

Theoretical Analysis, Classroom Practice, Opinion Essays

**Different Learners, Different Needs:
Comparing Post-Secondary and Adult EAL Education**

Elnaz Zamanzade
University of British Columbia

Abstract

This reflective paper examines English as an additional language (EAL) learning in two British Columbia contexts: a credit-bearing post-secondary pathway program and a non-credit workplace-oriented program for adult newcomers. Drawing on my personal practical knowledge as a graduate teaching assistant (GTA) and graduate research assistant (GRA), this paper compares how learners use English to enter academic and workplace environments. My guiding question for this inquiry was as follows: How do EAL learners in a post-secondary pathway program and EAL learners in an adult workplace program experience language learning differently and similarly, particularly in relation to identity, belonging, and confidence. Rather than reporting empirical findings, I use reflective practice to connect classroom moments with previous research related to additional language socialization, adult learning, belonging, and teacher knowledge. I argue that although learners in these two types of programs have different goals and life circumstances, both groups benefit from more than just improving their accuracy in English. They also benefit from opportunities to be seen as capable, to practice meaningful communication, and to belong in new academic, workplace, and community spaces.

Introduction

This paper grew out of two roles I held at a public research university in the southern interior of British Columbia. The first was my role as a graduate teaching assistant (GTA) in the Pathways to University English (PUE) program, a credit-bearing English language development program for multilingual students entering undergraduate studies. The second was my role as a graduate research assistant (GRA) in the Career English Pathways (CEP) program, a non-credit workplace-oriented program for multilingual adult newcomers to Canada that focuses on language, work, and belonging. Both program names are pseudonyms used for confidentiality. Both positions built on my prior English as an additional language (EAL) teaching career, and together they provide an instructive lens for considering how post-secondary and adult EAL learners navigate learning across academic and professional contexts.

At first, I understood these two programs as quite different. PUE students were usually younger (18 to 20 years old) and were focused on meeting academic expectations, passing courses, and moving into degree studies. CEP learners were older adults who often had work experience, family responsibilities, and goals connected to employment and settlement. Over time, though, I began to notice some important similarities. In both contexts, learners were not only working on improving their English. They were also trying to participate, feel connected, and show what they were capable of in a new environment. Based on my experiences, it appears that for EAL students entering higher education, English is not only about grammar, vocabulary,

or pronunciation. For students entering post-secondary studies, English appears to shape access to academic participation and confidence. For adult newcomers, English often becomes tied to employment, stability, and community participation. In addition, I have come to understand that both groups share the need for confidence, belonging, and identity.

Building Understanding Through Reflection

My work adopts a reflective rather than an empirical orientation. It is inspired by autoethnographic traditions in TESOL, where personal experience is used as a way to think about broader educational, cultural, and social issues (Mirhosseini, 2018). However, I do not present this paper as a formal autoethnography or as a research study with collected data. Instead, I draw on reflective practice (Farrell, 2024) and on my personal practical knowledge (Golombek, 1998) as a teacher and researcher.

Reflective practice is useful in this context because it asks teachers to look carefully at what happens in teaching, why it may be happening, and how classroom moments connect to larger ideas about additional language learning (Farrell, 2024; Farrell & Macapinlac, 2021). Farrell (2025) has explained that reflective practice helps teachers think carefully about their teaching, make more informed decisions, and better understand their professional growth. In this paper, reflection allows me to treat classroom and program experiences not as isolated moments, but as way to think more carefully about learner confidence, belonging, and participation. Complementing reflective practice, the concept of personal practical knowledge refers to the knowledge teachers build through their lived teaching experiences, relationships with learners, and repeated decisions in practice (Golombek, 1998; Ross & Chan, 2016). I draw on this kind of understanding to reflect on what I noticed across both the PUE and CEP while connecting these observations to research on EAL teaching and learning.

The guiding inquiry question for this reflection is: How do EAL learners in a post-secondary pathway and EAL learners in an adult workplace programs experience additional language learning differently and similarly, particularly in relation to identity, belonging, and confidence? To answer this question, I first situate the two programs in the British Columbia context. Next, I identify connections related to belonging, adult learning, additional language socialization, and workplace communication. Finally, I reflect on what I noticed in each program and what these experiences suggest for EAL educators.

