

Institutional exclusion and exploitation of language teachers

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Abstract: Language teacher education programs and language teaching research often overlook the impact of precarity on the teachers, their practice, and their sense of professional identity. The lack of stable employment in the field creates barriers to the professionalization and development of teachers. Precarious employment is used to further marginalize teachers within their institutions by systematically excluding them from activities that would enhance their practice and professionalization. At the same time, precariously employed teachers perpetuate these power imbalances by unwittingly participating in activities that may further contribute to their precarity. Teachers enter the profession because they care, but they are also taken advantage of because they care. Language teacher education programs need to address these power imbalances to prevent teachers from being excluded or exploited where they teach.

Keywords: language teachers; TESL; precarity; professionalization

1 Introduction

There are few stable job opportunities in the language teaching profession. Language teacher employment is precarious regardless of whether a language teacher works in government programs, university academic literacy programs, or intensive private-sector English language programs. Between 60 to 75% of language teachers are precariously employed (Breshears, 2019). These teachers, including myself, do not have stable jobs, which means most teachers in our profession lack financial and job security. Their employment may be in the form of part-time or short-term contracts based on the number of hours they are scheduled to be in contact with students in a classroom during a defined time period. The hours teachers put into marking, planning, advising, feedback, and administrative tasks are not paid (Breshears, 2019). With this job insecurity, teachers find themselves engaging in unpaid and unrecognised work.

In this same WALLY volume, I have argued that the lack of stable employment among language teachers affects teaching quality and results in poorer student outcomes (Elshafei, 2022). The lower teacher efficacy among part-time teachers is not due to lower qualifications or teaching aptitude, but is a result of the lack of institutional commitment to the teachers which is manifested in short- or part-time contracts, and poor institutional supports. This paper expands on how we have institutionalized the poor working conditions of language teachers that have inevitably affected language teaching quality despite professionalization efforts. Our precarious condition reduces the quality of our practice, undermines the legitimacy of our profession, and affects how we view ourselves within the profession (Kahn, 2020; Walkland, 2017; Wilkin, 2021). Lack of job

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security reduces our ability to grow individually and reduces our ability to contribute to the entire field. It isolates us from one another. Beyond the unpaid work teachers do, there is also the mass waste of labour involved when highly qualified teachers regularly spend hours applying for jobs. The time spent applying for jobs, and sometimes for the same jobs they may have already been doing, is not accounted for in most of the literature (Sano-Franchini, 2016). All these factors reduce the impact of professionalization efforts and teachers' quality of life.

Employment insecurity is not addressed in teacher training programs. Teachers spend a lot of time training, studying, volunteering, and working odd-end jobs in hope that it would land them "a good job" (Sano-Franchini, 2016). Meanwhile, teacher training programs make employment precarity seem like it is part of the initiation of teachers into our profession. Arguably, that is the worst way to initiate teachers who are still trying to hone their practice; supply teaching, covering classes, short-notice teaching, or having a one-off temporary teaching assignment will not improve their ability to teach. For me, improving my practice came with reflection, making changes, and testing changes repeatedly over time. This seems to be a luxury not afforded to most language teachers in the profession. And most importantly, part-time work is not part of the initiation process; it is the reality of our field (Breshears, 2019). Teacher training programs do not prepare teachers for the realities of the profession (Faez & Valeo, 2012). Instead, they support professional development programs that address teacher deficiencies. These professional development (PD) programs and professionalization efforts are removed from teachers' lived experiences (Breshears, 2019). Language teacher education (LTE) programs do not address these issues and provide teachers with few tools to address them. They need to equip teachers with the tools to fight for our humanity, profession, and the value of what we do. If these issues are not addressed in LTE programs, we will continue to perpetuate our deprofessionalization.

LTE programs need to equip teachers for the precarious job market and advocate for our professionalization. This can be done by creating long-lasting communities of practice, raising teacher awareness of the issues affecting our field, and reinforcing the social value of language teaching. Our employment conditions are excluding us, exploiting us, and marginalizing us. If LTE programs see their graduates as members of the same profession, it is to our collective benefit to address these issues in teacher preparation programs.

