

Spotlight — Irene Kosmas



Irene Kosmas is Program Coordinator for the EAP and TESL programs at Humber Polytechnic's English Language Centre, where she provides academic leadership and supervises practicum placements for teacher candidates. She has taught courses in TESOL Methodology, Linguistics, and Culture and Society across initial teacher education programs at York University, Seneca Polytechnic, and Humber Polytechnic. A PhD candidate in Applied Linguistics at York University, Irene's doctoral research examines mentor-teacher experiences in TESOL practicums. With over 20 years in English language education, she is a TESL Ontario Accredited OCELTA and former Board of Directors member, driven by a deeply humanistic approach to language teaching and mentorship.

Thank you for taking the time for this interview, Irene! You were nominated for the Spotlight by Farnaz Karimian for the impact you have on the TESL world – so tell us a little about your current work.

Thank you so much, and thank you to Farnaz for the kind nomination. It means a great deal coming from a colleague and friend in this field.

I currently serve as Program Coordinator at Humber Polytechnic's English Language Centre, providing academic leadership for our English for Academic Purposes (EAP) certificate and Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) graduate certificate programs, where I also supervise practicum placements, working closely with teacher candidates as they move from theory into practice. I teach the Practicum course, focusing on preparing new teachers to apply TESL theory in real-world adult ESL classrooms, as well as courses such as Methodology, Linguistics, and Culture and Society across initial teacher education programs at York University, Seneca Polytechnic, and Humber Polytechnic.

I'm also a PhD candidate in Applied Linguistics at York University, where my doctoral research looks at mentor-teacher experiences in TESOL practicums—examining the mentorship relationship and professional development from the perspective of the mentor, an area I think doesn't get nearly enough attention. That research grows directly out of more than 20+ years of working alongside TESL learners and thinking about how we support the mentor teachers who support TESL candidates during the practicum.

If you could use 3 adjectives to describe the work you have done, what would they be and why?

I'd choose *collaborative*, *relational*, and *evolving*.

Collaborative, because nothing I've done—coordinating programs, developing curriculum, launching new initiatives—has ever been a solo effort. It's always meant working closely with faculty, mentor teachers, and colleagues across departments and institutions to get things done well.

Relational, because at the core of teaching, mentoring, and academic leadership is people. Whether I'm supporting a teacher candidate through their practicum or mentoring a colleague, the work only succeeds when it's built on trust and genuine connection.

Evolving, because over 20+ years the field—and my role in it—has never stood still. From the English courses I have taught to the research questions I'm now asking as a PhD candidate, I've had to keep growing and adapting, and I think that's exactly what this work demands.

You are a PhD Candidate in Applied Linguistics. Tell us more about your passion for TESOL and mentorship.

My passion for mentorship really comes from having lived on both sides of it. Early in my career, I benefited from mentors who took the time to guide me through the practicum experience and beyond, and for the past two decades, I've had the privilege of being on the other side of that relationship—mentoring teacher candidates, host teachers, and faculty as they find their footing in the field.

Over the years, I've supported so many new teachers and mentors, and my greatest joy has always been the same: watching someone step into their role and gradually gain confidence—that shift from uncertainty to *I can actually do this*. I learn just as much from being part of that process as they do. Every language learner, every mentee, and every mentor teacher I've worked with, has taught me something about teaching, about patience, or about myself, and that exchange is really what keeps me so invested in this work.

That's also what drew me to my doctoral research. In TESOL practicums, so much attention understandably goes to the teacher candidate's experience—but the mentor teacher's experience is often overlooked. Mentors are doing

significant, often invisible, professional and emotional labour: opening up their classrooms, sharing their practice, and guiding someone else's growth, often without much formal recognition or support. My research looks at mentor-teacher experiences in TESOL practicums because I wanted to understand what mentors need, what challenges them, and how we can support them more intentionally for their professional development.

At its core, my passion for TESOL is really a passion for the people who make it come alive—not only the teachers and mentors who devote themselves to this profession, but the English language learners themselves, whose determination and growth remind me why this work matters in the first place.

If you could redesign English education from scratch, what would you change?

My strong conviction is that people remember far more about how you made them feel than what you actually taught them, and if I could redesign English education from scratch, I'd want that humanistic perspective built into the foundation of the system—not treated as a nice-to-have, but as a core principle.

In practice, that starts with how we support teachers. So much of language teacher education depends on the quality of practicum mentorship, yet mentors are rarely given the training, time, or recognition the role deserves. I'd build in structured, ongoing professional development for mentors—not a one-off orientation, but real, sustained support—because how a new teacher is made to feel during that formative experience shapes the kind of teacher, and mentor, they go on to become.



I'd also close the gap between theory and practice earlier and more often, immersing teacher candidates in real classrooms — with guidance — much sooner, so they learn early on that connection and confidence matter just as much as methodology.

And above all, I'd want the system to treat English language learners as whole people navigating a major life transition, not just students working through a curriculum. Learners may forget a grammar rule, but they won't forget whether they felt respected, capable, and welcomed in the process of learning it. That, to me, is what English education should be redesigned around.

What's something you've learned from your students that surprised you?

Because I teach two very different groups—English language learners and TESL teacher candidates—I've actually learned something surprising from each.

From my English language learners, I've learned just how resilient, courageous, and capable they truly are. Many are navigating incredible challenges and trauma, yet they're building strong lives here in Canada for themselves and their families, often while learning a new language at the same time. It's humbling to witness that strength up close, and it constantly recalibrates my sense of what real perseverance looks like.

From my TESL candidates, what has surprised and moved me is how deeply they believe in this work. They genuinely want to make a difference in their students' lives, and I've seen candidates light up with pride over helping just one student make progress. That's not something you can teach; it's something they bring with them, and it reminds me that the future of this field is in good hands.

Between the two, I've come to see that this work is really sustained by the same quality on both sides—a quiet, determined belief that things can get better, whether you're the one learning the language or the one teaching it.

What's the biggest challenge facing English language education today?

Honestly, my strongest opinion here is about funding and priorities. I don't think money is being directed at the right things. We need policies that put learners and small class sizes first—real investment in the conditions that let learning actually happen—rather than funding that treats learners like numbers to move through the system.

There's a real push from government to move learners in and out quickly, but language education doesn't work that way. There's no magic formula for learning a new language—it takes time, support, and community. One-size-fits-all programs that focus on moving learners through quickly do a disservice to people who are trying to build real lives here, not just check a box.

At the same time, teachers need meaningful time—ideally alongside their professional learning networks—to genuinely explore and experiment with AI and other emerging tools, rather than being handed a one-off workshop and expected to adapt. Right now, professional development in this area tends to be rushed and surface-level, when what's actually needed is sustained, well-resourced time to build real competence and confidence with these technologies.

So for me, the biggest challenge is a mismatch in priorities: We need funding and policy that reflect what language learning actually requires: time, smaller classes, community, and well-supported teachers instead of systems built around speed and standardization.



What's one piece of advice you wish every English learner knew?

I wish every English learner knew that mistakes are not a sign of failure; they're proof that you're actually learning. So many learners hold themselves back out of fear of getting it wrong, but the students I've seen grow the most are the ones who are willing to speak up, stumble, and try again anyway. Fluency isn't built by waiting until you feel ready; it's built by using the language, imperfectly, over and over.

And beyond the language itself, I wish every learner knew that they bring real strength and courage to this process. Learning a new language as an adult, often while rebuilding a life in a new country, is one of the hardest things a person can do—and that effort deserves to be recognized, including by the learners themselves.

Thank you once again for your contribution, Irene!

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