

Spotlight — Farnaz Karimian



Farnaz Karimian is an educator who's passionate about rethinking how adults learn English through inclusive, practical, and critically informed approaches. With an MA in Applied Linguistics and extensive experience across colleges, universities, private language schools, and settlement programs, she supports learners and educators in building meaningful, equitable learning environments. Outside of her professional work, she can be found doting on her pets, caring for her plants, and hosting thoughtful podcast conversations about language education in an ever-evolving ESL landscape.

Farnaz, you have a ton of experience—from all sorts of teaching to curriculum development to management—and now host of your own podcast, *Learning off the Syllabus*. Tell us everything about this exciting venture.

I'm so excited that you asked about *Learning Off the Syllabus*! Thank you, Nicola! This is a project that I started during a difficult turning point in my career. To provide

a bit of context, two days before a new term began, I lost my teaching position. As a contract professor in the college sector, I knew losing work would be absolutely inevitable, but knowing it in theory didn't make it easier when it actually did happen. I found myself grappling with really hard (and uncomfortable) questions about my own identity, values, expertise and needs as an EAL educator. "How can I be myself and move through life, if I'm no longer a teacher?" Coming to terms with that was incredibly challenging!

During this time I did everything in my power to not lose my identity entirely. On my "good" days that looked like being motivated to make a difference: applying to hundreds of jobs, looking for volunteer opportunities, signing up for PD workshops, or thinking about how I could transfer my existing skills to other fields. On my "bad" days it looked like giving up, having an existential crisis, losing hope, melting into my couch and accepting that working within the field of Teaching English as an Additional Language might no longer be what it used to be. Sitting with these unsettling thoughts is what ultimately inspired me to start this podcast.

Learning Off the Syllabus was created to highlight the voices that make English Language Education what it is: teachers, students, curriculum developers, directors, academics, coordinators and many more. I wanted to create a platform where I could talk to *real* people (our everyday heroes) and hear about *their* experiences and expertise. It is my way, although small, of advocating for equity and empowering my colleagues and students.



The concepts that are covered in each episode are what we're all thinking about every day; they are conversations that we usually have on the down low with our peers; whether it's about our pedagogical values that don't always align with operational pressures, the emotional labor of working in this field, the precarity of our jobs or other classroom stories, they are important issues that need to be spoken about out loud.

What started out as a creative outlet for me to make sense of the world I'm currently living in has led me to unbelievably perceptive, inspirational, emotional, and hilarious discussions with people I highly respect. I am hoping that these conversations bring validation, support, and generally valuable insight to our teaching and learning community.

If you're an immigrant, a language learner, a new or seasoned teacher, a leader, a thinker, or someone who's generally interested in what we do, then please listen and subscribe to *Learning Off the Syllabus* on any platform where you get your podcasts! <https://allmylinks.com/learning-off-the-syllabus>

I also always want to hear from my peers, so if you have a story of your own to share, or just want to reach out, please feel free to email me at learningoffthesyllabus@gmail.com or find me on IG: @learningoffthesyllabus

You mentioned it in one of your podcast episodes—the word *precarity*—and it's quite possibly one of the best words to sum up English language teaching currently for many. What have you learned during these times?

Honestly, the word 'precarity' comes up in almost every teaching-related conversation I have with my colleagues (and anyone else who'll lend me an ear, in which case, I'm so

sorry to bring it up again, but what can I say, I'm an advocate for fairness in education). I could talk about this for days, but I'll try to keep it concise

Precarity for EAL teachers really means working in conditions that are unstable and unpredictable, often without long-term security or strong institutional protection. Many teachers work at multiple institutions simultaneously and move from contract to contract, with hours tied to enrollment and limited access to benefits or support. Those with full time hours are likely paid unfairly, and their expertise is seemingly undervalued. Even our full time college and university professors are not entirely safe with the number of layoffs and program closures in the past year.

Precarity has been one of the most clarifying and blunt teachers in my own career. Working across colleges, universities, private language schools, and settlement programs, I've seen how instability influences everything from pedagogy, to morale, to innovation and more. I've come to see that precarity in our field is a structural reality that shapes how we live, teach, and plan for our futures. At this point I've chosen to treat it as a call to build stronger professional communities, advocate more intentionally for language educators, and help design learning environments that remain steady for learners even when institutions aren't.

Working within a precarious field has also reinforced something in which I strongly believe: Good teaching isn't always just about methodology; it's also about conditions. When teachers are expected to be endlessly flexible without stability, fair pay, or meaningful support, the strain on the profession becomes very real, especially when that flexibility looks like being okay with not knowing if you'll



have a teaching contract next term, losing classes at the last minute because of enrollment shifts, or suddenly teaching larger class sizes without compensated marking time or adjustments to the number of assessments.