2 Exclusion

2.1 Exclusion from scholarship

Few institutions in Canada support research initiatives by non-full-time employees (Vander Kloet et al., 2017). Given that most language teachers are not full-time employees, these teachers are less likely to engage in research. To start, research offices exclude sharing grant announcements with non-permanent teachers/faculty (Kahn, 2020). If a teacher decides to engage in research, they are unlikely to get approval from their institutional ethics review boards for their research and often receive resistance from their managers and institutions (Davis, 2019; Vander Kloet, 2017). That affects a teacher's ability to engage in study design, data collection, analysis, and sharing the results of their research. For example, if a teacher engages in action research to solve a problem in their teaching context, without institutional support and approval, they are not able to share the results of their research in-house or with others in the field. That limits their ability to engage in transformative discourses within their profession (Davis, 2019; Vander Kloet, 2017). As a result, precariously employed teachers will be less likely to engage in research or contribute to the field.

Because of the minimal supports provided to teachers who do decide to participate in research, research typically has to be undertaken without human subjects or without the intention of informing our professional praxis because of the lack of research ethics clearance. Davis (2019) has identified barriers preventing English for academic purposes (EAP) practitioners from participating in independent scholarship. Among the barriers, Davis identified isolation from constructive communities of practice (CoP), lack of access to literature, lack of dedicated paid time, lack of acknowledgement, and lack of career or employment rewards which hinders any meaningful participation in research. These are systemic barriers preventing teachers from developing their practice. These are also barriers that counter any significant professionalization attempts within the field (Davis, 2019).

There have been calls for more research in language teaching in collaboration with teachers (Baecher, 2012) to help the development of both praxis and theory. LTE programs can lead the cultural change in our profession that encourages and supports various forms of publishing through effective CoPs. Providing teachers with access to academic libraries post-graduation may also encourage them to continue exploring the factors affecting their practice. Davis (2019) called for this culture change to enable our professionalization and the development of our field. But it is also critical for the development of language teaching as a field: as the pool of permanently employed language teachers shrinks, less research is done, stunting the growth of the entire field.

2.2 Exclusion from community

Casual work hardly defines a career. Contingently employed teachers are rarely acknowledged for their work or at their workplaces and they often do not have a sense of community or camaraderie with other people in their field (Kahn, 2020; Walkland, 2017). It is hard to create a sense of belonging to a profession when we are isolated in our precarious roles. Isolated teachers have few opportunities for professional growth and acculturation (Öntaş, 2019), as seen when teachers are unsure how they would define themselves professionally if they have not been teaching regularly (Walkland, 2017; Wilkin, 2021). At the same time, some teachers see themselves as complete outsiders to the professional community (Penrose, 2012). The lack of professional belonging reduces teachers' investment in their professionalization and participation in the wider ELT community (Wu, 2019).

The lack of a solid professional belonging also affects a teacher's confidence in their abilities, or self-efficacy (Zonoubi et al., 2017). Isolation of teachers can also lead them to believe that their concerns are personal or their condition is their own (Haque & Cray, 2007; Walkland, 2017; Wilkin, 2021). Consequently, for many teachers, unstable employment may be internalized as deficits in their own abilities compounding their stress levels (Sano-Franchini, 2016). The view that teachers' employment status is linked to their teaching ability affects teacher confidence and further affects their sense of professional belonging. As a result, the teacher may doubt their abilities, thus affecting their practice. Not surprisingly, isolation has been identified as a major contributor to teacher attrition (Sleppin, 2009; Valeo & Faez, 2013).

The nature of the job market, on the other hand, perpetuates our isolation. The lack of professional socialization and the effects of isolation are damaging for the teachers and the profession (Walkland, 2017). Teachers need and want to belong to a community (Walkland, 2017). LTE programs can help mitigate the isolation teachers experience, especially at the start of their careers. This can be done by creating long-lasting CoP among cohorts, assisting teachers in building their networks, and developing their agency. This can be achieved by actively

incorporating activities that foster long-lasting relationships within cohorts. These relationships may help mitigate the isolation that teachers experience when they enter the field.

2.3 Exclusion from the institution

In addition to their exclusion from extra-institutional research and professional communities, precariously employed teachers are systematically excluded from decision-making processes within their institutions. Contract faculty are rarely consulted when it comes to decisions related to curriculum, assessment, and employment conditions (Arnold et al., 2011; Cook et al., 2021; Dobbie & Robinson, 2008). Their exclusion is easy when they are not invited to meetings where decisions are being made. Meetings that include contract faculty are usually to disseminate information or communicate the decisions that were made on their behalf. Even if invited to decision-making meetings, many teachers are hesitant to attend since they are not paid to do so.

