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In Plain Sight: Oppressive Dynamics and Learning Challenges in Adult ESOL Programs in the United States

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**In Plain Sight: Oppressive Dynamics and Learning Challenges in
Adult ESOL Programs in the United States**

Abstract

A previous convergent mixed methods study conducted by the author revealed that, based on their preservice preparation and access to in-service professional development, instructors of adult emergent bi/multilingual learners (EBLs) in the United States often felt ill-equipped to address the oppressive dynamics and learning challenges that might manifest in their adult ESOL classrooms. This follow-up interview study explored the prevalence of these oppressive dynamics, such as racism, sexism, and linguisticism, and learning challenges, such as neurodiversity, and investigated how preservice preparation, continuous professional development, program administration, and the field of TESOL might address these issues more consistently and equitably. Semi-structured interviews were conducted via Zoom or over the telephone with 10 randomly selected volunteers. The findings revealed that oppressive dynamics and learning challenges are commonplace in adult ESOL programs in the United States. Recommendations included either routinely incorporating discussions and content related to these issues throughout preservice coursework and continuous professional development or creating postgraduate certificate programs to do so. Participants also felt that the field of TESOL should address these issues on a regular versus *ad hoc* basis through its conferences, publications, and research literature. Limitations of the study and areas for future research were also identified.

Key Words: equity, inclusion, preservice preparation, professional development, adult learners

In Plain Sight: Oppressive Dynamics and Learning Challenges in Adult ESOL Programs in the United States

While affirming the overall quality of existing preservice preparation programs in the United States that have used the *Standards for ESL/EFL Teachers of Adults* (2008) to guide the content for their coursework, the findings from a recent study (Author, in press) also identified areas that require modification and expansion. Two of these areas included the oppressive dynamics, like racism, sexism, and linguicism, and learning challenges, such as neurodiversity, found in adult English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) programs and classrooms. These findings align with other researchers (Crandall, 2000; Cranton, 1996; Perin, 1999; Perry & Hart, 2012) who have asserted that the preservice preparation for instructors of adult emergent bi/multilingual learners (EBLs) in the United States can vary from no preparation whatsoever (i.e., simply being a proficient speaker of English) to short-term certificate programs to undergraduate and graduate degrees. For Darling-Hammond (2006), the belief that any proficient speaker of English can teach the language with no preparation, training, or ongoing professional development is a fallacy. Even with preparation, existing preservice programs can lack the scope and rigor needed to address “the realities of today’s classrooms” (Green et al., 2010, p. 115). Similarly, access to continuous professional development (CPD) is crucial for the evolution of self-reflective educational professionals (Bergeron, 2008; Brannan & Bleistein, 2012; Cranton, 1996; Faez & Valeo, 2012; Milner, 2002; Schön, 1983), especially for novice instructors (Farrell, 2012). Access to CPD, however, can be inconsistent. Scheduling synchronous CPD for instructional staff can be challenging because of the adjunct nature of teaching adult EBLs in the United States (Author, 2022a). The lack of funding at many community-based, adult ESOL programs and the inconsistent institutional support for CPD in higher education (Bachelier, 2015; Backus, 1984) can also thwart access to the training necessary to enhance instructors’ andragogical foundation to address their adult students’ complex learning needs, particularly those with special needs (Karabenick & Noda, 2004). Beyond a strong grounding in language teaching and pedagogical content knowledge (Freeman & Johnson, 1998; Shulman, 1996), many (Brookfield, 2017; Cranton, 1996; Farrell, 2012; Freire, 1970; Mezirow, 1991; Schön, 1983) have advocated for instructors to become reflective practitioners. Nurturing this self-reflection should be initiated during preservice preparation and refined throughout instructors’ professional careers. Ultimately, becoming “reflective in action” (Schön, 1983) during instruction is the most significant way that instructors can support their students with empathy and compassion, effectively manage classroom dynamics, and address whatever oppressive dynamics or learning challenges might present themselves in proactive, direct, and transformative ways. These recommendations might prove more difficult to

implement because, unlike PreK-12 educational settings, licensure is generally not required to teach adults in the United States (Author, 2020a). Therefore, teaching standards and expectations for CPD are not centralized, administered, or overseen at the federal level.

