some considerations for articulating and presenting best practices in online and blended teaching. From the environmental scan (144 respondents), we learned that 45% of respondents taught stage I (CLB 1-4), and 55% of respondents taught stage II (CLB 5-8). There are also various interpretations of blended learning. 15% engage learners online three days a week, 49% indicate either two online days or half & half, and 34% stated one online day each week. Therefore, best practices should be applicable to a range of levels or be differentiated for stage I and II and be applicable to a smaller or larger online component.

Teachers reported using various LMSs to support (asynchronous) online learning and platforms for (synchronous) video classes. 57% of respondents used a Moodle based LMS (either Avenue or other Moodle), Blackboard was mentioned by 17% of respondents, and Brightspace by 6%. The use of an LMS is complemented by other sites (iStedy, LEARN, Ellii, MS Teams, Smartboard, Settlement Online). MS Teams was further used by 49% for their video classes, other platforms were Blackboard, Zoom, and BBB. These LMSs and platforms offer different functionalities to their users, the extent of which can also depend on what role a user has been assigned. For example, on Avenue (Moodle) a facilitator can be a Teacher (editing), or an Instructor (non-editing). Furthermore, many other online resources are used by respondents such as Learning Chocolate, Teach-This, YouTube, Mauril, Padlet, Kahoot, Quizlet, Bow Valley literacy readers, and Wordwall to name just a few, as well as slide presentations instructors created themselves. All of this needed to be considered when drafting Best Practices for online or blended teaching.

Finally, as the title of the research project indicates, the Best Practices apply to a LINC/PBLA context. This is a different context than in an English for Academic Purposes or an Employment Language Training Program, even if these also serve learners of English as an additional language. This project's primary goal is to build knowledge about the most effective online/blended language delivery methods in a PBLA/ LINC context. Current PBLA practice is rooted in the physical classroom; materials, resources and tools for remote delivery of PBLA are quite limited. Therefore, a data analysis approach centered around the PBLA Pillars was adopted to present the findings.

We found that the field research findings (Phase I) confirmed the literature review findings but also further informed, extended and complemented them. Through analyses of the surveys, interviews and focus groups, we were able to identify current good practices as well as gaps in supporting practices for online and blended LINC and PBLA. We also needed to conceptualize the way in which these best practices could be articulated and presented so that they would be considered for implementation by the instructors participating in the field-testing phase of the ongoing study. As the findings of the field research phase had adopted an approach centred on the PBLA Pillars, we decided to use the same structure in a Best Practices Guide format.

To align this project with documents such as the ISTE Standards (International Society for Technology in Education, 2023), we articulated considerations for program administrators, based on the the PBLA Guide (Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks, 2019). These were included in the guide as Section 0. Best practices for synchronous and blended teaching at an organizational level. The sections in the guide can be summarized as follows:

1. How to provide support in a blended/online environment

2. A. – Suggestions for course set up and types of activities that are best suited for skill building

   B. – Possible solutions to complete assessment tasks in a reliable way

3. Ways to provide feedback in an online/blended classroom

4. Guidance for using group work (breakout rooms) and facilitating peer feedback

5. Suggestions and tools for goal setting and learner reflection

The Best Practices Guide (BPG)

The first version of the Best Practices Guide (BPG) was developed based on the findings from the Field Research phase and for the sole purpose of testing best practice recommendations through implementation at the community partners' programs during the Field-Testing phase. Instructors reviewed the BPG and provided feedback, after which the BPG was updated. At the start of the Field-Testing phase, the research consultants and project lead recorded a 20-minute webinar in which they introduced the BPG, briefly explaining each section and giving some examples of how suggestions could be implemented. Each section of the BPG is written in the form of a checklist, where administrators or instructors can check off which practices they have already implemented, which they want to try, and which practices they are currently not able to incorporate into their teaching. Thus, the guide enables instructors to set clear goals for improvement. The BPG is not prescriptive, but a tool for instructors to reflect on their teaching practice and find ways that they can continue to grow their skills in a blended/online environment.