Institutes drive the divisions within our field by tiering professionals, even teaching professionals. This tiering based on employment contract is manifested in the privileges awarded to different teachers based on their contracts, often via access to institutional resources like technology, spaces, and supports (Walkland, 2017). Collective agreements do little to remedy the divide between the different employment tiers. Different contracts reinforce the hierarchy between different forms of precarious contracts and full-time positions (Dobbie & Robinson, 2008). The use of words like ‘part-time’, ‘sessional’, ‘partial-load’, ‘short-term’, ‘occasional’, ‘long-term occasional’ pit contract teachers against each other in constant competition, while the selective use of words like ‘employee’ and ‘full-time’ creates a false sense of hierarchy. The use of this kind of wording to identify the different tiers of employment makes its way into different institutional and union meetings and casual conversations among teachers (Walkland, 2017). This division prevents teachers from standing in solidarity to address employment and systemic inequities within our profession and institutions (Wilkin, 2021).

Within many unions, contract faculty are underrepresented because of their lack of participation (Dobbie & Robinson, 2008). The lack of involvement leads to the under voicing of precarious teachers' concerns. The democratic union structures can only advocate on behalf of the concerns raised by its members with the participation of its members. If union participation is limited to full-time staff, then there will be little push for advocating on behalf of the precariously employed. This is seen when mostly full-time employees vote in general membership meetings (GMMs) on strategic plans, agendas, policies, and bargaining terms. The under-representation of contract teachers leads to their marginalization even within the structures that are supposed to advocate for them. This lack of participation of contract teachers in meetings, committees, and decision-making circles further marginalizes them. LTE programs need to educate teachers on the importance of participation and organizing. This participation does not improve employment chances, but it does help chip away at some of the injustices experienced in our working conditions. To make substantial changes, there needs to be greater participation by teachers in leadership, resistance, and advocacy.

The communities of practice that we form need to have open discussions of our working conditions. In our silent professionalism, talking about compensation is considered taboo. We do not share our financial woes or income, nor do we discuss working conditions. In our isolation, these issues are often viewed as personal and reflective of our own (in-)competence instead of a systemic problem (Wilkins, 2021). That said, there is also hesitancy on behalf of teachers to openly discuss compensation during interviews and with peers, because we have been acculturated into perceiving these discussions as unprofessional or inappropriate (Kahn; 2020; Sano-Franchini,

2016). As a profession, we need to signal that we are not afraid to discuss the financial value of our labour. This re-acculturation should start in LTE programs.

3 Exploitation

3.1 Educational technology

Open educational resources (OERs) are marketed to teachers under the belief of democratizing education and access. Altruistic ideals are frequently used to solicit unpaid labour from teachers. Many platforms and institutions encourage teachers to freely share lesson plans, activities, and educational resources under the pretense that these activities will save other teachers' time and promote equitable access to education. These materials may be valuable for teachers looking to support their students. However, Mirrlees and Alvee (2020) explain that OERs' use and creation are problematic. First, teachers do the bulk of the work, frequently without pay, and, at the same time, OERs are being used to deprofessionalize teachers. These OERs have been increasingly used in the creation of standardised course packages handed to teachers to “deliver”; thus, reducing the value of the teacher's contribution to each course. Second, the presence of prefabricated teaching aids, is used as an excuse to marginalise teachers' role in the classroom. The automatizing of teaching practices allows for institutions to monetize on low-cost courses that can have higher levels of enrollment with fewer teachers. This can be seen in many online language learning spaces where the teaching contact hours have been reduced or eliminated. In addition, OERs are used as an excuse for not paying teachers for preparing teaching aids since they are expected to draw on these freely available resources that they had volunteered to create. There is an assumption that the digital teaching material is an adequate substitute for the teachers' professional expertise (Mirrlees & Alvee, 2020; Salton et al., 2022). By standardizing courses and promoting efficiency using these OERs, teachers' roles have been reduced and de-skilled.