Instruction of adult EBLs also occurs within the complex historical, social, and societal context of the United States of America whose oppressive realities infiltrate and impact policies and instructional practices in adult ESOL programs and classrooms. If, as asserted by Author (2022b) and Gerald (2022), systemic racism and other forms of institutionalized oppression are endemic in the United States, acknowledging that “everyone is infected” with these “diseases” to “a greater or lesser” extent is a critical first step (Closson, 2011, p. 279). If *ostrichism*, or the deliberate avoidance or ignorance of conditions that exist, appears to be the *modus operandi* in many Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) preservice preparation and adult ESOL programs within the United States regarding oppressive dynamics and learning challenges (Author, 2022b), how do we affect a needed paradigm shift so that openly addressing and confronting these dynamics and challenges and implementing strengths-based, anti-oppressive instruction become commonplace? How can we dismantle the mistaken belief that we are not perpetuating racism or other inequities because of the “altruistic or self-sacrificial nature” (Gerald, 2020, p. 22) of our work teaching adult EBLs? Roy (2018) argued that unpacking internalized oppressive beliefs and dynamics demands “being comfortable being uncomfortable” because only this sense of “disequilibrium” can lead to “real learning and transformation” (Roy, 2018, p. ix). This study is a further investigation of the prevalence of oppressive dynamics and learning challenges in adult ESOL programs and how preservice preparation, CPD, program administration, and the field of TESOL through its conferences and publications could be modified to consistently challenge deficit thinking, strengthen the education provided to adult EBLs in more comprehensive and compassionate ways, and promote needed changes within oppressive and unequal societies.

Research Questions

This study investigated the prevalence and types of oppressive dynamics and learning challenges evidenced in adult ESOL programs in the United States and the degree to which they should be addressed in preservice preparation and CPD, including TESOL conferences and publications. The five research questions that guided the study’s design follow:

- 1) To what extent have you personally experienced or witnessed oppressive dynamics or discriminatory practices in the adult ESOL programs where you have worked?

- 2) To what extent have you personally experienced or witnessed oppressive dynamics, discriminatory practices, or learning challenges among your students as an instructor of adult EBLs?
- 3) How and to what degree should oppressive dynamics and learning challenges in adult ESOL classrooms be addressed in preservice preparation?
- 4) How and to what degree should oppressive dynamics and learning challenges in adult ESOL classrooms be addressed in continuous professional development?
- 5) How do you feel the field of TESOL addresses oppressive dynamics, discriminatory practices, and learning challenges through its professional conferences and publications?

Conceptual Framework

Aligned with Author (2022b) and inspired by Kamisli (2021), critical race and intersectionality theories were also the foundational and conceptual frameworks for this study. Critical race theory (CRT) initially investigated the impact of laws inspired by the Civil Rights movement (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017) but has since expanded beyond explorations of race and racism to include the examination of other oppressive dynamics, like gender bias, within American society. As cited in Closson (2010), Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) introduced CRT into the field of education in the United States to investigate the institutionalized racism experienced by Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) students. Ladson-Billings (1998) then advocated that CRT be incorporated into the preservice preparation for instructors to promote grappling with oppressive dynamics, including power and privilege, prior to working with BIPOC students. Aligned with Ladson-Billings (1998), Jiménez et al. (2015), citing Marx (2000) and Terrill and Mark (2000), asserted that instructors, especially those who are White, often have lower expectations for EBLs and other students of color and could “benefit from highly focused instruction designed to reduce prejudices” (p. 407) during their preservice preparation as language instructors. Much like critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970), CRT contains an activist dimension that attempts “to not only understand our social situation but...to transform it for the better” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017, p. 8). Aligned with Freire (1970) and Gerald (2022), Roy (2018) challenged instructors “to recognize, identify, and disrupt ways current pedagogical practices and curricula” that “privilege White European histories, practices, and experiences as primary narrative” (p. xi) and thus foster the implementation of decolonized pedagogies (Martin, Pirbhai-Illich, & Pete, 2017) that are more representative, equitable, and inclusive.

As an outgrowth of CRT, intersectionality investigates how “intersecting power relations” and oppressive dynamics are “interrelated” and “mutually shape one another” in ways that create “intersecting conditions of subordination” (La Barbera, 2013, p. 189) or multiple dimensions of disempowerment (Crenshaw, 1991). For example, when working with adult, immigrant EBLs in the United States or elsewhere, overarching anti-immigrant sentiments and xenophobia can be exacerbated by racism, linguicism, and ableism, which might be further complicated by gender oppression, heterosexism, classism, anti-Semitism, or Islamophobia. These interrelated dynamics can have a synergistic effect that further oppresses and disempowers the students in our adult ESOL programs. Similarly, instructors and administrators could also experience racism, gender oppression, ageism, etc., given the ubiquity of these dynamics within most societies. Consequently, CRT and intersectionality theories were appropriate lenses through which to examine the interview data collected in this study and as a framework to investigate and present the findings of the prevalence of oppressive dynamics, including ableism as manifest in learning challenges, within adult ESOL classrooms and programs in the United States.

