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From ESL to EAL: Moving from a Deficit Framework to an Asset Framework

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Introduction

The following article describes how I am changing my personal framework of teaching English as a second language (ESL) to teaching English as an additional language (EAL). This reframing is coming from formerly seeing non-native English-speaking students as deficit language learners to now seeing them as asset language learners. Moving my perspective from deficit to asset is enriching my work with adult non-native speakers of English both inside and outside of the TESOL classroom. It is an ongoing process, but one that can be shared with others in the field who are perhaps engaging in the same types of reflections.

In addition to the ongoing status of my reflections, I believe that it is equally important to note at the outset of this article that I am not equating "English as a second language" to necessarily signal a deficit perspective of working with non-native speakers of English. I myself have used the acronym *ESL* many times in speaking and writing about working with these learners. Instead, I am using it as a marker or a reframing mechanism for my own thinking. By that I mean that current changes from ESL to EAL terminology have coincided with my own thinking about deficit and asset approaches to working with non-native speakers of English and that is the way I am connecting these shifts in my own reflections.

Personal Perspectives

Reframing my perspective on working with adult students who are non-native speakers of English arises from my work with international students in academic libraries. I have worked as a full-time academic librarian while at the same time teaching ESL part time for the past twenty years. Library literature has long portrayed working with non-native speakers of English as working with students who present special problems as library users. Conteh-Morgan (2003) labels this the deficit perspective and describes it in the following way:

> …the insistence on differences, the negative meanings imputed to them, and the persistence of these in the literature over the decades, have led librarians, whether consciously or unconsciously, to construct a one-dimensional image of international students. These students are depicted as constituting an accretion of deficits, and this image has stuck in the collective minds of librarians. (p. 2)

The deficits alluded to by Conteh-Morgan in the library literature usually refer to linguistic or communication problems in speaking English, adjusting to new higher education or academic library systems, and general cultural adjustments to American life (Baron & Strout-Dapaz, 2001). Investigating ongoing cultural differences (Doucette, 2019) and language problems in using library sources (Yoon & Kim, 2014), as well as addressing plagiarism issues from a deficit perspective (Zimerman, 2012) continue to be mainstays of research in the literature of academic librarianship.

As a practicing academic librarian for many years, I have been influenced by reading this literature and I had generally seen these library users in the same ways noted above. Now, rather than personally seeing international students who are non-native speakers of English as linguistically and culturally deficient "problem students" to be "dealt with" in the library, I instead see them as students who can bring inclusion and diversity into library spaces. This change occurred after I ran and then reflected on a "human library" event in which students representing different countries acted as "books" and members of the community who wished to "check them out" for a short conversation acted as "readers" (Bordonaro, 2020). This event grew out of a speaking activity initially designed for graduate international business students to practice their English conversational skills in the library. Because of wider interest, however, it turned into an open university activity where people could meet people from different countries

to learn more about each other. People from different countries volunteered to be a "book" such as China or Mexico, and the "readers" were people who signed up to speak with them ("check them out") for an individual 15-minute slot during the course of an afternoon. After this successful intercultural experience in the library, I began to think that examining my perspectives of non-native speakers in ESL classrooms was worth considering as well.

I began my personal examination with the changing nomenclature in the field of Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), which was my graduate degree program. The move in terminology from an emphasis on teaching ESL to an emphasis on teaching EAL seemed a logical place to begin, as it is a change that is taking place right now. My current place of employment at a community college directly reflects the current state of this ongoing change: the department in which I teach as an adjunct professor is called the EAL Department, yet other areas of the college still use the nomenclature of ESL as the name of a pre-departmental pathways program (SUNY Erie Community College, 2019a, 2019b). This indicates to me the fluid nature of this current change in the profession itself, which offers a good opportunity to reflect on this change in a personal way. Set against this background, the personal reflections below represent an exploration of the shift in my thinking from a deficit to an asset framework.

Background Literature

The literature of TESOL offers hints of the switch in nomenclature from ESL to EAL. In a systematic review of the literature that surveyed the terminology used to describe language learners in TESOL, Webster and Lu (2012) proposed the use of the term "Learners of English as an Additional Language" (LEAL) as an alternative to ESL learners (p. 83). Their reasoning was that, "Rather than utilizing the language learning aspect as a defining characteristic, LEAL is a

politically and culturally appropriate and respectful term that utilizes *person first* language while also acknowledging existing language competencies" (Webster & Lu, 2012, p. 83). The authors advocated that "educators [should] help ensure that LEALs see themselves as learners whose language learning is simply one component of their wholistic selves, rather than interpreting it as a defining characteristic of their identities as students" (Webster & Lu, 2012, p. 93).

