

## Part-time language teachers and teaching quality

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**Abstract:** English language teachers face precarious working conditions affecting their financial security, well-being, and teaching quality. Teachers who are precariously employed are likely to engage in unpaid work, juggle multiple jobs, and are less likely to have paid sick days and extended health benefits. These stressors may affect the amount of enthusiasm teachers display in class, affecting student motivation and emotional well-being. Teachers being paid by the hour are less likely to invest in preparing for classes and supporting their students in and out of the classroom. Contingent employment also means that teachers are more vulnerable to student complaints affecting how hard teachers push or challenge their students in class and during their assessments. Not surprisingly, teachers' precarious working conditions negatively affect students' long-term success. With the compounding effects of precarious employment, teachers need to be empowered to challenge the status quo to improve their working conditions and advocate for their students.

**Keywords:** *EAP; language teachers; precarity; post-secondary; education quality; teacher motivation; teacher well-being*

### 1 Introduction

I teach academic reading and writing skills at one of Ontario's larger public colleges. I am one of the hundreds of contingent faculty members teaching in my college. The course I teach has over 200 sections in the fall semester, with almost 50 teachers hired on short-term contracts to teach it. I am one of the 50. In addition to working in the college system, I am a supply teacher in government funded Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) and English as a second Language (ESL) programs. I had previously been working full-time overseas as an English language teacher before moving back to Canada. During the first two semesters teaching part-time in the college system, I quickly realized that my approach to teaching was changing. Then I came across an article by Jacoby (2006), which showed that community college students taught by non-full-time teachers had poorer learning outcomes. In fact, student graduation rates were inversely related to the ratio of part-time faculty. At first, I felt insulted, but it made sense when I reflected on my practice and the institutional attitudes towards contracted faculty.

In Canada, the field of language teaching depends mostly on precariously employed teachers. Over 70% of English language teaching (ELT) professionals are hired precariously (Breshears, 2019). That means they do not have long-term full-time contracts; they do not have job security, are mostly under-employed, and have lower wages compared to permanently

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employed teachers. Most teachers are hired on an as needed basis and paid by the hour. Many of them do not have benefits and juggle multiple part-time gigs to make ends meet (Brashears, 2004 & 2019; Citizenship and Immigration Canada [CIC], 2010; MacDonald, 2017; Sanaoui, 1997; Valeo & Faez, 2014). In their Statistics Canada report, Jeon et al. (2019) defined gig workers as individuals who are “not employed on a long-term basis by a single firm; instead, they enter into various contracts with firms or individuals (task requesters) to complete a specific task or to work for a specific period” (p. 6). It seems that the education sector, and in particular ELT, has embraced employment relationships that are non-committal and not full-time. Across all sectors, reports show up to 30% of adults are gig workers (Caza, 2020; Jeon et al., 2019), but in language education the proportions seem much higher (Breshears, 2019; CIC, 2010; Sanaoui, 1997; Sun, 2010). I am one of those ‘gig’ teachers. These kinds of working conditions are not conducive to fostering the emotional and intellectual labour of teaching—particularly language teaching.

I noticed that the lack of job security affected my practice. It affected how I prepared material for students, how much time I invested in creating well-thought-out lessons, how willing I was to meet students outside of the classroom, how I carried out assessments, and the list goes on. I love teaching, and I love pushing my students to succeed, but something was seriously wrong. As I read through the literature and heard the voices of other teachers, I realized it was not me—or just me—it was the system. Teachers’ precarious employment impacts the classroom’s emotional atmosphere, teaching practices and interactions between students and teachers, and teachers’ and students’ long-term success and well-being.

## 2 Affect and the classroom

### 2.1 Teacher well-being

Financial insecurity and precarious working conditions have been repeatedly mentioned in the literature as a primary cause of teacher stress (Brashears, 2019). Sun (2010) found that teachers were primarily concerned about their “low pay (50.6% [of respondents]), limited benefits (47.1%), and lack of job security (42.7%)” (p. 152). Haque & Cray (2007) also found that the institutional constraints on language teachers in LINC programs affected their stress levels. The constraints that teachers voiced included “isolation, lack of job security, lack of professional development, underfunded programs, continuous intake, low wages, and problems with professional accreditation” (Haque & Cray, 2007, p. 637). The permeating theme among all the ELT professionals participating in the various studies is the lack of job security (Breshears, 2019; CIC, 2010; MacDonald, 2017; Sanaoui, 1997; Sun, 2010; Valeo & Faez, 2014). Precarious working conditions led to compounding effects beyond financial insecurity, including juggling multiple positions, doing unpaid work, a lack of sick days, and a lack of extended healthcare benefits. These stressors are likely to affect the quality of teaching and, thus, learners’ experiences.