Positionality and Terminology

The author self-identifies as a 61-year-old, white, gay, middle-class, cis-male who is free of known learning dis/abilities or challenges and who remains on a lifelong journey of unpacking his multiple areas of privilege. He has been a licensed social worker for almost 35 years and has worked within the field of adult literacy, primarily with adult EBLs in postsecondary settings, as an instructor, counselor, and administrator for over 22 years.

Of all the terms used in this article, *linguicism*, might be the least familiar. Credited for coining the term, Skutnabb-Kangas (1988, 2015) posited people who speak non-dominant languages (e.g., speaking languages other than English in the United States) or registers of the dominant language that are considered non-standardized or unduly accented typically encounter harsh judgement, discrimination, and oppression. The term, *emergent bi/multilingual learner*, is derived from the work of Otheguy et al. (2015) and Colombo et al. (2019) and supported by the work of Gerald (2022) by attempting to counter the deficit models and oppressive dynamics surrounding teaching adult EBLs, challenge both linguicism and the hegemony of English, especially in English-dominant countries, and acknowledge and leverage students’ full linguistic repertoires. Similarly, the use of acquiring a *new* or *additional* language affirms that many adult EBLs are bi- or multilingual before beginning their English-language studies. A glossary of the abbreviations of these and other terms can be found in Table 1.

Table 1

Glossary of abbreviations used in the article

| Abbreviation | Meaning |
|--------------|---|
| ADHD | Attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder |
| BIPOC | Black, indigenous, and people of color |
| Cert | Certificate program |
| CPD | Continuous professional development |
| CRT | Critical race theory |
| DEI | Diversity, equity, and inclusion |
| EBL | Emergent bi/multilingual learner |
| Edd/PhD | Doctoral degree |
| EFL | English as a foreign language |
| ESL | English as a second language |
| ESOL | English to speakers of other languages |
| IRB | Institutional review board |
| MA | Master's degree |
| SLIFE | Students with limited or interrupted formal education |
| TESOL | Teaching English to speakers of other languages |

Methodology

After completing a survey instrument, research participants could volunteer to be contacted for a follow-up semi-structured interview (Author, 2022b). From this volunteer pool, 10 participants were randomly selected. Once a mutually convenient time was established to conduct the interview remotely via Zoom or over the telephone, participants signed another informed consent agreeing to be audio-recorded and to review their interview transcript to ensure its accuracy, representativeness, and completeness. The interview transcripts were analyzed qualitatively, primarily by identifying “thick descriptions” (Patton, 2015) as related to the *a priori* themes embedded within the research questions themselves. Participants were instructors of adult EBLs in the United States, though some had also taught English to adult EBLs internationally. The proposal for this study was approved through the required Institutional Review Board (IRB) process for research conducted on human subjects, particularly related to the research participants’ informed consent, anonymity, and confidentiality.

Participants

Research participants were recruited through professional TESOL organizations, like TESOL International Association, Inc. (2020), as well as institutions and organizations that provide preservice preparation programs for instructors of adult EBLs throughout the United States. Snowball sampling was also encouraged. The goal was to attract a diverse participant pool with different degrees of preservice preparation and a range of teaching experience. From the research participants who agreed to be contacted for a follow-up interview, 10 were randomly selected: Six women and four men. Seven identified as white and three as BIPOC. Their teaching experience encompassed diverse contexts, ranging from USA-based to international, community-based organizations and libraries, English for Specific Purposes (ESP)/vocational training programs, for-profit language schools, intensive F-1 visa programs, and higher education. Three—Bridget, Earl, and Susan—have assumed administrative roles in adult ESOL programs, a career trajectory common in the field (Author, 2022a). Other participants identified themselves as “career changers” because they had not initially planned nor studied to teach adult EBLs. Perhaps Rochelle summarized this professional evolution the best: “One thing just led to another....I didn’t see myself teaching adult ESL...it just happened.”

The initial recruitment materials for the first study were generic, stating that participants would complete an online survey related to their “preservice preparation and ongoing professional development.” After completing the survey, however, participants were aware of the topics being investigated, specifically oppressive dynamics and learning challenges. Consequently, volunteers for this interview study cannot be characterized as representative of instructors of adult EBLs in the United States because of the recruitment strategy used. Similarly, they might also be more positively inclined and passionate about discussing the issues being investigated and incorporating them into preservice preparation coursework and CPD more consistently. A profile of the interview participants can be found in Table 2.

