Articles

Between Waves: LINC Instructors' Perspectives on Pandemic Teaching

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The 2020 outbreak of the global COVID-19 pandemic imposed emergency remote teaching on adult English as a second language (ESL) programs globally, creating unprecedented challenges not only for language learners but also for instructors. Immense difficulties were produced in the collision between a biological hazard (the novel coronavirus) and the power-inflected social structures that organize language teaching in different locales. In this paper I explore some impacts of the pandemic on three instructors in the single largest adult ESL program in Canada, Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC). Grounded in an account of the historical origins and development of the LINC program, a reflexive thematic analysis of instructor responses to vignettes of resonant challenges identified three major issues that were intensified by the pandemic: navigating digital inequities, balancing the teaching of digital literacies and language teaching in an accountability framework, and managing boundaries and expectations. These results are contextualized in the larger conversations around LINC and adult ESL programming globally, and some implications and new directions for the post-pandemic landscape now visible on the horizon are also considered.

L'éclosion de la pandémie globale COVID-19 a imposé d'urgence l'enseignement à distance sur les programmes d'enseignement de l'anglais langue seconde (ALS) partout dans le monde, créant ainsi des défis sans précédent pour les apprenants de langues et leurs enseignants. Des difficultés considérables ont résulté de l'intersection explosive entre un danger biologique (le nouveau coronavirus) et les structures sociales basées sur le pouvoir qui organisent l'enseignement des langues dans plusieurs endroits. Dans cet article, j'explore certaines répercussions de la pandémie sur trois enseignants dans le plus grand programme d'enseignement de l'ALS aux adultes au Canada, le programme CLIC (Cours de langue pour les immigrants au Canada). Basée sur un récit des origines historiques et du développement du programme CLIC, l'analyse thématique réflexive des réponses des enseignants à des vignettes illustrant des défis évocateurs a identifié trois enjeux majeurs qui ont été intensifiés par la pandémie : naviguer les inégalités numériques, assurer l'équilibre entre l'enseignement des littératies numériques et l'enseignement de la langue dans un cadre responsable et gérer les limites et les attentes. Ces résultats sont contextualisés dans une discussion plus large sur le programme CLIC et les programmes d'enseignement d'ALS aux

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adultes autour du monde. Certaines implications et nouvelles directions pour le contexte postpandémie, désormais visible à l'horizon, seront également discutées.

Keywords: adult ESL, LINC, pandemic teaching, thematic analysis, vignettes

The 2020 outbreak of the global COVID-19 pandemic imposed emergency remote teaching (Hodges et al., 2020) on adult English as a second language[1] programs globally. Under public health orders from governments, face-to-face adult language instruction in many countries was forced either to transition to online teaching with little advance notice or to halt completely (James & Thériault, 2020). The considerable regional variation in responses to the pandemic illustrated how a biological hazard, a novel strain of coronavirus, gave rise to disaster through its encounter with power-laden social formations and processes (L. Sun & Faas, 2018) that constitute adult language education. In this paper, I undertake a qualitative analysis of pandemic impacts on English as an additional language (EAL) instructors in the single largest adult EAL program in Canada: Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada, or LINC. I argue that the potential for these impacts was already latent in the historical conditions (Wisner et al., 2004) that constituted the program, and that the catalyzing effects of the pandemic both exposed these tensions and intensified them. Substantive attempts to mitigate pandemic-related challenges in EAL instruction in the present and future must therefore be based on a reconsideration of the underlying social relations, rather than on surface-level measures. To make this argument, I begin with a brief account of the background of the LINC program up to early 2020, when COVID-19 was first recognized in Canada.

Overview and History of LINC

As a settler-colonial state, Canada has a lengthy and complex history of immigration, in which language education provided by the federal government has played a central if not always consistent role (Y. Guo, 2013). These efforts culminated in the 1992 establishment of the Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) program (Fleming, 2007). Over the past three decades, LINC has expanded to become the single largest federally funded program in Canada to provide EAL instruction for adult immigrants (there is a parallel program, the *Cours de langue pour les immigrants au Canada*, or CLIC, for French instruction). Over time, the program's purpose has evolved from promoting linguistic and cultural integration of newcomers to preparation for employment and participation in nominally multicultural Canadian society (Y. Guo, 2015). These changes mirrored broader ongoing shifts in Canadian demographics and understandings of multiculturalism since the 1980s (S. Guo & Wong, 2015).

The work of teaching in LINC is carried out by approximately 1,700 instructors (IRCC, 2010). These instructors serve adult new-immigrant learners, many of whom are vulnerable because of refugee status (Khatri, 2016) or histories of personal trauma (Wilbur, 2016). Though LINC is funded by the federal

[1] I use the term ESL initially to acknowledge its historical dominance in the field. I continue to use it in the rest of the paper only where it appears in formal names of programs or institutions, or in quoted data excerpts from research participants. In all other cases I use the term English as an additional language or EAL instead, to reflect that for many multilingual people English is one language among several. This adoption of the term EAL is itself a pragmatic compromise, with the concession that all language varieties are in some sense discursive and political constructs.

government through Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC), instructors are employed to teach language courses not by the federal government itself but by a range of independent service provider organizations (SPOs), including community agencies, school boards, private language schools, and even local government institutions such as libraries (Baril, 2011; Fleming, 2007). It appears that for most SPOs, LINC programming is one among a portfolio of immigrant-oriented offerings such as cultural programs, employment searching, counselling, or legal consultation, and SPOs also receive funding from multiple sources. To obtain funding from IRCC, SPOs submit competitive proposals that specify quantifiable client outcomes (see IRCC, 2020), which are then codified in a "contribution agreement." SPOs might therefore be usefully regarded as contractors engaged to provide a necessary service for socializing newcomers into the linguistic and cultural patterns of Canadian society.