During the Field-Testing phase, the LINC instructors from the community partners implemented many best practices recommended in the BPG in their teaching, classroom activities and online courseware. They also provided further feedback through individual checklists and attended Community of Practice meetings with the researchers at each community partner to discuss the implementation. Researchers collected input from instructors during these meetings.

In the Community of Practice meetings at one community partner organization, the instructors participating in the research project reported varied experiences implementing best practices during the testing phase. They shared that step-by-step instructions improved learner engagement, particularly in lower-level classes, while participation trackers motivated learners but proved resource-intensive. They found forums enhanced community-building, especially for younger learners, but they also mentioned challenges for some of their students: Cognitive overload in flipped classrooms, difficulties with using Learning Managment Systems. Adaptations made to online courses, such as conditional access to past lessons and the use of tools like H5P, improved clarity and reduced cognitive load. Instructors also found that reflective practices were widely adopted, and they identified a need for streamlined digital resources and further training to enhance implementation efficiency.

The summary of all activities in the Field-Testing phase provided the basis for a revised version of the BPG. Several best practices were rephrased to make them less ambiguous. More details and examples were added where appropriate to improve the clarity of the suggestions, often following suggestions instructors had given in the community of practice meetings. Particular attention was paid to the checklist instructors completed at the end of the Field-Testing phase, indicating which best practices they could implement. Many of them left notes about practices they were not able to implement. These checklists were analyzed, and the summary of these results also informed Version 2 of the guide.

The Professional Development course

The team determined that exemplary practices would be best presented in a professional development course where instructors engage with supporting resources in addition to Version 2 of the BPG. At the start of this Material Development phase, the ISANS-NLS research team conducted another scan of resources to determine which professional development resources on synchronous online and blended teaching were already available and which may help instructors to implement the best practice recommendations. Some resources released during the COVID-19 pandemic were identified by organizations such as CCLB and TCDSB, to guide instructors in online teaching. These resources, such as videos, were evaluated, and researchers obtained permission to use some of them in the Best Practices Professional Development Course. Other resources identified as content for the Professional Development course were clips of the webinar the research team had offered, as well as certain sections from the PBLA guide.

The ISANS-NLS team decided to set up the PD course as a micro credentials course from which administrators and instructors can choose one or more topics they wish to learn more about. Each topic can be completed in under 2 hours. While the Best Practices Guide follows the PBLA pillars, the PD course offers a holistic approach, bringing together best practices from several pillars under different topics, thus showing how these best practices support and enhance each other. The Professional Development course consists of the following six topics.

1. Support from Administrators
2. Structuring Your Online Course
3. Being Present Online and Building a Classroom Community
4. Flipped and Blended Learning
5. Goal Setting, Learner Reflection, and Feedback Online
6. Administering Valid Assessment Tasks Online

Furthermore, the course has an introduction topic with information about the research project, the Best Practices Guide final version files, and a link to a feedback survey.

Each of the six topics is structured the same way, beginning with a self-assessment in the form of a questionnaire that can be completed at the beginning and end of each topic. Next, there are two H5P activities and a discussion forum that is only accessible once these two H5P tasks have been completed. Each H5P task contains two videos, readings, or podcasts. Instructors can assess their comprehension with quiz questions and reflect on their learning with discussion questions. These activities also include a summary slide and glossary of keywords. After posting to the Discussion forum, Instructors receive a badge for completing the topic.

The PD course further includes a topic with Additional Resources. In this topic, the information contained in the Appendices of the Best Practices Guide is offered on pages that include links to all resources mentioned in Version 2 of the BP guide and in the PD course. Finally, two sample units were included in the course, one for Stage I and one for Stage II. The original units are available from the Avenue Course Builder. The units were added, and changes were made where necessary, to give examples of how an instructor can implement Best Practices. The units were annotated to highlight where changes were made, and which best practices were included.

