

EAP Practitioners in Canada: Professional Dedication, Satisfaction, and Precarity

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A wide range of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) programs provide important support for international students enrolled in Canadian post-secondary contexts. While there has been a recent uptick in academic interest and research surrounding EAP programs in Canada, there has been relatively little work focused on understanding the practitioners working therein. In this article, we present and discuss data from the second phase of a sequential mixed-methods investigation of Canadian EAP programs and practitioners. Some 481 EAP practitioners from across Canadian universities, colleges, and English language institutes participated in the survey, leading to semi-structured interviews with 18 representative EAP directors and instructors. Building on quantitative results from the Phase I survey that revealed practitioners' differentially perceived professional satisfaction and agency, systematic analysis of Phase II interview data supported and expanded upon the Phase I results. Drawing on a critical conceptual lens, we interpret mixed-methods findings that highlight employment precarity as the most salient differentiator of professional satisfaction, concluding with analytically driven suggestions for post-secondary policy makers, language teacher educators, and EAP instructors, including a call for further research elevating voices of professionals working in this burgeoning field.

Un large éventail de programmes d'anglais sur objectifs académiques (AOA) apporte un soutien important d'étudiants internationaux inscrits dans des établissements d'enseignement postsecondaire au Canada. Bien qu'il y ait eu récemment un certain intérêt académique et de la recherche envers les programmes d'AOA au Canada, relativement peu de travaux se sont intéressés aux praticiens qui y travaillent. Dans cet article, nous présentons et discutons les données de la deuxième phase d'une étude séquentielle à méthodes mixtes qui a examiné les programmes et les praticiens de l'AOA au Canada. Quelques 481 praticiens de l'AOA provenant d'universités, de collèges et d'instituts de langue anglaise du Canada ont participé au sondage, qui a donné lieu à des entrevues semi-dirigées avec 18 directeurs et enseignants de l'AOA. S'appuyant sur les résultats quantitatifs du sondage de la phase I, qui ont révélé que les praticiens percevaient de façon différentielle l'autonomie et la satisfaction professionnelle, l'analyse systématique des données d'entrevues de la phase II a étayé et développé les résultats de la phase I. Dans une optique

conceptuelle critique, nous interprétons les résultats provenant des méthodes mixtes qui mettent en évidence la précarité de l'emploi comme étant le facteur de différenciation le plus important de la satisfaction professionnelle. Nous concluons avec des suggestions basées sur l'analyse adressées aux décideurs dans le contexte de l'enseignement postsecondaire, des formateurs d'enseignants de langues et des enseignants d'AOA, y compris un appel à davantage de recherches pour faire entendre la voix des professionnels travaillant dans ce domaine en plein essor.

Keywords: English for academic purposes (EAP), higher education, precarity, teaching English as a second language (TESL)

English for Academic Purposes (EAP)

Prior to recent policy changes that have somewhat stemmed the flow, Canadian post-secondary institutions had orchestrated a dramatic increase in the population of international students over the preceding decades, contributing to a domestic language education sector worth billions in revenue (CBIE, 2020; Douglas & Landry, 2021; Languages Canada, 2021; MacDonald, 2016; McKenzie, 2018). Many of these international students use English as an additional language (EAL) and either require or desire academic language or language-and-content-integrated support prior to or during their post-secondary studies. Regardless of where this post-secondary education is offered,¹ instruction falls under the umbrella of English for academic purposes (EAP), a “specialist theory- and research-informed branch of English language and literacy education” (Ding & Bruce, 2017, p. 53). As EAP programs have expanded to meet the global demand for this academic language support, a field of research has emerged to better understand this educational sector (Basturkmen & Wette, 2016; Charles, 2022; Hyland & Jiang, 2021; Hyland & Shaw, 2016). In Canada, recent EAP research has focused on and informed EAP assessment practices (e.g., Abrar-ul-Hassan, 2021; Huang, 2018; Woodworth & Barkaoui, 2020), pedagogical approaches (e.g., Galante, 2022; Van Viegen & Zappa-Hollman, 2020), writing instruction (e.g., Maatouk & Payant, 2020; Uludag et al., 2021), curriculum design (e.g., Tweedie & Kim, 2015; Zappa-Hollman & Fox, 2021), academic language socialization (e.g., Bhowmik & Chaudhuri, 2021; Douglas et al., 2022), and language teacher education / professionalism (e.g., Farrell & Ives, 2015; Farrell & Yang, 2019; Valeo & Faez, 2013). This strand of work has also provided both emic (e.g., Galante et al., 2019; Van Viegen & Russell, 2019) and etic (e.g., Douglas & Landry, 2021) perspectives on EAP programs across the country. However, though this growing body of work has been insightful, little attention has been paid to the perceptions of those who design and deliver this instruction: EAP practitioners.

This article reports on the second phase of a sequential mixed-methods investigation that sought to provide a greater understanding of EAP programs and practitioners (program directors and classroom

¹ Most often this EAP support is provided at universities and colleges; however, it can also occur in an outsourced manner at private language institutes or schools (henceforth referred to as “private ELIs”) that have relationships with universities and colleges.

instructors²) at universities, colleges, and private ELIs³ across Canada. In the first phase of this study (see Corcoran & Williams, 2021, for results specific to Ontario EAP; see Corcoran et al., 2022, for Canada-wide results), survey results ($N = 481$) included identification of the number of programs and practitioners in this sector, a diversity of program sizes and models, practitioner profiles across Canadian regions and institutions, as well as statistically significant differences in practitioners' perceived professional satisfaction based on role (director vs. instructor) and institution type (universities vs. colleges vs. private ELIs). Building on these survey results, we report here findings regarding the perceived professional satisfaction of EAP practitioners, focusing primarily on the qualitative findings.