The private tech companies managing these OERs and the institutions using them are profiting at the expense of teachers' labour (Mirrlees & Alvee, 2020). For example, the Ontario government funds a platform where teachers can create open-access interactive online activities called H5P (eCampusOntario, n.d.). The H5P plug-in is owned by Joubel (2022), a private company. At my workplace, training is usually provided to contract faculty to promote the creation of online interactive H5P activities that are publicly available. Faculty, who are sold the idea, champion the creation of these freely available activities without being paid for their expertise and efforts. Then, my institution uses these activities in the online courses they offer to students. There are many examples of OERs that are made by teachers, and not just H5P. Even if the intentions of each of the parties involved are not nefarious, the results are the same—job insecurity for teachers.

Teaching loads and expectations are also compounded with the use of technology. Precariously employed teachers are generally paid by the contact hour. This is sometimes justified because of the availability of OERs and pre-curated course packages. However, it undermines teachers' efforts to customize the teaching and learning experience. Also, teachers are expected to maintain online learning management systems using their own time without compensation (Mirrlees & Alvee, 2020). Setting up a course shell is time-consuming, and teachers are sometimes expected to do it even before their contracts officially start.

The altruistic ideals held by many in the teaching profession are frequently used to solicit unpaid labour from teachers (Kahn, 2020; Mirrlees & Alvee, 2020), and the bulk of OERs and Learning management system content are made with unpaid and unacknowledged labour. Teachers are sold the idea that OERs democratizes education, which is a fallacy. One thing the

pandemic has demonstrated is that access to technology is not equitable nor inherently accessible. Many of our marginalized students do not have access to these OERs. The use of technology creates further societal divisions and privileges one group of students over another. The question arises of who is this democratization serving? Digital technologies do have the potential to enrich student learning, but this is not achieved by just substituting teacher-student interactions with computers. According to Mirrlees and Alvee (2020), the overall quality of education has not improved with digitization. Instead, digitizing teaching activities has undermined the value of human classroom interactions in learning. Language teachers need to be aware of how to use technology effectively and participate in its creation to prevent the marginalization of both themselves and their students. Hence, LTE should raise awareness of how to effectively use digital technologies for teaching and learning (Lawrence, 2018). Teachers need to use their judgement when addressing how and if they will contribute to creating these resources. LTE needs to highlight the inequality and potential related to OERs and not just market them as a panacea for customizing learning.

3.2 Standardization

The idea of standardizing our practice has merits and is generally well-intentioned; however, it has opened the gates for the deprofessionalization of teaching (Salton et al., 2022). Experts within our field assumed that if we had a defined set of skills and knowledge, we would be able to legitimize our profession (Richards, 2010; Salton et al., 2022), and that standardisation would also create a culture of accountability within the field (Valeo & Faez, 2013). However, standardization has also allowed our skills and knowledge to be broken down into oversimplified tasks that can be automatized, digitalized, or reduced to simply a set of instructions decontextualized from the richness of the classroom experience (Salton et al., 2022). Standardization has also exacerbated deprofessionalization and inequity practices within our field. For example, teacher evaluations based on the professional standards set by professional associations are used in performance evaluations. These performance evaluations are not being used as potential PD tools for improving teaching; rather, they are weaponized against teachers (Salton et al., 2022) where managers use them to marginalize minority groups, privilege employment to specific groups, and compound employment precarity in others. Standardization has framed teachers as the problem instead of addressing the systemic issues affecting the quality of education.

3.3 Course packs

Most teachers in larger institutions are handed course packages to deliver. These cookie-cutter courses leave very little room for teachers to enact their own agency, experiment with new pedagogical activities, and orchestrate classrooms that align with their teaching philosophies. These cookie-cutter courses or pre-planned lessons delivered by contingent teachers are problematic. Yes, they may be convenient, but they undermine the professionalization and agency of teachers (Haque & Cray, 2007; Pennington & Richards, 2016) and they restrict pedagogical innovation. The misalignment between teacher belief and practice creates a negative resonance, stress, and negative self-efficacy beliefs. This is consequential since teachers whose practices align with their beliefs are generally reported to be better teachers. Also, teacher self-efficacy is positively correlated with teaching quality and student success (Faez & Valeo, 2012). Having course packages helps standardize courses, standardize assessments, and reduce the preparation required from teachers. However, it also undermines teachers' professional expertise and ability to customize their teaching to their students and teaching style.

