

Second Language Teacher Education in Canada: The Development of Professional Standards

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Abstract

The institution of professional standards for Adult ESL is one of the most influential developments in Canadian second language teacher education in recent years. As a major innovation in practice and values, this initiative has interesting implications not only for the content of the standards themselves, but also for the process by which the change is being accomplished. In particular, heterophilous communication (communication between individuals or bodies with different group affiliations) has played a significant role in both the definition and the diffusion of these standards. While some differences in approach may still be observed, in general a remarkable level of support has already been achieved and there is every reason to anticipate that the professional standards movement will continue contributing to the evolution of second language teacher education programs and to the profile of the profession cross the country.

Background

Given Canada's not only officially bilingual but also richly multicultural nature, with over 200 ethnic groups and with visible minorities comprising 13% of the population (Augustine, 2004, p. 16), it is not surprising that second language teaching is a thriving and multifarious enterprise here. Language instructors in Canada may be teaching modern languages in regular K-12 academic classes; English or French as a Second Language for children in the K-12 system; heritage languages, mainly for children, in non-credit settings; or English or French as a Second Language for adult newcomers, chiefly although not entirely in programs without academic credit. And second language teacher education options also vary widely, according to the intended student population for whom trainees are preparing. Consequently, no brief discussion of this field can avoid being highly selective. With that background in mind, I propose focusing on what I see as one especially important Canadian development in education for teachers of English as a Second Language (ESL): the initiation of professional standards for Adult ESL instructors.

This focus seems justified because it is a large-scale initiative evoking a number of characteristically Canadian educational concerns. Equally important, as a very

ambitious innovation, it repays study in terms of what its evolution reveals about the delicate mechanisms underlying any transformation of values and practices. In particular, I will examine the crucial role played in the development of Adult Professional standards by heterophilous communication: exchanges between individuals or groups with different backgrounds, whose long-term interests might well be mutually enhanced by interaction, but for whom communication may also create an extremely "uncomfortable" level of "cognitive dissonance" (Rogers, 2003, p. 306). In the course of defining and disseminating these standards, certain key strategies and decisions appear to have opened up access to the "special informational potential" of heterophilous communication (Rogers, 2003, p. 306), effectively mitigating what Freeman and Johnson (1998) have called the "somewhat conservative hegemony" of traditional thinking around the appropriate knowledge-base for language teacher education (p. 404). Indeed these underlying processes may hold even greater interest for non-Canadian readers than the particular details of Canadian professional standards for Adult ESL in themselves, which to some extent must be understood as answering to very context-specific demands.

Adult ESL Professional Standards in Canada

For a variety of historical and geographical reasons, regular school-based education is not within the jurisdiction of Canada's federal government (TESL Canada, 2005a, p. 2.3); individual provinces or territories have their own separate Ministries of Education. Consequently, there is no single K-12 certification or accreditation system in effect across the country. By contrast, no matter what the educational context in which they work, Adult ESL teachers have the option of belonging to a national organization: the TESL Canada Federation. Alberta, British Columbia, Manitoba, New Brunswick, Newfoundland, Nova Scotia, Ontario, Prince Edward Island, Saskatchewan, and the Yukon have TESL Canada affiliates through which ESL teachers access the national federation. The large majority of these do not, however, offer their own professional standards for ESL teachers. Alberta, Ontario, and Saskatchewan are the exceptions; the others generally rely on certification provided through the TESL Canada Federation itself.

Although TESL Canada was founded more than two decades ago, its professional standards are a relatively new endeavor: they began functioning in May, 2002. Considerably earlier provincial initiatives were undertaken separately in British Columbia (TEAL) and Alberta (ATESL), both in 1992. TEAL opted for a process of *certification*, based on the introduction of specific teacher-education criteria, whereas ATESL chose the route of *accreditation*, establishment of basic standards according to which teachers' existing education and experience could be verified and validated (Keevil Harrold, 1995, pp. 38-9). Accreditation through ATESL or through TESL Saskatchewan (SCENES), instituted in 1998, may still be obtained; TEAL certification has been discontinued, with TESL Canada certification taking its place in that province. In 2000 TESL Ontario began its own provincial certification system.

Funding Issues

Standards established by any professional body tend to have a double audience: members of the profession itself, and outsiders to whom the profession wishes to represent its identity and values (see, for example, Freidson, 2005). Movement towards professional standards for Adult ESL instructors in Canada has followed this pattern.