Power and EAP Onto-Epistemologies

EAP can be impactful for students as they navigate the choppy waters of their academic journeys (Douglas et al., 2022; Fox et al., 2014; Keefe & Shi, 2017). However, it is often critiqued not only for a deficit conception of EAL students as they develop their academic literacies (Marshall, 2020; Marshall et al., 2019) but also as an educational sector that promotes the English language—and thus the teaching thereof—as neutral and apolitical (Bruce & Bond, 2022; Haque, 2007; Marr, 2021). Orientations to language education have consequences for the ways of knowing and doing EAP within post-secondary institutions; this is true when considering not only student learning outcomes and trajectories but also the professional lives of the social agents who design and deliver this language or language-and-content-integrated support. In order to better understand the social phenomena associated with EAP programs, and thus advocate for practitioners, we have adopted a critical EAP lens (Benesch, 2001, 2009; Corcoran, 2019; Hadley, 2015; Pennycook, 2021) that “considers hierarchical arrangements within the societies and institutions in which EAP takes place, examining power relations and their reciprocal relationship to the players...involved” (Benesch, 2009, p. 81). This lens draws upon both neo-Marxist (Block et al., 2012; Hadley, 2015) and post-structuralist (Canagarajah, 2017; Sousa Santos & Menezes, 2020) approaches to language (teaching) and (social relations of) power. For our purposes, we are adapting this lens⁴ to better understand distributions of power and agency within the Canadian EAP milieu. However, we must first identify the structural conditions that potentially afford or constrain the actions of groups and/or individuals operating within this particular market of exchange (Bourdieu, 1992; Maton, 2014), situating EAP within a broader trend of neoliberal-oriented education (Flores, 2013; Litzenberg, 2020; Shin & Park, 2016).

Neoliberalism, which can be conceptualized as advanced capitalist economic organization characterized by the merging of state and market in governance, is a driving force in modern post-secondary education (Block et al., 2012; Giroux, 2014; Holborow, 2015). According to Ding (2019), modern post-secondary institutions embrace business values, cultivate branding and competitive strategies to gain market share, and erode the historical value of higher education, “replac[ing] it with economic and instrumental values” (p. 80). Such policies have led to the commercialization, and thus the

² Practitioners ranged from full-time tenured and tenure-track professors at universities to part-time instructors at private language institutes.

³ Adding to the complexity of EAP support and terminology is that private language schools / institutes may provide language support on-campus, as well, and be integrated with institutions of higher education. These organizational arrangements are often unclear and shifting.

⁴ Drawing on Pennycook (2021), one might also describe this lens as an instantiation of “doing” critical applied linguistics.

commodification, of teaching, research, and a range of other academic services and activities, with students⁵ reframed as consumers. One might argue that nowhere is this more marked than within the EAP sector, where these programs often operate in a profit-driven manner with operational focus on the “production, processing, quality, and the cost-effective delivery of knowledge content to student consumers” (Hadley, 2015, p. 39). This orientation toward language education potentially positions EAP practitioners as support workers and may negatively impact practitioners’ subjectivities and ontologies (Bruce & Bond, 2022; Charles & Pecorari, 2016; Shin & Park, 2016).

Critique of neoliberal business models that govern Canadian higher education is not exactly novel. EAP, as a potential lightning rod for this critique, has been called out by language education researchers and theorists for its employment conditions (Breshears, 2019; Kouritzin et al., 2022), positioning of international students as human capital (McCartney & Metcalfe, 2018), self-marginalization within universities (MacDonald, 2022), uncritical pedagogical orientation (Chun, 2016), lack of support from professional associations (Morgan, 2016), and championing of settler colonialism and hollow multiculturalism (Shin & Sterzuk, 2019). In this study, we are interested in reconciling social structures with individual agency, considering relations of power between groups and individual social agents (EAP practitioners) as they navigate a market of economic, social, and linguistic exchange that is potentially both structured and structuring (Bourdieu, 1992). Against this neoliberal post-secondary backdrop, we are keenly interested in better understanding practitioners’ perceptions of social agency, or “capability of an individual to act, initiate, self-regulate, or make differences or changes to their situation” (Liddicoat & Taylor-Leech, 2021, p. 1) as they negotiate their professional lives. To do this, we analyzed and interpreted mixed-methods data regarding professional satisfaction of EAP professionals in differing roles (instructor vs. director), and at different institutions (universities vs. colleges vs. private ELIs) across Canada.

The Study

This article presents data from the second phase of a sequential mixed-methods research study into EAP programs and practitioners across Canada. This phase of the research project included semi-structured interviews with a representative sample of EAP directors and instructors from three EAP contexts: universities, colleges, and private ELIs. Interview data build on Phase I findings (see Corcoran & Williams, 2021; Corcoran et al., 2022) and attempt to better understand Canadian EAP via practitioner perceptions of professional satisfaction, answering one of this study’s main research questions: What is the self-perceived professional satisfaction of EAP practitioners working at Canadian institutions of higher education?

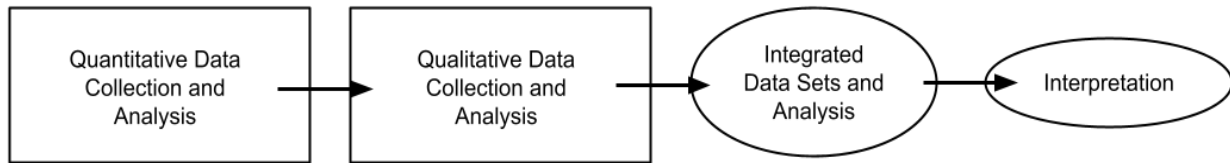
Research Design, Participants, and Sampling

In order to better chart the diverse landscape of Canadian EAP programs and practitioners, we used a sequential mixed methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018), employing both a survey questionnaire and individual interviews (see Figure 1). We selected a mixed methods approach to attend to the potential limitations that any one paradigmatic approach has on understanding complex phenomena (Shannon-Baker, 2016; Subedi, 2016), in this case the perceived professional satisfaction of EAP practitioners in Canada. Further, although in this article we focus on qualitative data that afford insight into EAP practitioners’ lives via their subjective perceptions, the quantitative data were helpful in both informing sampling and providing a baseline data set.

⁵ Students are also social agents impacted by EAP ideologies and practices; however, they are not the focus of this article.