Context and Significance

The need for EAL support in Canada is shaped by immigration and international education as well as multilingual learners' own goals for study, work, and community participation. These patterns are felt strongly in British Columbia, where universities, colleges, settlement organizations, and community programs support multilingual learners who are building English for study, work, and daily life. The two programs discussed in this paper took place within this broader British Columbia context, but they served different learner groups and different purposes. PUE was connected to studying at a post-secondary institution. Students were learning English for academic reading, writing, seminar discussions, presentations, and so on. In my experience, this focus on preparing for higher education was not only about improving language

skills, but also about helping students participate more confidently in university. CEP was connected to work and settlement. The multilingual adult newcomers in these classes were developing their EAL skills for interviews, workplace conversations, intercultural communication, and professional interaction. By developing these skills, newcomers were becoming better prepared to face workplace communication challenges that go beyond grammar or vocabulary, including those challenges related to workplace expectations, communication norms, and opportunities to be recognized as capable workers (Cheng et al., 2021; Doe et al., 2025; Douglas et al., 2020).

When I compare these two contexts, I see both difference and connection. PUE learners were often preparing for anticipated academic futures, while CEP learners were trying to move forward in employment and community life. However, both groups needed spaces where they could practise English, build confidence, and be recognized for the knowledge and experience they already had. This comparison matters for EAL educators, particularly in contexts such as British Columbia, because post-secondary and adult EAL programs are often discussed separately, even though, in my experience, learners may move across these spaces throughout their lives.

Literature Review

Adult Learning Theories

Understanding EAL learning across post-secondary academic and adult workplace settings requires grounding in adult learning theory. Knowles' (1984) concept of andragogy remains useful because it emphasizes that adults bring prior experiences to learning and are often more engaged when learning connects to immediate goals. I observed this in both programs, although in different ways. PUE students were often more engaged when tasks supported academic reading and writing, presentations, or communication with instructors. CEP learners were often more engaged when tasks connected to job interviews, workplace emails, work-related communication, or topics related to Canadian Industry. At the same time Tennant (1986) has cautioned against assuming that all adult learners are equally self-directed. This caution is important in EAL contexts. I've observed that some learners may want independence, but they may also be navigating unfamiliar systems, family responsibilities, work pressure, or uncertainty about expectations. This is especially important in comparing PUE and CEP because both groups needed support, but the kind of support they seemed to need often appeared different.

Mezirow's (1991) transformative learning theory also helps explain the role of reflection in EAL learning. In my experience with PUE students, unfamiliar academic conventions seemed to shape how they understood participation in university settings. In my experience with CEP learners, workplace communication norms appeared to shape how they understood professional interaction in Canada. In both contexts, reflection has the potential to help learners make sense of new expectations and connect language learning to their broader goals. Brookfield's (1988) work on critical reflection adds another important layer by reminding educators that adult learning is shaped by social and institutional conditions. In EAL education, learners may face challenges such as accent bias, limited recognition of previous credentials, or uncertainty about how their knowledge is valued in academic and workplace spaces (Douglas et al., 2020). For this reason,

reflection should not only focus on what learners need to improve. It should also help educators notice the barriers learners may be navigating. Together, these theories underscore that post-secondary and adult EAL learners seem to benefit from teaching that connects to the lived experience, supports reflection, and builds agency. Such principles relate directly to the practices I have observed in both the PUE and CEP programs.

Challenges of First-Year EAL Students in Post-Secondary Pathways

Students in English for Academic purposes (EAP) or post-secondary pathways programs are learning more than academic English as a set of skills. Hyland and Hamp-Lyons (2002) described EAP as concerned with the language and literacy practices of academic communities. More recent Canadian EAP research has shown that students in pathways programs often value support with academic expectations, social connections, confidence, and additional language socialization (Douglas et al., 2022; Douglas & Wiebe, 2025). Marshall (2024) has also argued for the value of a general EAP approach in Canadian post-secondary contexts because broad academic and social support can matter deeply for students' transition. This conceptualization of EAP helped me understand that when pathway students hesitate, their hesitation may not mean they are unprepared or unmotivated. They may be trying to understand what counts as a good question, how directly they can disagree, or how they are expected to participate in academic discussions and writing. In this way their transition is not only about learning English, but also about learning the expectations and practices of a new academic community. Duff's (2017) concept of additional language socialization is useful here because it provides insights into how multilingual learners gain access to the norms, practices, and identities of academic and workplace communities through interaction in English as they develop their English language skills over time.

Workplace English and Adult Newcomers

Workplace English involves similar complexity. Adult newcomers may need English for tasks such as interviews, professional emails, small talk, customer service, workplace instruction, and conflict management (Cheng et al., 2021; Doe et al., 2025; Douglas et al., 2020). Doe et al. (2019) have shown that newcomer workplace communication includes a range of interactional demands involving co-workers, customers, clients, and employers or supervisors. Their findings are useful for understanding why workplace EAL instruction is more robust when it includes listening skills, clarification strategies, workplace pragmatics, and confidence-building, especially because customer and client interactions can involve fast speech, phone communication, and less predictable responses from interlocutors. Holmes (2005) has further demonstrated that workplace interactions include relational language, such as rapport-building and everyday talk. It is not only made up of formal tasks. Soft skills for employability, including the communication practices that help workers participate more fully in workplace life are an important part of workplace success (Bartel, 2018).