How our society treats teachers is an indicator of how it values their work. Breshears (2019) discusses the impact of our precarious employment on our health, well-being, and families, which I believe are critical personal, ethical, and social issues. The well-being of every family member deteriorates as a result of strained personal relationships, lack of parental attention, and reduced ability to engage with activities or services that improve quality of life (Raphael et al., 2020). The high levels of stress, lack of time, and reduced access to services caused by employment insecurity are associated with poorer physical and mental health in teachers and their families (Lewchuk et al., 2008; Premji et al., 2014; Raphael et al., 2020). These are all factors that may add to a teacher’s stress levels reducing their effectiveness as teachers.

## 2.2 Motivation

Teachers who display high levels of enthusiasm transfer positive emotions to learners. Frenzel et al. (2009) cited studies showing that positive emotions were associated with higher levels of student performance and motivation. In their study, they found that students learn to appreciate and value different subjects via the level of enthusiasm displayed by teachers. Teachers who enjoyed teaching their subject area positively affected student motivation. Positive emotions displayed through enthusiastic behavioural hints mediated student enjoyment and possibly learning (Frenzel et al., 2009). Although Frenzel et al.'s (2009) study was carried out in middle-school mathematics classes, it reinforced the literature they discussed, showing the importance of genuine teacher enthusiasm and positive emotions. I argue that these positive relationships with students are less likely with contingent staff.

Teachers experiencing higher stress levels are unwittingly affecting their students negatively. The negative teacher emotions are likely to affect students' long-term learning because of the reduced perceived value of what students are learning and reduced motivation to learn in the short and long run. In their literature review, Frenzel et al. (2009) cite studies that have shown that students learn the value of both the content and learning activities from the subtle linguistic and physical cues displayed by the teacher indicating enjoyment and enthusiasm. Teacher enthusiasm is correlated with longer-lasting learning and motivation. These findings were supported in a study by Lazarides et al. (2019), which found that schoolteachers' affective enthusiasm was correlated with better student performance and motivation even after transitioning to subsequent grade levels. Teacher enthusiasm and positive teacher emotions are seen as predictors of both student enjoyment and achievement. If that is the case, then the students enrolled in our colleges' English for academic purposes (EAP) classes might not fully appreciate the value of academic literacy.

Most of the research I have read on the effectiveness of EAP courses did not account for the employment conditions of instructors as possible confounding variables. Contingently employed instructors experiencing job insecurity and stress may not be expressing the full spectrum of positive emotions observed by Frenzel et al. (2009) to be associated with higher perceptions of subject value and learning in students. A study by James (2010) found that students' ability to transfer learning from EAP courses into their disciplines was affected by how they perceived their peers and instructors. Reduced learning transfer was associated with lower levels of enjoyment in EAP courses and a diminished sense of its value. Based on these findings, it would not be surprising if future studies uncover the relationship between teacher working conditions and students' long-term success and the effectiveness of EAP programs.

## 2.3 Emotional transfer

Students can pick up even subtle clues that indicate teacher well-being. As Becker et al. (2014) explain, emotional states are contagious between interacting agents. Their study showed a strong relationship between student and teacher emotions, where students' emotions were incrementally affected by their teachers' regardless of the instructional behaviour in the classroom. Their findings were consistent regardless of subject domains and showed similar relationship strength. Becker et al. (2014) also showed how a teacher's mood before a class starts affects the situational emotions experienced and disseminated to students during the class. This implies that teachers experiencing a lot of stress may be transferring negative emotions to the classroom. This has implications in language classrooms, where affect plays a major role in learning (Dornyei & Ryan, 2015).