Figure 1

Sequential Mixed Methods Design



Data Collection and Analysis

Phase I: The Survey-Questionnaire

Drawing on past national and regional surveys in the field of EAP and language teacher education (Dyck, 2013; Sanaoui, 1997; TESL Canada Federation, 2019), our survey-questionnaire aimed to explore the landscape of EAP across Canada. We created survey items using Qualtrics software with the explicit aim of identifying salient characteristics of EAP programs and practitioners, considering similarities and differences across regions, institution types, and professional roles. Survey design also included creation of eight Likert-scale questions and an open-response item aimed at ascertaining practitioners' "professional satisfaction." Anticipating a diverse group of respondents, and aiming to increase internal validity, we piloted the survey with EAP practitioners from different types of institutions and modified it twice based on feedback received. Attempting to achieve a full sample, we recruited participants via official letters of recruitment posted on national (TESL Canada; Languages Canada) and provincial (e.g., TESL Ontario; BC TEAL) TESL organization listservs; via emails sent to public-facing EAP program administrators across Canadian universities, colleges, and language institutes; and privately via our shared scholar-practitioner networks. Between October and December 2019, we received responses from 481 EAP practitioners (75% [$n = 360$] of whom identified as "EAP instructors," 25% [$n = 121$] as "EAP directors"). Findings derived from Phase I of this project analytically informed Phase II, where practitioners who volunteered to be interviewed were purposefully selected based on Phase I analysis that revealed significant correlations between specific sub-groups of practitioners and differing levels of self-perceived professional satisfaction.

Phase II: Semi-Structured Interviews

In Phase II, participants were recruited from sub-groups according to analytically driven results from the Likert-style questions on the Phase I survey, where significant differences were noted between directors and instructors, and between those working at universities and colleges and those working at private ELIs. Randomized invitations were generated and sent to 30 directors and instructors, with 18 responses received in return. Each interview was limited to approximately 60 minutes. In total, seven directors (five university; one college; one private ELI) and 11 instructors (seven university; three college; one private ELI) were interviewed. The distribution of participants covered five regions (three Pacific; two Prairies; ten Ontario; two Quebec; and one Atlantic).

Following transcription of interviews, we completed multiple cycles of coding, using categories analytically derived from survey data and driven by our research questions. NVivo 12 software was used to assist the research team with coding and organization of emergent themes, with regular check-ins after each mini-stage of coding to produce valid, reliable mixed-methods findings. As coding represents multiple levels of analysis, it can be said that a critical EAP lens influenced the coding process. Survey data provided a form of “precoding” in advance of coding the interview data, though we employed “lumper” or “holistic” coding with regard to large chunks of language (Saldaña, 2016). This study also employed two main “cycles” of coding, namely, initial and secondary coding periods. While it is arguable whether there is a “proper” way to code, we endeavoured to ground our coding practices in an inherently iterative manner, “coupling a rigorous and systematic analytic approach with an open and flexible embrace of creative insights” (Holton & Walsh, 2017, p. 94). Adopting a constructivist approach that, as Silverman (2020) contends, emphasizes “eliciting the participant’s definitions of terms, situations, and events and trying to tap his or her assumptions, implicit meanings, and tacit rules” (p. 131), we proceeded one sub-group at a time: for example, directors, then instructors; and then one “sub-sub-group” at a time: for example, directors from university EAP programs, and then those from colleges, then the one from a private ELI. Initial coding took an open-coding approach, whereby “core” categories were identified. Regular check-ins were conducted after each sub-group was coded. Core categories were both analytically derived (i.e., from survey responses) as well as emergent from multiple levels of coding, demonstrating main concerns or issues among participants. Inter-rater reliability measures were employed at each cycle.

Phase I Survey Findings: Providing a Baseline

EAP Programs and Practitioners in Canada: Charting the Landscape

Survey respondents ($N = 481$) included EAP practitioners from a diverse range of universities, colleges, and private ELIs, and from five regions within Canada. Respondents represented both program instructors and directors, from both credit-bearing and intensive EAP programs that offered both English for General Academic Purposes (EGAP) and discipline-specific EAP models. Of the 481 respondents, an equal number ($n = 202$; 42% each), work at universities and colleges, while the rest ($n = 77$; 16%) work at ELIs. The respondents represented programs from the five Canadian regions of British Columbia (18%), the Prairies (18%), Ontario (52%), Quebec (3%) and Atlantic Canada (9%). Some 75% of the respondents were instructors, while 25% were program directors. Findings from Phase I include an estimated total of EAP programs (236) and practitioners (1,909) across Canada. Within this population of programs distributed across institutional types (universities, colleges, and private ELIs), there is a wide diversity of models, the most common being English for general academic purposes (EGAP) and what we term “bridging” or “pathway” programs that are either language-specific or language-and-content–integrated. With respect to practitioners, diversity is once again a key finding, with practitioners who are linguistically and culturally diverse (skewing more so in Ontario and British Columbia), well educated (but often lacking PhDs and/or STEM graduate degrees), and relatively evenly split between being employed full- and part-time. EAP practitioners’ job satisfaction, as determined by the responses to eight Likert-scale questions, was significantly correlated to role, institution type, and level of employment, with lower levels of satisfaction among instructors, those who work at private ELIs, and those who are employed part-time (see Corcoran et al., 2022).

Phase II Interview Findings: Satisfaction, Agency, and Precarity

Building on Phase I findings, in this section we report qualitative findings from a series of interviews conducted with EAP practitioners across a range of institution types, including universities, colleges, and private ELIs. Six directors and 12 instructors were interviewed from a group of 30 purposefully selected practitioners.⁶ The main themes emanating from these interviews are highlighted and organized with respect to the main research question on professional satisfaction. In line with salient differences noted between participant groups from Phase I data, we have separated findings into EAP program director and EAP instructor sections, followed by a discussion of the overall findings. It should be noted from the outset that practitioner perceptions are neither ubiquitous nor generalizable to the entire population of EAP practitioners; nevertheless, in this section we attempt to highlight representative practitioner voices regarding their self-perceived professional (dis)satisfaction.