Workplace language learning is further connected to identity and settlement. Wong et al. (2009) have demonstrated that language and skills development can affect immigrants' lives beyond employment preparation. In their study, participants connected their educational experiences with stronger employment prospects, occupational identity, self-confidence,

autonomy, and integration into Canadian society. These findings are important for understanding the CEP program because, from my experience, workplace English is not only about performing tasks correctly. It is also about how adult newcomers imagine themselves as capable workers and community members.

Identity, Belonging, and Learner Agency

Across both settings, identity, belonging, and learner agency are central. Pavlenko and Lantolf (2000) have described additional language learning as a process of self-reconstruction through a new language. This reconstruction can have impacts on identity. Norton and Toohey (2001) have argued that learners' investment in language learning is shaped by whether participation gives them access to valued identities and communities. These ideas helped me understand why confidence and belonging were not side issues in my teaching and research roles. They were part of the learning itself. Belonging is also an important part of this picture. Belonging is the feeling of being accepted, valued and included in a learning environment (Goodenow, 1993). More importantly, having a sense of belonging impacts English language learner's academic success, relationships, identity, and meaningful participation in their local communities (Finley, 2018). For EAL learners, it appears that belonging, can influence whether they take risks, speak in class, ask questions, or imagine themselves as legitimate members of a new community. Related to identity and belonging, learner agency involves students feeling responsible for their own learning, with the resilience, motivation, and desire to direct and guide their learning experiences (Tao & Gao, 2025). For PUE learners, agency sometimes meant speaking in a discussion even when the sentence was not perfect. For CEP learners, agency sometimes meant writing an email that sounded professional, asking for clarification at work, or naming their previous profession with pride. In both cases, learners were not simply acquiring English. They were trying to become more visible in spaces where English shaped how others understood their ability.

Reflection and Analysis

Drawing on Farrell (2024), I conceptualize reflection as an ongoing and intentional part of my teaching practice rather than as a one-time activity that happens only after a lesson ends. Reflection asks me to slow down and consider what I noticed, what I may have missed, and how my teaching choices affected learner's confidence and participation. In the section below, I use reflection to compare the two programs while keeping the focus on identity, belonging, and confidence.

PUE: Supporting Academic Transitions

The PUE program includes credit-based courses designed to help undergraduate students strengthen their English skills upon entering university. These courses focus on reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills as well as study skills, community engagement, and intercultural awareness. The program also includes tutorials, language labs, and occasional activities outside the classroom and workshops. My responsibilities in the program included supporting lessons, helping with group discussions, giving feedback on writing, occasionally substitute teaching, running workshops, and meeting students for Personal Learning Plan (PLP) sessions. In this program, PLP sessions were individualized student-centred tutoring meetings shaped by each

learner's goals and immediate needs. Students used these sessions in different ways, including asking for extra support with assignments, practising conversation, reviewing grammar, and learning new discussion strategies for improving their English. These personal learning plans were one-on-one conversations where students reflected on their goals, challenges, and strategies for improving their English.

One of the first things I noticed was that many students were not only learning English. They were also learning how university worked. Some students were unsure how to ask questions in class while other students were worried about sounding too direct or not direct enough. There were also students who had strong ideas but hesitated because they were not confident that they could express those ideas in the expected academic language. These moments reminded me that making the transition to an academic setting can be both linguistic and emotional. A moment that stayed with me was when a student told me they knew what they wanted to say but could not say it in the right way. That sentence captured much of what I saw in PUE. The problem was not a lack of ideas. The problem was the gap between the student's thinking and the language they felt was acceptable in a university classroom. Over time, this same student began contributing more often to group discussion. I read this change not only as language progress, but also as a small shift in identity. The student seemed to be starting to see themselves as someone who had something worth saying. The workshops in the PUE seemed to show a similar pattern. During one activity on using sources, several students said they did not know what the teacher wanted. At first, I wanted to explain the task more clearly, but I realized the issue was bigger than instructions. Students were trying to understand what critical writing meant in this setting. We talked about the differences between summarizing sources and putting sources into conversation. That discussion helped me see how academic writing can become a disorienting experience for students who have been successful in other educational systems but are now being asked to show knowledge in unfamiliar ways. I also learned to be more careful with feedback. When I focused too quickly on grammar, some students became quiet or defensive. When I first responded to their ideas and then moved to language, they seemed more willing to revise. This was a small shift in my teaching, but it mattered. It helped me understand that confidence is not separate from language learning. Confidence can decide whether a student takes the risk needed to learn.

