

The plight of the ESL program director

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Abstract

This presentation explores the precarious and arguably unethical position in which directors of English as a Second Language (ESL) programs at post-secondary institutions find themselves or rather, are placed by the institution and shares excerpts of interviews with ESL program directors who reflect on their work in marketing and managing revenue-generating programs at one Canadian university.

*Note: This presentation is based both on the presenter's doctoral research, as well as on a book chapter in *The Intensification of International Education* (Y. Hébert, ed.), forthcoming in May, 2009. Please do not cite this paper without the author's permission.*

Introduction

In this presentation we will examine the situation of English as a Second Language (ESL) program managers, many of whom are charged with the responsibility of marketing their programs and recruiting students internationally, often with little or no training in how to do so (Eaton, 2005). Not only are they set forth ill-prepared, the repercussions for insufficient revenue generation may be harsh, including having to fire instructors or having their programs may be closed by the very institutions they serve (Mickelson, 1997; Soppelsa, 1997; Staczek, 1997), many of which regard such programs as lucrative (Rubin, 1997). Building on the work that has been done in this field to date, my research adds in the voices of three language program directors, Anuradha (English for Academic Purposes), Karen (English for Professional Purposes) and Yassin (English Language Program, Continuing Education) each of whom directed a different program at the University of Calgary at the time this study was conducted. They offer commentary and insight into matters of importance for ESL administrators. Finally, I shall offer some recommendations on how things may be improved for the future.

Theoretical Framework

This work is informed by critical theory, which as Tyson (1999) points out, assumes “the impossibility of objective analysis”, as all events are situated both temporally and culturally and perspectives may change over time. Tyson notes that we “live in a particular time and place, and [scholars’] views of both current and past events are influenced in innumerable conscious and unconscious ways by their own experience with their own culture”.

I further situates language programs within an international context. In addition to examining educational issues, my study considers world events and economic factors that affect language programs, borrowing from educational policy theory insofar as it subscribes to the view that “a major theoretical assumption of those who study the international arena is that the world is interdependent and that global forces affect education systems” (Fowler, 1995). My study positions the global forces within a historical context, showing how they affect challenges faced by program administrators.

Historical context

The idea that ESL programs were cash cows emerged in the 1970s. As Eskey (1997) notes, “a great many new (ESL programs) were established in the 1970s”, adding that this led to “widespread perception, probably accurate at the time, that such programs were sure-fire money makers”. This marks a shift in how language programs were viewed within the institution. They were no longer purely a scholarly pursuit.

The 1970s also showed how global market forces come into play when we examine where students came from in order to take ESL courses. “In any given year, larger numbers come from certain parts of the world (the Middle East in the 1970s, the Far East in the 1990s), mainly as a consequence of economic and political factors” (Eskey, 1997). One key point here is that the 1970s were a critical decade for ESL programs because three things happened at the same time: the number of programs increased dramatically; the programs began to be viewed as mechanisms to generate revenue for the institution and we begin to see how students from particular regions populate these courses, according to political and economic conditions.

Enrolments leveled off in the 1980s and competition increased (Eskey, 1997). By the mid-to late -1990s there was another shift in the evolution of ESL programs, with increasing fiscal restraints and changes in the global economy. From an institutional point of view:

In the 1980s and early 1990s . . . the willingness of universities and colleges to launch such programs and to make front-end investments [declined and] the fiscal restraints and budgetary cutbacks at the same institutions in the mid 1990s have been the motivation for a shifting of risk away from the institutional parent to the program itself. (Staczek, 1997)
Emphasis in original.

Institutions began withdrawing support from programs, or making support conditional on enrollments. This placed many programs in a precarious position in the late 1990s when registrations from the previously lucrative markets of Japan and Korea plummeted, due to

economic decline in those countries (Eaton, 2004), creating additional pressures on program administrators. Heffernan and Poole (2005) note that “limiting factors may include the effects of wars and terrorism, regional or global economic recession, and policy shifts in countries such as China”. Hence, what happens in the world affects ESL programs.