EAP Directors' Self-Perceived Professional Satisfaction

High Satisfaction

Student Success. Levels of high professional satisfaction among directors often appeared to derive from seeing EAL students achieve their academic goals: "I really feel that ESL and working with international students is a very rewarding situation ... when you're teaching ESL, we get to know our students very well" (Cheryl,⁷ EAP director). She stressed the importance of EAP programs in supporting EAL students, both immediately as well as in the longer term: "I have had situations, you know ... student suicide ... mental health issues ... and see them resolved successfully or to see people really be happy in what they're doing." Cheryl concluded with a longer perspective on students' trajectories: "I actually have had students who started as ESL, who then went on to take TESL, and then teach ESL. So, this [academic language support] is a very good thing." Dave, a director at a southern Ontario university, concurred, stating that the most satisfying aspect of EAP is "any type of learner success, achievement.... I like to see the closing ceremony and I always enjoy watching their speeches." Likewise, Daniel, a director from a central Ontario university, reflected on his satisfaction of reconnecting with students later in their academic studies, "when they come back and say, 'I'm doing really well in my first semester,' I'm delighted ... that's exciting for students to tell me how they've changed and how the [EAP] experience has changed them." As was the case with instructors (see next section), student success was the most common reason provided for directors' perceived professional satisfaction.

Respect and Legitimacy within the Institution and Program. Next, among those identifying as EAP directors, high levels of professional satisfaction also appeared to stem from being valued as an important or legitimate member of the institution. Time and again, directors referred to this respect as integral to their perceived satisfaction (and the lack thereof to their perceived dissatisfaction, as outlined in the next section). This perceived importance and legitimacy often appeared connected to EAP as a vital source of revenue, benefiting departments and programs that recruit internationally: "I think over the 16 years that I've been here there's been a growing awareness that our programs bring in serious money" (Lucy, director at a south-central Canada university). Though what "serious money" meant was unclear,

⁶ Thirty potential participants were selected for interviews from those who volunteered to be interviewed at the end of the Phase I survey.

⁷ All research participant and institutional names used in this article are pseudonyms.

she added that at her institution EAP programs played a large role in integrating international students into their chosen degree paths, garnering respect from “important” faculties such as Math and Engineering. Similarly, Cheryl, a director from a central Canadian university, noted that her university benefitted from being able to recruit international students, an endeavor facilitated by her EAP program: “I know the administration is aware of us and appreciates us because not only are they getting the tuition during these eight months [of pre-sessional EAP], but then they also get international students [who] are a huge boon [to our university].”

Meanwhile, high levels of satisfaction appeared to stem from perceived legitimacy not only within institutions but also within EAP programs themselves. Lucy explained, “I feel like we’re well valued and respected within our unit and program. So, I’m very happy with our group, which is very collegial.” Similarly, Amy, a director of a private ELI, felt well respected by her colleagues and well liked and appreciated by her boss, the school owner. However, her sense of legitimacy seemed tempered by a fear that she was perceived as expendable: “I think he [my boss] feels like he could replace me. I think if I was to ask for more money, then the people in roles that assist me would be asked to step into my place.”

Facilitating Instructor Professional Development. Finally, when prompted to reflect upon their professional experiences, directors discussed their high levels of satisfaction with facilitating professional growth among their teaching staff. Dave said he enjoyed seeing his staff overcome challenges, grow as professionals, and derive joy from teaching: “I see the work that they do and their research, presenting at conferences ... or they’re just doing internal research on their own teaching and then reflecting on it. I find that to be very rewarding.” Likewise, Daniel suggested that his staff who took advantage of professional development opportunities benefited their program by applying and sharing their new knowledge: “I like the [instructors] who certainly [take advantage of PD events]. And I’ve got one who’s doing it. She’s finishing up her M.Ed. right now so anytime she learns something she posts for everyone and tries it out in her class and has fun.”

Low Satisfaction

Lack of Respect from Institution and Program Precarity. First, low levels of professional satisfaction among directors appeared to stem mainly from feelings of frustration due to the lack of recognition or standing in the institution. Lucy stated, “I think, probably, least satisfying is being involved in college wide committees that require me to work with people who have less respect for what my unit does than I think they should. That kind of politics is very challenging.” Cheryl concurred, arguing that other faculties at her university did not recognize EAP as a real profession: “I think for many years ESL professionals have felt that they are sometimes not respected the same way as their other colleagues in the university” She continued, “the whole idea of, well, if you can speak English, you can teach it ... there’s a lot more to teaching the language, and there’s a lot more to working with international students than just talking. It is a profession.” Refrains of this sort were the most common from directors when discussing professional dissatisfaction. However, this perceived lack of respect seemed connected to another area of discontent: program precarity. Several directors lamented the fact that their programs felt less than stable, impacting not only their own sense of job security but also that of their instructors: “I think, you know, there is the sense in the university that, well, international students are great ... so, you know, get more, more, more, bring the money in. But, you know, we [EAP program] are losing money now. How long are they going to keep us?” (Cheryl).

Unethical Assessment. Next, some directors reported perceptions of low professional satisfaction stemming from potentially unethical assessment practices, referring to the promotion of students that they deemed unprepared for university studies. For example, Amy felt that, at times, she was setting some students up for failure. She remembered a specific story about passing a student against her best judgment:

“There’s one student I’m thinking of and everybody in the school knew he wasn’t ready. And it didn’t matter. He had to go [through to the college program this private institute had an agreement with].” Amy continued, noting pressures she felt from a variety of stakeholders: “His parents were pressuring, the agent was pressuring.... I refused to say that he’d successfully met the requirements.... What happened? Yeah, [my boss signed the certificate passing the student] ... That was really difficult.” These refrains came from two directors, one in a university setting and one at a private ELI.