3.4 Teacher self-marginalization

One of the reasons teachers are unable to act according to their beliefs is the lack of agency (Clifton & Rambaran, 1987; Kumaravadivelu, 2012; Morgan, 2016). Teachers in precarious positions feel that they are at the employer's whims. Precariously employed teachers are less likely to question administrators, stakeholders, and peers regarding policies or expectations (Arnold et al., 2011; Goldstene, 2015; Swidler, 2016). This is because they do not want to be perceived as troublemakers or jeopardize future employment contracts with the institutions they are working in. This lack of agency is manifested both in and outside the classroom (Clifton & Rambaran, 1987; Goldstene, 2015; Swidler, 2016). When teachers do not have the agency to question, change, or adapt curriculum and assessments, it reduces teachers to the role of technicians, furthering our deprofessionalization (Salton et al., 2022). Moreover, teachers would have to commit a considerable amount of time and effort if they were to question policymakers, stakeholders, and decisions around teaching, students, placements, policies, and employment. LTE programs should strive to raise teachers' awareness of the power imbalances in our workplaces and provide potential tools to help teachers exert their agency.

As mentioned above, the isolation and division among teachers hinders positive change in our field. Teachers working in isolation view each other as competition (Walkland, 2017) and this prevents teachers from sharing information about working conditions, employment prospects, and teaching practices. A lack of trust prevents teachers from forming constructive bonds that address our collective employment conditions. Because teachers view each other as competition, they tend to do unpaid work that may make them stand out in the crowd, including attending meetings, socials, favours, or volunteering for their employer (Sano-Franchini, 2016). These practices diminish the value of their time, add to the burden of unpaid work, and do not necessarily improve employment prospects (Walkland, 2017). It allows employers and institutions to believe that a lot of the work can be done without pay. It also reduces the contracted hours for all teachers since teachers will be expected to step up. Instead of seeking to improve our individual status with an employer, we need to address our collective status with employers.

3.5 Devaluation of teaching

Teachers also propagate language that reduces the value of our work. Most teachers who have taught language classes describe it as very rewarding. There are emotional and intangible rewards that push teachers to persevere and help students against the odds. However, the idea that teachers find affective rewards does not diminish the importance of financial compensation. We need to signal to stakeholders that affective rewards are not an excuse for poor working conditions and pay (Kahn, 2020). Our communities benefit from the economic, social, political, and personal value of what we do. We need to ensure that the personal satisfaction we get from our jobs is not being seen as a sufficient reward.

On the other hand, despite the rewarding experiences teachers describe in their classrooms, teachers view their work as second-tier (Kahn, 2020). This is seen when teachers use apologetic language when describing their work. Language teachers need to voice the pride they have in language teaching and need to recognize the value of their work in the lives of their students, institutions, and community (Hanson & de los Reyes, 2019; Kahn, 2020). The idea that Language teachers are reluctant to identify with their profession undervalues the field. It sends the wrong message to stakeholders and gives others an excuse for devaluing our work. LTE programs need to address this firsthand by clearly demonstrating the value of language teaching and ensuring that the language used to discuss our field counters the negative connotations associated with “teaching

English”. Hopefully, LTE programs will graduate proud teachers who will hold (maybe inflated) beliefs that promote their agency and self-efficacy.

4 Conclusion

The suggestions made here for changing LTE programs are neither new nor radical. They can be realistically implemented with some conscious effort by program administrators, professional associations, and teacher trainers. Morgan (2016) argued the importance of incorporating advocacy in LTE programs. This paper echoes Morgan's concerns about how our professionalization is jeopardized by the lack of agency among the LT members. One-sided efforts to professionalize the field are not sufficient to make a change. Current professionalization efforts have increased the pressure on teachers to conform to standards that lead to neither professional nor financial rewards (Salton et al., 2022). It also sets up teachers to negotiate their identities in rather “hostile conditions” (Morgan, 2016). The call to promote critical pedagogies among teachers seems hypocritical if we cannot address the inequities within our profession and our education systems (Wilkin, 2021). Language teachers need to become advocates precisely because of the marginal space they occupy in their institutions while teaching the disempowered within their communities.

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