

# Reflection of My Experience on English as a Second Language User from a Social Work Perspective: Inclusiveness

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**Abstract:** As the author, I reflect on my education and social work practice experience as an English as a Second Language (ESL) user and how inclusiveness has influenced my practice experience.

**Keywords:** social work education, social work practice, critical reflection, inclusiveness

I was born and raised in Hong Kong. The majority of the population in Hong Kong are not English as first language users, which is the case of my family, who are Cantonese-speaking Chinese. After I grew up as an adult, I studied in the UK and later studied and worked in Canada.

I was and am an English as a Second Language (ESL) user in the UK and Canada. One challenge for me when I use English is to balance between substantivity and word limit. As an ESL user, I usually need to use more words to explain the same concepts than English as a First Language (EFL) users do. If I write within the limit, I sometimes may not write substantively to explain my concepts. Another challenge for me is style. One example is when to use active and passive voice. Although I understand that an active voice is preferable, in many circumstances, I feel that it is more respectful not to tell who the actor is because of the influence of my upbringing. Passive voice may be the only option in this case.

I went to study social policy in the United Kingdom and social work in Canada. I was one of the few ESL students. I felt that I was inferior. I was inferior to EFL users in English. I was also inferior to my cohorts in knowledge because I could not explain things substantially within the word limit.

Most students were EFL users. Some students were not EFL users but could pick up the language like how the EFL users used the language. I was a student who belonged to neither of the above groups.

I explained my problem of balancing substantivity and word limit and the use of styles to my professors. My professors did not only understand but gave support other than taking an English course. They were accommodating. They did not only provide me with flexibility in case I needed to write over the limit, but some even explained the justification behind their accommodation—it was social justice to accommodate me as an ESL user. Their explanation led me to think about social justice in education as a matter of equity. Students come from diverse backgrounds. Some are in more advantaged positions while some are in less advantaged positions because of their backgrounds in the current education settings. They are in an unlevel playing field for education opportunities due to their positions. Unless students who come from less advantaged positions are given accommodation, they will not be able to enjoy equal education opportunities. Going back to language, as suggested by Alexander (2017), ESL and

EFL students are on an unlevel playing field in an environment where English is the primary language. Therefore, accommodation is needed to be given to ESL students so that they can be on a level playing field. What I think further is that apart from language, educators also need to consider other background elements which will put some students in less advantaged positions, such as race, gender, social class, and more. Also, educators should expand their minds beyond the traditional classroom—in today's world, online education is getting popular. Educators need to pay attention to the background elements of students in an online education setting (Rogers-Shaw et al., 2018).

What ended up was that I seldom wrote over the word limit. I was even more likely to keep within the word limit than EFL users. Even if I wrote over the word limit, I only wrote a few more paragraphs or lines. My style might occasionally still be a problem. However, professors would share what they thought, be curious why I chose to use the language in a certain way, and see how we could work together. I no longer felt inferior and anxious. I felt that professors were willing to accept me as an ESL user and were inclusive. Such feelings helped me to use English better.

One element which is essential in my story of English learning is inclusiveness. The idea of instructors being inclusive, and thus accommodating students whose primary language is not the language of instruction in the learning environment, is also discussed in other countries such as France and New Zealand (Smythe, 2020). Most of my professors were EFL users. They accommodated my needs as an ESL user. They were also curious about how I used my language. Some of my professors were ESL users. They were empathetic to my situation. Some also related to my challenges as a part of my immigration experience.

I am glad that my professors actively suggested how my needs as an ESL user could be accommodated. However, this is not necessarily the case for other educators. This is because they may not be aware that students who are ESL users have language challenges. Such unawareness could be related to implicit bias (Reinholz et al., 2020). Implicit bias refers to bias embedded in educators' minds that educators are not aware of but subtly influences their teaching behaviours. In the case of ESL students, educators who are EFL users may have the implicit bias that students have the same language abilities. Such bias influences their teaching behaviours of not giving accommodation to ESL students. Literature suggests that attempts to ignore or eliminate implicit biases are not helpful (Reinholz et al., 2020). The only way to address bias is constant reflections on these biases. I raised the example of my challenge as an ESL user on writing within the word limits above. Indeed, ESL students face other challenges that need educators' attention, such as participation in the classroom. My experience as an ESL user was that it was harder for me to join the discussion as I needed to process different languages in my mind and thus responded slower than students who were EFL users.