The typically short-term and contractual nature of EAL teaching positions in SPOs is a longstanding challenge for attracting and retaining qualified instructors (IRCC, 2010), and employment as an adult EAL instructor in Canada tends to be precarious (Breshears, 2019), as it is elsewhere in North America (Y. Sun, 2010). The lack of stability and consistency due to the devolution of adult EAL instruction onto SPOs contributes to variation in teaching practices and outcomes (Fleming, 2007) across providers in different provinces, and this variation has in turn prompted repeated efforts at standardization (Mudzingwa, 2020).

The central pillar of LINC standardization has been the adoption of the Canadian Language Benchmarks (CLBs) for language proficiency to organize LINC course levels. The benchmarks were promulgated in 2000 and significantly updated in 2012 (Bournot-Trites et al., 2015). By defining benchmark levels in terms of language tasks, the CLBs function as a de facto curriculum (Fleming, 2015) that organizes classroom instruction while notionally leaving course design and implementation in the hands of SPOs and instructors themselves. Many SPOs in turn use the CLBs to develop additional curriculum guidelines and a variety of complementary resources (e.g., Toronto Catholic District School Board, n.d.). These curricula specify topics, levels, and timelines for instructors to implement in relation to the outcomes agreed by SPOs in exchange for their funding. Since 2010, student progress in LINC courses has been measured by means of portfolio-based language assessment, or PBLA (Pettis, 2014), although instructors remain ambivalent about its usefulness (Abdulhamid & Fox, 2020; Desyatsova, 2020). Together, the CLBs and portfolio-based assessment constitute a top-down framework of accountability to the priorities and policies of funders, with recognizable similarities to those that structure adult basic literacy education in the United States and elsewhere (e.g., Condelli, 2007). Consistency among LINC offerings by different SPOs has also been increased by a succession of online platforms, including Tutela.ca, Edulinc.org, and Avenue.ca, designed for resource sharing and collaboration among instructors, as well as for working with students directly. In addition to learning management functions, these platforms constitute an ecosystem of formal training and accreditation, collaboration with provincial TESL groups, professional development webinars, social media, and other resources about virtual and blended instruction across Canada's settlement sector (Avenue, n.d.).

Over the past decade, the use of blended teaching formats in LINC, combining in-person and online instruction, has been increasing steadily, although uptake by instructors varies widely between SPOs (Sturm et al., 2018). Blended instruction in LINC has typically meant electronic distribution of course materials such as text documents or links to videos rather than synchronous online teaching (Shebansky, 2018). LINC instructors noted that blended learning could enhance class participation and engagement, student autonomy, learning connections outside the classroom, and students' digital literacy skills (Cummings et al., 2019). However, instructors also cited time pressures, technological barriers, and their own lack of necessary skills to account for their ambivalence about increased adoption of blended approaches (Shebansky, 2018). As a result, nearly all LINC teaching at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic

relied at least partly on in-person instruction, with only about four percent characterized as "pure" distance education (Sturm et al., 2018). For this reason, the transition to online teaching in LINC programming constituted a disruption to typical practices that is best viewed using a lens of emergency remote teaching (Hodges et al., 2020) rather than online learning designed as such from the ground up.

This brief overview of the history and conditions in the LINC program as of early 2020 establishes the backdrop for exploring the following research question: According to instructors themselves, how did the COVID-19 pandemic both make visible and intensify the challenges of teaching adult EAL in LINC?

Methodology

The data set for this paper is drawn from a corpus that was generated for a larger study of language-teacher identities and epistemologies in summer 2020, during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. The full study enrolled 15 EAL instructors in different adult and postsecondary contexts across five Canadian provinces. To be included, prospective participants had to have two or more years of compensated language-teaching experience and either hold or be working toward a postgraduate degree in TESL or a related field. Participation entailed a sequence of four procedures: (a) an individual semi-structured interview and topic brainstorming for group discussion, conducted on the Zoom videoconferencing platform (questions included both general ones about instructors' experiences and background and more specific ones about adaptations to the pandemic, including blended or remote teaching, if any); (b) one or more focus-group discussions, also done on Zoom, that were organized around selected participant-generated topics; (c) a written response to a set of focus-group discussion quotes, presented as a series of vignettes, which were selected and transcribed by me, the researcher; and (d) a concluding written reflection about the experience of participating in the study.

In the individual interviews for the full study, instructors of adult EAL repeatedly described a set of pandemic-related challenges and concerns different from those mentioned by instructors in postsecondary contexts. Because the adult EAL sector in Canada is characterized by precarious employment and often difficult working conditions, and because LINC is the largest single program in the sector, analyzing the pandemic teaching experiences of LINC instructors became an important piece of advocacy in my project. The analysis in this paper focuses on three participants, who at the time of data generation were all teaching in LINC. I selected them because they had taken part in the same focus group discussion in the second stage of the study and had written about the same series of vignettes in the third stage. As a result, their responses had centred LINC concerns specifically. This was a fortunate coincidence of participant availability and scheduling. The responses of two other LINC instructors in the larger study, who had participated in other focus groups with instructors mainly in postsecondary settings, did not foreground LINC to the same degree. The three participants are introduced in Table 1 (details have been kept general for anonymity, and all names are pseudonyms).