Issues around marketing, recruiting and promoting

Marketing, recruiting and promoting are but one aspect of the language program administrator’s job. However, historically they have not been considered an essential facet of ESL programs. In Pennington and Xiao’s (1990) national U.S. survey of ESL program administrators, marketing and promotions did not appear in the survey question on job-related skills, which included 24 items which respondents were asked to comment on. The closest related skills were “making profits” and “recruiting new students”, neither of which fell into the top five skills that the respondents believed they needed for their jobs. The top five were: maintaining an environment conducive to teamwork, developing a staff “team” (hire, orient, assign, etc.), managing time, communicating program goals to faculty and motivating faculty members.

In fact, recruiting new students fell into the bottom five skills that ESL directors believed they needed for their jobs. When asked what tasks ESL directors spend their time on, marketing and recruiting were not options in the questionnaire and although respondents were allowed to add additional information about that they spend their time on, not one mentioned marketing or recruiting. Perhaps not surprisingly, the highest rated item was paperwork (e.g. reports, budgets).

Despite the fact that maintaining and increasing enrollments helps to secure a program’s future, and linguistic and cultural diversity keep it vibrant, one problem is that administrators are simply overwhelmed with tasks and marketing and recruiting fall to the bottom of the list. This may be due, in part, to the fact that many of them lack training in these areas, as well as adequate resources to market effectively (Eaton, 2005).

Qualifications, training and traits of ESL administrators and teaching staff

Pennington and Xiao are not the only ones to point out that one trait shared by language program administrators is lack of training and experience. Kaplan (1997) echoes the same ideas in his work and Nolan (2001) cites empirical research by Hussein that examines future administrators, summarizing that “In a survey of 100 graduate programs future teachers of ESL were seen to have no administrative training (78%), while the majority of program directors (62%) declared that they had been poorly prepared to administer an ESL program (Hussein, 1995)”. Lack of training for the position was a concern as far back as almost two decades and continues to be a concern today.

A national survey conducted in the U.S. by Pennington and Xiao (1990) shows that “compared with other academic administrators, the ESL directors are younger, less experienced, more likely to be female, less likely to hold a professional rank, less likely to be tenured, less likely to have been appointed from inside the department or program, and with less time available for teaching or research”.

Here is a brief overview of the training, experience and qualifications of the 3 program directors who participated in my study:

Profile of the ESL program administrators at the U of C

	Yassin (ELP)	Anuradha (EAP)	Karen (EPP/CLAL)
Gender	Male	Female	Female
Length of time in the profession	16 years	9 years (including graduate school)	33 years
Higher education	M. Ed. TESL, including some business courses	Ph.D.	Master's degree TESOL
International experience	Japan	U.S.A.	UK, Spain, Saudi Arabia, China, Oman, Italy
Languages spoken (other than English)	Fluent in Japanese	Fluent in Bengali; Functional skills in Hindi; knowledge of French and Spanish	Fluent in Spanish; knowledge of French and Italian

From the information in this table we can see that all of the participants have many things in common. They all hold graduate degrees directly related to their field. Anuradha holds a Ph.D. and Yassin and Karen hold Master's degrees. Yassin was the only person who had taken courses in business as part of his graduate level training. He mentioned during the interview that he had taken half of his courses in the Education faculty and half of them in the Haskayne School of Business at the University of Calgary.

All of the participants have lived abroad and speak at least one other language fluently. Anuradha had studied in the United States and Karen and Yassin had both taught EFL abroad. Karen had the most extensive international experience, having lived and worked in six countries outside Canada. With 33 years of experience working either in ESL or EFL contexts, she was also the most experienced director of the three.

Overall, we can conclude that the directors of the various ESL programs at the University of Calgary are, in general, highly educated and skilled, with international experience and fluency in at least one foreign language.