Teacher well-being directly affects students in the classroom. For instance, Mercer (2018) explains that teacher well-being has a direct and positive relationship on student performance because of the higher quality of teaching. Frenzel et al. (2009) discuss previous literature indicating that pleasant emotions “foster problem solving, protect health by promoting resiliency, create attachments to significant others, lay the groundwork for individual self-regulation, and guide the behavior of groups” (p. 705). Frenzel et al. (2009) refer to studies showing that the positive emotions experienced in learning generate interest and long-lasting engagement. This implies that this may be a challenge for most teachers working in ESL/EAP. Indeed, EAP instructors identified precarious working conditions and lack of student motivation as sources for job dissatisfaction (Corcoran & Williams, 2021). I wouldn’t be surprised if the lack of student motivation voiced by EAP teachers in Corcoran and William’s (2021) survey was related to (or a consequence of) teachers’ stressful and precarious working conditions.

### **3 Pedagogy & practice**

#### **3.1 Preparing**

Preparing for a class is an investment. It is an investment, not just for the upcoming lesson, but for each time the course is taught again. Job satisfaction affects how much time and energy a teacher will put into preparing their lessons. The sense that a teacher’s work may not be valued could undermine their effort and motivation (Haque & Cray, 2007). The fact that ELT professionals are underpaid and overworked limits the amount of time they can commit to preparation and professional development (PD) (Haque & Cray, 2007). In addition, teachers experiencing job insecurity are less likely to spend time developing, creating, and preparing teaching materials that could improve students’ learning experience (Valeo & Faez, 2014). This affects the quality of teaching and learning happening in the classroom.

The institutional power imbalances also affect how much effort teachers put into planning. For example, in larger font than the rest of the document, a statement in my contract reads, “materials produced by the employee for the teaching contract, including online materials in the College learning management system, to remain the property of the College” (personal communication, September 9, 2021). This implies that I can’t use my own material outside my college, the college holds the intellectual rights to my work, and the college could use my course materials and not need to hire me again. I used to develop video tutorials and materials for my students. Then I realised my and other instructors’ materials were being used in courses even when we were not offered a full-teaching load. I used to believe in creating open-source teaching materials, but after my experience, I realized this seemingly altruistic belief was being used to the disadvantage of the precariously employed. In short, I stopped.

These negative emotions experienced by contingent teachers affect how much investment they put into their teaching practice. Frenzel et al. (2009) explain that positive emotions “fuel teachers’ efforts in pursuing in-service training opportunities, reading subject- or teaching-related books, or planning and preparing lessons thoroughly” (p. 706). Precariously employed language teachers do not experience the full spectrum of pleasant emotions described by Frenzel et al. (2014). Thus, the stressed teachers in our profession are less likely to provide teaching that is to their full potential and quality.

#### **3.2 Classroom practice**

Our interactions with our students in the classroom are also affected by our employment conditions. Goldstene (2015) used an example of how a precariously employed political science

teacher in a post-secondary setting was less willing to challenge students with controversial issues and topics to avoid student complaints or reprisal from management. Teachers responsible for teaching academic writing and literacy in EAP settings may experience the same sentiment. Teaching academic English requires critical reading, writing, and a healthy level of argumentation. These are skills that are easily diluted if we avoid making students uncomfortable. Goldstene (2015) explains that contingent post-secondary teachers are forced to conform to a system that “stunts intellectual and, hence, social progress. Moreover, this working environment impedes the ability of contingent faculty to teach in a manner that fully embraces the relationship between the acquisition of skills and thought—and, especially, its expression in politics” (p. 370). These kinds of dynamics dilute the transformative nature of education.

Beyond the subtleties of teaching critical thinking, part-time teachers were found to have lower expectations for their students. Xu (2019) discusses how contingent teachers’ assessments were less rigorous than those of their permanently employed peers. They also required less writing from students. Umbach (2007) found that “part-time faculty interact with students less frequently, use active and collaborative techniques less often, spend less time preparing for class, and have lower academic expectations” (p. 110). This is especially relevant in language education, where any of these effects can profoundly impact our students’ learning trajectories.

There is also a difference between how teachers in permanent and contingent positions teach. Evidence from Baldwin and Wawrzynski’s (2011) survey of faculty members showed that teachers with permanent or long-term contracts used a wider variety of learner-centred teaching strategies than contingent faculty members. This was found across subject areas suggesting that employment conditions negatively impacted teaching practice. Among their findings was that contingent faculty in creative and investigative courses used a narrow selection of teaching tools and were less likely to allow students to submit multiple drafts or use essay-style assessments. Although these studies were not specific to EAP or language teachers, I expect similar findings in other adult teaching contexts and language education.