All three participants contacted me individually by email in early summer 2020 after I had distributed an ethics-approved recruitment message on a professional association email list. We had no previous acquaintance or relationship, nor had they ever met one another. In this paper, I analyze their vignette responses from the third stage of the study. I draw on interview, focus group, and reflection data only in occasional support of interpretive choices.

Table 1

Participants

	Erica	**Blanche**	**Carmen**
Demographic information	Female, white, L1 English	Female, white, L1 English	Female, white, L1 English
Teaching experience (approximate)	5 years	10 years	20 years
Canadian province	Alberta	Alberta	Saskatchewan
Teaching context	Urban centre	Urban centre	Small town / rural
LINC teaching experience	CLB 3–4	CLB 1–4	CLB 1–3
Pre-pandemic online, blended, or remote teaching experience	Had done some webinars	None described	None described

Vignettes in Qualitative Research

The original study in which these data were generated took place in a qualitative rather than quantitative paradigm, using a range of qualitative methods as described above (interview, focus group, vignette, and written reflection). The data therefore consist of words as opposed to numbers; the analytic emphasis is on interpreting local patterns of meaning, rather than testing hypotheses or seeking generalizable results; and personal involvement and subjectivity are considered an asset rather than a detriment for producing insights (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

As a research method, vignettes refer to text or images which develop a scenario as a prompt for eliciting a participant response (Hughes & Huby, 2004). This scenario is typically a hypothetical, self-contained episode (Braun & Clarke, 2013). In qualitative studies, vignettes are frequently used as an elicitation device in the context of an interview or focus group (Törrönen, 2018). They may be adopted as a sole method of data generation or as a complement to other methods, provided that they align with the research paradigm (Skilling & Stylianides, 2020). A successful vignette must offer sufficient background information and context for participants to understand the situation while leaving space for them to fill in with their own perspective (Braun & Clarke, 2013). The internal validity of the hypothetical scenario, or how persuasively it represents the topic of investigation to participants, is of great concern because vignette realism and relevance tend to increase the quality of responses (Hughes & Huby, 2004). Strategies used to increase vignette realism may include drawing on conceptual or theoretical frameworks, field experiences, and case studies (Skilling & Stylianides, 2020). Constructed vignette scenarios are typically piloted to check their internal validity and refined before they are used in research (Hughes & Huby, 2004).

This study design adopted a contrasting approach to vignette internal validity. Rather than develop a hypothetical composite scenario based on multiple accounts of specific phenomena, I began by selecting, transcribing, and anonymizing five extended narrative excerpts from the focus-group discussion in which these participants had previously taken part. These vignette episodes featured descriptions of

situations that were chosen based on their resonance as "microcosms" (Törrönen, 2018) of teaching issues or concerns raised by study participants in their previous individual interviews, as well as my own interest in the practical challenges of language teaching during COVID-19. I argue that basing vignette scenarios on participant-described situations helped increase their realism and therefore their persuasiveness.

One potential concern with this approach is that a participant could recognize their own words in any of the resulting vignettes and draw on their personal recollection of the represented situation for their response. Although familiarity with the described situation is considered important for an adequate response (Skilling & Stylianides, 2020), de-personalizing the scenario provides an important layer of protection for engaging with difficult situations (Bradbury-Jones et al., 2014). Conceptual distance between vignettes and participants was achieved in this case by the use of an oblique elicitation approach (Richards, 2003), which prompted participants to frame their responses in the form of advice to a hypothetical colleague:

> Carefully read the selected quotes from your focus group discussion, reflect on your own experience, and consider the implications of these moments for other practicing language instructors. In your opinion, what would this person need to know? What would they need to be able to do? What kind of future can you see? Imagine that you are addressing a current or future colleague. Adapt your comments for your own personal teaching context. Remember that your recommendations may be shared with readers who were not present at the original discussion and provide enough background for them to understand…. Please address any or all of the points that are most interesting and relevant to you.

Oblique approaches to elicitation may prompt different and perhaps richer responses compared with straightforward questioning (Richards, 2003). Skilling and Stylianides (2020) described a range of perspectives from which participants can be asked to respond, such as the vignette character's viewpoint, a general viewpoint, or a participant's own viewpoint from outside the vignette. Adopting a consultant role to a vignette character may facilitate exploration of sensitive or stressful topics (Hughes & Huby, 2004). In this task, positioning research participants as experts advising a colleague teaching in their same context (i.e., LINC) was also intended to foreground and honor their practical and professional teaching knowledge.

The five compiled vignette scenarios generated from the focus group discussion quotes, together with the instructions for responding, are reproduced in the Appendix. An electronic copy was distributed to the participants by email as a single document to be completed individually in writing and returned, also by email, with an expected timeline of two weeks. Each of the focal participants in this paper returned their responses within a single week without any additional prompting. The 15 vignette responses (five from each of the three focal participants) in this data set amounted to 17 pages of text.

Interpretation of vignette responses involves at least two common challenges. When they are analyzed in a realist mode, there are persistent questions about the correspondence between participant responses to the hypothetical scenario and social reality (Barter & Renold, 2000). In this study, the responses are analyzed not as accounts of particular actions taken by participants but as more general descriptions of the conditions a hypothetical colleague might face. A second interpretational complication arises from the multiple layers of interactional context around vignette responses. Especially when vignette participants are prompted to respond from their own point of view, there is a strong tendency to offer a socially acceptable, "public" account of the topic (Hughes & Huby, 2004). The inclusion criteria, two years of experience and a postsecondary degree, implied a level of professional expertise and may have influenced participant self-presentation. Furthermore, participation in the study carried a modest financial incentive of $30 for each research procedure that was completed. There is a possibility that this payment could have induced participants to structure their responses according to their guess about what I wished to hear. In

sum, vignette responses, much like other research events such as interviews, are co-constructed situations in which all parties have to manage multiple identities related to the study topic and also be a "good" research participant (Lee & Roth, 2004).