Training in marketing and administration and challenges of the job

While the three administrators shared the traits of being highly educated and having personal and professional international experience, they differed markedly in their philosophical approaches to their work and in the challenges they faced in their jobs.

As indicated in the table above, Yassin was the only program administrator who had taken courses in business during his graduate degree. He stated that:

“I felt that I was getting in a lot of the, the applied linguistics classes was either something that, from ten years of teaching I already knew, or was something that I felt was just obviously wrong, that someone who has taught could never think that. And the tools that I needed to serve my students, I felt, would be better served by improving operations, by improving my understanding of what it was that my students needed as customers, what the best way of reaching the students, the best way of ensuring the deliverables. So those courses I took were very, I think, very valuable. I mean, I wouldn’t want to go the other way, either. I wouldn’t want to take just business courses. I think the combination of the two was, was very beneficial. I don’t... I haven’t really heard of other ESL program directors or managers who, who have formal training in marketing or who have a specific interest in following, following a marketing, a marketing directive.”

Even though Yassin had undertaken his Master’s degree in Education, he had taken the initiative to include business classes as part of his graduate training. He noted that the combination of linguistic training and business training was somewhat unique and he felt it had better prepared him to direct a program.

This training was evident in the language he used in the interview. He used more business vocabulary in his interview generally, with one of the more notable examples being that he referred to students as customers twenty-six times, which accounts approximately one-third of the references to students during the interview. Karen used the word “customers” once and Anuradha never used words “customer” or “customers” at all.

Neither Anuradha, nor Karen, had taken any formal business or marketing classes. When asked what training she had in business, Anuradha was emphatic in her response that she had:

“Absolutely nothing, I would say professionally. Zero. Zilch. If it could be a negative integer, that’s what it would be. I mean, it’s so not a part of my training, because I trained to be an academic. And the funny thing is, I think people in my position need to have that balance of academia, understanding all the rules, procedures, and guidelines, how things in academia need to function, but at the same time they need that other component, of how things work in the real world. And that’s the difference. I think it’s where academia and the real world hit the pavement. And that’s been one of the challenges of this position.”

Karen also noted that her formal training in business and marketing was “little or none” and that this had proven to be a challenge in her job:

“No, you’re expected to do an awful lot without any professional knowledge, which is quite extraordinary, really, when you think about it. It does not happen in the business world. It certainly happens here in the institution because I think there’s a certain expectation that because of your knowledge or intelligence base, you will somehow pick

it up like osmosis, you know? You are expected to know or learn how to do these things and in fact, you don't and can't without training. And if you don't, you are in a... in a situation whereby you're made to feel that... 'Don't talk about it, if you don't know it, you know. Go off and do it on your own.'

Karen went a step further, talking about a lack of support for professional development, and the consequences of being poorly trained for the job:

“There's not a lot of that kind of professional development support that I have seen or that has been offered. So of course you make mistakes. You make some very big mistakes. And what I see when I look back is that we relied quite heavily on, for example, the first person who did our marketing brochures, was an outside contractor, and it cost us an arm and a leg for those brochures. And when I think of it now, how I approach the whole concept of marketing and our brochures, I know exactly what I want and how I can get ripped off and by how much I can get ripped off, but I have learned that by having gone through that experience.”

Both of the two administrators who had no formal training in business or marketing were open about the fact that they felt this would have benefitted them in their job and that their lack of training in this area had meant having to learn the necessary skills on the job, making mistakes as they went. All three participants agreed that training in business would be an asset for language program directors.

Global forces as they affect ESL programs

Unlike traditional academic courses, ESL programs are at the mercy of market forces (Kaplan, 1997). This is a critical point that two of my research noted. Anuradha said:

You really need to know what the demographics are, who it is you're trying to market to and from year to year, that will change. And it changes a lot based on politics. And that's another thing I don't think marketing and recruitment think about. There are countries we should be targeting that we're not targeting. We have openly had students and parents come in and say, 'I refuse to send my son or daughter to an American school because of this war or because of trade embargoes or because of whatever. We are coming to a Canadian school because we're Cuban and the Americans don't want us. Or we're coming because we're Iraqi and we refuse to go to an American school. We're going to send our son here.' And when you think demographically that way, for us, I think it's why we have the high numbers of Iranian students that we do, because we're considered politically neutral to them.