Data Collection

The data sources for this study were semi-structured interviews that lasted between 18 and 59 minutes ($\bar{X}=39.2$) for the 10 volunteer participants. The use of the terms, *oppressive dynamics* and *learning challenges*, were intentionally broad so that participants could articulate their own interpretations of these terms. In addition to the variety of *isms* manifest in American society (e.g., racism, sexism, classism, ableism, ageism, heterosexism, linguicism, etc.), participants included the “infantilization” of adult EBLs (Gerald, 2022), “language hierarchies,” and homogenous classrooms as potential oppressive dynamics in adult ESOL programs and classrooms. Similarly, although the learning

Table 2

Interview Participant Profile

| Participant | TESOL Preparation | Career Changer | EFL Experience |
|-------------|-------------------|----------------|----------------|
| April | Cert. | Yes | No |
| Bridget | MA | Yes | No |
| Doris | Cert. | Yes | Yes |
| Earl | Cert./MA | No | Yes |
| John | MA/EdD | No | Yes |
| Lori | MA | No | Yes |
| Max | MA | Yes | No |
| Neil | MA | Yes | No |
| Rochelle | MA | Yes | No |
| Susan | MA/PhD | No | Yes |

challenges identified by participants fell largely under the aegis of neurodiversity (e.g., students on the autism spectrum or with undiagnosed learning dis/abilities, etc.) or mental health issues (e.g., trauma and social anxiety), some participants included socioeconomic status, family/childcare responsibilities, and housing and food insecurity as learning challenges.

Data Analysis

The author/lead researcher transcribed all audio-recorded interviews. Prior to reviewing the transcripts to identify specific details and “thick descriptions” (Patton, 2015), the accompanying transcripts were reviewed and edited by all participants. After this member checking and revision, the transcripts were “solo coded” by hand using the *a priori* codes embedded in the interview questions themselves, primarily focusing on manifestations of oppressive dynamics, discriminatory practices, and learning challenges within the administration and classroom dynamics of adult ESOL programs. The other *a priori* codes focused on the degree to which participants felt that these issues should be addressed in preservice preparation, CPD, and the field of TESOL through its conferences and publications. These multiple rounds of review and coding were guided by the lenses of the research questions and the conceptual framework.

Findings

Given the areas addressed in the interview questions themselves, the following overarching *a priori* themes emerged: 1) programmatic manifestations; 2) classroom-based manifestations; 3) implications for preservice preparation; 4) implications for professional development; and 5) recommendations for TESOL conferences and publications.

Programmatic Manifestations

Although not all participants witnessed explicit incidents of oppressive dynamics or learning challenges on a programmatic level, they have all experienced an overarching, perhaps unconscious, deficit perspective towards adult EBLs. April and Susan characterized this bias as “infantilization” based on language proficiency and “unspoken standards” about what “being educated” means. Doris concurred that language proficiency can get conflated with intelligence, which has obvious ableist undertones (Gerald, 2022). Neil and Susan asserted that such bias and other “microaggressions” are commonplace because of the socio-cultural-historical context of the United States where oppressive dynamics and discriminatory practices are the “norm.” For John, many adult ESOL programs have failed to deal effectively with the obvious trauma manifest among immigrant, especially refugee, students, or, for Neil, their intense “work and family responsibilities.” As Bridget entered administrative positions herself, she grappled with the following self-imposed questions: “In what ways is oppression baked into [existing] administrative structures and practices?” and “What can I do to overcome them?”

To cite specific examples, Bridget observed program administrators who were “obviously racist” to non-White employees and students and advertised their programs as having “native speaking” (read White) instructors. All participants identified linguicism in all its varieties as commonplace in adult ESOL programs. Earl, Bridget, and Lori identified “native speakerism” when students might not like an instructor because they were not a native speaker of English or because they spoke “accented English.” Earl pondered whether the languages spoken by program staff ultimately influences which students attend adult ESOL programs. In many areas of the United States, Spanish speakers are privileged over those who speak other home languages because so many program staff and instructors speak Spanish proficiently. For example, Earl realized that Mandarin speakers in one of his programs were immediately perceived as “really low level” by program staff when their English-language proficiencies were comparable or better than the native Spanish-speaking students. Lori and Rochelle observed this

phenomenon as well, which Lori described as a “language hierarchy” where certain home languages are privileged over others.

Earl mentioned that private English-language schools handle oppressive dynamics differently because “profit is the main motivator versus justice and equity,” and they tend to cater to their “paying customers” versus protecting their staff. He recalled being told by an administrator of a for-profit language school that “we don’t want to make our students feel uncomfortable.” This explains why the administrator did eventually remove a male student who exposed himself to a female student in a Zoom breakout room because she had failed to respond to his sexual advances but “turned a blind eye” to the sexual harassment experienced by instructors from students.

