

Second Language Teacher Education at the Tertiary Level: A Pressing Issue in Canada

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Abstract

The knowledge base required by ESL teachers at the tertiary level in Canada is particularly specific to that field. By looking at pre-service preparation programs and in-service professional development (PD), this paper identifies the difficulties encountered when attempting to provide PD that meets the needs of all practitioners in such a diverse field. In particular it points out the importance of affording practitioners the ability to identify their own PD requirements, as they are the professionals at the interface between teachers and learners. Finally it calls for empirical studies of the constituent ESL teachers' knowledge base, their professional development needs, and factors impeding their PD needs.

Keywords: second language teacher education, professional development, pre-service, in-service, Canada.

Introduction

The professional development (PD) of in-service teachers is key to students' learning in the context of English as a second language (Sparks, 2002). However there is a dearth of empirical and conceptual studies found in the Canadian academic literature that actually define the professional knowledge unique to ESL teachers. Given the increasing population of students studying English as a second language (ESL) in Canada, it is not surprising that ESL teaching is a growing field in this country. As a field within the educational domain, it has many unique characteristics that separate it from other venues of teaching. First and foremost, ESL teachers work in an environment wherein the means of instruction is also the subject of instruction. They practice their craft in a wide variety of instructional environments and as a result, often teach in isolation from other ESL educators. The knowledge base required by ESL teachers is particularly distinct. As well, opportunities for in-service professional development are sparse.

This paper attempts to delineate the realities of the ESL field at the Canadian tertiary level, as they pertain to the teachers gaining access to professional development. It first looks at the second language teacher education and certification status quo in Canada. A review of the connection between pre-service teacher education programs and the standards set by the potential gate-keeping mechanism for Canadian ESL teachers will be conducted. Then, ideas using in-service professional development to transcend possible inadequacies are presented. Finally, it calls for an up-to-date empirical study of the constituent ESL teachers, their knowledge base, their professional development needs and factors impeding their PD needs.

Second Language Teacher Education and Certification in Canada

In an effort to understand current ESL teacher preparation programs, it is prudent to provide certain descriptors to promote a common understanding. Academic discourse pertaining to the dominant methods for preparing people to teach contains an extremely diverse sampling of ideas. Widdowson (1993) explains that with the term "education," the focus involves general concept parameters whereas with the term "training," the focus concerns the manner in which such parameters can be set to match the requirements of specific practical situations. With these references as a framework, any course that promotes teachers' absolute adoption of certain techniques or the following of a specific

method is considered to be a training course. It is a moot point as to whether one views the teacher preparation programs as training or education. Regardless of which descriptor is applied to the programs, it is important to determine the functionality of the curriculum included in the program.

Teacher education, functionally, can be divided into two sections: pre-service and in-service education. Pre-service teacher education refers to that learning which is completed prior to entering a classroom and engaging in the act of teaching. In-service teacher education speaks to the ongoing professional development that is present throughout one's teaching career. As the number of newcomers to Canada who are speaking languages other than English increases, so does the drive to determine effective practices for teachers to apply in working with these ESL learners. It is readily agreed within the education world that it takes more than just knowledge of the English language to become an effective instructor to speakers of other languages. Within the variety of certifying programs offered across Canada, there exists a diversity of courses offered by universities, colleges, non-profit educational organizations, private schools, and even some fly-by-night organizations. Within this plethora of opportunities are excellent introductory programs covering the basic necessities for a beginning educator in the ESL teaching world. As with any course of education there are also programs run by charlatans who offer a low quality product in exchange for a great deal of money.

In Canada, the label of pre-service teacher education for adult ESL instructors is readily applied to an immense assortment of preparatory methods, ranging from completing grade 12, up to and including the completion of a Ph.D. in Applied Linguistics. It is this situation that several organizations at both the provincial and national level are attempting to remedy, by introducing a set of standards leading to certification and accreditation systems. This act of instituting standards is, perhaps, one of the most potentially influential and impacting changes to occur in the field of second language teacher education in Canada (Sivell, 2005). This evolutionary process is referred to, by some, as the professionalization of the adult ESL teaching field in Canada (MacPherson, Kouritzin, & Kim, 2005). It is receiving a mixed review of acceptance and respect from members of the profession as well as consumers of the product of the field.