Other authors offer additional reasons for not employing the acronym of ESL. Earlier considerations came from where the English learning or teaching took place. Gorlach (1989), for example, called for distinctions between English as a Second Language (ESL), English as a Foreign Language (EFL), and English as a Native Language (ENL). Williams (1992) offered Non-English-Speaking Background (NESB) as a less pejorative acronym, as well as Language Background Other than English (LBOTE) and Language Other than English Background (LOTEB). Teaching Unbroken English (TUE) has been similarly offered as a less linguistically hegemonistic alternative (Eoyang, 2003). English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) and World English (WE) have also appeared as seemingly more inclusive acronyms (Pedrazzini, 2008). Additionally, Runciman (2011) suggested that the primacy of *E* in any acronym for teaching English ought to be questioned because it privileges England.

While "learners of English as an additional language" does not appear to be a phrase that appears frequently in TESOL literature, the subset phrase of "English as an additional language" does appear to be gaining in frequency. This can be seen in a keyword search of the Linguistics and Language Behavior Abstracts database conducted in March 2020 that lists 39 results for a search of "learners of English as an additional language" as opposed to 655 results for a search of "English as an additional language." The articles that appear for "English as an additional language" are studies that do not appear to describe the use or appropriateness of this

terminology but instead simply list it as the name of an instructional program, a department, or an academic learning support unit at a university. This would seem to indicate that EAL is becoming a more common term of usage in academic fields related to foreign language teaching and learning. To keep this in perspective, however, it should be noted that the phrase "English as a second language" remains the most common terminology, with over 41.000 results coming from a search of this phrase conducted in the same timeframe of March 2020 in the Linguistics and Language Behavior Abstracts database.

As with the appearance of changing ESL/EAL nomenclature in the TESOL literature, the use of "deficit" and "asset" as terminology in the field does not appear to be a primarily linguistic endeavor, but rather a pedagogical one. This means that deficit perspectives and asset perspectives seem to be studied in the TESOL literature as beliefs that impact the efficacy of teaching and learning (Brooks, 2017; Hertzog, 2011). These beliefs are tied to identity issues on the part of both teachers and learners (Marshall, 2009; Zacarian et al., 2020).

The deficit identity of learners is often seen in studies that investigate how learners are perceived by educators and administrators. Brooks (2017), for example, looks at the "deficit conceptualizations of adolescent bilinguals" (p. 342) through the lens of perceived deficiencies in spelling abilities on the part of both teachers and institutions. That these deficit beliefs can encompass cultural beliefs as well as linguistic abilities appears in a study that investigates a successful teacher's "deficit beliefs of her students' home languages and cultures" (Hertzog, 2011, p. 197).

Asset beliefs appear in the literature less frequently than do deficit beliefs. Marshall (2009), in one such example, notes that students who might have positive self-identities outside

the confines of ESL programs may assume negative self-identities when being placed into pre-degree English language proficiency programs:

> Despite the fact that multilingual students bring a high degree of multilingual competence and literacy to the university, as well as a diverse range of multiple identities, they find themselves in spaces in which they are ascribed an identity that fails to recognize their many assets: a deficit remedial ESL identity. (p. 54)

Another study that implies asset beliefs found that ESL students could in fact continue to claim identities as musicians and athletes while in these language programs and that "no cases of deficit identity" could be found (Londrico, 2018, p. 43).

The strongest instance of asset beliefs that I found came from practioner writing rather than reported research in the field of TESOL. This article comprised an interview that was conducted on why English language educators should move from a deficit-based to an asset-based approach to improving student learning (Zacarian et al., 2020). Its main point was that, "focusing on people's strengths—that is, what they already possess inherently or have learned and experienced—can lead to far greater academic and social-emotional success than does focusing on what we perceive as their weaknesses" (Zacarian et al., 2020, p. 1). While focused on a discussion of children learning English in K-12 settings, this piece offers much food for thought as to how these ideas could be applied to adult learners of English as well.

Theory and Methodology

The adult education theory of self-directed learning and the adult education research methodology of autoethnography served as the vehicles for examining my changing perspective. Self-directed learning has recently been defined as "an intentional learning process that is created and evaluated by the learner" (ISSDL, 2020, para. 5). This definition clarifies and updates self-

directed learning by stressing intentionality more than the commonly known one offered by Knowles (1975) of self-directed learning in which "individuals take the initiative, with or without the help of others, in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating learning goals, identifying human and material resources for learning, choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies, and evaluating those learning outcomes" (p. 18). In choosing the newer definition, my emphasis is on my own intentionality in exploring how I went from a deficit to an asset perspective in working with adult ESL students. In other words, I wanted to examine how and why this shift had occurred in my adult working life. Once I established what I wanted to explore, I then made use of autoethnography as a means for doing so.

