Immigrant Teachers in Canada: 
Learning the Language and Culture of a New Professional Community

Ping Deters
Modern Language Centre
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto

Abstract

This paper reports on a narrative research study on immigrant teachers in the Canadian English public K-12 and college system, and their acquisition of professional language and culture. The research question examines the factors that facilitate or constrain the successful acquisition of occupation-specific language and culture of immigrant teachers in the province of Ontario. This study is informed by sociocultural theory and Lave and Wenger’s Community of Practice (COP) framework in which social practice and identity formation are central to learning, and learning is conceptualized as becoming a full participant in a particular community. Findings from this study highlight the dialectic nature of the professional acculturation of immigrant teachers, which include a number of factors such as the community stance and acceptance, the newcomers’ trajectories, and the newcomers’ ability to negotiate their identities and values.

Introduction

The status of Canada as an immigration country is well known. In an OECD survey conducted in 2000 (cited in Canadian Labour and Business Centre, 2004, p. 4), Canada ranked third in terms of the total number of immigrants in OECD countries. The 5.5 million immigrants in Canada formed 18.4% of the total population. Beginning in the early 1990s, an average of 220,000 immigrants came to Canada every year, a significant increase from the annual average

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of 125,000 in the 1980s. This increase in immigration reflects the stated long-term objective of the federal government to reach annual immigration levels of approximately one percent of the country’s population (ibid, p. 2), in anticipation of future labour market needs.

Additionally, Canadian immigration policy in recent years have targeted the “skilled worker” class of immigrants. These immigrants are highly educated and skilled: 90% have post-secondary education or training (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005), compared to 43% of Canadian-born adults (StatsCan 2001 Census, cited in Canadian Labour and Business Centre, 2004, p. 10). Another important change is the countries of origin of recent immigrants. Whereas immigrants came primarily from Europe in previous decades, in the 1990s, the top three source countries of immigrants were the People’s Republic of China, India and the Philippines (ibid, p. 5). The majority of recent immigrants speak English as an additional language.

Newcomers often face barriers to attaining employment in their occupation. According to a recent survey of immigrants, 70% reported problems in finding employment (Canadian Labour and Business Centre, 2004, p. 17). Both immigrant job seekers and Canadian employers identify the same barriers or obstacles to employment: 1) lack of Canadian work experience; 2) foreign credentials; and, 3) lack of official language skills.

Table 1: Common Barriers to Finding Employment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Immigrant Job Seekers</th>
<th>Public &amp; Private Sector Managers</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lack of Canadian work experience</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign credentials</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of official language skills</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>66%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Canadian Business and Labour Centre (2002)
Internationally Educated Teachers (IETs) in Canada

Internationally educated teachers have an especially high rate of unemployment and underemployment. The Ontario College of Teachers (2004), the provincial regulatory board for public school teachers, reported that IETs had consistently lower rates of employment as compared to other groups of newly-certified teachers (see also McIntyre, 2004). For example, IETs, who had many years of teaching experience overseas, had lower rates of employment than new graduates from teacher education programs, who had no teaching experience.

In addition to this issue of employment equity, there is another important reason to facilitate the entry of IETs into the Canadian public education system. Increased immigration has resulted in greater linguistic and cultural diversity in our society, especially in major metropolitan centres which attract the majority of newcomers and their children. As a result, the students in our schools and colleges are also becoming increasingly diverse. Many stakeholders in education have expressed the urgent need for a teaching force that reflects the multicultural student body in our public education system (see, e.g., Dei, 2002; Fenwick, 2001; Quiocho & Rios, 2000; Solomon, 1997). The shortage of linguistically and culturally diverse teachers in Canada and the United States is well known, and education systems have been searching for ways to attract minority students to the teaching profession. What has received little consideration is the unfulfilled potential of internationally educated teachers to address this need in the Canadian and American education systems. This is a classic mismatch: on the one hand, there is a need for greater diversity in the teaching force; and on the other hand, there is an abundance of immigrant teachers who are experienced and clearly have much to contribute to a diverse school system, but are unsuccessful in entering the profession.