This issue of setting standards for adult ESL educators and educator programs in Canada is being addressed by both national and provincial teacher education accrediting agencies and professional associations (Sivell, 2005). Within the Canadian educational system there is a distinction drawn between teachers of adults, and teachers of those in the kindergarten to grade 12 range. In the K-12 education system, teachers do not have the option of becoming a member of a nationally recognized certifying system. Their membership is governed by provincial Ministries of Education, each having their own intricacies for certification. Adult ESL instructors can choose to belong to a national organization, namely the TESL Federation, or in some instances a provincial organization, or both. Teachers may hold both a provincial certification and the TESL Canada certification simultaneously. TESL Canada is an organization that has created national standards for certification of adult ESL educators and teacher training programs. Since its implementation in May 2002, the TESL Canada National Professional Certification Standards has become a basis for evaluation of ESL teacher training programs in Canada (www.tesl.ca). Moreover, certain provinces have developed their own certification processes, for example, Alberta, British Columbia, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, Newfoundland and Labrador, Ontario, Saskatchewan, Yukon, and Manitoba all have TESL Canada affiliate organizations. Some provinces have additional ESL instructors' registries that are separate from the TESL Canada federation.

In addition to offering certification to individual professionals, TESL Canada also created an accreditation system that provides recognition to the teacher training programs in Canada as well as the appropriate programming to fulfill the academic requirements for this certification. The accepted governing organization establishes a level of standards that a program must adhere to in order to receive and maintain their accreditation. When TESL Canada evaluates programs for accreditation, it awards interim recognition for newly established teacher training programs that meet its application requirements (www.tesl.ca). When the interim program meets and maintains TESL Canada Teacher Training Standards a full recognition of that program is granted. TESL Canada evaluates a program on the basis of its curriculum, qualifications of instructional staff, and resources available to be applied in preparing teachers for their ESL instructional roles. TESL Canada is careful to point out that their recognition of a specific program refers only to those particular aspects of it. It is not to be taken as an endorsement of that program's business practices (<http://www.tesl.ca/approvedTTInst05.html>).

TESL Canada identifies its own professional standards as a "teacher-driven initiative." In order to accommodate its professional members who have a variety of educational and professional back-

grounds, TESL Canada has created standards denoting three professional certificate levels for adult ESL teaching qualifications. The TESL Canada Certification Standards are based on a combination of level of education, TESL training, teaching experience, and performance reviews. Each of the three levels is available in both interim and permanent status. A *Professional Standard One* (Interim) is earned with a university degree, 100 hours of methodology and theory instruction, and a

supervised practicum of at least 20 hours in an adult ESL classroom. This can become a permanent classification with, at minimum 1,000 hours of teaching experience with positive performance reviews. In addition to a university degree and a 20 hour supervised practicum in an adult ESL classroom, the *Professional Standard Two* (Interim) requires 250 hours of methodology and theory instruction. This interim certification can be upgraded to permanent after 1,500 hours of teaching experience and positive performance reviews. Up to 500 hours of this experience time can be spent in adult ESL/EFL program administration. The third level of certification, *Professional Standard Three* (Interim), requires a Master's degree in Applied Linguistics or TESOL and a minimum of 20 hours in a supervised practicum in an adult ESL classroom. After 2,000 hours of teaching experience and positive performance reviews this can be upgraded to a Professional Standard Three (Permanent). A *Professional Standard Three* (Permanent) can also be attained with a minimum Professional Standard One (Interim), a Master's degree in a related field, 2,000 hours of teaching experience and positive performance reviews. Within the 2,000 hours of teaching experience for a standard three level of certification, up to 1,000 hours can be done in adult ESL/EFL program administration or teacher training.