Qualitative data from Phase II interviews supported Phase I findings that indicated EAP program directors’ higher levels of self-perceived professional satisfaction than EAP instructors, pointing to potentially salient reasons for this (e.g., greater job security). Another revealing data point from interviews was the differential satisfaction displayed by those working in universities versus private language institutes, once again supporting quantitative findings from Phase I that identified significant differences in satisfaction depending on not only role but also institution type. Overall, university program directors appeared to sense greater agency when compared to instructors. Is this simply a reflection of the better employment conditions experienced by those who occupy managerial roles? It is clearly something more complex than simply employment stability that acts as a differentiator. Nevertheless, this variable was noteworthy, especially for those working in university settings. However, program directors, like instructors, also suggested a sense of precarity within their institutional contexts, where their perceived value was ostensibly connected to international student recruitment and retention. Despite their greater perceived individual employment stability (this is especially so for tenured faculty and permanent employees at universities), there were also worries among directors about the future viability of their EAP programs should they cease to be profitable for the institution. These findings are less than definitive, and experiences of this sub-group of practitioners are neither uniform nor explanatory, but they raise many questions with respect to the characteristics of directors’ material employment conditions that allow them to potentially experience more agentive professional lives than instructors. Findings with respect to EAP program directors’ (and other experienced EAP professionals’) professional satisfaction and agency should receive greater empirical attention, given the dearth of research into this diverse group of professionals that rarely appear in the extant EAP literature (Bond & Bruce, 2022; Fitzpatrick et al., 2022).

EAP Instructors’ Self-Perceived Professional Satisfaction

High Satisfaction

Connecting with and Supporting Students. Feelings of high professional satisfaction among instructors from all institution types appeared to emanate mainly from interactions with students and connecting with them on a human or emotional level. Antoinette, from a Quebec university, stated, “most satisfactory, hands down, is just the interaction with the students. And watching them progress, I mean, that’s why I’m still there.” Emily, from a community college, concurred: “[I really enjoy] asking them questions and sort of unraveling what is going on in their minds and opening them up so they can say, ‘Oh! OK, I get it now.’ ... that for me is like the most enjoyable moment.” Meimei, from a south-central Canadian university, went further, saying that “teaching is emotionally, cognitively, psychologically, professionally involved. There are many happy moments [when] ... I see [the students] grow to reach their potential...” She went on to speak about the rewarding nature of working with students as they navigate their social and academic lives: “they fall down, they get up, help each other ... move from undergraduate to graduate studies.... I’m passionate about teaching because I can share what I have learned with my students.” Similarly, Rodney, from a western Ontario university, stated, “Number one is seeing their academic English improve, but

number two is the relationships.” He proceeded to describe what many instructors alluded to: a high degree of professional satisfaction from facilitating academic progress, often related to academic discourse socialization: “when they understand that there are particular conventions of writing that they didn’t understand prior, and that can help them decipher and produce pieces at a level that doesn’t cause them incredible anxiety.”

Collegial Relationships, Instructor Autonomy, and Professional Development. Instructors’ satisfaction was also derived from collegial support developed among staff. Tyra, an instructor at a private ELI in Atlantic Canada, stated, “I think my co-workers find me really valuable.... I think it’s a pretty good atmosphere, when we’re in the school working together and helping out people.” Patricia, from a west-coast university, concurred, suggesting that when instructors are trusted by management, it engenders feelings of professional satisfaction and legitimacy. She stated, “The instructors were trusted to create lessons that were interesting, that would fulfill the criteria and stimulate students.” Reflecting on other EAP contexts, she went on: “I have worked in places where you had your supervisor popping in every couple of hours, or every couple of lessons ... and it was excruciating.” Atun, a college EAP instructor, points to professional satisfaction derived from being “left alone in the classroom” but also “given support in terms of the curriculum development, LMS training for free ... or whatever, I can get any kind of professional development training.” Some instructors also appeared to draw satisfaction from being provided professional development opportunities in their EAP programs. Antoinette stated, “we have a professional development fund. And any instructor that wants to apply for the funds can apply for them. I have gone to TESOL about three or four times through those funds.”

Low Satisfaction

Lack of Respect and Legitimacy within the Institution and Program. Like directors, instructors’ perceptions of being valued by the institution appeared to derive from being recognized as an important service for international students that brings a substantial source of revenue for the university. Charlotte, an instructor at a northern Ontario university, stated that her university is “very appreciative of the amount of money that we make. Because all the renovations that have gone on at [our college] have been funded from our program.” However, many instructors felt that EAP is often taken for granted and not seen as essential service by other faculties. Atun argued that his EAP program was seen as necessary, but academically unimportant. He stated that his program was “very much taken for granted at the college.” He expanded: “it’s been interesting to see us focusing very strongly on the recruitment of international students, yet this is not reflected in terms of how the teaching staff are being treated or how the faculty are treated in the academy.” Other instructors also felt that the business-oriented approach to EAP decreases the sense of being valued as professionals. Emily, who had worked in EAP in the United Kingdom as well as Canada, stated, “I get the sense that sometimes at some of these ESL college schools, it’s sort of a business ... a funneling business to bring students in. And then they are kind of left to fend for themselves once they’re in the program.” Along similar lines, Patricia felt that among other faculty members and departments, EAP programs were seen as being illegitimate pipelines for students paying their way into university. She stated, “I think some people [outside our EAP program] were concerned about the percent of Chinese students and their [students’] actual academic credibility.”

Lack of Professional Development Opportunities and Engagement with Research. Many instructors discussed the general lack of professional development opportunities as an area of dissatisfaction in their professional lives. Atun felt that the least satisfactory aspect of his job is not being seen as a legitimate professional. He stated, “we have become numbers. I have gone from partial load [close to full time] to being a part timer. And what that means is that I get no support at all [from my EAP program].” He continued, “I don’t get any kind of compensation, for example, for registering for the annual

TESL Ontario conference. There's very little support for the part time instructors or partial load instructors. It really does not give you a feeling like you're appreciated." While many university faculty suggested good support for professional development from their departments, others from all three institutional categories expressed discontent with the level of support from their programs or departments. For example, Tyra explained that her institute provides only one webinar a year of professional development and rarely covers conference fees. She stated, "the only professional development I've had in my time at this school, so a year and a half, is one webinar. And our fee for a TESOL conference was covered once." For some EAP professionals, who did not have research as part of their professional duties, dissatisfaction also stemmed from limited opportunities to engage in meaningful classroom-based research. Janine, from a northern Ontario college, stated, "[a well-known researcher] asked me to be his lead RA for a SSHRC-sponsored TOEFL study. All I needed was a non-contact day." She continued, "I had a non-contact day, it was Monday. I said, 'Can we switch that to Thursdays. That's all I need!' The answer was no. I turned [the researcher] down. Those opportunities come once in a lifetime."

