

**Teaching Culturally and Linguistically Diverse International Students in Open and/or  
Online Learning Environments: A Research Symposium**

**Decolonizing Teaching in Online English for Academic Purpose  
Environments**

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**Abstract**

*Continued revelations of the systemic racism and violence in past and present Canadian society underscore the importance for EAP educators to understand our situatedness in a settler society as the foundation of decolonizing classroom practices. This theoretical exploration advocates for the continuing to decolonize English for Academic Purposes (EAP) classrooms during the post-covid transition to online learning environments. This exploration draws on post-structural theories of identity (Butler, 2002; Foucault, 1980, 1991; Weedon, 1987), and Morgan's (2004) conceptualization of identity as pedagogy, as contributions to decolonizing EAP classrooms in face-to-face or online environments.*

*Keywords:* English language teaching, identity, decolonization,

## **Introduction**

Online teaching and learning brings opportunities and challenges for teaching international students in post-secondary EAP contexts. EAP teachers in settler societies like Canada face significant challenges in continuing to decolonize our classrooms, while building pedagogical knowledge and skills required for online teaching. Yet ongoing revelations about past and present systemic oppression of Indigenous peoples make decolonizing pedagogies imperative.

EAP teachers in Canada have begun to consider our situatedness and the history of English-language teaching on seized and settled lands, often with support from indigenization initiatives at our post-secondary institutions. We have begun to engage with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action in our teaching. However, EAP teachers may experience significant gaps in their knowledge of accurate histories of Canada and discomfort in taking up settler identity work. These challenges compound the already challenging task of learning online pedagogies. Drawing on post-structural theorization of identity (Butler, 2002; Foucault, 1980, 1991; Weedon, 1987) and Morgan's (2004) conceptualization of identity as pedagogy, this paper discusses decolonizing classroom practices that engage the identity formation of English-language teachers, which are relevant to online environments.

## **Conceptual Exploration**

Language learners are often newcomers, unfamiliar with the construction of a settler state who take up Canada's "peacemaker myth" (Regan, 2010). This myth is at odds with their experiences, and they have questions about their new home (Sterzuk & Hengen, 2019). This conceptual paper focuses on contributions that post-structural identity theorizing can make to decolonizing classrooms, including online contexts.

## **History, decolonizing teaching, and identity work**

History, decolonizing teaching, and identity work go hand in hand. Like other EAP instructors in Canada, and with the support of Indigenizing initiatives at the University of Regina, I have been learning the histories of land seizures withholding food, Treaty making the pass and permit system, the impact of the Indian Act on Indigenous women, and the horrors of residential schools and the forced learning of the colonizer's language (Carter, 2019; Daschuk, 2013; Miller, 1996; Milloy, 1999; Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015). These histories transformed my sense of self in relation to citizenship, race, gender, white privilege, education, and health care. I am still on a learning journey, mindful that decolonization is not a metaphor (Tuck & Yang, 2012), and wary of moves to innocence (Tuck & Yang, 2012) that distract me from that emotional work.

The work to decolonize teaching seems to compound the already challenging task of adapting to online teaching and learning environments. However, post-structural theoretical approaches to identity construction might alleviate this challenge. Teachers are trained to develop a relatively stable and fixed teaching identity—to be experts who have achieved a plateau of knowledge. This approach to teaching identity is dissonant with personal learning journeys like mine. Contradictions arise in that I am asked to present myself as an expert

English-language teacher, while questioning the ethical implications of teaching the language of the colonizer on Indigenous lands.

Post structural theorizing postulates that a sense of self is changeable, unstable. For Weedon (1987), our sense of self is a response to the subject position's that society offers, or subjectivity. In her words, subjectivity is "precarious, contradictory and in process, constantly being reconstituted in discourse each time we think or speak" (p. 33). Weedon's theorization of subjectivity accurately describes my sense of self as a decolonizing settler-descendent English-language teacher continually being reconstituted by learnings that contradict the settler stories of my childhood and education. It allows me to be situated, transformed in and by place, in constant evolution.

This position may feel familiar because this is the impact of involuntary online teaching on post-secondary educators. The teaching identities we took into our pre-pandemic classrooms are being re-shaped by remote teaching and learning contexts, as well as with new technologies. We have yet to consider the effects of the pandemic and isolation on our teaching identities. A fluid identity provides a theoretical approach to facilitate that work. Additionally, this theorizing provides an approach to continue decolonizing teaching in post-covid environments. Decolonizing is not a module that we add to a syllabus; it is deep identity work taking place within educator and student. Embracing the precariousness and contradictions of our teaching selves provides a tool to contend with the unsettling and uncomfortable process of taking in the truth of Canada's colonial past.

### **The power of colonial discourse**

This identity work is significant, because the discourses of colonialism are pervasive, and continually reproduced (Pennycook, 1998). Foucault's early writings emphasize the lack of individual agency. He writes that responses to discourses or practices of the self "are schemas [the individual] finds in his culture and that are proposed, suggested, imposed to him by his culture, society and social group" (de Sousa & Furlan, 2018). Butler (2002) echoes this lack of agency when she writes, "subjects are produced by juridical systems of power, and are formed, defined and reproduced in accordance with the requirements of those structures" (p. 4). On my decolonizing journey, I have experienced the overwhelming impact of colonial discourse congruent with these statements. I felt that I am constituted entirely by the unearned benefits of white privilege. I acknowledge that my research is based on western knowledge production, while resisting that knowledge production and that colonial discourses are undeniable and daunting.