By the end of the term, I saw students who were more willing to present, ask questions, and speak with classmates. Not every challenge disappeared, and I do not want to idealize the transition. Still, I saw how belonging can grow through repeated low-stakes opportunities to participate. PUE taught me that pathway students need more than preparation for assignments. They need guided entry into academic life, and they need teachers who notice the emotional work involved in becoming a university student in an additional language.

CEP: Language, Work, and Belonging

The CEP program had a different rhythm compared to the PUE program. In the CEP, the learners were adults, and many of them had professional histories and settlement responsibilities. The classroom felt purposeful because the learning was closely connected to work, communication, and daily life. My role as a GRA involved observing the classes, interacting with learners, and occasionally support teaching. These experiences helped me see how workplace English can

carry emotional weight. For example, one learner once said that they knew the words but did not always know when to use them. That comment helped me understand the difference between knowing English and feeling confident using English in a workplace. Learners practised greetings, small talk, polite refusals, workplace email, and ways to disagree respectfully. These were not simple language exercises. They were rehearsals for situations where tone, timing, and confidence could affect how learners were perceived.

Many learners also carried the pain of professional loss. Some had strong careers before coming to Canada, but they were now working in positions that did not reflect their education or experience. In class discussions, I sometimes heard frustration, sadness, and determination together. When learners practised introducing themselves as professionals, not just as language learners or newcomers, the activity seemed to do more than speaking practice. It gave them a way to reclaim part of their identity. A workplace email lesson during the program showed me this clearly. Several learners were worried about sounding rude, even when their grammar was correct. We looked at examples and discussed how tone changes across formal and semi-formal messages. The lesson became less about finding the perfect sentence and more about building a professional voice. I saw learners begin to ask better questions related to how directed they can be in communication, what sounds confident but polite, and how to write in a way that stays true to themselves while still fitting into the workplace.

Roleplays around polite disagreement were also important. Some learners were uncomfortable disagreeing with supervisors or coworkers because their previous educational or workplace settings valued hierarchy differently. The debrief after the roleplay mattered as much as the roleplay itself. Learners talked about respect, power, and what it means to participate in a Canadian workplace. This reminded me that language teaching can open space for critical reflection, especially when learners are navigating new expectations that are not always explained to them.

CEP taught me that adult newcomers do not come to class empty. They bring careers, family histories, skills, humour, and strategies for survival. Effective workplace EAL teaching is likely most beneficial when it recognizes those resources. When instructors validated learners' previous knowledge, participation increased. Learners seemed more willing to practise English when they were treated not as deficient speakers, but as experienced adults expanding their communicative options.

Comparing PUE and CEP

Comparing PUE and CEP helped me see that different learners really do have different needs. PUE students generally needed support with academic reading, writing, speaking, and the hidden expectations of university life. On the other hand, CEP learners generally needed support with workplace communication, professional identity, and the everyday language of settlement. On the surface, the age, goals, and pressures of the two groups were not the same. At the same time, deeper concerns overlapped. Both groups wanted to be understood. Both groups wanted to sound capable. Both groups wanted access to communities where English mattered. In PUE, belonging often appeared when students felt safe enough to speak in class or ask for help. In CEP, belonging often appeared when learners could connect English to work, family, and

professional pride. In both settings, belonging was built through small but repeated moments of recognition. This comparison has changed how I think about EAL teaching and learning. I now see language instruction as a form of guided participation. Teachers are not only explaining language forms. They are helping learners enter spaces where those forms have social meaning. This shift in approach requires patience, practical relevance, and attention to power. It also requires remembering that a learner's silence, hesitation, or anxiety may be telling the teacher something about the environment, not only about the learner's language level.

Conclusion

Reflecting across the PUE and CEP programs has helped me understand EAL teaching and learning as an academic, professional, and deeply human process. In the post-secondary pathway context, students were learning how to participate in university life and how to see themselves as capable academic contributors. In the adult workplace context, newcomers were learning how to communicate in ways that supported employment, confidence, and belonging while also rebuilding professional identity. The literature on reflective practice, personal practical knowledge, additional language socialization, belonging, and adult learning helped me make sense of what I noticed in both programs (Duff, 2017; Farrell, 2024; Finley, 2018; Golombek, 1998; Knowles, 1984). It also helped me see that confidence, identity, and belonging are not extra outcomes that appear after language has been learned. They are part of how additional language learning happens. For EAL educators in British Columbia and beyond, the comparison suggests a practical lesson: learners benefit from instruction that connects English to the real communities they are trying to enter. For some, that community is the university classroom. For others, it is the workplace or a new neighbourhood. Different learners have different needs, but many share the same hope: to be heard, to contribute, and to be recognized as fully capable in a new language.

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