PD course uptake and feedback from participants

Following the project's conclusion, post-project activities entailed moderation of discussions within the professional development (PD) course, fostering an environment conducive to instructors sharing their insights and experiences. Moreover, proactive promotion of the PD course will persist, advocating its utilization for onboarding purposes and ongoing professional development within organizations.

As of August 28, 2025, 113 instructors have been enrolled in the PD course on Avenue and 22 instructors enrolled in the same course on Settlement Online. Overall, 149 badges for completing one of the individual topics have been issued and 19 badges for completing the entire course were awarded.

In response to the question *How well did the course material support your learning experience?* instructors mentioned: "The material was thorough and clear to follow and understand," and "The podcasts and videos were especially great."

As to why the PD course was helpful, one participant said: "The additional resources and learning what other instructors are doing to keep their classes engaging and how they are running assessments was most helpful as that is what I struggle with, but I am thankfully already doing many of the other best practices."

Another course participant mentioned that the activities "built up my confidence to make the best decision for planning as well as practicing before starting a course." And a third instructor taking the course reported that "all the materials made an important contribution to professional growth."

In the Avenue Leadership Learning Certificate (ALLC) course, where a plan for local innovation is articulated as part of a capstone project, one participant referred to the ISANS/Avenue-LearnIT2teach one-page *Summary of Best Practices for Synchronous/Blended Learning*, that is available in the Professional Development course. One element of the plan mentioned is to request regularly scheduled PD days to provide time for extra training and/or to implement and integrate digital resources into the program. Another element is an integrity quiz for the learners to complete before online assessments that could be used by other instructors in the program for consistency.

Overall, instructors who have taken the PD course and worked with the Best Practices Guide have provided positive feedback. At the end of the course, participants are asked to provide feedback. The survey results highlight the effectiveness of the course material in supporting participants' learning experience. Respondents appreciated the clarity and thoroughness of the topics, with particular praise for the podcasts and videos. The materials were seen as instrumental in fostering professional growth and building confidence for planning and practice. Overall, participants found the resources well-structured and valuable for enhancing their skills and decision-making abilities.

We invite you to review the course and the guide and share your experiences with your colleagues in the course forums or your program.

How you can access the PD course and Best Practice Guide

The Best Practices for Synchronous/Blended Teaching - PD Course can be found on Avenue and on Settlement Online.

Avenue: https://avenue.ca/classroom/course/view.php?id=6088

Send an email to apremkumar@isans.ca for enrollment

Settlement Online: https://settlementonline.ca/course/view.php?id=655

For self-enrolment follow the instructions here: https://cdn3.me-qr.com/pdf/21592453.pdf

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Matthias Sturm is the Lead Evaluator and Researcher with New Language Solutions for the Avenue-LearnIT2teach project. He has a MA in Distance Education and is a PhD candidate researching the use of technologies and digital equity among newcomers in LINC programs. Matthias has worked in the adult education field for more than 20 years, supporting service providers in basic skills education and settlement language training in their efforts to build program capacity.

Anita Premkumar is an ESL professional with over a decade of experience teaching ESL. Currently, she is associated with ISANS as a Program Supervisor. She holds an Ed.S in Education and Technology and is strongly committed to integrating technology into education. Anita is dedicated to exploring innovative AI applications, aiming to bridge the gap between traditional teaching methods and modern technological advancements, making education more accessible and impactful for all learners.

Exploring code-switching in Persian-English bilingual children: Lessons for language educators

By Zohreh Salaribaghsangani, Canada

Abstract

Code-switching, a common phenomenon among bilinguals, serves as a strategic tool for effective communication rather than a reflection of linguistic inadequacy. This article examines code-switching among Persian-English bilingual children during storytelling, shedding light on its triggers, cultural implications, and relevance to language education. By leveraging findings from qualitative research, it offers practical strategies for integrating bilingual pedagogies into English Language Teaching (ELT). These approaches not only enhance linguistic competence but also foster cultural inclusivity, aligning with TESL Ontario's commitment to equitable and innovative language instruction.

