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Navigating policy, pedagogy, and the self in TESOL

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Introduction

From time to time, those of us working in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) become acutely aware that the field is evolving in ways that demand our attention. Established conversations take on new contours, and challenges long familiar begin to reveal unfamiliar dimensions. This issue – Volume 34, Number 1 of *TESOL in Context* – emerges at one such moment.

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In the current issue, it is clear that our field is grappling with a convergence of pressures. The lingering shadows of systemic policy shifts and the burgeoning integration of artificial intelligence (AI) in the classroom have compelled practitioners to rethink professional identities, day-to-day pedagogy, as well as the psychological and identity-based dimensions of language education. This issue brings together a collection of papers, a special report, and a book review that collectively examine where the field stands today and, importantly, where it is heading as these forces intensify and further influence learning and teaching.

The contributions in this issue can be broadly categorised into three intersecting themes, as we 1) discuss some of the key dimensions of present-day TESOL policy and advocacy, 2) evaluate the pedagogical affordances of emerging technologies, and 3) create insights into the inner lives of learners and teachers, specifically regarding identity, anxiety, and investment. Together, these publications challenge us to look beyond the surface of policy and classroom

practice to the structural and emotional undercurrents that shape the educational experience of language learners and teachers.

The erasure of expertise: A call for policy literacy

We begin this editorial by drawing attention to the issue's Special Report, a historical policy analysis by Michael Michell. Michell's contribution is essential reading for every TESOL professional in Australia and might offer a cautionary tale for international contexts. For decades, educators in Australia fought for the recognition of English language teaching (being it English as a Second Language (ESL), or English as an Additional Language/Dialect [EAL/D]) as a specialised field requiring specific funding, curriculum, and expertise. Michell discusses how this recognition has been systematically eroded. He traces the trajectory from the specific-purpose ESL provisions of the 1980s, described as a high-water mark for equity, to the 'broadbanding' in the 1990s, and finally, the 'disbanding' in the 2000s.

Michell's analysis uses Kingdon's (1984, 1995) policy streams and New Public Management frameworks to explain how ESL was subsumed under general literacy and disadvantage agendas. This bureaucratic sleight of hand, also known as broadbanding, effectively rendered the specific linguistic needs of migrant and refugee students invisible within broader equity programs. The report argues that this was not accidental but a result of 'displacement by design'. By reframing ESL issues as generic literacy deficits, policymakers could dismantle tied funding and specialised support structures.

What makes the report really worthwhile, however, is its call to action. Mitchell argues that for TESOL educators to reclaim their professional standing and advocate effectively for their students, they must develop policy literacy. It is not enough to be a good classroom teacher; one must understand the machinery of government that determines whether that classroom is funded or whether the specialist is replaced by a generalist literacy support officer. This report sets the tone for this issue, reminding us that pedagogical innovation (the focus of other papers in this volume) occurs within a policy ecosystem that requires vigilance, input, and change from those working on the ground: the TESOL professionals.

Advocacy beyond borders

Complementing Michell's Australian domestic policy critique is the Book Review by Xiaoxiao Kong, discussing *Decentering Advocacy in English Language Teaching: Global Perspectives and Local Practices* (Reynolds et al., 2024). If Michell documents the structural dismantling of support in Australia, Kong's review highlights the grassroots resilience of teachers worldwide who are filling the gaps. This emphasis on locally grounded, teacher-led advocacy also reflects insights emerging elsewhere in the literature, which identify such everyday practices as a stabilising force amid broader systematic pressures (Tang, 2025).

The review focuses on the book's shift away from Western-centric, top-down models of advocacy toward locally responsive initiatives. Kong details how the edited volume showcases educators in contexts such as Nigeria, Belize and Vietnam who are navigating resource constraints and institutional indifference to advocate for their students. The review notes that true advocacy is often 'situated, everyday practice,' driven by teacher resilience rather than grand policy reform. The review argues that this decentring is a critical intellectual move. It validates the work of teachers who may not hold structural power but who exercise agency to create inclusive spaces for their learners. Alongside Michell's report, it suggests a dual approach: we must be aware of what happens top-down, fight for policy that works for the field, while simultaneously valuing, equipping, and being inspired in this fight by bottom-up, teacher-led advocacy.

Challenging the "saviour" mentality

Bridging the gap between policy/advocacy and classroom practice is Mandana Arfa-Kaboodvand's opinion piece. This piece serves as a check on the international development of TESOL. Arfa-Kaboodvand critiques the 'paternalistic mindset' and 'saviour mentality' often embedded in English language teaching projects in the Global South.

Drawing on personal experiences in Eswatini and other contexts, the author argues that well-meaning interventions often fail because they are predicated on the assumption that developing nations are 'deficient' and need rescue by Western expertise. Instead, she advocates for 'respectful support' that centres local autonomy, intercultural competence, and dialogue. For TESOL practitioners, especially those involved in international education or aid work, this is a reminder that language teaching is never neutral. It can either reinforce colonial power dynamics or foster genuine, reciprocal partnership. The paper calls for a pedagogy that 'bridges cultural divides' rather than one that simply reinforces archaic norms and inequalities.