Rochelle, Bridget, and Susan mentioned more subtle examples, including how learning challenges and culturally nuanced dynamics, like plagiarism, are addressed. For Rochelle, interventions for dyslexia in higher education typically only included testing accommodations or tutoring, which are extracurricular versus andragogical in nature. Bridget asserted that “there aren’t systems in place that actually help [adult EBLs] with learning challenges.” Related to plagiarism, Susan posited that higher education generally assumes that “everyone has the same foundational knowledge,” regardless of country of origin, and has also internalized the individualism exulted in the United States. Yet, doing collective work and using the words of scholars and cultural icons are accepted in other countries and cultures versus being seen as a violation of academic integrity.

Classroom-Based Manifestations

Much like programmatic manifestations, classroom manifestations and unconsciously discriminatory practices were simultaneously “more systemic” and omnipresent for Bridget yet “more subtle and insidious” for Max. As a practical strategy, Bridget and Earl advocated for making discussions related to “marginalization, oppression, and power dynamics” as “routine” components of instruction. For them, addressing “patriarchy, heteronormativity, cis-gender, and transphobia” should become classroom norms, not anomalies. Addressing trauma must also be integrated into classroom dynamics for April, especially given the lived experiences of immigrant and refugee students and the shared trauma prompted by the recent COVID-19 pandemic (Author, 2021; Gross, 2020).

For Bridget and Earl, grappling with internalized linguicism can manifest in pondering “who determines what native-like proficiency actually is” and where “global Englishes” and “language distance” lie in this discriminatory language hierarchy? Why is American, British, or Australian English

deemed superior to Indian or Nigerian English? Similarly, who determines what “standardized formal English is” and how can instructors counteract the prejudice and discrimination that students face for communicating in “non-standardized” ways, including in international contexts (Gerald, 2022).

Bridget, Lori, and Earl mentioned witnessing homophobia and transphobia in adult ESOL classrooms, specifically when promoting equity and fairness for transgender students during their transitioning process. Earl asserted that heteronormativity and transphobia can also get compounded by people’s religious beliefs. He gave an example of a gifted, openly gay ESOL instructor who was harassed by a female student who condemned him for his “deviant lifestyle” and suggested that he could be “cured” if he just met the “right woman,” whom she offered to procure for him.

As someone who has taught English extensively outside the United States, John asserted that addressing oppressive dynamics with an American “woke” consciousness and sensibility is complicated in an EFL context where cultural norms and beliefs may be different. For example, during a class discussion, a male student made a blatantly anti-Semitic comment to a female Jewish student, which could have been further complicated by ageism and sexism. Appalled, John went to the program director whose response was: “What do you mean? What is the problem? He is just giving his opinion.” As a man of color, John also experienced racist comments from his students while teaching abroad. In both cases, no disciplinary action was taken by his superiors.

Rochelle mentioned that her preservice preparation presupposed that all her adult ESOL classrooms would be “widely diverse.” Yet, given language enclaves and racialized segregation common in many urban/suburban areas in the United States, adult ESOL classrooms can be quite homogenous in that one home language predominates. Students from other language backgrounds can be “marginalized” with racially, ethnically, or linguistically charged taunts and jokes. Susan cited examples where an instructor wanted “to cater to one group versus another” (based on gender, age, race, home language, etc.) and “allowed discriminatory dynamics to go unchallenged.” She posited that this failure to confront discriminatory practices does a profound disservice to adult EBLs and thwarts our own evolution as innovative and inclusive educational professionals.

Overall, participants cited more examples regarding learning challenges among their students because of their prevalence in adult ESOL classrooms. Though not clinicians who can diagnose, participants could sense that some students’ struggles were not related to “language interference” but more to “thought processing” issues. For Earl and Bridget, undiagnosed learning dis/abilities can get

“conflated with intelligence” and overall ability. April, Lori, Rochelle, and Max mentioned how marginal literacy in EBLs’ home languages and limited or interrupted formal education (SLIFE) can adversely affect acquiring a new language. April suspected that one of her students had Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) given her inability to concentrate and being consistently tangential during Zoom sessions. These behaviors could also be manifestations of trauma (Gross, 2020). Lori worked with a student who was dyslexic in English but not his home language and Neil with a student who struggled with dysgraphia. John has suspected having students on the autism spectrum or with learning dis/abilities in his classes or the programs he has administered, but these students only become “problematic” if they “disrupt classroom dynamics” or cannot “complete required work.” Akin to his experience with oppressive dynamics while teaching abroad, John asserted that “identifying and diagnosing learning challenges might be more difficult in an EFL context” as what is considered “normative” is “culturally relative and dependent.”