Previous studies of immigrant teachers have highlighted barriers faced by these teachers in gaining entry into the host country’s public education system (see for example, Phillion, 2003;
Thiessen, Bascia and Goodson, 1996; Ross, 2003; Xu, 1999). To date, there has been little research that examines factors that facilitate the successful integration of IETs, particularly with a focus on the acquisition of language and culture in the workplace. The issue of occupation-specific language and culture is especially crucial for internationally educated teachers, as teaching is a linguistically and culturally dependent profession (Remennick, 2002).

**Theoretical Framework**

In recent years, the participation metaphor has been introduced to complement the traditional acquisition metaphor in the field of second language acquisition (Donato, 2000; Hall, 2002; Norton, 2000; Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000; Sfard, 1998). According to the participation metaphor, learning is a process of becoming a member of a community, and this process involves developing the ability to communicate through the language and behaviour that is deemed acceptable by the community. One theoretical framework that focuses on the social situatedness of learning is Lave and Wenger’s Community of Practice framework (COP) (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998).

A central concept in COP is that of legitimate peripheral participation (LPP). Learners must be seen as legitimate participants in order to access a particular community’s resources. Both legitimacy and peripherality are necessary in order for an individual to become a full participant in a particular community. Access is key and crucial:

“To become a full member of a community of practice requires access to a wide range of ongoing activity, old-timers, and other members of the community; and to information, resources, and opportunities for participation.” (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p. 100).

LPP involves power relations which determine whether one moves to full participation or one is marginalized and denied access to participation. Dahl (1997) presents a useful graphic to illustrate the interactional dynamics of Lave and Wenger’s situated learning model. This model
shows that both newcomers and the community have various positions. Figure 1 illustrates that if the newcomer seeks to join the community and the community wishes to sequester the newcomer, then access to resources is relatively easy. On the other hand, if the newcomer withdraws from the community, and the community obstructs the newcomer, then access to resources is very problematic.

**Figure 1: The interactional dynamics of the situated learning model**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Newcomer trajectory</th>
<th>Community stance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sequester</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Join</td>
<td>access to resources is relative easy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benign neglect</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoid/Withdraw</td>
<td>access to resources is problematic (adapted from Dahl, 1997, p. 6)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Another important concept in this framework is that of nonparticipation in addition to participation:

We not only produce our identities through the practice we engage in, but we also define ourselves through practices we do not engage in. Our identities are constituted not only by what we are but also by what we are not. To the extent that we can come in contact with other ways of being, what we are not can even become a large part of how we define ourselves. (Wenger, 1998, p. 164)

There are many other concepts in this theoretical framework, but the concept of multi-membership is also particularly pertinent to my study. Wenger states that identity entails multi-memberships which require reconciliation:

The work of reconciliation may be the most significant challenge faced by learners who move from one community of practice to another. ... e.g., when an immigrant moves from one culture to another ... learning involves more than appropriating new pieces of information. Learners must often deal with conflicting forms of individuality and competence as defined in different communities. (p. 160)
The COP framework can be fruitful in the study of the adaptation and integration of immigrant professionals as it conceives of learning as a highly complex and socially situated process that is dynamic and involves the negotiation of access, power relations, participation and above all, identity.

