

## **REIMAGINING ENGLISH AS AN ADDITIONAL LANGUAGE: CONFRONTING INEQUALITIES DURING A PANDEMIC**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Even during a global pandemic, a model intensive English program can be achieved through a perceptual shift to English as an Additional Language (EAL) and by empowering both students and teachers through inclusive educational practices that expressly honor their native languages and cultures. However, persistent application of key practices is essential to program success. Native-speakerism, a discriminatory ideology often seen in employment policies, neglects the cultural and linguistic diversity of talented and qualified professional English language teachers around the world. On the other hand, technology and globalization have given rise to educational resources unavailable or too expensive for students in low-income countries, thus open educational resources (OER) have expanded access to quality teaching and learning materials. Additionally, a flipped classroom allows for easy introduction of home languages and cultures and a seamless integration of inclusiveness for students and teachers. These progressive qualities, and the shifts in perspective with which they evolve, necessitate leadership and frequent professional development opportunities. Consequently, Westcliff University (WU) has contended with these issues by creating an online intensive English program called Reimagining English as an Additional Language (REAL).

**Key words:** English as an Additional Language (EAL); intensive English program (IEP); open educational resources (OER); flipped classroom; Reimagining English as an Additional Language (REAL)

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Language professionals are constantly looking for dynamic and inclusive ways to foster language development, enhance students' productive and receptive skills, and enrich knowledge that is deeper and connects what is learned in the classroom to the world beyond it. This article explores not only how educators are reimagining English as an Additional Language (EAL), but also the importance of home languages, cultures, and multilingualism while actively engaging students in their learning process by leveraging innovation and globalization for the 21st century. Native speaker norms are being challenged by teachers around the world. Acknowledging learners' skills in their home language is essential to learn English effectively. Through highlighting the academic aspects pivotal to success, this paper explores how inclusive access to English, enhanced by the rich socio-cultural and linguistic assets of EAL learners, is of paramount importance in today's English language classrooms. The REAL intensive English program is striving to create a focus that shifts perception and reimagines English instruction through the lens that we view it from within the current TESOL educational paradigm, one of increased equality and awareness with regard to identity, race, and gender.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1. Defining EAL**

While EAL is parallel to ELL, using the term EAL highlights the following focal points: (1) recognition of the learners' competence in their home languages (Baker, 2011) and how this competence can aid and support further development of their English language skills (Cummins, 2000, as cited in Scott, 2020; Nordquist, 2020), (2) emphasis on utilizing the learners' cultural and linguistic backgrounds to construct new knowledge in the target language (English) (Brown, 1998; MacLean, 2011), and (3) nurturing the value of diversity (MacLean, 2011). But EAL effectively refers to someone that is striving to learn. It refers to someone who wanted to improve their life and provide a little more for their family. An EAL is someone who wanted to make it further than their parents or reach another part of their culture that can only be accessed by way of another language. It is someone who wants to bring English education into their community and truly values the changes that it creates. There are countless reasons and stories that we carry with us when we learn another language, and perhaps this is why language exists so closely with identity. EAL means so much more than someone who is

learning English. An EAL is someone who wishes to fully experience and embrace the culture and identity that comes with an additional language and add to the qualities that make up the core of their person; they are interested in far more than merely learning a language.

## **2.2. Examining EAL**

The ability to function in two or more languages has its benefits. Adesope et al. (2010) summarized what EAL learners gain in the process of acquiring English during their schooling: better attention control, heightened metalinguistic awareness, and advanced thinking skills (creative, abstract, critical, and problem-solving). In the field of TESOL, English teachers who speak their students' home language(s) have been EAL learners themselves. Having gone through similar learning processes as their students, they are able to provide richer descriptions and explanations in the languages, including cultural nuances and usage. Moreover, they have a compassionate affect towards a shared challenging experience, which can increase empathy, success, and retention in academic programs.

In the REAL program, we value this perspective of the learner when they desire to become the teacher. We agree that those who have pursued language so passionately may have some insight for explaining their feats to others, so we regularly search out high-achieving students in our graduate programs in the WU College of Education in hopes of recruiting them to teach in REAL or serve in some other capacity. We are proud to say that our REAL intensive English program graduates are now entering into our graduate programs, and we hope to see former REAL graduates attain the requisite qualifications to pursue teaching in the REAL program. In our eyes, meeting these employment requirements might be the paramount achievement of a former REAL student, and we would readily welcome their membership into our faculty.