ESL Pre-service Education

Vélez-Rendón (2002) asserts that evidence can be found in the general teacher education literature that teacher education programs have little impact on what teachers do in their classrooms. He also posits that while general education pre-service programs fail to adequately prepare teachers for the challenges that they will face as they enter the classrooms, there is some variation to this finding in the field of second language teacher education. Numerous opinions have been expressed on exactly what should be included in an ESL pre-service teacher education program. Richards (1998) speculates that within the second language teacher education field, the core knowledge base contains six domains of content: theories of teaching, teaching skills, communication skills, subject matter knowledge, pedagogical reasoning and decision making, and contextual knowledge. Freeman and Johnson (1998) put forth the opinion that language teacher education should focus mainly on the act of teaching, looking at the teacher, the circumstances surrounding the teaching, and the pedagogy used in the teaching.

Certificates, diplomas, and degrees are available to qualify one as an adult ESL instructor. There is a variety of ways in which an individual can obtain any of these. One can choose between full-time and part-time study, on campus or distance education programs. Depending on the type of program selected, timelines vary in duration from four weeks up to two years. Investigation seemed to produce a common theme showing that TESL programs offered by private institutions are shorter than those offered by public institutions. This raises a question of quality control, when comparing a pre-service program of four weeks with one of two years. Candidates seeking certification can access TESL Canada accredited education programs leading to certificates, diplomas, or degrees through both private and public institutions in Canada. The majority of programs conducted by universities are offered through education facilities or faculties of extension or continuing education.

TESL Canada requires programs to involve at least 100 hours of instruction in linguistics (syntax, phonology, morphology, sociolinguistics, discourse analysis, and pedagogical grammar), pedagogical theory (learning strategies and styles, factors affecting language learning, adult teaching and learning principles), and methodology (lesson planning, material analysis and development, curriculum for specific contexts, techniques for listening, speaking, grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation and assessment). The difference in the duration of the various programs offered across Canada permits topics to be covered at different depths. Additionally, trainees are to be instructed in professional issues such as finding acceptable resources, professional conduct, classroom management, and professional development. As well, all candidates for certification must complete a minimum of 20 hours of a supervised practicum in an adult ESL classroom. At least 10 hours of this must be directed observation and 10 hours must consist of practicing teaching under the supervision of two separate people, a sponsor teacher and a practicum supervisor. A study of the information on the websites of the TESL Canada accredited programs shows that they include a 20 hour supervised practicum in adult ESL classrooms. It is not evident from the information provided at the sites as to whether or not two sepa-

rate people are supervising the practicum. Also, in some programs trainees could opt for a 10 hour practicum (it was not noted that this did not meet with TESL Canada requirements for certification). Some programs offered a 25 hour practicum, while some programs offered extra courses dealing with interaction of cultures.

Program Starting Points

There are quite a variety of pre-service training starting points for trainees. All programs are open to both native and non-native English speakers. TESL Canada rules require non-native speakers of English to provide proof of their English proficiency level prior to beginning any program. Candidates can meet acceptable proficiency levels by obtaining an undergraduate degree from an English speaking university, or by graduating from a Canadian high school with a minimum score of 70%. Other ways of proving proficiency include completing tests such as the TOEFL with a score of 550 on the paper-based or 213 on the computer-based test. The majority of institutions across Canada require at least a score of 550 on the paper-based TOEFL test, with some institutions calling for slightly higher scores. Native English speakers are not required to submit a proficiency test.