Keywords: *Code-switching, bilingualism, Persian-English learners, TESL Ontario, cultural identity, ELT strategies*

Ethical considerations

This study was conducted in compliance with ethical guidelines, including approval from Brock University. Informed consent was obtained from the guardians of all participants, ensuring their voluntary participation and the safeguarding of their identities.

Introduction

In today's globalized classrooms, bilingualism is increasingly common, making it essential for educators to understand its dynamics. Code-switching, or alternating between two languages within a conversation,

exemplifies bilinguals' adaptability. This study investigates code-switching among Persian-English bilingual children while retelling an Iranian folktale. The findings highlight how code-switching serves cultural and communicative functions, offering valuable insights for TESL professionals.

Research context and methodology

The study focused on five Persian-English bilingual children aged 5–7, residing in Canada. Participants narrated the Iranian folktale *Amoo Nowruz* in English, a task designed to elicit code-switching due to its cultural richness. Audio recordings of their storytelling were analyzed to identify patterns and triggers of code-switching. Parental surveys provided additional context about the children's language proficiency and usage. This multi-modal approach ensured a holistic understanding of the code-switching phenomenon. Observations included analyzing how cultural elements influenced language choices and how communicative functions dictated linguistic preferences.

Findings and discussion

1. Cultural triggers

Code-switching occurred frequently when children encountered culturally specific terms such as *Haft Sin* (a traditional Iranian table setting) and *Samanoo* (a Persian sweet). These terms lacked direct English equivalents, prompting participants to retain Persian words to preserve cultural meaning. The children demonstrated a strong attachment to their cultural identity by maintaining these linguistic markers within English narratives.

2. Communicative functions

Beyond linguistic gaps, children used code-switching to fulfill various communicative functions, including:

Requests: Switching to Persian for clarification or assistance (e.g., asking for the English equivalent of a Persian term). This highlights their reliance on both languages to ensure effective communication.

Humor: Lighthearted switches to add comedic effect and create rapport. For instance, humorous comparisons between Persian folktale characters and familiar Western figures like Santa Claus enhanced engagement.

Topic shifts: Spontaneous changes in language during digressions from the story, reflecting the fluidity of bilingual discourse and their natural inclination to use the most effective linguistic tool for the context.

3. Language proficiency gaps

Code-switching often bridged vocabulary limitations in English, enabling uninterrupted storytelling. For example, when describing items like *lipstick*, children switched to Persian while providing contextual clues in English. This adaptive use of language highlights bilingual children's ability to balance linguistic systems effectively, even when one language is dominant.

Practical recommendations for TESL Ontario practitioners

1. Integrating bilingual resources

TESL educators can incorporate students' first languages into lesson plans through storytelling, role-playing, and cultural discussions. Using bilingual texts and multimedia materials fosters engagement and bridges linguistic gaps. For instance, bilingual picture books featuring cultural narratives can support language learning while reinforcing students' heritage.

2. Encouraging cultural exchange

Code-switching offers an opportunity to explore students' cultural identities. Facilitating discussions about cultural terms and practices can promote cross-cultural understanding in diverse classrooms. Activities such as multilingual fairs and collaborative projects centered on cultural heritage can foster appreciation for linguistic diversity.

3. Supporting strategic code-switching

Educators should view code-switching as a learning tool, not a deficit. Activities like lexical mapping, bilingual debates, and reflective journaling in both languages can help students refine their language-switching skills, enhancing both fluency and confidence. Teachers can explicitly model when and how to switch languages effectively, turning code-switching into a skill rather than a challenge.

Classroom applications

1. Cultural storytelling

Assign students to retell folktales from their heritage in English, encouraging the use of culturally specific terms. Follow with discussions about these terms' meanings and significance. This activity fosters both linguistic skills and cultural appreciation, making language learning more meaningful.