## **2.3. Adapting EAL**

Preparing English language learners for post-secondary and higher education, university-affiliated intensive English programs (IEPs) require innovative approaches to respond to the demands of globalization and the 21<sup>st</sup> century. EAL learners need academic and leadership skills along with technological and interpersonal communication skills to be able to function successfully in their new learning environments (both virtual and face-to-

face) and beyond (Jabeen et al., 2019). Adapting EAL approaches to the existing IEP framework (Szasz, 2010) encourages learners to contribute to their own study while working proactively and collaboratively with both teachers and peers.

The REAL program incorporates various methods of improving technological and digital communication skills through a combination of our learning management system and Google Docs. Students are provided with access upon joining the program and begin to be taught immediately how to work collaboratively using Google Docs if they do not already possess this capability. They use the technology to practice communicative feedback and questioning and revision through weekly writing tasks. One of our current students noted his own improvements with the technology.

#### **2.4. Reimagining EAL**

Prior to the global pandemic caused by the coronavirus, traditional IEP classes were held face-to-face, and some programs had integrated blended learning to incorporate technology skills into the ESL curriculum. There are also newly developed online English language learning programs that aim to reach independent learners around the world who wish to pursue their studies in higher education. One of the first IEPs to adopt EAL approaches in a 100% online environment is the REAL (Reimagining English as an Additional Language) Intensive English Program at (name of institution). The program's mission is "to prepare prospective international students for their new academic environments (online, hybrid, or on-campus) by providing a smooth transition from achieving the expected English language proficiency levels required to participate in their program of choice to becoming a successful professional in their chosen field of study." (Westcliff University, 2020)

According to Jabeen et al. (2019), academic engagement, social integration, and academic socialization were three major factors influencing the success of international students in a post-secondary setting. A common denominator of these major factors is the learners' English language skills. By adapting EAL approaches in the IEP, learners acquire language at a faster rate because acknowledging their competency in their home language(s) provides a welcoming and motivating learning environment (Cummins, 2000). Adapting EAL approaches fosters not only a sense of belongingness but also a sense of equality.

It has been a challenge adapting a program to this type of environment,

but we began with experienced online educators and we have been doing our best to provide students ample tools to make the educational experience more valuable. For example, we developed an online training guide to help students make a smooth transition into their REAL course, and we created a series of video screencasts to assist learners with initial technological instruction acquainting them with various online resources and course assignments. Attention was also paid to create script and subtitles to assist with translation to foreign languages.

### **3. REAL PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS**

#### **3.1. Multilingualism**

One significant change that the REAL program is sensitive to is the vital role that the students' mother tongues play in the second language acquisition process. In addition to native-speakerism, there has also been the belief that monolingualism is the best approach to adopt in the language-learning classroom. However, scholars have been keen to point out that proscribing students' use of their mother tongues, especially in the early stages of acquisition (Jenkins, 2010), can remove important linguistic crutches that are key to helping students gain the confidence necessary to excel at learning English. The REAL program ensures that teachers are sensitive to the students' usage of their first language (L1), and when appropriate, teachers allow students the flexibility to use their L1s to make critical connections to the second language (L2). In addition to being sensitive to the politics of teaching English in the 21st century, the REAL program also endeavors to promote materials that both minimize expense to students and enhance the teaching and learning experience. We believe in using all linguistic resources available to express desired communication, especially in the initial stages of learning.

#### **3.2. Open Educational Resources**

Accessibility is of the utmost concern when designing an online program for an international student population. Often accessibility barriers can be hard to identify beforehand and become apparent only once a program is in the preliminary stages of launching (Sandanyake, 2019). The Westcliff University REAL program was constructed with consideration to the challenges of students who may be operating on low internet bandwidth or limited connectivity, students who may need additional resources available

for download and offline use, and those who may have more frequent access to mobile devices over laptops or desktop computers. According to the International Telecommunication Union (2019), 57% of households worldwide have internet at home, but only 49.7% of those have a computer at home. By grouping class contact hours and limiting meetings to 1-3 days per week, even students who may not have daily access to a desktop or laptop at home can plan ahead to utilize a computer via an alternative resource such as a school, library, workplace, relative, or friend. REAL classes never meet more than 3 times in a week.