Finally, although the vignette responses were completed individually, the instructions as well as the fact of their production in a research study made clear that anonymized excerpts from the responses would be shared publicly. It is possible this knowledge might have led participants to present themselves more positively than they might have done under other circumstances, for instance in a conversation with a close confidant(e). But there is some evidence in the data that the participants themselves considered this possibility and in fact designed their responses to reach an audience far beyond the borders of each research event. As Blanche stated in her written reflection on her participation in the study,

> I hope what I encountered and shared would help to form a larger data base about ESL practitioners, practices, and challenges. Then, that this knowledge could be used to guide the training of ESL practitioners, curriculum development, and assist employers with knowledge about how to best support and resource both the practitioners and their students.

When viewed from a realist perspective, these contextual layers and participant agency constitute factors that must be controlled for, or otherwise explained away. But approached from a constructionist point of view, the "grey areas" of vignettes (Hughes & Huby, 2004) instead become rich resources for developing an account of participant understandings and professional logics (Križ & Skivenes, 2013). Given that they were addressed to a hypothetical colleague in circumstances like those of the participants, these responses permit a range of inferences to be made about conditions that the participants themselves faced. This is the task to which I turn in the following section.

Reflexive Thematic Analysis

Once I had selected the data set, I subjected it to reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) or search for thematic patterns based on my research interest. My initial reading of participant responses was guided by three provisional areas of focus derived from the literature review of salient issues in LINC: the use or non-use of information technology for teaching, the role of standards and assessments, and any discussion of working conditions. These three topics functioned as provisional codes (Saldaña, 2013) for initial high-level categorization of the data. Repeated readings of the responses led to adjustments in the focus and emphasis of each category and resulted in three initial "thematic maps" (Braun & Clarke, 2006) for the developing analysis.

Prospective sub-themes in each category occasionally had to be reassigned in order to improve fit and tell a coherent story. For example, I initially coded a data segment about using visual instructions to teach beginning students digital literacies as a use of information technology. But after I re-read the excerpt, it appeared to me to align more closely with the standards and assessment theme (emphasizing the beginning student aspect rather than the teaching of digital literacies). This change helped tighten the focus of the information technology category to be specifically about access to devices and connections, while also filling in critical details about the relationship between digital literacies and language standards. Each of the three main themes underwent a similar process of realignment and refinement. The resulting thematic maps are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Thematic Maps

Theme	Sub-theme	Data excerpt
1. Navigating digital inequities	Variation in device types	“Make sure you know what devices your learners are using, as not everything is as easy on a phone as on a laptop and sometimes vice versa.” - Erica
	Impacts of gender and family dynamics	“If learners are borrowing technology from other family members, create some flexibility for learners to work around the schedules of other family members.” - Blanche
	Associated costs of technology	“Technology has a cost: Wi-fi, data, devices. Find out whether what you are expecting learners to do will be costly or even impossible for them.” - Erica
	Finding outside resources	“Explore community donation programs to supply the necessary technology needed for learning.” - Blanche
2. Balancing digital literacies and language teaching in an accountability framework	Visual instructions	“If they are learning how to write in a chat box, take screen shots of icons and the box itself to make it more readily identifiable.” - Erica
	Technology–language relationship	“View teaching technology as part of learning language not a ‘must do’ before any language can be learned.” - Blanche
	Informal learning	“The spontaneous, informal interactions that happen in the classroom are not possible online; for example, holding a door open and being thanked for your courtesy. For beginning students, this level of interaction constitutes assessable learning.” - Carmen
	CLB standards	“The assumption behind online learning is that the digital literacy skills required to participate in them is a relevant real-world task for CLB-1 students.” - Carmen
3. Managing boundaries and expectations up and down	Physical and emotional tolls	“Pace yourself. Burnout is very real right now, as is eye strain, body ache and other maladies stemming from reduced movement.” - Erica

	Boundaries with students	"Limit means by which you can be contacted so that you are not receiving late night texts." - Erica
	Employee–employer relations	"The ability to create expectations that exist outside official work hours is a social issue that currently favors employers." - Carmen
	Outsourcing educational labor	"Encourage learners to access any community technology courses offered by partner organizations or community organizations." - Blanche

These *semantic themes* prioritize explicit or denotative meanings present in each of the responses, compared with *latent themes* that concern underlying assumptions, ideas, or conceptualizations (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The choice was informed by all three participants' desire, expressed in their initial interviews and individual reflections, that their perspectives might contribute to the conversation around teaching adult EAL during the pandemic. This thematic analysis is reflexive in that the themes were not pre-existing, hidden in the data and waiting to be uncovered. Instead, they are the product of active and conscious development by me. As such, they embody my own subjectivity and interests as a researcher (Braun & Clarke, 2019) as well as historically important issues in the LINC program. Finally, as an experienced EAL instructor myself (though never in LINC), I came to identify strongly with my participants and sought to interpret their responses favourably. Some of the assumptions underpinning my analysis are that these three instructors were highly competent professionals; that they generally enjoyed their work, found it meaningful, and wished to do it well; and that they oriented to the COVID-19 pandemic as a disruption to be overcome with determination.