When teachers have stability and support, they are more likely to provide more thoughtful feedback on assessments, design more engaging and relevant curricula and be fully present for their learners. This is not to say that teachers who work in these precarious situations aren't giving their 100%, because I know a lot of them are considering how burnt out teachers usually are, but it's also extremely difficult to mentally compartmentalize these issues and not let it seep through in our practice at times.

Ultimately, I think precarity doesn't just affect teachers and their mental, physical, financial and emotional wellbeing; it also affects our students because educational quality is inseparable from unstable working conditions.

You might have heard me say this before, because I really believe it: As EAL educators, we've been conditioned to be extremely resilient. But resilience in our field shouldn't be an individual survival skill; it should be something we build collectively into the systems we create.

Let's talk transferrable skills. For many, they're not clear. You, on the other hand, have a good sense of your abilities and what you're able to do. How do people realize their transferrable skills, but most importantly, what do they do with that to make themselves, for lack of a better word, marketable?

Good question! I'm a firm believer that EAL educators have a strong set of transferable skills. I think what's often missing isn't ability, it's recognition. Our field has a long history of undervaluing its own expertise, so teachers, myself included, sometimes describe their work in narrow terms like "I teach

pronunciation" or "I teach academic writing", when in reality we're demonstrating complex competencies every day: curriculum design, facilitation, assessment strategy, intercultural communication, project management, etc.

Designing a course from scratch, for example, requires highly specialized skills such as needs analysis, learning outcome mapping, materials development, and feedback data management. Consider, too, the moments when you supported students in crisis or adapted a curriculum overnight for a new delivery mode. These aren't just teaching tasks, they're clear demonstrations of problem-solving, adaptability, and strategic decision-making.

If you had asked me this question a few years ago though, my response might have been very different. As a racialized, female, NNEST (Non-Native English-Speaking Teacher), I've personally experienced how difficult it can be to make yourself "marketable." It's always been quite awkward for me to put myself out there professionally, and that probably speaks to other issues like impostor syndrome, etc., but we won't get into that here. What has helped me though, was conversations with supportive and thoughtful colleagues in my community of practice who pushed me to see my work differently and name my skills more intentionally. I realized that identifying transferable skills starts with reframing your experience through a skills lens rather than a job-title lens and recognizing that what EAL educators do requires sophisticated professional judgment.

A crucial part of this process, in my opinion, is learning to articulate your expertise clearly and strategically. It's not about changing who you are; it's about translating your expertise so others can understand it. Educators lead initiatives, analyze learner data to inform instruction, design



accessible learning environments, manage priorities, and collaborate with diverse stakeholders. When we name these abilities with precision, we push back against the persistent misconception that teaching is narrow or limited work.

Lastly, I think what truly strengthens a language educator’s professional positioning is demonstrated impact. When educators can point to tangible outcomes (courses they’ve designed for multilingual learners, retention they’ve improved among newcomers balancing work and study, curricula they’ve adapted for diverse proficiency levels, or supports they’ve provided to help students transition into academic or workplace contexts, etc.) they make their expertise visible.

This matters because the issue has never been whether adult language teachers are skilled enough; it’s whether institutions have learned to fully recognize the scope of what they do. The more clearly we name and demonstrate that expertise, the harder it becomes for it to be overlooked.

Professional Development. From TESL Toronto to TESL Ontario, you immerse yourself in PD – whether it be for your own development or to change the landscape of English language teaching. What have been your experiences?

Professional development has really been a space of learning for me more than anything else. My involvement with the TESL Toronto Executive and TESL Ontario Board of Directors has been shaping me not only as an educator, but also as a collaborator and advocate. It’s opened up opportunities to learn alongside colleagues whose insight, generosity, and commitment to the field continually inspire me. I consider my contributions as one piece of a larger, collaborative movement led by EAL educators who continue to strengthen our profession.

PD has also expanded my own thinking. It’s pushed me to stay responsive to emerging research, evolving student needs, new technologies, and the ongoing responsibility to advocate for educators and the conditions they need to do their best work.

Equally important, it’s taught me that professional growth doesn’t happen in isolation. It happens in communities. What I’ve truly gained through PD is a deeper appreciation for how much knowledge already exists within our community. The real impact comes from creating opportunities for educators to share that knowledge with one another, amplify each other’s work, and collectively move the profession forward. I feel fortunate to be part of those spaces and to continue growing within them.

Thank you again for the contribution, Farnaz!

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