In order to help minimize costs, Open Educational Resources (OERs) can be utilized and referred to students whenever possible. Whether in written form or audio/video clips, most OER materials can be saved and downloaded by the instructor and students to be shared and accessed offline or printed out when convenient. Additionally, utilizing computer learning platforms or mobile applications that are able to be downloaded and used offline (without any data connection) can also be beneficial for students to practice on their own time and increase target language exposure. Starting point databases for several student and educator focused OER databases can be found in the appendix. When operating a synchronous online program, the flipped classroom model lends itself well to utilizing out-of-class time for students to independently study required readings, videos, etc., leaving precious in-class-time for active production, questioning, and timely feedback. The REAL program continues to utilize these resources.

### **3.3. Flipped Classroom**

The teaching methodologies employed by the REAL program are a combination of best practices that reinforce the program's objectives. The program has its basis in EAL; however, it focuses on coordinating 4-skills instruction using a flipped classroom methodology. Skills instruction is integrated and connected to authentic tasks through various curricular activities and assignments such as unit projects and presentations, in which students are encouraged to incorporate their native culture and experiences. In this type of classroom, the focus of the teacher shifts to facilitating rather than controlling the learning. The benefits of flipping the classroom are numerous. For example, they can enhance the quality of students' writing as well as contribute to more active engagement of students in their learning (Soltanpour & Valizadeh, 2018).

In the REAL program, students are introduced to content by engaging

in a number of different interdisciplinary activities outside of the classroom related to 4-skills instruction. Synchronous, individualized instruction of varied activities allows further practice with the language in a controlled environment, where the teacher can devote time to observation and evaluation rather than presenting content.

The flipped classroom model of instruction is well-suited to a variety of different teaching contexts, but it is especially relevant in situations when face-to-face instruction is not possible, such as during the current global pandemic. Social distancing in the pandemic is only physical, and this can be alleviated through the myriad of possibilities that students and teachers could adopt to interact online. Moreover, this collective social exchange is a compelling supporter for student engagement. Flipping the classroom provides opportunities for multiple informal assessments and project-based learning, both of which have been incorporated into the REAL IEP courses.

This type of flipped classroom is an integral aspect of the IEP at (name of institution). Because engaging in this teaching methodology requires experience and persistent reflection from the teacher, providing dependable and comprehensive professional development opportunities is one component that establishes performance and professionalism in the higher education culture. Although teachers in the REAL program have experience teaching in both EFL and ESL contexts, it would be difficult to apply the desired critical teaching practice without continual guided professional development for faculty.

#### **4. REFLECTION ON THE PROGRAM**

##### **4.1. Emphasis on Professional Development**

In education, teaching is referred to as the sharing of knowledge and experience, the provision of stimulative actions to facilitate the psychological and intellectual growth of a learner (Pumilia-Gnarini et al, 2013). In the REAL program, teaching is a science, a craft and an art. As such, the teaching skills necessary to plan and carry out an effective English language session need to be honed in order to maximize students' learning experience.

Strengthening EAL teachers' professional identities through professional development, in a broad sense, refers to an evolution of teachers in their professional role, a growth achieved as a result of gaining vast and robust language instruction experience as well as examining their teaching systematically (Glatthorn & Fox, 1996). This is the reason why

instructors should be up-to-date with the latest trends in the TESOL field; REAL teachers specifically, should be able to constantly look for professional development opportunities that help them understand, face, and overcome the different challenges that involve the teaching of an additional language with students from different age groups, whether in on-ground or online settings.

The Learning, Innovation, and Teaching Excellence (LITE) Center at WU recognizes and embraces the importance of providing ongoing opportunities for educators to achieve professional growth and academic excellence. To meet its mission, which includes the improvement of the effectiveness of instruction and wealth of knowledge among REAL instructors, the LITE Center provides professional development opportunities, ongoing support and training on advances and innovations in educational tech tools and instructional approaches to support active learning environments, specifically those necessary to help students develop their language skills in an intensive and accelerated way. These services are provided to the teaching community at large, the university as a whole, and to the REAL faculty as well.

With the help of the LITE Center, REAL instructors engage in reading professional literature, participate in informal dialogue with peers on how to improve online teaching, and attend webinars where the latest tech tools such as Kahoot, Peardeck, Nearpod, etc., are discussed while taking part in mentoring, peer observation, and coaching activities sponsored by the university. These are just a few examples of the level of academic engagement REAL faculty are involved in and committed to with the purpose of offering the ultimate English language learning experience where home languages and cultures are embraced and utilized as learning resorts.