**Research Methodology**

This paper reports on the first phase of a qualitative research study of internationally educated teachers (IETs) in the province of Ontario, which receives the majority of new immigrants to Canada. Data collection in this phase consisted of semi-structured interviews with 32 IETs from various countries and with different teaching specializations (see Table 2). The study includes teachers in the English public Kindergarten to Grade 12 (K-12) system, as well as faculty in the English public Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology. I have included three divisions of education in order to compare IETs’ acculturation experiences across different age groups. I also wanted to compare the experiences of teachers seeking entry as well as teachers in the system. I was especially interested in finding out how the teachers who are in the system succeeded in gaining entry, and their strategies for acquiring the language and culture at the workplace.
Table 2: Participant Profiles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Primary/junior division</th>
<th>Intermediate/senior division</th>
<th>College division</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>K to grade 6 (teach all subject areas)</td>
<td>Grades 7 - 12</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>IETs seeking entry</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>Daily substitute teaching or seeking teaching position</td>
<td>Part-time or short-term contract</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>female from China</td>
<td>1. female from Albania: Chemistry</td>
<td>1. female from Columbia: Psychology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>female from China</td>
<td>2. female from Kenya: Chemistry</td>
<td>2. female from Romania: English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>female from Jamaica</td>
<td>3. female from Philippines: Biology</td>
<td>3. female from Philippines: Spanish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>male from Mauritius</td>
<td>4. female from Romania: Fine Arts</td>
<td>4. male from Greece: Fashion &amp; Marketing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>IETs in the system</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>New in the system Long-term contract or new full-time contract</td>
<td>Full-time contract</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>female from Hong Kong</td>
<td>1. female from Hong Kong: Family Studies</td>
<td>1. female from Bulgaria: General Science</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>female from Russia</td>
<td>2. female from Hong Kong: English</td>
<td>2. female from Hong Kong: Social Work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>female from Russia</td>
<td>3. female from Egypt/France: French</td>
<td>3. female from Russia: English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>male from Belorussia</td>
<td>4. male from Moldova: Mathematics</td>
<td>4. male from India: Hospitality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Established in the system</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>Established in the system Permanent full-time contract</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1. female from Austria: Family Studies</td>
<td>5. male from Poland: Biochemistry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>female from India</td>
<td>2. female from India: History</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>female from India</td>
<td>3. male from Poland: Physics</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>female from Venezuela</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This paper will focus on findings related to the following research question: What factors facilitate or constrain the successful acquisition of occupation-specific language and culture of internationally educated teachers (IETs) in Ontario? “Successful acquisition” is defined as the ability to fulfil teaching-specific functions and is operationalized by IETs’ perceptions of their level of communicative competence (linguistic, sociolinguistic, and strategic competencies), and their perceptions of their ability to function well in an English medium-of-instruction school or college.

All interviews were conducted in person, and audio-tape recorded. An interview schedule was used (see Appendix 1). The interviews were approximately 60 to 90 minutes in length. The recordings were then transcribed verbatim, and coded for meaning units and categorized into themes. The dominant and recurring themes were then analyzed in relation to the research question and the theoretical framework.

Findings

In this paper, I will focus on findings from three IET participants at different stages of their teaching career in Canada: Emily, a secondary school teacher from Hong Kong who is in her first year of teaching in Canada; Merida, an elementary school teacher from Venezuela who has been teaching in Canada for eight years; and, Evelyn, a teacher from Austria who has been in Canada for over thirty years and recently retired. Evelyn taught in both elementary and secondary schools in Canada. All of the participants had completed a teacher education program in their countries of origin and were experienced teachers before coming to Canada. All of the participants had learned English as an additional language, but had different degrees of proficiency upon their arrival in Canada, according to their self report.
I will focus on three major themes that emerged from the interview data with regards to the professional acculturation of these three teachers: mentorship and support, community acceptance, and the relation between identity and the acquisition of language in the professional context.

**Mentorship**

Each of the participants spoke of the importance of mentorship and support. Evelyn said that the principal at the first school where she taught was instrumental in her staying in teaching, as she was so discouraged at the beginning and often thought of quitting.

Altogether I’ve had ten principals. He (my first principal) really stands out because I felt really understood, and at the same time, he was really honest. He didn’t say, “You’re doing a fabulous job.” No, he said, “We can’t have so many complaints. This doesn’t go.” I thought I was doing a good job. He was honest, for example, he said, “If you are willing to do extra work, well the kids might not, and that’s not the assignment.” … He told me my progress, and sort of watched out for me, which usually people don’t do. Mentoring. A foreign educated teacher needs mentoring, either an administrator or another teacher. … He’s honest with you, he tells you what’s good, what’s not so good. He takes interest.