Autoethnography is a research method for gaining qualitative insights into educational inquiries in an extremely personalized way (Chang, 2016). It has been described as an "encounter between broad theorizing and personal reflection" (Taber, 2010, p. 20). The subject in this research methodology is the researcher themselves. The data can come from the researcher's reflections on their own lived experiences and how they may intersect with theories.

The use of autoethnography as a research method has not been advocated by all researchers. Sparkes (2000), for example, has stated very explicitly that "The emergence of autoethnography and the narratives of self … has not been trouble-free, and their status as proper research remains problematic" (p. 22). Promoting narcissism and engaging in self-indulgence have been offered as reasons against its use for research (Atkinson, 1997; Coffey, 1999).

I chose to use autoethnography as a research method because I see it as "a reflexive means by which the researcher-practitioner consciously embeds himself or herself amidst theory and practice, and by way of intimate autobiographic account, explicates a phenomenon under investigation or intervention" (McIlveen, 2008). Autoethnography serves as a way for me to

critically explore meanings in my own lived experiences of language teaching and learning. It also gives me a way to:

> contribute to others' lives by making them reflect on and empathise with the narratives being presented. Through reading a cultural or social account of an experience, some may become aware of realities that have not been thought of before, which makes autoethnography a valuable form of inquiry (Mendez, 2013, p. 282).

Personal narratives offer a rich source of data to explore in an autoethnography. In my case, I used learning journals that I have kept over the past twenty years as a language learner and as a language instructor as data sources, along with any recorded reflections from personal intersections between language learning and library work as points of reflection.

My own specific lived experiences with language learning and teaching include: learning German as a foreign language in Germany, serving as an English tutor for one-on-one literacy sessions with non-native speakers of English in the United States, doing library work involving out-of-classroom learning with non-native speakers of English in the United States and Canada, and working as an ESL instructor with non-native speakers of English in the United States and Canada. I engaged in reflections on each of these particular lived experiences in depth, and compared these emerging reflections to the findings of an autoethnography I had recently conducted examining my intersections of librarianship and language teaching and learning (Bordonaro, 2019).

Having broadly reflected on my lived experiences involving language learning and teaching in preparation for this current study, I then began reflecting most deeply on the ESL classrooms in which I taught as a backdrop for deficit and asset considerations. My ESL-

classroom focused experiences spanned institutions, courses of study, classes taught, and student backgrounds. These experiences included teaching stints in: a two-year community college in the United States, a four-year college focusing mainly on undergraduates in the United States, and two research intensive universities, one in the United States and one in Canada. The classes that I taught across these institutions included reading, writing, listening, and speaking classes serving mostly intermediate and advanced English language learners. Two of the institutions had separate ESL programs that were considered pre-degree programs, and two others offered ESL classes for credit within the degree programs. All students were adults 18 years and older, and they came from non-English dominant countries all over the world. Many of the students were international students from countries such as Japan, South Korea, China, Mexico, France, Germany, and Saudi Arabia, who were trying to earn a degree in the United States or Canada. Lately, however, the students have been immigrant or refugee students in the local community who come from countries such as Afghanistan, Rwanda, Congo, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Iraq, Burma, and Sudan.

In using an autoethnographic approach, I also invoked learning theories that had great personal meaning for me in my reflections. My knowledge of these theories came from extensive reading, research work, and applications of research from the field of TESOL to my teaching practice over the past twenty years. During this period of time, I took great personal interest in many of these theories because they seemed to shed light on learning that appeared to be taking place in my own classrooms.

The theories of most personal interest to me in this stage of reflection included: language learner autonomy, plurilingualism, and internationalization at home. Language learner autonomy is a theory I learned about as a doctoral student in TESOL which emphasizes student control

over learning goals and ways of learning (Benson, 2001). *Plurilingualism* is a recent theory that I discovered during coursework in adult education for the past two years. It differentiates itself from multilingualism in that it stresses multiple levels of linguistic and cultural proficiency across languages as of more importance than native-like linguistic mastery (Choi & Ollerhead, 2018). *Internationalization at home* is a theory from higher education that I became familiar with as an academic librarian over the past decade. This theory posits that gaining knowledge about other peoples and cultures in the world need not take place only at international sites away from a home campus, but that this type of learning can also effectively take place domestically as well (Choi & Khamalah, 2017).