#### **4.2. Native-Speakerism Bias**

Concerning teaching, it has been a long-held belief that English is best taught by “native speakers” of the language (Phillipson, 1992). While that perspective often dictated who was best qualified to teach, it has needed to adapt to the rapidly changing teaching landscape. More than 80% of the ELT field is “non-native” speaking teachers (Richardson, 2016), and the ownership of English has shifted well beyond the original borders of English speaking countries. As such, the definition of a qualified teacher has continued to be redefined to focus on the most important aspects, which are teaching competence and intelligibility. The REAL program makes an explicit



commitment to recruiting the most talented teachers regardless of their countries of origin. Taking this approach ensures that in a globalized world, students will have access to the very best teachers from around the world.

### **4.3. Power and Inclusion**

Language learning is a productive struggle, and EAL adult learners grapple with the complexity of language, perceived shortcomings to effective communication, and building a cultural community that values integrating language rather than seeing it as a barrier. The demands of the 21<sup>st</sup> century require that institutions of higher education no longer neglect the needs of EAL learners and respond in terms of policy, program, and mission. Inclusion demands that resources align and intersect language and culture with the notion of power and privilege (Tulpan, 2017).

Language is visible. The powerlessness and inequity is clearly demonstrated when underserved populations lack access to educational settings that foster both cognitive and social interactions valuing students' socio-cultural and linguistic skills pivotal to success. Language can be an equalizer as it pertains to alienation or privilege. By providing access to innovative classrooms that bring authentic encounters inside, EAL learners have the power to compete.

Language creates culture. Language is emotional. Language conveys identity and communicates value. Learning language requires collaboration and a spirit of cooperation to engage in discourse that preserves diversity. This strengthens the learning environment and promotes creative and divergent thinking, resulting in innovative solutions to problems. The interdependence of language and culture shows respect for others' customs and beliefs and builds a bridge of awareness and action. Linguistic competence and social awareness is inherent yet often overlooked in traditional educational programs. This fuels the belief that REAL will play a significant role in the development of a quality education for all. The changing face of education demands new forums that foster high expectations and utilize technological advancements (The Change Leader, 2018). We must equip classrooms to keep pace with the changes and meet the challenges with creative measures as evidenced by REAL.

## **5. ANALYSIS AND CRITIQUE**

Any English program is not without its flaws, and there are certainly

ways that we can strive to improve aspects of any of our creations. Language learning is particularly susceptible to this type of reflection because the learning process is so intense, often occurring over the course of many years and in many different contexts, geographical, social, familial and otherwise. In REAL we also follow the Westcliff motto of “Educate. Inspire. Empower.” Much like language learners, the REAL program must also continue to focus on improvement and aspire to reach beyond the initial goals set. With each new day, new challenges arise for which we must make decisions rooted in our beliefs, expressed here throughout this paper. Already we have had to turn down multiple prospective students with requests for intensive English courses focused on ESP and advanced English proficiency levels. We have also struggled to meet the needs of one of our affiliate institution in Mali who noted that due to ongoing political tensions our program no longer matches the means or employment aspirations of their students and English language culture. We are currently working together to find solutions including altering the curriculum and scholarships that might better serve the needs of the communities that we aim to serve. These are just two small examples of the barriers that we have come upon in our journey building and implementing a theoretically well-founded program. Placing students into the correct level, creating courses that serve specific time zones, and helping students with burgeoning English skills through the administrative process of program admission are some of the other areas of growth that we have faced. Undoubtedly, challenges will continue to arise, and the constant and steady guide through the turbulence must be a commitment to those original, shared core principles of identity, inclusion, recognition and equality because they will continue to inspire and empower our students and faculty and our communities toward the most realized versions of themselves.

## **6. CONCLUSION**

Although there is no escaping the fact that online distance education requires at least baseline technological capabilities, with flexibility and a little ingenuity, instructional designers can offer students diversified delivery to help mitigate some of the barriers. By employing OERs, facilitating out-of-class engagement with the use of offline materials, and integrating mobile device compatibility into distance learning, EAL programs such as REAL can help keep accessibility and equitability at the forefront of course design. Confiding in EAL with differentiated and flexible course design and delivery

allows for individualized instruction and implementation of teaching strategies that amplify the influences of L1 language and culture. Despite the unfortunately common native-speakerism prejudice, the REAL program fights for inclusion by striving to make visible the intersections of power, language, and culture. Weekly professional development opportunities assist faculty in following the latest research and methods to continue to integrate a critical and informed perspective on teaching EAL learners. Each of these integral parameters set by the REAL program are fundamental to successfully fostering diversity and linguistic development while preparing students for higher education and life beyond the classroom. While we realize that no approach is perfect, we strive to continue to become more valuable for each individual who makes up the REAL program because EAL students are learning much more than just language.

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