

## Food for thought on Canadian campuses

### Preparing Our Learners and Ourselves by Ana-Marija Petrunic <sup>1</sup>

Canada's 2023-2025 Immigration Levels Plan reflects a commitment to over a million newcomers as they enter Canada and are expected to contribute to economic recovery and labour shortages (Government of Canada, 2022). Our classrooms and campuses will continue to diversify and reflect the plurilingual and multicultural society in which we live as newcomers and international students seek educational opportunities. With each new wave of federal immigration policy and post-secondary institutional internationalization strategies, linguistic and cultural diversity creates an intricate and complex teaching and learning environment. Navigating these complexities across academic spaces is a responsibility for all of us. However, English language learners face unique challenges when coming to campus. Beyond trying to communicate in a language in which they may not be confident, English language learners must also integrate into the Canadian academic environment, navigate diverse learning expectations and intercultural differences across classes, and try to understand a narrow perception of what the post-secondary experience is supposed to be like. As our institutions welcome international and newcomer students, how are we preparing them for success?

I remember graduating with a Linguistics degree and wanting to enter the world of English language teaching. In my last year of university, I volunteered teaching English at a local community agency supporting refugees from the former Yugoslavia. Throughout my classes I recognized that I was working with immigrant learners, families like my own, who had come to Canada with hopes and dreams. My parents had the same hopes and dreams but could not afford to take classes to help achieve those dreams. During my voluntary teaching at the local agency, I soon

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realized I could help immigrant families like my own. When reflecting on my two decades of teaching, curriculum development, mentorship, and program administration, I feel grateful for the opportunity and am proud of becoming part of the journey that has helped shape the lives of new immigrants and international students in this country—the journey that would have also contributed to shaping my own parents’ settlement back then. If they would have been supported in the ways that I have been able to guide students and families today, their lives, and my own, would have been very different.

Many colleges and universities have English for Academic Purposes (EAP) programs designed to prepare English language learners for entry into post-secondary programs. However, some students bypass this academic programming and go directly into college/university by presenting various language proficiency test results (i.e., TOEFL, IELTS or Duolingo). In EAP programming, curriculum is often designed to prepare students for specific academic programs (e.g., hospitality, business, or early childhood education) and leads to easier transition into these areas. The EAP curriculum also reflects a learner-centered approach where students learn academic and student success skills (e.g., note-taking, time management, group work) that support their academic development. But what happens when EAP students enter traditional college or university programs? Are our faculty or our administrators prepared to navigate the cultural and language realities of these students?

I believe there is so much more work to do.

The responsibility for transitioning English language learners to the post-secondary classroom must continue engagement with students but we need to provide better supports for our faculty and our administrators. While many students face challenges and barriers, international students and newcomers often have the added complexities of language and intercultural differences. Some institutions have greatly supported students by offering mental health counselling, subsidized housing, food service and financial assistance. However, we also need to support our classrooms and our faculty to better build community and navigate language and intercultural complexities in their classes to help all our students. Supporting evidence-based teaching and learning, sharing

research findings and building communities of practice contribute to the development of diverse teaching and learning spaces.

Had my parents had access to English language training that supported their career interests and expertise, they might have gone on to college or university. Although English language training programs exist today, our faculty may lack the training and the resources necessary to support language and intercultural development while also teaching their own disciplinary content. Preparing our faculty to incorporate intercultural skills development along with language support teaching strategies would not only contribute to the learning environment but it would better prepare our students to contribute and live within an inclusive and diverse society.

### **FOOD FOR THOUGHT**

1. In your role, what is one small change you could make to expand intercultural awareness and inclusion in your classroom or on your campus?
2. At your institution, what supports are there for your international students and/or English language learners? What supports are missing?
3. Are there curriculum changes or new assessment strategies you could implement that might recognize international experiences and other ways of knowing?

### **REFERENCES**

Government of Canada. (2022, November 1). *An immigration plan to grow the economy* [Press release]. <https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/news/2022/11/an-immigration-plan-to-grow-the-economy.html>