

# Adult and Higher Education ESOL—A Field in Crisis

by Fatiha Makloufi

The English to Speaking of Other Languages (ESOL) field has both produced cutting-edge research on the theories and pedagogy of language acquisition and has enriched other disciplines. We have kept pace with the various approaches, from grammar-based to the communicative to the content-based to the current technology-enhanced. We redefined what an ESL learner is and identified emerging and distinct types of learners from the ESL, ELL, and Generation 1.5 to trans-lingual, among others.

Our innovative and contributing field, however, has lost ground—and the troubling signs are everywhere:

1. *Few employment opportunities and a part-time workforce:* Look everywhere and the litanies are loud and clear. Many community colleges have eliminated or reduced their ESL offerings. Established and free ESL programs at community-based organizations or public schools hire mostly part-time instructors, if at all. As a result, we have now a majority adjunct/part-time “migrant” force piecing together two or more jobs to survive.
2. *Long waiting lists for free ESL programs in urban areas:* Quality and free comprehensive ESL programs for adults are very few: most have limited capacity to address the huge demand. Our ESL population is now solidly immigrant, poor, working long hours, and in need of flexible programs that can serve their needs. Another barrier is that many programs charge fees that the current ESL population cannot afford. These programs work hard to recruit and brand their courses, and to attract students who can afford to pay the fees. A few have sacrificed quality and have become another profit-seeking corporate venture that pays little attention to their teaching faculty, who work with no benefits or part time and who can be terminated when enrollment dips.
3. *Proliferation of quick teacher certificate programs:* A disturbing trend we see everywhere is the proliferation of teacher certificate programs that offer a fast route to becoming an ESL teacher. What all these certificate programs have in common is the notion that one can become teacher-ready by taking a limited number of “quick and dirty” practical courses on effective pedagogy without any time given to researching or learning the underlying theories of language acquisition.
4. *A loss of focus, a field adrift:* We have become “interdisciplinary” and we blend everywhere: Our field is now watered down; we are no longer seen as distinct. In fact, if you want to hear a serious talk about language issues or research, go to a conference focused on reading, linguistics, or English. The word out there is that our ESL/ESOL conferences have become a forum for effective practices and practical approaches to pedagogy, a bonanza of recipes for teaching the how and what—instead of the why. Who has time for the why? Not the frazzled part-time teacher who was hired on a one-day or one-week notice.

How did this situation happen? I would like to propose a few reasons for the current state of our field:

- **An underrepresented population.** Our target population of immigrants does not have a strong voice or place in the current discourse on education. They are not seen as a force to pay attention to, and our policies reflect this stand. There is a feeling that they are here to work and not be educated.

- **Lack of funding for public education.** States have been coping to fund public services and ESL education has been asked to compete with others who had to gut or reduce their services to the public. Our parks, soup kitchens, day care centers, libraries, and other programs have had to cut their services, scrambling to make up for the gap in public support.
- **A changing EFL population.** As English has become a global language, developing and developed countries have incorporated English in their K-to college programs as a skill rather than an elective. As a result, our instruction needs to adapt to these changes.

### Toward a Plan of Action

Any plan of action would need to include the following key areas of focus:

- **Full-time employment and paid staff development.** Our first goal should be to create and advocate for full-time employment at all levels, whether at a community college, a community-based-organization (CBO), a library, or other consortium. We should as well advocate for adequate pay and paid staff development for teachers.
- **Funding for programs.** We need adequate funding of full-time and accelerated and managed-enrollment programs. The research has shown that programs with wrap-around services and resources serve adult immigrants well.
- **Curriculum and instruction.** We need to analyze and clarify standards of professional development in ESL/ESOL teacher education to meet the needs of the new ESL groups.
- **Immigrant learners.** As specified earlier, we need to accommodate the needs of new immigrants who have educational and literacy gaps needs that need to be remedied if they are to be effective second language learners and acquire academic literacy for higher education purposes. In addition, instruction and curricula need to be adopted/enhanced to the changing language needs of the global English learner, who will need focused, contextualized, and higher level writing, communication, and critical-thinking skills.

As these troubling trends in ESOL become increasingly evident, and affect our ability to meet our students' needs and hopes, it is imperative that we work individually and collectively to help revitalize our profession. We must reach out beyond our programs, departments, institutions, and titles to rally around a strong agenda for the renewal, stability, and growth of our field.

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