Even though TESL Canada requires candidates to possess an undergraduate degree prior to becoming certified, there are several TESL Canada accredited programs that do require such as a prerequisite for entry into the program. It is possible to gain entrance into some programs with only a grade 12 education level. This is condoned by TESL Canada and addressed by requiring that trainees without undergraduate degrees be provided with written notice that they will not qualify for TESL Canada professional certification. It is also noted that certification with TESL Canada requires an undergraduate degree and that teaching ESL overseas is possible without a degree. This presents the possibility of a wide disparity in the experiences and ability being brought into the classrooms of pre-service ESL teachers and may influence the level of learning that occurs in the program. With the exception of non-native speakers there is no expectation that pre-service teachers have any personal second language learning experience despite the importance placed on this type of learning for developing reflective teachers.

As of August 2007, TESL Canada has accredited ESL teacher training programs in 81 institutions throughout Canada (www.tesl.ca). This is an increase of 42 from the 39 identified in January 2004 (MacPherson et al., 2005). These programs include Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), Certificate in English Language Teaching to Adults (CELTA), Accelerated Career Enhancement Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (ACE TESOL), Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL), and provide a certificate, diploma, or degree. This list of accredited programs includes those affiliated with academic programs at universities or colleges, those offered by private for-profit schools, continuing education programs, and distance education programs. While the number of accredited programs across the country has increased since the 2004 review, it must be noted that several institutions that had previously held accreditation no longer do so. Of these 81 institutions, 55 produce graduates eligible for a TESL Canada Professional Certificate Standard One, 25 produce graduates eligible for a TESL Canada Professional Certificate Standard Two, and only one has graduates qualifying for a TESL Canada Professional Certificate Standard Three.

As presented above, it can be seen that TESL Canada requires that pre-service teachers have acquired knowledge in the areas of foundational linguistics, second language acquisition, pedagogical knowledge, sociolinguistics, methodological techniques, curriculum/lesson/unit planning and assessment, analysis and development of material, and a practicum (MacPherson et al., 2005; Sivell, 2005). While it is a realistic and appropriate goal to pursue, ensuring that all ESL adult instructors have a common background, it is not easily attainable. An unfortunate reality of the present system of certification for ESL instructors in Canada is the lack of enforceability of the standards put in place by either the TESL Canada Federation or the provincial organizations. These organizations do not have any authority over their members. This creates a unique situation in the area of professional workers. Medical doctors, police officers, and most other professionals answer to a governing body for their qualifications and conduct whereas ESL instructors answer only to their employers for such things. Many instructors are working in the field of teaching ESL without even the most basic qualifications deemed required by the standards set in place by TESL Canada or the provincial organizations. Teachers in the K-12 systems in Canada are subordinate to professional organizations and are unable to even gain employment without the appropriate qualifications. If teachers in those systems are subject to accountability, then one has to logically question the lack of such accountability in the world of ESL teachers.

Professional Development in the In-service Education

There is a pervasive question about whether or not teaching English as a second language even deserves to be considered as a profession (Macpherson et al., 2005). Even in the general sense of the word, where it is defined as an occupation that requires special education or training, one may question whether or not it fits this description. On the other hand, if teachers in the K-12 systems are considered to be members of a profession, then so too should instructors in the world of ESL teaching. As presented by Macpherson et al. (2005), this becomes less definite if we consider the term “professional” in comparison with the fields established by the Canadian academia. In this light we would look for evidence of: (a) specialized pre-professional training, (b) a common certifying body responsible for (c) setting standards, professional codes of conduct, ongoing professional development and sanction for misconduct. To this point, this paper has looked at pre-service training and the ongoing process of creating a governing body for this developing field. Now it will discuss the connecting role played by in-service professional development and look closely at the viability and occurrence of ongoing professional development as it occurs in the field of adult ESL instruction in Canada.