Since the majority of Adult ESL instructors in Canada teach outside the provincial K-12 or university academic credit systems, they risk being perceived as more or less marginalized members of the educational community. Thus, clearly defined standards could contribute not only to the development of the profession itself, but also to its increased respect in the eyes of the wider community. It is noteworthy that among the justifications for TEAL certification was the desire to "promote the teaching of ESL as an academic discipline and a valued profession", and that ATESL identified accreditation as a way to "send a message to employers and funders that we are prepared to back our claim to professional status with action" (Keevil Harrold, 1995, p.38). Such statements plainly address the need for heterophilous communication across occupational borders so as to help groups outside the field respect and understand the TESL profession.

As the ATESL declaration suggested, funding agencies are among the outside groups whose perceptions of TESL are extremely important. In fact preparing the way for "professional recognition from funders" was from the very beginning a key objective underlying the pursuit of Adult ESL standards in Canada (Keevil Harrold, 1995, p. 40). This concern is especially significant because a substantial portion of all funding for Adult ESL is provided by the federal government through a single entity, the Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) program. Ottawa is permitted to sponsor such instruction because it is technically categorized as "training" with potential implications for job-preparedness rather than as more general "education", which would fall outside federal jurisdiction (Burnaby, 1998, pp. 248-249). To the extent that LINC and other such funders come to recognize that, despite belonging to a different and relatively young professional community, Adult ESL teachers are indeed expert and trustworthy interlocutors, they may be expected to feel more confident about their own powerful need for accountability when disbursing financial support. And that message has clearly been effective: criteria for LINC funding now include the stipulation that new instructors hired for courses under this program should meet provincial or national Adult ESL professional standards. Thus, TESL professional standards as a vehicle for effective communication with funding agencies are a clear-cut instance of highly beneficial heterophilous communication, opening the door to many important opportunities.

Accreditation or Certification?

In addition to various different professional communities outside TESL, there have always been diverse constituencies *within* the profession as well. In this respect, the accreditation-certification debate is revealing. For instance, ATESL's decision to opt for accreditation was explicitly designed as a way to develop professional standards that would recognize the existing experience and expertise of classroom teachers - focusing, as Freeman and Johnson (1998) aptly put it, on "what they actually knew" rather than just on what they "needed to know" (p. 398) - in contrast to what was perceived by some as the top-down approach of imposing certification standards from on high. This concern underlines the ATESL goal to "take control of our own professional standards" (Keevil Harrold, 1995, p. 38). Indeed, in a personal communication (April 28, 2005), David Wood, ATESL President and Past-President during the early stages of the accreditation drive, emphasized his continuing belief in the importance of having used an extensive questionnaire to elicit input from all participants at the 1988 ATESL conference, followed by a mail-in ballot for every ATESL member before the standards were finally approved. As Keevil Harrold (1995) stresses, such sharing of perspectives

among diverse groups within ATESL perforce required "compromise" on the way to "consensus" (p. 43): in effect, the resolution of the cognitive dissonances noted by Rogers. But to be fair, certification standards, too, may be introduced with respect for the values and knowledge of all constituencies. For example, TESL Canada identifies its own professional standards as "a teacher-driven initiative" (TESL Canada, 2005b, p. 2), and TESL Ontario also pursued very extensive consultations in the process of establishing its professional certification standards.

Additionally, in order to be open to a wide range of professional members with differing educational and professional backgrounds, TESL Canada actually offers national standards for four different teacher certification levels (TESL Canada, 2005b). Permanent Certificate Level One is the foundation on which the others are built: it requires an undergraduate degree followed by completion of a teacher training program recognized by TESL Canada (or equivalent), which must include a minimum of 100 hours of classroom instruction plus at least 10 hours of classroom observations and at least 10 more hours of supervised teaching. Higher levels of certification require increasingly greater numbers of years of service, along with specified numbers of classroom hours and of successful performance reviews. For the highest level, Permanent Certificate Level Four, a minimum of eight years of professional experience is required, including 6400 hours of classroom experience (some of which may be substituted by administrative hours), along with a relevant graduate degree.

Content of Professional Education

Beyond such exchanges between the TESL profession and external funders, or among sub-groups within the profession, there is also scope for heterophilous communication among diverse constituencies in the process of developing the content of teacher education curricula to meet professional standards. It is important to note that TESL Canada, ATESL, SCENES and TESL Ontario have all set out standards for the recognition of TESL teacher education programs approved to offer training that will be acceptable for certification or accreditation purposes.