Results

Theme 1: Navigating Digital Inequities

The first theme that I identified in the responses of the focal instructors concerned their efforts to navigate variations in student access to the technologies needed for online learning. Students might not all have the same devices available to use at home, and as Erica wrote, "not everything is as easy on a phone as on a laptop, and sometimes vice versa." Both the one-time financial costs associated with obtaining a device, and the ongoing costs of wifi and data connections, could present an obstacle to teaching and learning. As Erica added, it was necessary to "find out whether what you are expecting your learners to do will be costly or even impossible for them—can they watch what you are sending them without having to download it? Are your instructions compatible with the device they have?" The need to know about student access to devices and connections informed the formulation of this theme as navigation: The instructor must know, in order to chart an instructional course. On behalf of those students lacking devices or connections, Blanche also urged instructors to take the initiative to "explore community donation programs to supply the necessary technology needed for learning." The strategic enlistment of outside support also recurred in Theme 3, in relation to managing instructor workloads.

In addition to financial barriers, instructors also had to consider how access to shared technological resources could be complicated by dynamics within families. Erica admonished instructors "[not to] take

for granted that everyone has access to a device, and consider that accessibility might be affected by other family members' schedules." Blanche likewise suggested that "if learners are borrowing technology from other family members, [instructors should] create some flexibility for learners to work around the schedules of other family members." The potentially gendered aspect of this challenge was pointed out by Carmen, who wrote, "online learning can be a double-edged sword for women. Not only may there be secondary access to technology but time reserved for learning may also be secondary to family needs." A computer or phone that was needed by a (typically male) head of household for work or their own education, or by a child for online schooling, might not be available to a wife or mother during working hours, and instructors had to be prepared for this eventuality. Blanche's recommendation to create flexibility offered only an imperfect solution, with implications for instructor workloads, as will be discussed in Theme 3 below. Concluding her thoughts on this topic, Carmen wrote, "it is a shortfall of the online learning method that it cannot effectively deal with this inherent inequality. In-person classes create specific blocks of time to honor women's learning and mitigate this issue."

Instructors had to consider access to technological resources not only for their students but also for themselves. Appearing to address SPO employers rather than her fellow instructors (a framing choice that occurred repeatedly in all three accounts, despite the prompt to address an imaginary colleague), Blanche wrote, "for the teachers, resource them with the technology they need to do their job. Don't expect or assume that teachers have the means to use their own personal devices to do the work their employer is requiring." This framing spoke to LINC instructors' constrained capacity to meaningfully affect the distribution of technological resources outside of the classroom around which to organize online teaching. Blanche's suggestion to enlist the support of other organizations for technological resources appeared to locate the responsibility for solving access challenges outside the purview of the employer.

Theme 2: Balancing Digital Literacies and Language Teaching in an Accountability Framework

The next theme had to do with preparing learners for online instruction in a context organized around teaching to language standards, the CLBs. All three instructors questioned their students' readiness, capabilities, and prior need for online learning, especially at the lower end of the CLB scale. The nature of the instructional difficulties was made clear in a longer excerpt shared by Carmen, in which she described a pre-pandemic experience of having

> taught CLB 2 students simple online tasks including turning on a computer, entering, and typing in a search bar. This was not done without intensive hands-on support from me or other students in the class who had more advanced digital literacy skills. I cannot imagine the teaching time this would entail in an online and isolated student environment. Is this a priority for newcomers versus being able to give their name and address verbally? I think that even in this COVID time there are many listening and speaking tasks that have much higher value.

Nonetheless, all three instructors offered a number of concrete suggestions for helping such learners develop their digital literacy skills. One recurring piece of advice was to create visual and multimodal instructions. Erica advised instructors to "make videos, take screen shots…make a video showing a message being written and responded to by someone else." Blanche likewise recommended that others "use lots of visual resources showing them what they see on their device…use screen shots of what they will be seeing on their devices to explain the meaning of icons/symbols and actions." Visible in these suggestions was a bottom-up instructional approach grounded in what was already known to students, in Erica's words by making visual content "bite sized, tackling one thing at a time, start[ing] with what is familiar and relevant," and in Blanche's urging to "introduce in small steps. Repeat using a function several

times before adding on the next step or function…use what they are already familiar with such as their personal phone, YouTube, taking and sharing pictures."

Taking nothing for granted, Carmen also cautioned against making broad assumptions like "*technology is everywhere* and *students are already comfortable with technology* that can silence legitimate concerns" (emphasis in original) about learner preparedness for language study online. Here again Blanche also highlighted the importance of outside support: "invite community organizations offering computer classes to become a part of the language program to help increase the technical skills of learners and reduce the burden on language teachers."

Yet despite the resourcefulness of these suggestions for adapting one's practices to teach digital literacies, it was evident that supporting lower-CLB students for online or blended learning required time that could not then be used for other teaching and learning; in other words, this preparation carried a high opportunity cost. The latter part of Carmen's earlier extended quote, concerning the relative priority of teaching digital literacy versus doing other language-related tasks, was illuminating: "I think that even in this COVID time there are many listening and speaking tasks that have much higher value." The competing priorities of teaching digital literacy and teaching language were further hinted at in Blanche's recommendation to synthesize them: "view teaching technology as part of learning language, not a 'must do' before any language can be learned. Therefore, use the learning of technology to assess language through." The tension at issue in these excerpts arose between teaching digital literacy and not just teaching language in a general sense, for instance speaking and listening as mentioned by Carmen, but specifically teaching language oriented to the CLB standards as expected by funders:

> It is one thing to embrace technology because of necessity, but the risks of ignoring these lost aspects of learning will result in less successful outcomes and therefore require more time to achieve the funders' goals. If funders are willing to acknowledge these losses and compensate for the additional time it may take students to acquire a language, then that should be addressed in any planning, resourcing and budgeting considerations.