Findings

In considering the intersections of my lived experiences with the learning theories described above, the following themes emerged from these points of intersection for my developing an asset framework over a deficit framework: offering choices, marking learner success along the way towards gaining proficiency in another language, and embedding cultural information in domestic settings. In order to identify these flashpoints as elements of a personal asset framework in TESOL settings for me, I reflected on how they encouraged positive views rather than negative views for me of English language learners.

Offering Choices

Offering choices leads to many ways for the learning of non-native speakers of English to be viewed in a positive light by both my students and myself. For example, as a reading teacher, I have often incorporated extensive reading in order to give students choices about what to read outside of class. Feedback from students on extensive reading choices reflected the positive energy with which they often made these choices and I, in turn, could see their enthusiasm grow

for making these choices over the course of a semester. Notes of appreciation and comments of thanks accompanied year end reflections made by students regarding choices in extensive reading.

Another example of choices leading to a positive viewpoint is my use of a word-a-day strategy for introducing new vocabulary. At the start of many writing classes, I ask students to choose their own vocabulary words to share at the start of each class with their fellow students. I ask them to introduce a new word by telling their classmates what the word is, offering a brief definition, saying what part of speech it is, giving other common forms of the word (either verb tenses or other parts of speech), noting several synonyms, and giving us an example sentence with the word embedded in it. They must choose their own words to share. I point them towards sources like the Academic Word List (AWL, 2020) but then allow them to make their own choices as to which words to concentrate on learning and sharing. This choice seems to empower them by giving them confidence in their own abilities to make good choices, to teach other students those choices, and then to add these choices to their own vocabulary knowledge. A student recently remarked to me that "Now I know this word better" from engaging in word-a-day activities.

Offering choices in the ways described above reflects the presence of language learner autonomy in TESOL settings. For me, the connection of this theory to my lived experiences shows me the importance of looking at English language learners as learners who are engaged in growing their knowledge of English. It reflects a building up process rather than a process centered on overcoming deficiencies. This served as the first transition point in my thinking about asset learning and deficit learning.

Marking Learner Success

Marking learner success on the way towards gaining language proficiency was another place at which many examples of positive views were apparent. An example of this came from my use of peer feedback forms that ask students to note what their fellow students did well before offering any suggestions for improvement. I use this technique often on peer feedback forms for speeches given by students in speaking classes. Another marker of student success can also be seen in the use of rubrics that award points for what students do well, instead of simply marking them off on mistakes made in writing compositions. Learning journals reflect this viewpoint as well by letting students reflect on progress made over the course of a term. Portfolios can offer this positive view as well if students collect what they have produced and look it over at the end of a class.

The marking of learner success corresponds to the theory of plurilingualism in which acknowledging the importance of acquiring bits and pieces of linguistic and cultural knowledge is viewed as gaining proficiency. The linguistic knowledge gained by students who learn from and with their peers in a constructive way helps build their knowledge of English in a way that does just that; it "constructs" their knowledge (Dewey, 1938). The focus on what was done well shifts the focus from what mistakes were made. Learning journals give students a way to reflect on what they have done well and how they are building their knowledge of English, and a portfolio offers a concrete visual of these gains over time. In emphasizing the gains made in this way, English language learners once again can be seen as students engaged in building their knowledge, rather than students who need to fill holes in their knowledge. It is this shift in emphasis that was important for me to develop a positive asset framework.

Embedding Cultural Information in Domestic Settings

Embedding cultural information in domestic settings is another area in which I found that positive views of language learning occur. This refers to the implanting of opportunities for non-native speakers of English to share information about their home cultures in English-dominant learning settings. This could take many forms. For example, in using tongue twisters in speaking classes, I not only have students engage in English tongue twisters as a pronunciation exercise but I also ask students to volunteer tongue twisters in their own native languages. This has led their fellow students and me as an instructor to appreciate the fluidity of Arabic speakers, for example, in pronouncing *l*-sounds.

Another example is asking students in speaking classes to share information about their home cultures with other students through an oral report. This type of assignment gives students a way to engage in speaking proficiency work while also sharing cultural information to help build the cultural knowledge of the whole class, the instructor included. Building knowledge of and appreciation for other cultures across the world offers a strong way to embed cultural information in a domestic setting. Writing assignments could similarly build cultural knowledge in these settings as well. Larger celebrations across college campuses for International Education Week or similar happenings also encourage the building and sharing of cultural information in domestic settings.