TESL Canada's program-approval criteria (TESL Canada, 2005a) focus on three areas: facilities, personnel, and curriculum. In terms of the innovative impact of heterophilous communication, it is especially significant that the curriculum requirements include not only the traditional core linguistics subjects (syntax, phonology, and morphology), as well as a practicum and various methodological elements, but also "sociolinguistics" and "professional conduct and practices" (TESL Canada, 2005a, p. 2.10). These latter topics are not specifically defined in the TESL Canada regulations; however, they strongly echo similar requirements in provincial criteria, the most extensively elaborated of which are TESL Ontario's Institutional Program Standards, where attention to "Sociological and Sociopolitical Issues" requires a minimum of 15 hours of class time devoted to:

1. Cultural pluralism in Canadian society
2. Institutional and individual barriers to participation in Canadian society
3. Culturally-determined life styles and learning styles and their effect on second language learning
4. Acculturation
5. Anti-racism

(TESL Ontario, n.d., section I-C)

Such subject matter reflects the "social context" element in what Freeman and Johnson (1998) propose as "a broader epistemological framework" for the knowledge-base of language teacher education, particularly in relation to "the role of education in sustaining or altering the prevailing values and social order" (pp. 405, 409). This newer, more inclusive vision of ESL teacher education has the potential not only to recognize the real-life responsibilities of instructors in multicultural Canada, but also to support a significant assertion of professional values in keeping with the principle that well educated teachers will be encouraged to "look critically at the interests involved in the production of different types of knowledge" (Pennycook, 2002, p. 51). Certainly, TESL Ontario's highly interdisciplinary view of Adult ESL teacher education, which includes but goes well beyond "methods and materials, phonology, morphology, syntax, applied linguistics and theories of second language acquisition" in order to reach a wider conception of "what is worth knowing" (Freeman & Johnson, 1998, p. 403), once again relies on the kind of potentially uncomfortable but nonetheless very fruitful heterophilous communication among diverse communities of thought identified by Rogers (2003) as central to any process of successful innovation. As Richards (2001) explains, in order to move beyond mechanical reliance on prepackaged generic methods, teachers need confidence and training in support of becoming independent-minded "investigators of both their own classroom practices and those of their learners" (p. 177).

Making Change

In an article whose title directly poses the question underlying much of the preceding discussion - Can teacher education make a difference? - Bouwer and Korthagen (2005) reach the conclusion that the answer is *Yes*, but with the proviso that "close cooperation between university-based and school-based teacher educators is a necessary condition" (p. 214). This emphasis on the need for heterophilous communication, between university and school groups, echoes Rogers' (2003) reciprocal warnings that when "elite individuals interact mainly with one another", innovations may fail to "trickle down to nonelites" (p. 307) and that, vice-versa, weakly-developed heterophilous communication may stifle upward adoption of innovations that "arise from practice as certain practitioners seek new solutions to their needs or problems" (p. 153, and ff.). As for Canada's initiation of professional standards for Adult ESL instructors, it is plain that both their widespread acceptance in only about a decade and their inherent interdisciplinary vigour are positive outcomes that could only have been attained in an environment of highly effective intergroup communication.

Predictably, the process is not yet complete, perhaps most notably in the sense that there is still a sharp divide between K-12 and Adult ESL instructors. Mary Ashworth has (2000) lamented that, although "[t]hose who teach ESL to adults have led the way," K-12 ESL instructors continue to lack consistent professional standards across Canada, despite the fact that all the familiar arguments applicable to Adult ESL are relevant to their field, too: respect, improved practice, and increased bargaining power (p. 79). Moreover, for better or for worse, the combination of provincial and national frameworks means that there is as yet no single set of Adult ESL professional standards for the entire country. But each in their own way, TESL Canada, ATESL, TESL Ontario and SCENES have developed context-appropriate professional standards and are well along in the process not only of winning adoption by practitioners but also of encouraging universities, colleges and private institutes to apply for recognition as providers of approved teacher education programs. The potential long-term impact on

second language teacher education in Canada is enormous.

Looking Ahead

Meanwhile, a certain level of on-going tension among diverse groups under the overall banner of Adult ESL standards can be expected to remain. Such intellectual skirmishes are the natural consequence of dynamic heterophilous communication among groups with divergent values and perspectives, but also with diverse contributions to offer. These strains are an inevitable part of the process; they are peculiar neither to this specific time (see for instance Spindler, 1963, on the period following World War II), nor to second-language education as opposed to other professions (see for instance Utting *et al.*, 2003, p. 63, on present-day issues around innovations in sustainable development). As in all such cases, the challenge for those engaged in the Adult ESL professional standards debate in Canada will be to approach the lively, sometimes even raucous exchange of viewpoints constructively, avoiding the tendency to fall back on "received knowledge", and enthusiastically embracing the wide-open opportunity for "cogent analysis and self-understanding within the social, cultural, and political contexts and consequences of language teaching and language learning" (Freeman & Johnson, 1998, p. 412).

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