Conflict with Management, Lack of Autonomy, Stuffed Curriculum, Grading Overload. Several instructors reported dissatisfaction stemming from a general lack of support, attention, or communication from management. Charlotte discussed the impact of top-down administrative decisions on her morale and sense of agency: "... there's no autonomy. You do your work and then it just gets revamped in whatever way by a single individual. They don't really trust us to do our own work. I've thought about leaving or quitting." With respect to instructor autonomy, several instructors argued that their capacity to innovate was greatly affected by the amount of assessment required by their EAP program. Rodney elaborated: "when we're talking about writing, it's a heck of a lot of feedback ... that's definitely a challenging and unsatisfying part of the work." Along the same lines, Ewan, from a western Canadian university, stated, "the curriculum is so overloaded with required teaching topics that there is no room for any discussion, or innovation.... There's no room to relax in the classroom, it's full on go, push, every day. That's not right for language learning."

Precarity and Peripheral Participation. The most salient concern for many, and potentially the largest contributor to professional dissatisfaction, was the perception of being expendable, especially among part-time instructors. Tyra stated, "I know that my bosses value me to an extent, but I've also heard my bosses, not necessarily in a threatening manner, suggest that there's more teachers than there are jobs, you know?" It was not only instructors from ELIs who experienced feelings of precarity; some instructors at colleges and universities also perceived unequal treatment between part-time and full-time staff. Antoinette suggested that there is a difference in respect shown to part-time instructors who are pre-sessional EAP and part-time (aka sessional) instructors at her university: "I mean we're part of a separate union, we get different benefits, we get different salaries. So, I would say that in those terms we're not as valued." In addition, sessional university and college instructors also repeatedly expressed a sense of anxiety surrounding their contract status: "I only have a part time contract. And there is absolutely no guarantee that there will be a course available to me to teach next semester" (Atun).

Qualitative findings from instructor interviews support the quantitative findings from the survey with respect to lower satisfaction among instructors and more acute dissatisfaction among those with less secure employment as well as those working at private ELIs. These lower levels of satisfaction, as emerged in the Phase I survey data, often (but not always) appear to stem from reasons related to employment status and working conditions, where those working under precarious conditions seem to experience less agentive professional lives. However, on a heartening note, salient findings emanating from interviews with practitioners point to widespread dedication to students' lives and (language) learning outcomes, as well as an apparent sense of shared responsibility to meeting student needs during their academic journeys.

The most striking finding, however, is employment precarity as a distinguishing feature for many practitioners in Canadian EAP, where social agency appears constricted among instructors and is a clear marker of differential power relations within the field, separating those with greater job security from those without (see Table 1).

Discussion

In this section, we discuss findings related to our mixed-methods investigation of EAP programs and practitioners in Canada, connecting them to the extant literature and reflecting on the potential implications for educational stakeholders. Specifically, we employ our critical lens to interpret data related to EAP practitioners' self-perceptions of professional satisfaction, and how these levels of satisfaction may be reflective of their social agency within Canadian EAP. We note that despite the constructivist approach to data analysis in Phase II, this exploratory study ultimately sought to chart the landscape of EAP programs and practitioners while amplifying practitioner voices rather than to theorize deeply about power and agency and their distribution in the field. Further, we note that findings from this study do not imply analytic generalizability with respect to practitioner experiences across contexts. In what follows, we draw on our critical EAP lens that forefronts EAP practitioners' subjectivities while attending to structural critique as we consider both wide-angled and zoomed-in perspectives of a cadre of professionals rarely profiled in the research literature.

Table 1

Salient Themes for Self-perceived Satisfaction or Dissatisfaction among EAP Instructors and Directors

	Satisfaction	Dissatisfaction
Instructors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Engagement and interaction with students ● Autonomy ● Intra-program respect 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Employment precarity ● Poor remuneration and benefits ● Student lack of motivation ● Lack of opportunities for PD and collaboration
Directors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Employment stability ● Program impact ● Program growth and innovation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Lack of respect for EAP within institutions ● Workload ● Sector / program instability

Diversity and Perceived Legitimacy in Canadian EAP

As we consider this employment sector, it is worth noting that not all programs and practitioners fall neatly into pre-selected categories (instructor vs. director; college/university vs. private ELI; Native English Speaking Teacher (NEST) vs. Non-Native English Speaking Teacher (NNEST)). Rather, diversity of practitioners and their perspectives is a feature of EAP across Canada (see Corcoran et al., 2022). Indeed, findings from this study highlight the folly of attempting to refer to EAP, whether it be programs or practitioners, as either a monolithic sector of language education *or* a disciplinary area: though the boundaries are fuzzy, study findings suggest it is most certainly both (Ding & Bruce, 2017; Fitzpatrick et al., 2022; MacDonald, 2016; Corcoran et al., 2024). What our mixed-methods findings have reinforced, however, is that EAP programming is taking place in similar ways across a range of post-secondary institutions⁸ (see Douglas & Landry, 2021, for data on university EAP programs), often but not always in what MacDonald (2016) has described as a “third space.” In adopting our critical EAP lens, and drawing on study findings, we suggest that practitioners perceive and experience EAP in different ways that may indeed both reflect the relations of power between EAP practitioners within neoliberal post-secondary institutions and reify them (Bourdieu, 1998; Giroux, 2014; Holborow, 2015).