2. Role-playing

Simulate bilingual interactions, such as shopping or asking for directions, to practice switching languages naturally in different contexts. Role-playing can be further tailored to reflect real-life scenarios students might encounter, thereby building their practical language skills.

3. Lexical mapping

Create visual tools that connect vocabulary across languages, helping students navigate linguistic overlaps and gaps. For instance, a *vocabulary tree* with branches representing terms in L1 and L2 can aid memory and comprehension. Such visual aids can also include cultural elements to deepen contextual understanding.

4. Peer-led discussions

Organize group activities where bilingual students share how they navigate code-switching in daily life. Peer-led discussions can provide insights into diverse language strategies and inspire collaborative learning. For example, students might create presentations on how their cultural heritage influences their language use.

5. Multimodal projects

Encourage students to create bilingual multimedia projects, such as videos or digital storytelling, that highlight their experiences with code-switching. These projects can help students reflect on their linguistic strategies and foster creativity.

Conclusion

Code-switching is a dynamic and resourceful practice among bilingual learners. By embracing its pedagogical potential, TESL Ontario educators can foster inclusive and effective language learning environments. This approach not only enhances students' linguistic capabilities but also validates their cultural identities, enriching the collective learning experience. The findings from this study underscore the need for innovative bilingual practices that align with TESL Ontario's standards for equity, accessibility, and lifelong learning. Future research could expand on this work by exploring code-switching in older learners or in different linguistic contexts, offering even broader insights for educational applications.

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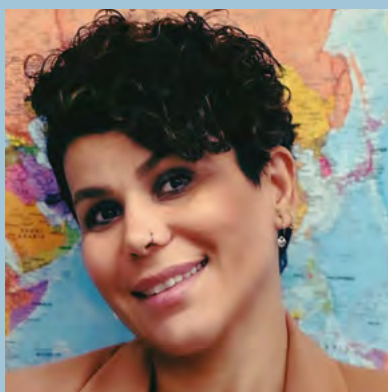
Zohreh is a certified ESL instructor with over a decade of experience teaching English in Canada and internationally. She specializes in CLB-based instruction, IELTS preparation, and curriculum design. With dual master's degrees in TESOL and ELT, she brings a strong academic foundation and a passion for student success. She thrives in hybrid classrooms, uses tech to enhance learning, and adapts her teaching to meet the diverse needs of adult learners.

The linguistic competition and other sports

By Diana Lombardi, Canada

Fencing

The linguistic competition is what I like to refer to as fencing. The first round of fencing commences, and you are speared by the sword of your competitor. That sword is the primary language and the secondary language. In this case, English represents your sword that failed to draw in time. Your opponent wins, and the primary language scores a point. Your secondary language stood no chance, and you had no time to make contact with your opponent. The question is, how do we defend ourselves from this situation? And how can we use our own sword in such a way that it overtakes our opponent? There is overwhelming evidence that both languages in a bilingual's repertoire are always active to some extent, even if one of them is not required for the current context (Bialystok, 2017). It comes down to strategy. How can we plant our feet, move our body, and draw our sword to tap them for the win? We could take quicker steps, move in a different direction, or bend our bodies in a different way. This may give us a chance to see the gap, draw our sword, and touch our opponent. And just like that, the word that we were trying so hard to find comes out. And it is one point for us.

Bialystok (2017) argues that bilingual language processing is based on an attention system, the Supervisory Attention System. This system inhibits the unwanted language so that processing can proceed in the target language. It is not just changing the steps we take towards our competitor but it also involves focused attention. And attention requires relaxation. With this in mind, let us take a couple of deep breaths. How do we feel? Relaxed? A little more focused? So now there is that English word again we hope comes to mind when we need to make a quick draw.

Strategy 1: Relax, focus, and take a deep breath.

Strategy 2: Get to know the word you want to call to mind. For example, what does the word look like, what does it sound like, and how does it move? Now talk about it. How would we like to use it? Put it in a sentence. We can also write the word several times to help us remember the word and how to spell it. We can also create a story from it. And before you know it, we have learned some new steps, which will move us closer to

overtake our competitor. So, let us take our spots on the mat. Deep breath and draw. We tap our opponent. And we win.