### **3.3 Student access to teachers**

Beyond the classroom, part-time teachers are less accessible to students. Xu (2019) discussed this as a problem affecting the quality of education based on various research findings on the effect of contingent faculty on post-secondary education. This research resonates with my experience teaching post-secondary EAP. I am not paid for my time outside the class. While on campus, I have had to pay for parking to meet with students when I was already volunteering my time. On campus, I did not have an office or a desk. There was one shared workspace for contingent staff in a remote part of the campus. I had to juggle childcare and my other part-time gig schedules to make extra time for students. This took a toll. I still volunteer my time working online, but now I do it on my own terms. It is an unrealistic and unsustainable expectation that contingent teachers hold office hours or assist students outside the contractually scheduled and paid hours. But my students need extra assistance to succeed. I wonder how my students would fare without it.

## **4 Long-term impact**

### **4.1 Long-term impact on students**

Research on post-secondary education gives some insight into the effect of contingent teachers on long-term student success. For example, contingent post-secondary teachers were less likely to identify student needs and were less likely to know about the support services available (Schuetz, 2002; as cited in Xu, 2019). Again, I am not surprised. It took me over a year to identify

and refer students to the correct campus services. As a supply ESL/LINC teacher, I do not know how to guide students who need extra support. The best I can do is ask them to speak to an administrator during business hours. For students, teachers are the main points of contact with the institution. When teachers cannot assist students, we create additional barriers to their success. I feel these barriers created by ignorance or complacency profoundly affect my vulnerable or marginalized students. In essence, our isolation affects student success in ways beyond the “service” we are perceived to deliver.

There is growing evidence of how contingent employment of post-secondary faculty affects long-term student success. Baldwin and Wawrzynski (2011) discussed how higher ratios of precarious teaching staff are associated with lower graduation rates, lower persistence, and lower levels of student retention. In adult language education, most teachers are precariously employed. So, it is not surprising that dropout rates among LINC students were reported to be over 22% (CIC, 2010). Although the official report attributed the high student dropout rates to various personal reasons (CIC, 2010), these dropout rates may be caused directly or indirectly by the teachers’ working conditions for the reasons highlighted throughout the previous sections.

#### **4.2 Professional development**

Like other precariously employed teachers, I feel that isolation hindered my efficacy as a teacher. The isolation that contingent faculty face and the lack of formal professional socialization inhibit a teacher’s ability to stay on top of trends and discourse of the field. Over a third of language teachers reported in White and Naylor (2015; as cited in Breshears, 2019) worked over 40 hours a week juggling multiple jobs. These teachers would probably find it difficult to stay on top of professional trends. PD would likely be perceived as either a luxury or an imposition (Penrose, 2012). Indeed, Penrose highlights that contingent faculty are not required to engage in conferences or PD, thus affecting their ability to socialize in their communities of practice and their sense of professionalization. Those who do engage in PD do so from their own pocket and time and are rarely ever acknowledged for it. This lack of professional socialization stunts teaching and fossilizes ideas (Penrose, 2012), affecting the quality and content of teaching. Penrose also discusses the importance of professional socialization for improving student outcomes. She explains that schools with higher levels of professionalization and a stronger sense of community were higher achieving. The professional identities formed out of these relationships helped shape the students’ experiences at these schools. Penrose also discussed how lower-achieving schools had weaker or no sense of community among the teachers, with teachers working in isolation. This raises concerns over the compartmentalization and social isolation of language teachers caused by our employment conditions.

### **5 Conclusion**

I went into teaching to empower students. I refuse to disadvantage my students by my presence. However, even if I try to go the extra mile for my students, it is unrealistic and unfair to ask this from other teachers sharing my circumstances. Also, if teachers, like myself, work harder for the sake of the students, we have allowed the institutions which created these conditions to applaud their own success in “doing more with less”. There are serious ethical, political, and economic consequences for allowing neoliberal policies to continue unchecked. As Mercer (2018) states, teachers are “valuable stakeholders in the teaching and learning process in their own right” (p. 508). I believe that teachers need to become empowered to challenge the status quo. Precarious employment of any kind is unjust and marginalizing. It accentuates the power imbalances in our

society. If I empower myself and other teachers, we can start to create small ripples that demand better working conditions for ourselves—the teachers—and better futures for our students.

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