Some of the responses demonstrated a level of confidence and even enthusiasm about the practical challenges of orienting students to online language learning. However, other responses represented these increased responsibilities as rivalrous with teaching language to the CLB specifications in the available timeframe. More attention allocated to one of these aspects would inevitably reduce or "crowd out" attention to the other. While one of Blanche's comments hinted at the possibility of synthesizing the two, plausible specifics were not offered by any of the three focal instructors in their communications for this study.

Theme 3: Managing Boundaries and Expectations Up and Down

The extra labor entailed in the first two themes, accommodating the wide variation in students' technological resources and teaching and assessing digital literacies as well as language, appeared to carry serious physical and emotional consequences for instructors. "Burnout is very real right now," Erica wrote, "as is eye strain, body ache, and other maladies stemming from reduced movement." Physical exhaustion was also mentioned by Blanche, who recommended that instructors "limit the amount of screen time for both teacher and learner as both will tire more quickly from online learning." She also urged that someone, presumably not a colleague but an SPO employer, "make larger screens available to both teachers and students, if possible, to reduce eye strain" (again framing her response against the prompt). Some of the

physical advice offered by Carmen was for individual instructors "to get up, walk around, stretch, look out the window."

In describing the physical and emotional toll of emergency remote teaching, the focal instructors emphasized the importance of setting personal boundaries and expectations as a tool for keeping workloads manageable. One set of recommendations focused on expectations in the instructor–student relationship. Erica advised instructors to "create a framework for yourself that both you and the learners can work within. Set office hours. Limit means by which you can be contacted so that you are not receiving late night texts." She underscored the importance of "[telling students] ahead of time what you will be marking and what you will not be marking" and "[making] it clear, perhaps in a course outline, what you will and will not be doing, and what [students] will and will not be doing so that there are no surprises, disappointments, or guilt." Blanche affirmed the necessity of limiting contact to regular office hours "to help protect personal lives of both learners and teachers." Although this boundary-making work might be negotiated between instructors and students, and framed as mutually beneficial, it was ultimately under the authority of the instructor. For this reason I describe it as managing boundaries downward in the hierarchical instructor–student relationship.

However, language programs, including LINC, involve a constellation of stakeholders with varying degrees of formal or informal authority and influence, and instructors are seldom the only or final arbiters of working conditions in or out of the classroom. Carmen emphasized this point by drawing connections between language instruction and other professions forced to work from home during the pandemic as she reflected on the limitations of instructor-created boundaries:

> My recommendation is for instructors to set boundaries around work hours, availability, and method of contact. This affects ESL instructors and many other workers who are now required to work from home. The ability to create expectations that exist outside official work hours is a social issue that currently favors employers. Do workers have the support from employers to limit work hours to paid work hours without suffering negative consequences? Do workers have the self-discipline to adhere to their own boundaries?

To varying degrees, Erica, Blanche, and Carmen each urged fellow instructors to protect themselves as much as possible, even while acknowledging the inherent limitations of individual responses to systemic stresses resulting from the pandemic. Though Carmen stated the issue most directly, Blanche also appeared to recognize it, propsing that teacher job descriptions be rewritten to "provide direction on institutional expectations when a different mode of delivery is asked of them, i.e., preparing for face-to-face teaching requires different skills than blended or online learning," and that it was important to "review teacher compensation to reflect their new job requirements." Together, these two responses suggested that the demands of online teaching during the pandemic had overflowed original job descriptions set by SPOs and that formal recognition of this new terrain (and an accompanying increase in compensation) was now warranted. Given that such recommendations are not typically in the purview of an individual instructor to implement, they may be read as being addressed to a higher authority in the language-program hierarchy—namely, the SPO employer.

The sense that instructors were on their own to set boundaries and manage expectations only with learners and not with employers was reinforced in responses to a separate prompt about students' access to technology for online learning. Erica suggested that instructors "direct [their] learners to sites that will allow them to do their own independent learning." Going a step further, Blanche wrote, "encourage learners to access any community technology courses offered by partner organizations or community organizations" and "invite community organizations offering computer classes to become a part of the language program to help increase the technical skills of learners and reduce the burden on language teachers." The proposed solution to increased work for instructors was to delegate some of this work to

students themselves or to enlist the aid of outside organizations. Irrespective of the potential impacts on student learning, these choices were offered here principally as a strategy for managing instructor workloads in the face of new challenges faced by students. In aggregate, the offered strategies of formally setting boundaries and informally "farming out" instructional work located the responsibility for managing pandemic effects on learning with instructors rather than employers, whose presence in the data was more implicit than explicit.

Discussion

The vignette responses of these three LINC instructors offer glimpses of a remarkable professional commitment and expertise. In analyzing them, I have proposed a number of inferences about the changing conditions of adult EAL teaching in LINC following the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. Guided by a literature review of the LINC program's origins and historical development, I have identified and developed three key themes: navigating digital inequities, balancing digital literacies and language teaching in an accountability framework, and managing boundaries and expectations up and down. I argue that the antecedents of these challenges can be located in the constituent social relations and material conditions of the LINC program and its contractor SPOs as a whole, and these latent tensions were made visible and urgent by the arrival of the novel coronavirus and the transition to emergency remote teaching.