Yassin also noted that:

something happens to you politically and it affects your market right then and there. A terrorist attack, a health problem like SARS, a fluctuation in currency, can have drastic

effects on your program. So, you know, all of those sorts of things will affect what sort of numbers that you can maintain, what sort of pricing strategy you can implement. Makes it far less predictable than, and maybe a little lonely, let's say (Laughter) because for most the university, if there's a downturn in Calgary everybody knows there's a downturn in Calgary. And everybody's living that day to day, so it's very... it's very clear. But when the dollar goes through the roof, there's only a few of us on campus that really feel that, that pinch. When there's some sort of crisis somewhere in the world, that will affect people personally, generally, but as an institution or in terms of departments, it tends not to, unless it's a department directly related to that, that area.

And so, while ESL programs at universities are at the mercy of market forces and obliged to generate revenue, they are also solidly rooted in the tradition of public education and social services, which seek to enrich the lives of their students. Negotiating the purpose of the ESL program on campus is a major philosophical issue with which administrators grapple. The tension created by the desire to enrich students' lives, help them adjust to life in a new country and ensure their well being, is at odds with the mandate to generate revenue. It is a tension that is unlikely to disappear soon.

Skills and qualities directors felt were important

Although the interview itself did not include any questions on skills or qualities that are important for language program directors to have, two of the participants offered opinions on this theme. Their opinions are noteworthy insofar as they expressed somewhat opposing views. Drawing on experience at two Canadian universities and one American university, where she had either been a student or a faculty member, Anuradha felt that:

“You can not have someone with a business background in this position. And I've seen that in all three institutions. I saw that with my predecessor here. There's only so far that a business background will take you. Because this is an academic program, you really need someone who understands all of the, the key components to running this program. So everything from marketing, which is the one place I am more than... honest to say, I have a complete deficit in knowledge, and it's grown. Maybe I'm not at zero any more. And I've learned quite a bit on the fly.”

This stood in contrast to her previous comment that,

“I think people in my position need to have that balance of academia, understanding all the rules, procedures, and guidelines, how things in academia need to function, but at the same time they need that other component, of how things work in the real world.”

Yassin, on the other hand, never wavered in his opinion that for revenue-generating programs, a focus on business was critical, stating:

“A program director who's... who's looking at, maybe the research in second language acquisition and not looking at the people who are acquiring the second language is not

doing their job, I would say. And is certainly completely away from the marketing approach.”

While Yassin was not in favour of a program director who focussed on research in second language acquisition, it should be noted that he was not opposed to research. In fact, he felt that market research was an important aspect of his job, but that one of the challenges he faced was “having the time to build up your research tools and then having the time to actually implement them and analyze them, that is probably the most difficult part, I think, of what we do.” So even though he had the training in how to conduct market research, he felt the demands of his job did not always allow him sufficient time to implement what he had learned in his graduate-level business classes.

Each of the administrators faced obstacles with regards to marketing their programs. Whether it was lack of training (Karen and Anuradha), a perceived lack of institutional support to develop professionally (Karen) or a lack of time to undertake marketing-related activities that were central to their work (Yassin), all the participants expressed that they faced some challenges.

Perception of language programs by the institution

It is important to consider how the ESL faculty are perceived by their colleagues within the institution. One problem is “the pervasive belief that anyone who can speak a language can teach it” (Eskey, 1997), making the job of teaching the language to foreign students seem somehow less valuable than teaching them literature or any other academic subject. Eskey’s comment points towards a general lack of understanding of the ESL teaching profession and marginalization of ESL programs on a university campus.