Merida also spoke of her first teaching position and the principal who recognized her potential:

In my mind, she gave me the opportunity because she looked and she saw beyond my English proficiency. So somehow that lady knew that I was going to be effective in that class. She saw in me the qualities to handle a behavioural class. It was a big challenge. … I think she believed in me, she gave me that big opportunity, and I have to be grateful for that. I think it was the big open door, that I needed, the confidence boost that I needed, to let me know that I was going to do that. It was going to be step by step because I never stopped taking courses and upgrading myself and going to workshops and learning better ways of doing things, but at the same time, she gave me that push.

Emily had much support from her colleagues and department head. As she was teaching in a large secondary school, her department was the most significant community in her professional context.
Community Acceptance

Community acceptance was also crucial to these teachers’ success. Both Emily and Merida reported that they felt comfortable in their school community. Emily said that her colleagues and administrators all understood how difficult it was to be a new teacher in a school as they had all been in that position before. In addition, the school community was very linguistically and culturally diverse, and demonstrated an appreciation of different cultures. Emily was reassured by her administrators and colleagues:

A lot of people are coming from different cultures. And they encourage me, even if you speak English with an accent, --- don’t mind. Most of us are like that!

Emily was welcomed as a member in this diverse school community, and had access to the social resources of this school’s community of practice such as interactions and guidance from more experienced peers, and physical resources such as course materials. For Merida, the parent community was instrumental to her feeling accepted.

In this particular school, I am very happy with the community. The community is very simple, mostly ESL, from East Asia. They appreciate the efforts we do in the school to help the children get used to the new system, to the new language. Parents are positive. You don’t have the parent that gets the school and gets in your way and demands certain things. That doesn’t happen here. In terms of the approach or the attitude of the school towards the parents, here in Canada, in Ontario in particular, we give a lot of importance to the parent community.

It is interesting that both Emily and Merida teach in diverse school communities, which may explain the welcoming stance of the communities to these newcomer teachers. Evelyn also spoke about the importance of community acceptance on a teacher’s success:

It is absolutely critical or crucial that you have a comfortable staff, that accepts you for who you are. My first school was perfect. … I never felt in any way not accepted. That was not always in the other schools. … Where you don’t feel comfortable, you don’t feel accepted, I don’t know how you could thrive.
**Identity and Language Issues**

In terms of learning the language of a new teaching context, all three participants’ acceptance of their identity as newcomers and second language speakers helped them to deal with language issues. In the following excerpt, Emily talks about communicating with colleagues:

Everyone seems to be very supportive, but it’s just the language barrier we have. Sometimes my colleagues- I cannot explain very well in specific words or terms. I have to explain more, and sometimes it seems that she cannot understand what I’m talking about. Sometimes it makes me a bit embarrassed, but I try to tell myself it’s okay because you’re a new immigrant, you’re not so familiar with their culture, their language.

Merida’s strategy was to be up front with every person whom she meets:

I always try to be very open, with my co-workers, my family, my friends. If you hear me say something that is not right, please tell me. I will not get offended, just tell me how it is, and I will correct it. That has been my attitude towards learning English. I don’t make a big deal out of making a mistake. I tell the kids the very first day of school that sometimes my words come out, and they sound kind of funny, because I do speak other languages. If they don’t understand, just put up your hand and I’ll try, I’ll try to be as clear as I can, I’ll try to tell you again.”