I have been practicing social work after I graduated from school. I have been practicing in healthcare. Healthcare is a fast-paced setting. It emphasizes the clarity of reporting. However, I am still able to survive working in this setting where my colleagues are either ESL users or EFL users but master English well. My colleagues are accommodating. For example, they will let me speak ten extra seconds because of my language. They value my contribution. They would

rather waste ten extra seconds to let me finish reporting clearly than miss any vital information about our clients or lose me in the team.

One of my strengths as an ESL user that I had not noticed until my EFL colleagues told me is that I always try to be as inclusive as possible when communicating with my clients and their families. For example, I speak slowly and constantly check with my clients and their families whether they understand what I say. As an ESL user, I have these habits because I want to make sure that my clients and families understand what I am saying. Such practices have an unexpected benefit—I give my clients and their families opportunities to clarify anything they do not understand. In turn, this helps them feel not to be left out and helps me build relationships with them. Being inclusive is crucial. In a complex healthcare system, clients and their families can easily be left out and fall through the cracks.

Apart from EFL clients, I also have ESL clients. When I work with ESL clients, I always offer interpretation services as I hope that my ESL clients are included in the discussion of their healthcare and not be left out because of language. Of course, if clients feel that their English is good enough and does not need interpretation, I respect that. However, my experience is that most of the time, ESL clients prefer to have interpretation. Previous literature also suggested the importance of offering interpretation to ESL clients (Tong & Sims-Gould, 2021).

Being an ESL user helps me see my ESL clients more empathetically. I will give an example. I had a client who was an ESL user. Because of her dementia, the ability of her English, which was her second language, declined rapidly. She could only speak her first language. (By coincidence, I spoke her first language, so we spoke in her first language.) Growing up in Canada, her adult children's English was better than my client's first language. They could not communicate in my client's first language. My client provided limited resources and an environment for them to learn and practice her first language. She and her spouse spoke English to their children at home. She even insisted on moving far away from their ethnic community and living in a community where most residents were EFL users. She hoped that they could learn English well because having good English was crucial for them to participate in school and work.

However, now, my client's English ability had declined. The children felt depressed. My client was getting to the end of life. However, they were not able to communicate with her to support her emotionally. They needed an interpreter between them. The children felt resentment toward my client: "Why didn't you let me learn your first language? Why did you move our family far away from our ethnic community? I am not able to support you now." I could understand my client. She wanted her children to have a better future, so she did everything to make sure they could learn good English. However, now her family blamed her. We are very fortunate now because our society knows that children or even adults can learn two or even multiple languages well (Du, 2017; Li et al., 2020; Spiro et al., 2018). However, this was not understood in the old days. Interpreters interpreted what my client and her family said. However, they could not help with the intense emotions in the family. As a social worker who is an ESL user, I could see how sad the situation was. I did not think that it was the fault of either parent or the children. I tried my best to give emotional support to my client. I also asked her children not to blame her and

encouraged them to think from her perspective. Being an ESL mother raising EFL children was challenging. Although I had never been a mother, I had a lot of empathy for my client. My client reflected that she felt understood and was grateful that I helped her children understand her perspective.

To conclude, in this article, I reflected on my education and social work practice experience as an ESL user and how inclusiveness influenced my experience. I was fortunate that people around me in my journey of education and practice tried to be inclusive. Because they were inclusive, I am influenced by them and carry such inclusiveness to my current social work practice. I do my best to ensure that my clients and their families understand what I am saying, do not feel left out because of language, and feel understood. I wrote this article because I hope educators can understand the importance of being inclusive to ESL students. This can have long-term positive impacts on the students and the people they serve. I am one of the examples. My social work practice on how I work with my EFL and ESL clients is positively influenced by my professors' inclusiveness. Their inclusiveness has implications on me beyond the classroom.

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