For Rochelle, John, Susan, and Bridget, accommodations for learning challenges are “lacking,” due to “defined, often restrictive protocols.” As mentioned previously, these accommodations are typically not related to adjusting curricula or andragogical practices but rather extracurricular adjustments like notetaking and extended time or other testing accommodations (scheduled breaks, larger print, etc.). In John’s experience, these accommodations can be interpreted as “cheapening the value” of a college degree. Embedded in this conundrum is the lack of governmental funding so *all* students who aspire to earn postsecondary degrees in the United States receive sufficient support to do so (Zaloom, 2021).

Implications for Preservice Preparation

“I feel really strongly that [oppressive dynamics and learning challenges] should be a huge part of teacher education curriculum...If faculty members in STEM can integrate aspects related to the dismantling of discrimination and oppression, certainly in teacher education we can do that as well.”

Susan

“I was stunned that these issues and concerns [being bias aware and culturally competent] were not on the syllabi [in my preservice preparation].” April

Most participants felt that oppressive dynamics and learning challenges should be addressed in preservice preparation. For Neil, these issues “should be one of the primary things we study” to promote “the social justice aspect of our work.” The degree and the manner they should be addressed, however, varied. For example, as a preservice instructor who was new to teaching, Doris felt challenged enough acquiring sufficient pedagogical content knowledge to teach English effectively to adult EBLs.

She did admit, however, that these dynamics “should at least be raised” so they are on novice instructors’ “radar screens” when they enter the field. Max, another career changer, strongly disagreed and, like Neil, felt that these issues should be integral to preservice preparation. As an experienced instructor and teacher educator, John’s perspective aligned closely with Max’s because failing to address these issues in preservice preparation will have a “profound effect on novice instructors.” Bridget concurred and firmly believed that teacher educators in preservice programs need to “lead by example by openly addressing “White supremacy, racism, and ableist and heteronormative thinking” and share their “own struggles and mistakes” when grappling with these issues. As role models, they could affirm that “every person goes through this [professional self-reflective process] differently” when unpacking dynamics of privilege and oppression.

Perhaps the participants were adamant about the inclusion of oppressive dynamics and learning challenges in preservice preparation because these topics were lacking or absent in their own preparation. For example, Susan shared that “none of my educational programs, from undergraduate to doctorate, addressed these issues.” Her experience was echoed by John. Rochelle felt “ill-prepared” when entering the field because she received “nothing on learning challenges with adult EBLs,” which left her at a loss when these challenges presented themselves among her EBLs.

Certificate programs might be too condensed to address these issues fully (Author, in press), but, as John asserted, “in master’s programs, there is plenty of time to expose people to some of these oppressive dynamics and the different types of students” teachers-in-training will encounter. Rochelle and Lori asserted that preservice preparation programs should have “at least one class” related to “special education” so instructors of adult EBLs are prepared to work with students with learning challenges. Max, Bridget, Lori, Susan, John, and Doris felt that discussions of these dynamics should extend beyond the “sociocultural or intercultural communication” classes that are common in certificate and graduate preparation programs. Addressing these dynamics should also move “beyond theoretical discussions” and a “superficial awareness of cultural competence” to include “practical strategies and techniques” that can be employed in classroom instruction. When preparing instructors of adult EBLs to work internationally, John asserted that racialized dynamics might vary, but common threads exist regarding “gender oppression, socioeconomic hierarchies, and homo- and transphobia.” All participants felt that awareness of teaching context, specifically the different kinds of adult ESOL programs and administrative requirements unique to each within the United States and internationally, should also be addressed in preservice preparation.

Implications for Professional Development

Although all participants affirmed the importance of CPD throughout their teaching careers, they acknowledged the challenges of scheduling synchronous sessions, either virtually or in-person, given the adjunct nature of teaching adult EBLs in the United States (Author, 2022a). Ensuring attendance and attracting quality outside speakers is equally difficult because instructors and speakers are not typically compensated for CPD in most adult ESOL programs. Due to these challenges, April asserted that instructors of adult EBLs must be “self-motivated to evolve professionally.” When CPD is offered, Bridget suggested providing options that, for Doris, have a “practical versus a theoretical focus” (Author, in press).