The digital classroom: AI, gamification, and translation

Moving from policy to pedagogy, this issue features a number of papers that explore how technology is reshaping the TESOL practice landscape. These studies move beyond the hype of educational technology to examine the messy, complex reality of digital implementation in our classrooms.

Louise Smith and Mingyan Hu discuss the use of AI in adult migrant and refugee learner settings in Australia. The study reveals a tension: while teachers see the potential for AI to support personalised learning (which is often seen as a holy grail in diverse classrooms), they do require time and guidance in how to effectively integrate the technology. The paper calls for experimentation on the ground to enhance professional development and to work these tools into existing curricula. The teachers' desire to 'explore with guidance' underscores a recurring

theme: technology does not replace the teacher, but it does increase the demand for highly skilled, adaptable pedagogy.

Complementing this is Cuong Huy Pham and Duyen Nguyen Thien Ngo's study. Focusing on the platform Quizizz, the authors find that gamification does more than just make learning fun; it has an effect on inclusion and affect. The study reports that gamified elements reduced anxiety and fostered a community of practice among adult learners. However, the authors are careful to note that there are also drawbacks to report, as learners can face technical issues and are sometimes unfamiliar with the tools and approaches of a gamified task, which can result in some of them feeling left out or anxious to use it. This reminds us that digital tools can be double-edged swords for inclusion if not scaffolded correctly (Peeters, 2022).

Perhaps the most counter-intuitive finding comes from Thao Dao and Ha Nguyen's mixed-methods study. In an era where students routinely use translation tools, educators often fear that their language skills will deteriorate. However, the study found no statistically significant difference in error frequency or word count between essays written with and without Google Translate. The implication may be that the tool itself is not a magic bullet for quality, nor is it necessarily the cheating crutch some fear it to be. Instead, the qualitative data reveals that the experience of writing changes; students' attitudes vary based on their past experiences with the tool and whether it has been successful in previous tasks, whether their peers were using it, or how confident they felt when starting to use the technology. The study urges us to move beyond banning or blindly accepting these tools, and instead to understand how they impact our learners' cognitive and emotional processes of writing.

Language learning: Anxiety, identity, and investment

The final major theme of this issue concerns the psychological dimensions of language education.

Neil Curry and Ward Peeters present an intervention study in foreign language settings. Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) is a well-documented barrier to second language acquisition, but few studies offer concrete interventions to remedy it. Building on their earlier findings (Curry et al., 2020), the authors adapted Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) techniques, such as challenging negative assumptions and contextualising fears, to show how teachers can actively help students reframe their self-image. Through the CBT interventions, this study found that students can develop a more positive view of their speaking abilities, which suggests that, ideally, the modern TESOL classroom should be able to double as a space for psychological resilience-building.

This focus on overcoming learning challenges is echoed in a case study conducted by Mehdi Moharami, Anne Keary, and Alex Kostogriz. Drawing on Darvin and Norton's (2016) model (which updates the concept of motivation to include power, identity, and capital), the paper

explores how learners in Iran navigate their desire to learn English amidst complex political and cultural challenges. The study highlights that the decision to learn English is never just about grammar; it is an investment in a hoped-for identity, in this case pursued against a backdrop of societal ambivalence toward the language.

Curriculum and assessment

Finally, the issue closes with contributions that tackle the nuts and bolts of curriculum and assessment, viewing them through the lens of identity and teaching practice.

Haeng A Kim's paper on profiling the dynamics among assessment, curriculum, and pedagogy examines how a tutor's language assessment literacy and personal identity tend to shape their teaching. It argues that assessment is not an objective yardstick but a practice deeply influenced by who the teacher is. Similarly, Anne-Coleman Webre and Darrell Allen's paper on supporting assessment of EAL/D student writing provides a concrete example of using genre-based feedback in pre-service teacher education. By equipping new teachers with the metalanguage to explain why a text works (rather than just correcting errors), they can be empowered to support students more effectively. In a similar vein, Stella Giorgou Tzampazi argues that different types of instruction can yield different results in a classroom and have to be embedded properly. The paper contributes to the foundational debate on how to best instruct our learners, exemplifying the impact of deductive vs. inductive grammar instruction. The paper also offers empirical data to the perennial question of how best to teach form.

Concluding remarks

Volume 34, Number 1 of *TESOL in Context* leaves us with a complex picture of the field. On the one hand, we face challenges as our professional standing in policy frameworks is questioned. On the other hand, we see a profession that is vibrant with innovation, harnessing AI, adapting new approaches to help our students excel, and decentring advocacy to empower local voices.

The thread that connects these diverse papers is the agency of the TESOL practitioner. Whether it is teachers in Australia navigating new policy landscapes, lecturers in Vietnam gamifying grammar, or tutors in Iran understanding their students' investment, the central figure is the educator who mediates between policy, technology, and the human needs of the learner.

As editors, we hope this issue inspires you to engage with these tensions. We encourage you to read up on the history of policy to be ready for the future, to consider the technological studies as invitations to experiment critically, and to reflect on the psychological studies as a reminder of the vulnerability and courage students and teachers bring to the classroom every day.

We extend our gratitude to the authors for their contributions and to the reviewers who helped shape this volume.

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