Our qualitative data indicate that practitioners agreed on many of the parameters of EAP, consistently referencing a range of pedagogical work aimed at EAL learners transitioning into or actively engaged in undergraduate or graduate studies. What was less clear was the extent to which EAP practitioners viewed themselves as “scholar-practitioners,” something that should be investigated further in relation to EAP practitioner agency and identity (see also Bond, 2020; Charles, 2022; Davis, 2019; Ding, 2019; Douglas, 2019, 2022), including in Canadian post-secondary contexts. For example, many directors and instructors pointed to the vital importance of the work they do within the sector and field of EAP, seeing themselves as legitimate and essential members of the academic community. They appeared to draw large amounts of satisfaction from their impact on students’ academic and personal trajectories. This professional satisfaction was evident across practitioner groups, including those in tenured (or tenure-track) positions at universities, those working as sessional instructors at colleges and universities, and (to a lesser extent) those working part-time at private ELIs. However, while some viewed themselves as scholar-practitioners⁹ engaged in both teaching and research (whether remunerated or not), there was also a pervasive sense among both directors and instructors that they were seen by others in the institution as merely preparing EAL students for their legitimate disciplinary programs of study.

Though these findings with respect to differential perceptions of (il)legitimacy among EAP professionals are neither ubiquitous among study participants nor novel as a research finding (see also Bell, 2021; Charles & Pecorari, 2016; Ding & Bruce, 2017; Hadley, 2015), it is troubling that a wide swathe of Canadian EAP practitioners sense that their professional contributions are undervalued within post-secondary academic communities. These findings raise a range of questions with respect to equitable working conditions within Canadian post-secondary language education. Given the potential connections, evidenced in this study, between employment security and perceived professional satisfaction, we argue for a need to reassess the impact of EAP program and institutional policies on practitioner precarity. For example, should EAP instructors be required to have a PhD in order to work in colleges and universities? If not, how might EAP argue for its (and therefore its practitioners’) equal importance in the post-secondary

⁸ As well as at off-campus institutes and schools affiliated with these institutions.

⁹ See Douglas (2019, 2022) for a discussion of this terminology and why it is an important consideration when referring to EAP practitioners.

milieu? Might particular changes to credentialization, hiring practices, and professional development shift perceptions of illegitimacy, lack of agency, and disarticulated identity among those who view themselves (and are viewed by others) as marginal members of these communities? As was evident from our findings, these were contentious issues, with some questioning the trend toward requiring more advanced degrees in an educational sector that provides no guarantee of stable or well-remunerated employment. What stood out most from our analysis of practitioner perspectives was the saliency of employment precarity as a tangible feature—rather than a bug—of Canadian EAP practitioners’ lived experiences.

Canadian EAP and Self-Perceived Professional Satisfaction: Differentiating Variables

Qualitative data support quantitative findings with respect to differential levels of professional satisfaction (see Corcoran et al., 2022). In Phase I, significantly higher levels of satisfaction appeared correlated to employment role (director > instructor), status (full-time > part-time), and institutional context (colleges / universities¹⁰ > private ELIs). However, the strength of the correlation between these factors and perceived satisfaction is still an open question, and further research within different EAP contexts would be welcome. In what follows, we outline the qualitative data from Phase II, focusing on practitioner perceptions of professional satisfaction as a way of understanding social agency within Canadian EAP.

Employment conditions appeared to be the principal differentiator with respect to levels of professional satisfaction among practitioners. While several practitioners expressed high levels of satisfaction with their work as EAP researchers, directors, and instructors, many instructors with more precarious employment situations related how they felt interchangeable and disposable as labour within their institution. Those in this latter group suggested that EAP was not the fulfilling career they had hoped it might be, resulting in what appears to be a constrained sense of individual and collective social agency. However, many also described satisfaction and pride associated with the impact of their professional practice alongside a perception of illegitimacy and marginalization (see also Corcoran et al., forthcoming). Those with greater job security tended to emphasize a shared sense of vision, camaraderie, and agency in their role(s) as EAP practitioners within post-secondary institutions. Those with less security noted conflicting sentiments, with a prevalent sense of dissatisfaction both with how they experience their work and with how it is viewed by others. This perceived alienation from their work, expressed more often by instructors, and more often by those working in private ELIs, is worthy of attention and should ring alarm bells for those in the post-secondary language education sector. Perceptions of constrained agency and marginalization among EAP professionals (mostly instructors) are likely connected to what Haque (2007) describes as EAP instructors’ limited control of professional “terms of engagement” (p. 103) and reflect broader relations of power within Canadian institutions of higher education, where precarity appears widespread, and not limited to the EAP sector (Acker & Haque, 2017; McCartney & Metcalfe, 2018; Marr, 2021).

Ultimately, our findings point to overwhelming evidence of what Breshears (2019) referred to as economic “impermanence” (p. 42) as a main factor in practitioners’ sense of dissatisfaction, ostensibly leading to a constrained form of social agency (Breshears, 2019; Kouritzin et al., 2022; le Roux, 2022; MacDonald, 2016; Rockwell, 2021; Valeo & Faez, 2013). In the “knowledge economy” (Altbach, 2013; Demeter, 2020), where English language teaching is often a form of (real or perceived) abundant, disposable labor for neoliberal institutions of higher education, our findings add to a growing body of work on EAP practitioners that points to a need for systemic reform that better recognizes, rewards, and advocates for this cadre of workers. Precarity and asymmetrical relations of power within programs and institutions—

¹⁰ Qualitative findings did little to explicate the quantitative findings that pointed to higher levels of satisfaction among college practitioners vs. university practitioners.

exemplified in our findings—are more than academic concerns, and addressing them can help equip our sector to “better respond to the potentially avaricious and mercantile vision of EAP” (Ding, 2019, p. 73). Laying bare the realities of EAP practitioners’ perceived material conditions and social agency, differing and complex as they may be, is perhaps a necessary step on the way to providing the conditions for change. However, though our research may be helpful in amplifying EAP practitioner voices and interrogating power-imbued issues related to “the contingent and contextual effects of power in relation to access, exclusion, reproduction, and resistance” (Pennycook, 2021, p. 162) in language teaching, we argue that it is high time for description and analysis to give way to critical action. What that action might look like remains an open question.