Regarding oppressive dynamics and learning challenges, John asserted that discussions of these topics in CPD should become “less ad hoc,” and Bridget, Earl, April, and Susan agreed. They felt that these issues should be addressed “on a consistent basis” and “not tokenized.” Rochelle asserted that addressing students with “low-level English-language proficiency,” including adult EBLs with absolutely no English, on the autism spectrum, and with learning dis/abilities, is imperative. For Max, the essence of “strengths-based, culturally responsive, sustaining, and decolonizing pedagogies” (Gay, 2002; Guy, 1999; Ladson-Billings, 1995a; Martin, Pirbhai-Illich, & Pete, 2017; Paris & Alim, 2017) addresses oppressive dynamics and learning challenges directly by acknowledging and leveraging adult EBLs’ lived experiences and realities to acquire a new language and content. These andragogical strategies and techniques should thus be regularly presented and reinforced in CPD. Similarly, given the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the lingering presence of completely online or hybrid classes in adult ESOL programs, April advocated for ongoing presentations addressing the andragogical “best practices” of educational technology and sensitivity surrounding the “digital divide” common among many adult EBLs (Author, 2021; Boeren et al., 2020). Lori advocated for more collaboration with other related disciplines to honor the voices of “minoritized communities within adult ESOL programs.” For example, she suggested that “Arabic-speaking instructors of adult EBLs should present their perspectives regarding working with Arabic-speaking students versus White scholars sharing their perspectives and research on Arabic-speaking EBLs.”

Recommendations for TESOL Conferences and Publications

Up and down in the field, from publishers to master’s programs to the teachers themselves, it [addressing oppressive dynamics and learning challenges] could be done. It could be given more attention...the textbooks are not inclusive of these realities. John

Overall, participants' experience with TESOL conferences and publications has been more limited, but in what they have experienced, oppressive dynamics and learning challenges have not been addressed to the degree they had expected. For example, Rochelle has "never seen" sessions addressing discrimination or learning challenges in the conferences or CPD events that she has attended. Bridget has seen "token workshops" on occasion. John concurred that "they are not consistently a central focus of these conferences." For Neil, he wishes that oppressive dynamics and learning challenges "were an [integral] part of our professional development and our literature." April stressed that fostering cultural competence should be consistently cultivated through "pragmatic strategies, approaches, and best practices" through TESOL conferences and our research literature. Bridget and Max's heartfelt belief in "humanizing our adult EBLs" through "empathy and compassion" are supported by April's comments. Aligned with her recommendations for CPD, Lori felt that publishers in the field and curators of TESOL conferences should cross-pollinate our literature with "diverse perspectives" from "other academic disciplines."

Discussion and Implications

As the findings of this study affirmed, more significant progress needs to be made in consistently addressing oppressive dynamics and learning challenges within the field of TESOL, particularly in our adult ESOL programs and classrooms. As Susan asserted, we still have a "long way to go" to truly overcome "the deficit thought and theory" that permeates teaching adult EBLs in the United States. Perhaps the critical first step in promoting effective teaching practice and ensuring longevity in the field is incorporating professional self-reflection in all preservice preparation coursework (Bergeron, 2008; Brannan & Bleistein, 2012; Cranton, 1996; Faez & Valeo, 2012; Farrell, 2012; Milner, 2002; Schön, 1983). This way, instructors-in-training can begin grappling with their unconscious biases towards students who are different, including those with learning challenges. This self-exploration is essential within the United States because these oppressive dynamics and ideologies, including ableism, have been institutionalized and codified in our laws and educational policies and practices since the country's inception (Gerald, 2022). For Bridget, "we are so inured by the harsh messages that we hear daily about different types of people" that we become "unconscious of them." As Susan acknowledged, "the ability to disrupt some of these discriminatory and oppressive practices is slow, but it is possible when it is intentionally done," like through purposeful inclusion in preservice preparation coursework, CPD, and daily teaching practice. Max and Susan agreed and asserted that failing to address these issues consistently is "doing a disservice" to adult EBLs and their instructors alike.

As a strategy, both Max and John felt that these issues could easily be interwoven into existing preservice coursework and CPD. For example, in methodology classes, why couldn't prospective instructors develop lessons for adult EBLs who are on the autism spectrum or dealing with social anxiety? When discussing classroom management, why not address strategies for confronting racist, sexist, linguist, and homo- or transphobic comments in adult ESOL classrooms? Developing these skills during preservice preparation will, in turn, cultivate the best practices of culturally responsive, sustaining, and decolonizing pedagogies (Gay, 2002; Guy, 1999; Ladson-Billings, 1995a; Martin, Pirbhai-Illich, & Pete, 2017; Paris & Alim, 2017) as well as facilitate their successful implementation once instructors enter the field. Regarding professional advocacy, how can discriminatory or prejudicial hiring practices in adult ESOL programs be challenged? As Bridget and Earl affirmed, true representation of diverse voices in the field as instructors, program administrators, and teacher educators is paramount. Equally crucial is mentoring, supporting, and advocating for diverse staff after they are hired. Otherwise, diverse representation becomes superficial, for appearance's sake, but not truly equitable and inclusive. Such advocacy, inclusive representation, and disruption of the status quo is a true manifestation of Freire's (1970) critical pedagogy and will, in the end, promote more equitable and just societies.