Embedding cultural information in this way is another display of plurilingualism as an important aspect of language learning because this theory stresses the importance of both linguistic and cultural knowledge building. In addition, embedding cultural information in domestic settings is also a very direct example of internationalization at home. This theory advocates for the building of international knowledge not only in study abroad locations, but also

for its importance in growing knowledge of other cultures in domestic settings (Almeida et al., 2019). Cross cultural learning can grow in both ways, and non-native speakers of English can contribute strongly to internationalization at home efforts. Their presence on campus also reinforces the notions of diversity and inclusion that inform a lot of current thinking in higher education. For me, this third flashpoint offered the strongest reason yet to reframe my work with non-native speakers because it showed me very concretely how they were making positive contributions to knowledge building while learning English.

In considering the various ways described above that offered me flashpoints for seeing non-native speakers of English through a positive framework instead of a negative framework, my thoughts boiled down to this: Successful learners work forwards *towards* something, rather than backwards *from* something. In other words, the act of working towards higher levels of language proficiency is an achievement to be proud of in itself rather than just serving as a marker of an area where the learner lacks language knowledge. To be more concise, I now see these learners as academic achievers rather than deficient students. In addition, I also see them as contributors to a widened view of knowledge building in terms of cross-cultural learning across campus. In this view, these students are both learners and instructors themselves because they have an important role to play in internationalization at home. Embracing an asset perspective allows me to see this widened role.

This widened perspective in turn makes me more aware that learning English as a non-native speaker may be better reflected through the terminology of English as an additional language (EAL) rather than English as a second language (ESL). This comes from seeing non-native speakers' native languages as being equally as important as the English language in the learning theories introduced above. For example, language learner autonomy is not tied explicitly

to the learning of English by non-native speakers; instead, this theory applies to the learning of any further language by a native speaker of another language. The second theory, plurilingualism, emphasizes both cultural and linguistic proficiency in language learning, so by its very nature this shows the importance of both native and non-native languages. Internationalization at home likewise places great importance on the sharing of cultural knowledge across different cultures, which very often implies different native languages as well. In these ways, a non-native language is not less important than English, but is equally important. From this new perspective, the idea of being equally important resonates more strongly in the word "additional" than in the word "second."

Discussions and Conclusions

The most important finding that came out of this research project for me is the need for awareness about the attitude that an instructor projects to students in terms of what successful language learning means. This attitude comes from an instructor's perspective. My perspective changed from a deficit perspective to an asset perspective. This enabled me to see non-native English-speaking students as assets in a classroom and in a library rather than as deficits. I now see them as positive contributors to language learning, rather than as people with linguistic problems to be overcome. This new perspective further informs my thinking about using English as an Additional Language (EAL) instead of English as a Second Language (ESL).

My change in perspective began with my acknowledging that I have used a deficit perspective in my past library work with language learners, an attitude that came under consideration when I ran a human library event. Engaging in autoethnographic research gave me the opportunity to reflect more deeply on my own lived experiences being both a language learner and a language instructor. The theories of language learning that helped steer these

reflections included language learner autonomy, plurilingualism, and internationalization at home. In looking at the intersections of my lived experiences with these theories, discrete themes appeared that included offering choices, marking learner success along the way towards gaining proficiency in another language, and embedding cultural information in domestic settings.

Connecting these findings back to previous research shows the importance of adopting an asset perspective in language learning for working successfully with non-native speakers. Rather than seeing my students' native languages as deficits (Hertzog, 2011) or as contributing to a remedial ESL identity (Marshall, 2009), I now see the importance of focusing on the positive contributions that these students bring to a classroom (Zacarian et al., 2020). Other language instructors may benefit from this switch in perspective as well because it opens the door to focusing on strengths rather than weaknesses. An asset perspective allows instructors to acknowledge what students already bring to their classrooms, to offer immediate opportunities for these students to share what they already know, and to help build the knowledge of other students and instructors in language learning classrooms.

Moving from a deficit framework to an asset framework can and should therefore have explicit classroom implications. These implications can change classroom practices concerning activities and assessment. Activities could be designed that incorporate more choices for student learning, as well as more markers of learner success, and the embedding of cultural information in domestic settings. Activities that emphasize proficiency rather than mistakes could use different forms of assessment. Learners could be asked to record their successes in learning journals. Portfolios that show improvement in writing could be assembled over the course of a class. Asking students to reflect on what they have learned could further direct assessment to focusing on gains over deficiencies.

This investigation represents only one small glimpse at how reframing work with non-native speakers of English can move from a deficit perspective to an asset perspective. It relies solely on myself and my own experiences as a research subject, and it offers no objective measures or quantifiable results. However, it may offer one way to begin the investigation of reframing ESL to EAL, and it may offer other instructors a viable means for conducting their own investigations. Future research should consider investigating an asset framework from a student perspective as well.

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