The first theme, instructors navigating digital inequities, foregrounds the comparative economic vulnerability of the LINC student population. The uneven distribution of adult EAL students' access to technologies for learning has been described as a new digital divide (Rosen & Vanek, 2017). Surveys of blended learning in LINC before the pandemic showed that the availability and quality of learning technologies varied widely among SPOs (Sturm et al., 2018). Although some did make tablets or computers available to students in the school, many others relied on a "bring your own device" model in which students were expected to use their own tablets or phones for blended learning (Sturm et al., 2018). In their interviews, Erica, Blanche, and Carmen all reported surveying their learners about access to digital devices and internet connections. Erica shared that her learners typically had computers, a mobile phone, or both, as well as internet access at home. By contrast, Blanche described her learners as being in a lower income bracket and having a lower level of education. They typically did not have computers, wi-fi, or a personal device at home, although some were able to borrow a mobile phone from an adult family member for virtual learning. Carmen noted that her learners had been furnished with computers and connections by settlement services but found that her students' digital literacy limitations and the need for children to use computers for their own learning during school hours could be obstacles to her remote teaching. All three participants affirmed the importance of knowing about possible competition within families for access to limited technological resources, in which women's needs could be a lower priority compared with those of adult men or children. This variation in home digital access, or new digital divide (Kaiper-Marquez et al., 2020), could be mitigated to an extent by creating new pedagogical resources such as screenshots or videos tailored to different devices that might be available. However, the effort to work around inequities and induct students into digital platforms and environments for online language learning was a formidable task that not only demanded increased effort on the part of instructors but also carried significant opportunity costs for students.

The next theme, balancing digital literacies and language teaching in an accountability framework, originates in the pandemic-imposed necessity to equip students with the skills to use the tools and platforms for emergency remote teaching. Present in all three instructors' accounts are more or less explicit appeals for understanding: In the face of this additional responsibility, funder-established instructional

timelines for student learning, agreed before the pandemic, are inevitably strained. While acknowledging the possibility of melding digital literacies teaching and language instruction within the existing accountability framework, none of the participants proposed concrete suggestions for achieving this unification. This relative silence suggests that the issue was not resolved for them at the time of data generation. Adding to the dilemma of what to teach was a noticeable loss of informal learning from incidental interactions in the in-person classroom.

The third theme, managing boundaries and expectations up and down, is grounded in the devolved structure of LINC and the comparatively precarious employment of EAL instructors in the program. In their earlier individual interviews, Erica, Blanche, and Carmen had all described themselves as generally satisfied with the stability and security of their employment, and in her account here, Blanche also made references to the additional limitations on part-time instructors in contrast to her own position (by suggesting that casually employed colleagues should also receive paid professional development). Operating within formal pre-pandemic job descriptions, these three focal instructors underscored the importance of self-protection by maintaining boundaries and setting clear expectations with one's students. I describe this as managing boundaries *downward* in the power hierarchy of the program.

By contrast, the ability to negotiate employer expectations *upward* in that hierarchy is either absent or described (by Carmen) as constrained. In these responses, there is a sense that during the pandemic, the ongoing flexibilization and resulting precarity of adult EAL instructors noted by Breshears (2019) have continued and perhaps even been intensified by employer lack of recognition or will to provide necessary relief for instructors—or their students. In particular, Blanche's comments about ensuring that instructors are sufficiently resourced and revisiting job descriptions and compensation appeared to be directed not at a hypothetical colleague or to the researcher, who would in any case have limited ability to do these things, but rather at SPO employers. In light of Blanche's expressed desire to contribute her experiences to the database of knowledge about ESL practice and "assist employers with knowledge of how best to support and resource both the practitioners and their students," it is tempting to read in her vignette responses a plea for greater recognition, as well as attendant material support, by employers in the adult EAL sector.

These accounts of the transition to emergency remote teaching suggest that the pre-pandemic reluctance of LINC instructors to adopt blended teaching with a higher proportion of synchronous activities (Shebansky, 2018) may have as much to do with practical concerns about student access to devices and connections, as with lacking desire or training on the part of LINC instructors. If this is indeed the case, additional professional development opportunities might have limited benefits for addressing the most pressing concerns of teaching during the pandemic and beyond, compared with improving the material economic circumstances of students (to ensure equitable access to devices and connections) and instructors themselves. In particular, Carmen directly expressed frustrations with the prospect of professional development for supporting lower-level students, writing, "While I have listened to many solutions in this [the research study] and other forums, I have yet to hear concrete methods that address the learning needs of pre-benchmark and CLB 1 students."

Paths Beyond the Pandemic

From the vantage point of relative calm between the first and second waves of the COVID-19 pandemic in Canada, the words of these participants show an individual struggle to do right by their learners in the face of interlocking systemic difficulties. The pandemic has ebbed and flowed continually since that time, between the development of effective vaccines, their uneven uptake, and the emergence of new coronavirus variants. It is therefore important to consider how the patterns described here might continue to reverberate in this future.

First, the enforced transition to emergency remote teaching has clearly made digital literacy experts out of many adult EAL instructors. Only a few months into the pandemic, the participants in this study already demonstrated comfort and confidence using online platforms and instructional methods; their concerns notably had to do with student access to technology, increased demands on time without compensation, and lack of agency with regard to employers, rather than integrating digital tools into their practice. Their familiarity has surely grown with the increasing refinement of early ad hoc solutions into more reliable pedagogical infrastructure. Extrapolating from this trend, it appears certain that some form of blended teaching and perhaps even fully remote online teaching will continue to be offered through LINC SPOs. With credible distance offerings reducing geographic barriers, SPOs might face heightened competition with one another for students. Instructors who are unwilling or unable to adapt to this increasingly competitive landscape are likely to see a further deterioration in their working conditions.