In addition to interweaving these issues into preservice preparation, Doris and Rochelle suggested creating "postgraduate certificate programs" whose coursework could deal specifically with either oppressive dynamics for Doris or learning challenges for Rochelle. They argued that, once instructors have teaching experience, these issues feel less abstract and theoretical and more grounded in their daily interactions with adult EBLs. These courses should focus on practical, evidenced-based best practices for addressing these issues, which could then be immediately incorporated into instruction. Given the "social work aspect" of teaching adult EBLs, Lori advocated for "mental health program staff" or at least reliable "referral pathways to resources and organizations in the community" that could provide legal, vocational, and other forms of psycho-social-emotional support to adult EBLs (Author, 2020b).

Limitations of the Study and Suggestions for Future Research

The most obvious limitation of this study is the lack of representativeness of the interview participants and their potential bias toward the issues investigated. Ideally, this interview study should be replicated both in the United States and internationally with a completely randomized sample of instructors of adult EBLs to affirm the veracity and generalizability of this study's findings. Although the examples of racism and linguicism cited in this study might be unique to the United States given its history of chattel slavery and colonialism (Gerald, 2022), I would argue that oppressive dynamics (e.g.,

sexism and homophobia) and learning challenges exist in all contexts in which English is taught as an additional language and warrant investigation in all international contexts. An area of future research could be a document analysis of preservice preparation curricula and syllabi for instructors of adult EBLs to investigate the degree to which oppressive dynamics and learning challenges are addressed in this coursework. Similarly, an analysis of CPD opportunities and TESOL conference programs and publications could reveal the degree to which these issues are presented.

Conclusion

I don't think there are open discussions about discriminatory practices and oppressive dynamics in teacher education programs...but I think DEI [diversity, equity, and inclusion] is becoming much more engrained, particularly in the English-language teaching world...I hope that it's not a fad. Susan Education is not just pedagogy or classroom management or knowing content well enough to teach it. It is presupposition, ideology, questioning, and reflecting. I think we need to be honest with preservice instructors and in-service teachers in professional development that education is both/and, not either/or.
Susan

"If we choose equitable options and actions, we will achieve new outcomes: equity, inclusion, humanity...the cumulative impact of many small choices can be as significant as the impacts of big decisions. Each of us has the power to catalyze the change we want to see in the world." (Ward, 2022, p. 11).

Oftentimes, confronting internalized biases and external realities related to oppressive dynamics and learning challenges can feel daunting, almost insurmountable, but, as Ward (2022) asserted, we all have the power to promote needed changes within ourselves and the programs where we work. What the Chinese philosopher, Lao Tzu, said centuries ago remains true today: "The journey of a thousand miles begins with one step." If we can rally against the allure of *ostrichism* (Author, 2022b) and directly and honestly address the conditions and realities that exist in our adult ESOL programs and classrooms, we can do much to disrupt the status quo for our minoritized and marginalized adult EBLs students. By overcoming our own feelings of awkwardness, shame, or pain and addressing these dynamics in a straightforward manner, we will, in turn, be fostering more equitable and inclusive societies. We must first divest ourselves from the fallacy that we are not perpetuating racism or other inequities because of the "altruistic or self-sacrificial nature" (Gerald, 2020, p. 22) of our work. In the end, this seemingly selfless intent can have inadvertent and deleterious consequences (Gerald, 2022; Roy, 2018). Citing Daniel Tatum (2017), Bridget shared the analogy of walking in the opposite direction of a moving sidewalk, much like salmon swimming upstream, when attempting to resist and disrupt oppressive dynamics, including racism and ableism, in our adult ESOL programs and classrooms. Sometimes, this journey can be arduous and feel isolating, but, if we work together, needed changes can occur

incrementally yet steadily. As this study identified, one collaboration could be consistently incorporating content and discussions regarding oppressive dynamics and learning challenges into our preservice preparation coursework and our ongoing CPD. Having these issues become permanent features in our field, versus *ad hoc* or faddish, will not only promote more effective and student-centered instruction but also cultivate more self-actualized adult EBLs who can disrupt the status quo, liberate themselves, and transform societies (Freire, 1970). As Susan eloquently stated, routinely addressing these issues in the field of TESOL need not be an extraordinary or exclusive (“either/or”) but can be an ordinary and inclusive (“both/and”) enterprise. Embracing this more comprehensive philosophy of *both/and* mandates removing “our heads from the sand” and includes engendering more self-reflective educational professionals, modifying our andragogical practices in culturally sustaining and decolonizing ways, and directly confronting the realities that exist in plain sight with the goal of creating a more just, equitable, and inclusive world.

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