Evelyn also confirmed she had to learn to be comfortable with herself, and her accent:

You have to feel really comfortable with yourself. You see, I didn’t feel comfortable with myself yet because I knew my language skills weren’t quite the way they should be and so on, … You see, the moment there is an insecurity within you, they pick up it instantly. … If you’re comfortable with yourself, the kids would pick up on that. For example, the kids would imitate my accent. I would feel so uncomfortable, and I would feel offended. Well, as the years went on, the kids would do that, I say, “You know, you have to practise a bit more because I don’t quite say it that way.” That takes the wind out of the sail. So nobody imitates me now, and I still have an accent. So you sort of learn, but it takes a long time.

**Discussion**

These findings speak to the importance of mediation, community membership, and identity in the professional integration of these immigrant teachers. First, the findings highlight
the importance of scaffolding from a more experienced teacher or administrator in the IETs’ adaptation to a new school context. All three teachers discussed how important it was to have mentorship and support. In COP terms, these IETs were legitimate peripheral participants. They were able to access various forms of resources, including interactions with “old-timers,” in order to develop their competencies.

Another crucial factor that contributed to these teachers’ successful professional integration was that they felt accepted by various levels of the community. According to Dahl’s model, the interaction between the welcoming stance of the community and the strong desire of the teachers to join this community helped these teachers to be successful practitioners. However, this is not to say that the acculturation process is an easy one. Evelyn stated that it took her many years to feel comfortable with the values in the Canadian education system and culture that conflicted with the culture from which she came. For Merida, her adjustment was easier as she believed that many aspects of the Canadian education system were better than the system in Venezuela.

Wenger also raises the point that the community changes with the participation of new members. When the dominant society or community is resistant to change, newcomers’ access to the community is obstructed. Additionally, the relation between the newcomer and the community is dialectic. The newcomer teachers who have been successful in their integration have exhibited an openness to new ways of doing things, a certain flexibility concerning their values and beliefs. Also, as discussed by Wenger, they have to be able to reconcile their multi-memberships and identities.

Finally, what was reflected in the findings is the relationship between these teachers’ identities and their acquisition of language. Acceptance of their identity as a newcomer who
speaks English as an additional language helped these teachers to develop strategies to deal with language issues in a professional context.

In conclusion, a sociocultural view of learning and the COP framework, with its focus on the workplace context and on social practice, can provide valuable insights into immigrant professionals’ acquisition of occupation-specific language and culture. As discussed above, a number of COP concepts such as access to community resources and the need to negotiate competency and identity speak strongly to the experiences of immigrant teachers described above. In recent literature on immigrant settlement, there has been increasing awareness of the need to educate the Canadian public and employers, in contrast to the traditional focus on perceived deficiencies of immigrants. In order for immigrant professionals to integrate, the community stance must be open to the newcomers, and accept them as legitimate peripheral participants.
References


Appendix 1: Interview Schedule

I. Background information
1. How long have you been in Canada?
2. Could you tell me about your life before and after you came to Canada?
3. Could you tell me why you decided to become a teacher?
4. What are your professional goals?

II. Previous education and teaching experience
1. Could you tell me about your previous education and the education system you attended?
   • elementary, secondary, post-secondary
   • teacher education program
2. Could you tell me about your teaching and/or other professional experience before coming to Canada?

III. Teaching in Canada
1. Could you tell me about your teaching experiences since your arrival in Canada?
2. Could you describe the certification/re-certification process? (K-12 teachers)
3. What are your experiences in gaining entry into the Ontario public education system?
4. What are your experiences with the application / interviewing process?
5. Regarding teaching in a different education system (from your own education or teaching):
   • What do you like?
   • What do you dislike?
   • What do you find easier?
   • What do you find challenging or more difficult?

IV. Acquisition of professional language & culture
1. In relation to your teaching and/or seeking a teaching position in the Ontario education system, are there any issues related to language or culture that stand out in your mind?
2. How does classroom/teaching-related language and culture compare to your country of origin?
3. Is there anything you find particularly challenging about teaching-related language and culture in Canada?
4. What are some strategies that have helped you in the acquisition of teaching-related language and culture?

V. Other
Is there anything else you would like to share about your experiences as an internationally educated teacher/professor in Canada?