The embrace of blended and virtual teaching formats is in turn likely to drive changes in curriculum and assessments in relation to the CLBs. Arguments about their relative merits are in some sense a proxy for negotiating allocation of resources within LINC and the SPOs. Claims about increasing pedagogical efficiency, for example, set the table for reducing financial support or shortening program timelines. Where instructors are able to work together to insist on workplace changes, there is a possibility that they will be able to obtain improvements such as pay increases, compensated preparation time, or formal limits on unpaid working hours. Although the relevant labor issues are hinted at in these data, they are ultimately beyond the scope of this analysis. However, the lengthy history of precarious employment in Canada's adult EAL sector gives little reason for optimism when the system is under unprecedented strain.

Limitations

The preceding analysis is subject to a number of limitations. Because the data set was produced in July and August 2020, it must be regarded as a snapshot of a particular moment comparatively early in the course of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is inevitable that conditions have continued to evolve in directions that might have been foreshadowed in the words of these participants but might also have taken some surprising turns. Additional research with follow-up data generation or longitudinal designs would help to document the ongoing adaptations made by LINC instructors and their SPO employers to the continued buffeting of the pandemic. However, I argue that data from the earliest days describe most vividly the disruptions in the patterns of language teaching, when they were still new and vivid. This analysis of instructor responses from that time can provide useful context for interpreting subsequent pandemic-driven changes in LINC and perhaps other adult EAL programs.

A second possible limitation concerns trustworthiness and reliability. The primary themes reflect my subjective interpretations of historical conditions in the LINC program based on my reading of prior scholarly research, rather than direct personal experience. The sub-themes also reflect my own interpretations of data meanings and their alignment with primary themes. Collaboration with an additional coder would have contributed inter-rater reliability to increase analytical robustness. I attempted to compensate by documenting the coding process with detail and transparency. In places, I also drew on a second data source, the instructors' written reflections on their participation in the study, to triangulate or complement (Hammersley, 2008) interpretive choices. Finally, I have already acknowledged my growing identification with these participants as they persevered through the early period of a global disaster that wreaked havoc on their local practice. It is to them that this paper is dedicated, with respect and gratitude.

The Author

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Appendix: Vignette Scenarios

Introduction: Thank you again for continuing in this research project on language instructor knowledge and practices. In this stage, your task is to review the video of your focus group discussion about language teaching, and from it, to develop a set of personal and professional "best practices" for other language instructors who may be facing similar questions and challenges. Your recommendations will be collected, anonymized, and shared with all the other participants in the study, as well as studied by Dmitri in order to document how language teaching is changing during these times, and how it may change in the future.

Directions: Carefully read the selected quotes from your focus group discussion, reflect on your own experience, and consider the implications of these moments for other practicing language instructors. In your opinion, what would this person need to know? What would they need to be able to do? What kind of future can you see? Imagine that you are addressing a current or future colleague. Adapt your comments for your own personal teaching context. Remember that your recommendations may be shared with readers who were not present at the original discussion and provide enough background for them to understand. There is no minimum length, but please make your comments and suggestions as rich and full as possible. Please address any or all of the points that are most interesting and relevant to you.

You may either write your answers, or audio (or video) record them. When you finish, please return them by email. Thank you very much!

Quote No. 1
(16:52) "When you're teaching people literacy and some of the lower levels it's very challenging to give people verbal instructions of how to approach technology in a new way so I think that's been a very interesting challenge… and yet tech is such a big part of our world now, that I'm actually quite thrilled, my students are more confident using email for example now but it's not part of everybody's experience. There have been triumphs that are almost invisible but they have been triumphs nonetheless."

Quote No. 2
(20:00) "Women are often on the bottom of the ladder, perhaps husbands and children come first, and women are last… Access to any technology has been a challenge for us, if there's computers at home it usually belongs to their children and is being used for their own educational purposes. Moms may borrow a kid's phone or a neighbor's phone. We've found it difficult that way."

Quote No. 3
(39:10) "I post a lot of extra practices… (you) talked about extra prep time, that we're not getting paid for… we have the platforms. However, that doesn't mean it is, was, or has been an easy switch either, we didn't assess online. There were lots of things that we did in person that the teachers, we didn't learn how to do that stuff on the platform because language learning doesn't go online, it stays face to face, so we had very similar issues and a lot of us are still struggling and some of the limitations of the technology aren't helping either. A lot of my students were asking for extra stuff… I was posting tons of things, giving a lot of feedback, marking. Many students were doing extra work on their own, revising their work even if it wasn't for a grade. I'm working more now I think than I was face to face because students want that extra stuff, and because it's all email and virtual meetings, they can't harass me on the walk between classes, we're scheduling everything, and it matters, most of my students have families so I've actually had meetings at 10 PM because it's when a partner has just left for work or the kids are asleep."

Quote No. 4
(53:30) "It was very tiring to perform. It was exhausting, if I had three hours of class one day online, just trying to keep the energy up while still trying to foster relationships with the students but also among the students, it was possible, it worked, it was a positive experience overall but it was exhausting… my eyes started to have almost tears pouring down just from the strain."

Quote No. 5
(54:40) "Our program is language AND settlement, and I think the human contact, what I see happening at the school, I see connections being made… that element, I'm not sure what that will be like going forward. As we have people coming together that don't know one another in the group, and to me that's an important part of teaching a successful class… there's something sterile about a video class, how will we welcome newcomers and make them feel welcome and supported eludes me at this point."