The research shows overwhelmingly that perceptions of those who work in, teach in, or administer ESL programs, extends to how the ESL programs as a whole are viewed. It has been noted that “perhaps the most sensitive issue for [ESL programs] is academic credibility” (Jenks, 1997) and Soppelsa (1997) declares that ESL programs are “often accorded second-class status within their host institutions”.

This may be due to the fact that although the ESL program “exists within the culture of the university at large, [its] culture contrasts sharply with the institution of higher education, and as a university entity it is often misunderstood” (Rowe-Henry, 1997). Perhaps because they differ from other academic courses, ESL programs are often viewed as being remedial (Carlin, 1997; Stoller, 1997).

As one scholar points out, “Marginal program status keeps ESL professionals out of the mainstream of academic discourse, and their nonparticipation in academic discourse hinders their ability to influence their marginal status” (Carlin, 1997). In addition, institutional policies and regulations (e.g. registration and admission policies) may be “negative, inflexible, and reactionary” (Rawley, 1997), making it difficult for administrators and almost impossible for ESL students.

While marginalized, the ESL language program is expected not only to be financially self-sufficient, but also to generate revenue (Rowe-Henry, 1997; Staczek, 1997). The surplus may then be used for other institutional purposes and the program itself is not necessarily allowed to

keep the money that it takes in (Kaplan, 1997). Two scholars bitterly express concern over this. Eskey (1997) contends that “in addition to low status, (ESL programs) are often burdened with oppressive budgetary arrangements. Most are required to be self-supporting and many are frankly regarded as cash cows that are expected to generate large surpluses for the support of more prestigious programs”. Rawley (1997) echoes these thoughts by stating that the upper administration is interested in income, not diversity and that it views ESL programs mostly as a source of revenue.

Conclusions

The research reveals the difficult and somewhat paradoxical situation of ESL programs at post-secondary institutions. They lack legitimacy and their staff, faculty and administrators lack status, in comparison with their non-ESL equivalents. Yet the programs themselves are seen as desirable by upper administration because they have the potential to generate significant revenue, which can then be returned (at least in part) to the same institution that marginalizes them.

Jenks (1997) notes that, unlike other programs on campus, ESL programs must earn legitimacy. They do so after having proven their success. First they must convince students to enroll. Next, they must increase registration numbers. Only then is it likely that they will be noticed, that their staff will have better working conditions.

Jenks observes that, “Recognition is not achieved passively.... An active [ESL program] must publicize itself and its accomplishments, thereby validating its uniqueness as an educational asset within the university and beyond”. How a program is perceived from within its own institution affects how it is seen from the outside. It has been noted that when teaching staff are accorded full-time academic appointments, it has a striking effect on the program as a whole. “In such cases, the quest for equality becomes a moot one; faculty and staff are immediately perceived as being equals, receiving similar rights, responsibilities, salaries, and benefits” (Jenks, 1997). This is what Fullan (2006) calls “taking all the excuses off the table”. When all the reasons for not succeeding are eliminated, it is logical that success will follow.

The marginalization of ESL programs on campus and lack of support for them, are major challenges. These manifest as variety of issues including human resources issues, crisis management as a chronic condition, and administrative jobs that have excessive demands on time and are often unrealistically broad in scope.

Most importantly, the programs themselves need to be viewed as having a legitimate place on campus. Those who administer the programs must be regarded as peers among their colleagues. Students in the programs should be viewed as undertaking a valid course of study and be appropriately recognized for their successes. The senior administration of the parent institution must not make support conditional on enrollment, for as we have seen, registrations in language programs may be affected by circumstances beyond the control of any administrator. It needs to be made clear that ESL programs are on campus to stay and that they are an integral and important aspect of the academic success of an institution sincerely committed to international education and diversity. This includes not only endorsement in principle, but financial support, permanent jobs and adequate training for those who administer them.

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