Salient Characteristics of “Progressive” EAP Programs

One way to provide conditions for change may be to identify some of the shared characteristics of EAP programming and pedagogy that appear to lead to agentive professional EAP lives. Though not a primary focus of this research project, drawing on our qualitative data we have identified “progressive” practices that appear to inspire more agentive lives for EAP practitioners in various post-secondary contexts. These EAP program characteristics appear to include unionization, permanent positions, instructor autonomy, potential for professional and program growth and innovation, funding for scholarly research for instructors, and positive relationships with other institutional faculties, departments, and programs. Whether different stakeholders are incentivized to enact substantive change in institutions seemingly increasingly driven by profit motive is unclear (Benesch, 2001; Hadley, 2015; Haque, 2007; Shin & Park, 2016). However, we remain hopeful and suggest that incremental change is a reasonable goal and potential bulwark against neoliberal EAP and its place within a “system of deeply incorporated ways of being, doing, thinking, and perceiving” (Bourdieu, 2017, p. 292). Perhaps identification of positive models of EAP programming by researchers and administrators could forward the goal of a more humane, equitable professional sector that values and is valued for the knowledge and practices it produces, as well as those who produce it (Cummins, 2021; Douglas, 2019). Precarity as a way of life in EAP should no longer be an acceptable status quo.

Study findings hinted at how we might better equip EAP practitioners for the realities of the “field of battle” in a market that often positions them as disposable and interchangeable. Assuming the political will, primarily on the part of those in leadership positions, Table 2 presents a number of data-driven recommendations that may be taken up by stakeholders in order to attend to the professional dissatisfaction and constrained social agency identified in this study.

Limitations, Conclusions, and Future Research Directions

Significant limitations exist with respect to the validity of our findings. First, as is always the case with self-reporting, self-selection bias is front and centre. Next, our goal was to achieve results that allowed for analytic generalizability to the EAP practitioner population as a whole; however, sampling challenges (challenges obtaining accurate sample size; under-representation of Quebec EAP practitioner survey participants; reluctance of private-sector practitioners to be interviewed) render these claims less trustworthy. Therefore, we have shied away from making absolute claims regarding EAP practitioners’ self-perceived professional satisfaction. There was also the unanticipated shift in practitioner lives due to COVID-19 that is not meaningfully addressed by this study, as Phase II interviews were conducted as the first wave of the pandemic hit Canada. Finally, though we were guided by past survey work on EAP

Table 2

Addressing Perceived Professional Dissatisfaction in EAP

Instructors	Directors	Institutional decision makers	Language teacher educators	Researchers
Seek out positions with greatest potential for professional autonomy, growth, and security	Promote instructor autonomy, scholarship, and innovation	Utilize expertise in EAP programs that can effectively support EAL students	Prepare pre-service and in-service instructors for a precarious employment landscape	Engage in research that identifies progressive EAP program models
Advocate for yourself and others inside and outside your program	Advocate for and provide maximum employment security for instructors	Provide long-term commitment to EAP programs, allowing for EAP programs to provide secure, innovative work environment	Provide strategies for managing career trajectories that may involve significant economic hardship	Engage in ethnographic research that elucidates the lived experiences of EAP practitioners
Seek out community in organizations for support (unions, EAP associations, etc.)	Advocate for program and instructor EAP expertise within the institution while building / maintaining relationships with other programs, departments, and faculties	Support in-house applied language expertise rather than outsourcing academic literacies support	Draw upon existing EAP practitioners' experiences when planning and delivering course content	Engage in scholarship that includes participation by EAP professionals

practitioners, the construct validity of “satisfaction” is certainly debatable. Although the findings of this study reflect the perceptions of its participants, they may not necessarily be representative of all EAP practitioners in all Canadian contexts. Clearly, much more research is needed to better understand the perceived satisfaction and related social agency of EAP practitioners.

This project was wide ranging in scope. We hope it provides not only a quantitative baseline from which to better understand these educational activities and practitioners but also qualitative data that amplify the voices of this diverse, under-researched cadre of professionals. As is often the case with exploratory research such as ours, study results lead to as many questions as answers. For example, how are EAP professionals engaging with and adapting to new realities brought on by the intensification of neoliberal policies and practices and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic at our institutions of higher education? How might we better understand and support the development of ideal competencies of EAP practitioners (education, disciplinary background, certification, etc.)? How might we identify and replicate ideal models of EAP program delivery that support not only student learning outcomes but also the agentive lives of practitioners? Whose responsibility is it to enact changes that have a positive impact on EAP practitioners' material work conditions?

Clearly, further research on the approximately 2,000¹¹ EAP professionals working in Canada is necessary, including how they navigate their complex professional lives. Unlike previous studies investigating Canadian EAP practitioners, our work includes practitioners from three types of institutions: universities, colleges, and private ELIs. Inclusion of those working in the private sector in future studies is arguably more important than ever, given the occluded nature of these programs and the encroachment of multinational corporations acting as outsourced EAP providers (Bond, 2020; Maqsood, 2021). Future research into mostly unexplored areas of EAP (e.g., private program delivery within and beyond institutions of higher education, innovative in-service professional development¹²) will require deeper ethnographic dives into particular cases, where researchers can have an opportunity to share examples of programs that afford and promote collaborative relations of power (Cummins, 2021) between instructors, directors,¹³ and the institutions in which they work. Finally, given the material and structural concerns identified by this study, there is a real risk that effective, dedicated EAP practitioners may experience a "disarticulation of identity" (Hadley, 2015) and subsequently abandon an educational sector predisposed to ways of knowing, doing, and being that appear exploitative of labour. While the findings from this study may not be all that surprising to this readership, let this be a call to action—especially for those in leadership positions (e.g., tenured faculty, program directors, language teacher educators)—to advocate for and provide employment conditions that allow for all practitioners to engage in meaningful, rewarding, and agentive EAP practice.

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¹¹ Phase I results led to an approximation of 1,909 EAP practitioners and 236 programs across Canadian institutions of higher education.

¹² It is likely that innovative professional development is happening in EAP programs. These initiatives, particularly those that inspire engagement with research (for those both with and without PhDs), have the potential to cultivate individual and collective EAP scholar-practitioner identity and may impact perceived agency.

¹³ There is a need for greater focus on not only EAP instructor lives but also those of EAP directors, the latter being even less apparent in the EAP literature. Investigation of less-reported areas of the EAP sector may allow us to delineate the Canadian EAP landscape in a way that affords and inspires efforts to address issues of equity related to EAP practitioners.

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