Despite the vast amount of research available concerning issues related to ESL teacher education, there is a paucity of studies in the area of professional development needs for instructors at the adult level in Canada. Within the realm of second language teacher education, there is growing appreciation for the idea that it is teachers alone, irrespective of what materials or methods they choose to invoke, that are responsible for improving teaching (Johnson, 1992; Richards & Nunan, 1990). As teachers progress through their individual careers, they experience a variety of professional needs in response to societal and student demands. The demand on teachers to remain current in terms of their knowledge base is extreme (Richards & Farrell, 2005). The nature of employment for ESL instructors in adult settings in Canada is such that the concept of professional development is difficult to organize or to participate in. Often one instructor will be employed in several, sometimes very dissimilar, programs simultaneously, in order to facilitate full-time employment. Areas of instruction can include everything from basic communication skills to English for specific or academic purposes. In addition, job requirements sometimes include functioning as both instructor and program administrator.

Professional development is a term which is difficult to define in the field of ESL education. For many educators, it may invoke ideas of in-service days, workshops, conferences, and seminars, all of which provide useful venues for disseminating information. Unfortunately, this process does not always promote the development of theoretical knowledge into practical classroom behaviours. As Crandall (1993) states, professional development “is an ongoing process, not a product which can be neatly packaged; nor is it something which can be developed in occasional workshops...” (p. 505). If we consider Shulman’s (1987) point that “teaching is a learned profession” (p. 9), then we need to consider the learning that continues throughout the career. Sparks (2002) posits that professional development should be embedded into every teacher’s daily activities. It can be self-directed learning (Caffarella & Zinn, 1999) or broad-scale (Bailey, Curtis, & Nunan, 1998). From our perspective, professional development is defined as an ongoing process of learning in which teachers participate for the purpose of adapting their teaching practices to more efficiently meet the needs of their learners.

Diaz-Maggioli (2003) speaks of the high attrition rate among language teachers in the first few years of their careers. This reality speaks to the need for further professional development to compensate for the learning curve of ESL teachers as they attempt to put into action the information gained in their pre-service programs. He purports that appropriate and timely professional development would offset this unfortunate reality. Guntermann (1993) expresses the point that a language teacher’s knowledge base should reasonably be expected to change continually in response to the expansion of information available from the disciplines of language acquisition theory, instructional theory, learning styles, and cultural communication. Terdy (1993) identifies the tendency for ESL adult education instructors to be involved in part-time employment and the idea that they often possess minimal credentials as reasons to have and promote professional development programs. It is only through the ongoing professional development of in-service ESL teachers that deficiencies not cured by the gatekeepers of this field of education can be remedied.

There is a variety of professional development models available for use by instructors in the ESL field. Park, Oliver, Johnson, Graham and Oppong (2007) maintain that teachers serve as excellent resources for each other. One major way in which to differentiate between these models is by the amount of involvement the teachers actually have in developing and delivering the activities. Sparks (2002) claims that professional development should be entrenched into the daily activities of every

teacher and should receive the support of their administrators. He states that “teaching makes a difference in student learning... the professional learning of teachers and principals is a central factor in determining the quality of teaching” (p. 14). He adds that when professional development promotes active teacher learning, collective participation and coherence, there is always an increase in the use of desired strategies by the teachers in their classrooms. The most constructive professional development involves the use of strategies developed with the specific needs of the ESL teachers such as pedagogy, culture and language, in mind.

Terdy (1993) identifies several models of professional development for ESL adult educational staff. The first involves the transmission of key teaching skills, such as specific techniques for teaching listening, speaking, reading, and writing. As research in all these areas is ongoing, it is very important that in-service teachers stay abreast of new developments. A second method entails encouraging the in-service teachers to reflect on their practices and set up idea-sharing relationships with other teachers. Thirdly, in recognition of the isolation in which numerous ESL teachers operate, Terdy (1993) strongly advocates the use of mentoring and partnering between the teachers to foster connections.

Three models have also been put forth by Crandell (1993). The first of these, the mentoring model, is one of the oldest forms of professional education. In this model the “expert” and the “learner” work closely and knowledge is gained through observation, tutoring, and practice. This model is often found in current ESL teacher education program in the form of the practicum. The programs require students to work in classrooms under the supervision and guidance of a cooperating teacher. The opportunity to observe an expert teacher practicing their craft can prove to be a wonderful learning experience in developing pedagogic, content, and pedagogic content knowledge. The applied science model is also often found in the ESL teacher preparation programs in Canada. It involves the teaching of scientific knowledge and theories to students, who will in turn put the information into practice in their teaching. The inquiry-based model involves discussion and analysis of actual case histories in the classroom. This method is very popular in medical and business schools but not as much in education programs.