The horse carousel

Context is everything. We need to learn the context so we can see where and how the word fits in the sentence. It involves learning about your surroundings and finding the best home for that word to sit in. Context is everything when one word has several meanings. Let us take a look at a horse carousel. We all remember going to the carnival as a kid and there in the middle of the hyped-up crowd was a large shiny circular structure with different coloured wooden horses moving round and round all the while being held into place by a cylindrical rotating piece. In this case, the word sits in the middle of the structure while the different coloured horses represent the context. Our mission is to get on every single horse and get to know them. Once you get to know each horse, you will then understand the word that anchors them. Taylor (2014) notes: "One requirement for comprehension is knowledge of the meanings of the words of which an utterance is composed". The horse carousel and all its workings, takes much longer to learn versus the quick game of fencing. Fencing is a quick draw while going on each horse takes time. And depending on the time you need in getting to know the horses, you may slow down the speed of that carousel or speed it up.

Archery

Words as placeholders. The lazy man's way of making sentences. For example, using the word stuff. For instance: Why is your stuff on the floor? What is that stuff in your car? Where did you get all that stuff?

It is a very generic word, and if this was a sport, stuff would represent the bullseye in a game of archery. The black dot. Centre of the board. Question of the day. A clear target. "An expression is vague, if its meaning is not precise. For vagueness at sentence-level this means that a vague sentence does not give rise to precise truth conditions" (Van Rooij, 2011). Although generic words lack accuracy in a sentence as Van Rooij explains, words and phrases such as stuff, things, that there may actually help us in our fight to win the fencing match. It can be a weapon to beat the linguistic competition of the primary language. These simple words may come to mind much easier and quicker than its long descriptive counterpart. And so placeholder words can help us win the game of fencing. When simple words are all you have, and your linguistic competitor wants to take over, the placeholder comes to mind. And just like that you win another point.

Language learning is a sport. It is our primary language versus the secondary language. A back and forth, push and pull, until soon something gives way, and you learn a new move, a new strategy for maneuvering around your fencing competitor, and you can spin that carousel a little faster and get to know each horse

in a little more detail. Finally, the placeholder becomes a choice and not just a quick automatic insert. The placeholder sits on the table staring at you, holding your spot, waiting patiently. You see it as bright as day, and you can make the decision to either pick it up or leave it alone. Soon you will be on the starting lineup, running out on the field, in a big arena with more options and strategies at your fingertips. And you know you will be okay because your tools are in the bag with room for more.

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Author Bio
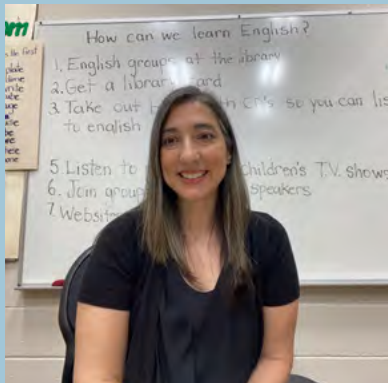
Diana Lombardi graduated with an Honours Degree in Theatre and Film studies from McMaster University and received her TESL diploma from the Canadian College of Educators. She currently works as an ESL supply instructor at St. Charles Adult and Continuing Education Centre in Hamilton. She was awarded the Mary Robbins Memorial Bursary in June 2025 and used the monetary gift to purchase books, flash cards, and games to help support her students' learning of the English language. She has also been a guest blogger for TESL Ontario since December 2024.

Navigating language and life: Supporting immigrant learners in their ESL journey

By Tetiana Yaremchuk, Canada

I came to Canada in June 2022 as an immigrant because of the conflict in Ukraine, so I know directly how difficult it is to start over in a new country. I currently teach English as an additional language (EAL) to adult immigrants at ISANS, mostly dealing with students at Canadian Language Benchmarks (CLB) levels 1 through 3. I have almost ten years of experience teaching high school students in Ukraine.