Embracing the precarious, and contradictory, even multiple, nature of identity becomes a tool of resistance. In his later work, Foucault contends that resisting a discourse begins with reflexivity, and awareness of the operation of that discourse in one's personal knowledge building. He "introduced a positive ingredient in his analysis of subjectivity, in other words, considering the perspective of what a subject can do for his own life or existence, and not only from the perspective of what the other makes of him" (de Sousa & Furlan, p. 331). The inner work includes practices of journaling, engaging in dialogue, and searching for truth, which is not empirical or logical, but which is ethical (de Sousa & Furlan, p. 332). For Weedon, resisting oppressive discourse is an inner struggle for power. She writes, "the site of a battle for power is the subjectivity of the individual and it is a battle in which the individual is an active but not a sovereign protagonist," (p. 41). I contend that the inner search for truth Foucault and Weedon

describe is the place where histories that conflict with mainstream settler stories meet, and where the individual ponders, amplifies, and reconciles these stories within oneself, as one's subjectivity is re-shaped.

### **Teachings of elders and indigenous professors**

This advice comes from multiple voices, including the teachings of Cree professor, Dr. Angelina Weenie. Dr. Weenie taught me that my personal story, including the history of my family in Treaty 4, and my situatedness on Treaty 4, is at the core of decolonizing work that happens in my classroom. Her advice encouraged me to learn about how my ancestors lived, the languages they spoke, and the changes they underwent as settlers on Treaty 4. Gwawa'enuk author, Bob Joseph, and Cree Elder, Joseph Naytowhow, both teach that the critical justice work of reconciliation begins with an inner journey of knowing oneself.

### **Language-teacher identity work**

Language-teacher research engages post-structural identity theorizing. Morgan (2004) conceptualizes a fluid identity in his work. After mentioning that he enjoys cooking for his family to his students, they expressed surprise at what they considered an activity atypical for his gender. From that point, he states, "how I viewed myself and presented myself in class changed frequently in response to students' comments and queries" (p. 181). Morgan employed a fluid identity in his teaching. He also stated (2017) that language teacher identity is "reflexive and transformative," a site of "agency and pedagogy," that, as he wrote in 2015, is jeopardized with the commodification of the language classroom.

I embrace the idea that my teaching identity is not fixed, and consider that openness to transformations in my settler identity that come from learning accurate histories is a pedagogical strength and not a burden. It is similar to the transformation of our identities that accompany our technological, emotional, and psychological response to Covid-19.

## **Discussion**

### **ESL Students' experiences with first nations culture: methodology and findings**

The insights in this paper are relevant to EAP students, as expressed in a research study. In 2013, I conducted the study into ESL students' experiences with First Nations' culture in order to think about how to write decolonizing curriculum. Grounded Theory provided a useful methodology for the study, since I knew of no other similar work. I interviewed 11 students in both focus groups and individual settings.

The findings of that study indicated that language teachers need to navigate student settler identity. Bassel from Syria observes insincerity in Indigenous-settler relations, but does not have the conceptual tools to explain how that insincerity might arise:

Bassel: There's something fake in that relationship between the Canadians who immigrate to Canada and the Native.

SMH: How do you identify that fakeness?

Bassel: I am not really sure, but I feel it.

Beth, who was sponsored to Canada from Burma, illustrates her struggle to understand how the government of the country that offered her a durable solution to statelessness citizenship would not extend the same rights to all of its citizens:

Beth: I also want to know about [whether] they have the same rights or not, but I just think that they have, but they have or not; I am not sure.

Simone: What makes you unsure about it?

Beth: Because this country and the government, they make everything [sic] item based on the constitution and the law, so everyone who lives in the country has to live by the law.

Language learners can only construct Canadian and English language identities based on what they know of the history of Canada. EAP instructors often have the flexibility to determine the content of their lessons. Ideally, these language learners should have been taught the history of Canada and explored their situatedness in the language classroom. They needed an instructor with pedagogical tools to navigate their identity.

A fluid conceptualization of identity will allow teachers to navigate both their own and their students' journeys in the classroom and meet the needs of students, like David, who stated: "At least they should have taught me the truth."

### **Decolonizing practices that engage identity formation**

1. Allowing for precarious, conflicted, evolving teacher identity.
2. Speaking from situatedness. Inviting speakers to present their culture, or perspective, or using materials that include the voice of community members.
3. Teaching accurate histories of colonization using archival and research that uses authentic materials.
4. Using accurate histories to discuss systemic racism.
5. Encouraging reflection through journals, talking circles.
6. Using inquiry methods to open dialogue.
7. Encouraging safe houses (Canagarajah, 2004) which affirm students' linguistic diversity and knowledge construction.

### **Conclusion**

Post-structural identity theorizing contributes to settler identity work because it proposes a flexible construction of identity where contradiction, paradox, and conflicting perspectives are normalized. It opens up possibilities for transformational identity work. Post-structural identity theorizing is useful for future research into the way English-language teachers situate themselves on and in Canada, construct settler identities, and for English-language teacher training program development.

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