It is possible, within the ESL adult instruction in Canada, to complete one’s pre-service training and never again engage in professional study. Professional development is not required to maintain the professional certification once it is issued. This is a unique situation since other professionals regularly undergo professional development in order to stay in tune with evolving aspects of their worlds. It makes good sense to expect the same from professional instructors in the ESL field. Research continues to develop our knowledge concerning language acquisition and teaching methodology. As societal norms continue to transform, even the acceptance of various forms of English is being altered. With the diversifying of the Canadian population, our concepts of the treatment of culture and the resulting suitable pedagogies are constantly evolving. Professional development for in-service teachers is a way for teachers to maintain the ability to match their classroom goals with the needs of their students. Diaz-Maggioli (2003) claims that in the realm of second language teachers, professional development is required to enable teachers to help the students develop target language proficiency and increase their understanding of the culture associated with the target language. Calderhead (1991) puts forth the idea that professional development by educators should be considered as an ongoing process of practical teaching and learning situations. Instructors can develop personal insights into teaching through the interaction between personal reflection on the practical teaching and learning situations, and theoretical notions offered by the expert (Korthagen & Kessels, 1999).

It can be postulated that studies have demonstrated the intense need by second language teachers in Canada for professional development (Epstein, 2001; Lee, 1999). The next logical question then deals with the decision of what is required in the form of professional development. A study by Epstein (2001) looked at the professional development needs of six language teachers in Western Canada. Three of these were teaching English for Academic Purposes and three were teaching English to adult newcomers to the country. Her findings demonstrated a varied list of needs and preferences for types of professional development that was dependent on work environment and student population. In response to questions concerning perceived barriers to the needed professional development, she received a variety of replies, such as time constraints and low administrative support for such activities. To reflect the reality of the diversity involved in the field of ESL instruction in terms of student population, employment environments, and access to professional development opportunities the importance of educators identifying their own needs must be acknowledged. These findings are indicative of the distinctive challenges faced by adult ESL instructors in creating effective professional development.

Conclusion

The field of ESL adult instruction in Canada is obviously one that is in the process of developing towards professionalization, but it is on the brink of a precipice while in this process. As the governing bodies of English as a second language instructors in Canada continue to battle towards developing this field into a truly professional group, with enforceable rights and responsibilities similar to the educators in the K-12 systems, their progress is in part being undermined by the evolution of the Canadian population. The demand for ESL instructors in Canada continues to grow at an ever-increasing rate. This creates another hurdle for the professionalization of this field. At a time when the governing bodies would prefer to become more restrictive in their policies concerning specific education required for membership, the demand for their potential members is growing. Remaining cognizant of the fact that the professionalization process is still in its infancy and the governing bodies lack an authoritative voice on all aspects of this reality, the possibility of unprepared instructors working in the field increases.

The most logical manner in which to attempt to keep the quality of instruction in line with the ever-changing needs of the student population is through professional development of in-service teachers. Given the diverse qualifications held by instructors and the various environments in which they teach, it is impossible to place professional development under one umbrella. This speaks to the pressing need for empirical studies to evaluate the current working force of the Canadian adult ESL profession and their knowledge base in pre-service education, and the further need to have instructors identify their own professional development needs as well as factors impeding their professional development. Eventually, the information obtained from such studies will aid policymakers and administrators with regard to the facilitation of certification and accreditation policies for prospective language teachers, and provide guidance to practicing ESL teachers. Only after the "client analysis" (Epstein, 2001) will we have the information needed to come up with the appropriate professional development programs that ESL teachers actually need.

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