Teaching low-level students from a variety of backgrounds necessitates a thorough comprehension of their requirements and difficulties. In accordance with the CLB, ISANS uses the Portfolio-Based Language Assessment (PBLA) approach. This method guarantees that classes centre on useful, real-world tasks, enabling students to confidently navigate their new surroundings. In addition, I work to include the organization's guiding ideals of diversity, equity, and inclusion into my teaching.

The educational backgrounds of the students in my class are diverse. Five to ten percent have earned bachelor's or master's degrees from universities. About 10% have only completed junior high school, whereas around 60% have either completed high school or college. Because of their diverse educational backgrounds, some students may be less familiar with formal education, while others may be more used to regimented classroom settings. It is essential for educators to consider these distinctions while creating lesson plans and selecting suitable teaching strategies.

Additionally, a lot of students deal with homesickness, personal trauma, or the strain of adjusting to a new society. Attendance and concentration are frequently impacted while juggling work, children, and other obligations with lessons. It can be quite difficult to navigate Canada's educational system and social conventions, particularly for students who are not accustomed to scheduled study.

I create lessons that emphasize relevance, usefulness, and accessibility to overcome these obstacles. The CLB framework and the PBLA system offer helpful direction. Using real-world tasks examples like completing documents, scheduling appointments, or comprehending transit schedules, I emphasize task-based learning. This method aids students in developing vital life skills and confidence.

I also use a range of interesting activities, both in-person and online, to help them even more and make learning fun and accessible. In addition to dialogues and interactive exercises to increase speaking confidence, these activities also include icebreakers to establish rapport and lower fear, role-playing games to simulate real-world interactions, visual materials, sensory techniques, and project-based work to accommodate various learning styles. Since many students are anxious about speaking or making mistakes, especially when they are new to the class, I also implement supporting tactics.

My objective is to establish a friendly and secure atmosphere where students feel at ease taking part. My teaching style has been influenced by a trend I've observed in my students over the years. People who have been educated in their home country, but are unemployed, frequently have exceptional receptive abilities, such as writing and reading. Conversely, students who work full-time or part-time but did not complete college typically possess better productive abilities, such speaking and listening. This discovery leads to a crucial conclusion: students' language development is greatly influenced by their persistence, autonomous efforts, and the assistance they receive from their surroundings.

For them to succeed in their language journey, combining these efforts—whether through structured instruction or practical experience—is essential. For my students, these tactics have produced motivating results. After volunteering at a food bank, one student was hired as a teaching assistant at a private daycare facility. After getting lost, another elderly student was able to find her way home without a cell phone, just having a conversation and asking for directions. Another student was also employed to work as a volunteer in a senior home. Notably, a senior learner from Ukraine who had previously relied on her daughter for help was able to discuss her health concerns with a nurse and make an appointment with a doctor for a follow-up.

These success stories demonstrate both the adaptability of students and the potency of a learner-centered, inclusive teaching methodology. My teaching style is influenced by my personal immigrant experience. My desire to develop lessons that are both realistic and caring stems from my understanding of the anxiety that comes with adjusting to a new language and culture.

It is a privilege and a challenge to teach ESL students at a low level. These students are incredibly resilient and determined, and they can make amazing progress in the classroom if given the proper tools. The CLB and the PBLA system offer a strong basis for creating learner-centered, successful sessions. Teachers may close gaps and assist students in creating a better future in their new nation by emphasizing diversity, equity, and inclusion and adjusting their classes to meet the needs of their students and to make the classes meaningful.

Author Bio

Tetiana has over 15 years of experience teaching English as a second language. Before moving to Canada from Ukraine, she taught high school students and ran private classes for adults. She holds a Master's degree in English Language and Literature (Greek Language), along with TESOL and TEFL certifications. She arrived in Canada in 2022 and was hired the same year as an EAL instructor at ISANS, where she supports newcomers in building essential language skills.

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