



Situated lives and human-centred practices in TESOL: Teachers, learners and changing contexts

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Introduction

What does it mean to be a language teacher at a time when the roles of teachers and learners, and the technologies mediating their work together, are being rapidly reconsidered? This is not an entirely new question for TESOL, as teachers have always worked amid changing learner needs, institutional expectations, educational policies, and technologies (Uysal & Gao, 2026). Yet the growing presence of GenAI, alongside increasingly multilingual and multimodal learning environments, has brought renewed attention to teacher expertise, agency, identity, and professional judgement. Rather than being treated as individual attributes, these dimensions are increasingly understood as socially mediated and contextually situated (Tao & Gao, 2026). Technological change adds further complexity by reshaping the conditions in which agency, participation, identity, and pedagogical relationships are negotiated and enacted (De Costa, 2025; Tao & Gao, 2026). At the same time, it reinforces a longstanding recognition that TESOL is enacted through relationships: between teachers and learners, between educational aspirations and institutional realities, and between pedagogical possibilities and the contexts in which they are realised. Questions of how teachers develop and sustain their professional identities, how learners negotiate language, culture, belonging, and agency, and how practices developed in one context can, or cannot, travel meaningfully to another therefore remain central. Rather than displacing these concerns, current technological and social changes make context, judgement, participation, and responsiveness even more salient.

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These questions feel particularly pertinent as we introduce General Issue 1, 2026 of *TESOL in Context*, our first editorial together as a team of four associate editors. Coming from different academic and professional backgrounds, institutions, and career stages, we bring complementary perspectives on teacher education, EAP and assessment, EAL/D and multilingual education, and technology-enhanced language learning. These different vantage points have shaped how we have engaged with the contributions and identified connections across the collection.

Working with the manuscripts, authors, and reviewers has been both a privilege and a learning experience. Three interconnected themes came into focus: (1) teachers, particularly their professional identities, learning, and trajectories; (2) learners, including their identities, autonomy, belonging, participation, and language development; and (3) practices, encompassing the resources, evidence, and pedagogical decisions through which teaching and learning are mediated. We treat these not as fixed categories, but as overlapping points of connection across this diverse general issue comprising 14 papers and one book review. Together, they position TESOL as situated and negotiated work, shaped by relationships, resources, and the social, cultural, institutional, technological, and educational conditions in which it unfolds. In the sections that follow, we consider each theme in turn before bringing them together in our concluding reflection on situated lives and human-centred practices in contemporary TESOL.

Teacher identity, professional learning and resilience

Teacher professional learning is increasingly understood as a situated and continuing process that extends beyond the acquisition of pedagogical knowledge and skills (e.g., Tran & Nguyen, 2026; Zhou et al., 2025). It is closely intertwined with how teachers understand themselves and their work, how they respond to the conditions shaping their practice, and who they are becoming professionally (De Costa, 2025; Uysal & Gao, 2026).

In this issue, *Huong's* study of pre-service EFL teachers in Vietnam, for example, shows how professional identities evolve throughout teaching practicum as teachers interact with mentors, students, peers, and institutional expectations. During transitions into teaching, tensions between university-based pedagogical ideals and classroom realities, together with emotional experiences and reflection, become important resources through which participants negotiate who they are becoming as teachers. Reflection similarly connects experience with development in *Tran and Pham's* study of novice Vietnamese EFL teachers. Their participants used structured reflective journals to identify classroom challenges and consider subsequent pedagogical responses, including more varied and student-centred practices.

Professional growth, however, is not produced through reflection alone. *Sangia and Rajab's* study of emergency remote English teaching in Indonesian Madrasah Tsanawiyah foregrounds resilience as situated, relational, and responsive to changing conditions. Teachers gradually

developed workable practices through experimentation, peer mentoring, relationships with students and parents, and technologies responsive to local conditions. Their experiences demonstrate that resilience cannot be reduced to an individual capacity but is shaped by the social and material conditions in which teachers work.

Institutional conditions are equally prominent in *Zhou, Nguyen and Dang's* autoethnographic study of professional learning in a commercial English language centre in China. Contradictions arising from fragmented professional learning, standardised teaching tools, workload, and competing educational and commercial priorities could constrain development, yet teachers' responses to these tensions could also create possibilities for learning through reflection, adaptation, and informal collaboration. Importantly, such adaptation could simultaneously leave broader organisational arrangements unchanged, reminding us that professional learning is embedded within, rather than independent of, institutional structures.

Araminta and Pasaribu's life-course study of Indonesian ESOL teacher educators extends this situated perspective across a longer temporal trajectory. It demonstrates how motives for becoming teacher educators develop through critical experiences across family life, schooling, university education, and subsequent career decisions. Collectively, the studies in this theme portray teacher development as an ongoing process of becoming rather than a linear accumulation of expertise. Across career stages and institutional settings, professional identity, learning, resilience, and agency emerge through the interplay of reflection, relationships, tensions, and the sociocultural conditions of teachers' work.

Learners, identities and participation across contexts

Building on the previous section's attention to how teachers develop through experience and interaction with their professional contexts, this section turns to learners and the ways language education shapes learning, participation, and identity. Across the five contributions, learner development emerges as extending beyond linguistic proficiency, consistent with more recent conceptualisations of academic language and communication in EAP research (e.g., Yin et al., 2024). Rather, what learners can do with English is closely related to how they perceive themselves as learners and users of the language (*Guan, Dai, & Zhang; Jacobs & Weinmann*), the linguistic, educational and cultural experiences they bring to learning (*Daniel, Weerasinghe, & Hart*), and the opportunities they are given to exercise agency and participate meaningfully in learning and social life (*Creely; Dewi, Manuhutu, & Lestari*).

The studies nevertheless approach learner development from different vantage points. *Daniel, Weerasinghe and Hart* focus most explicitly on changes in language proficiency, demonstrating measurable gains in speaking, listening, reading and writing among international students undertaking EAP programs in an Australian university. Their findings also show that patterns of development vary across language skills and program durations, drawing attention to the importance of time and learners' starting points in interpreting academic English performance.

Yet the studies by *Guan, Dai and Zhang* and *Jacobs and Weinmann* demonstrate why proficiency represents only one dimension of learners' experiences in higher education. For Chinese international students in the UK, *Guan, Dai and Zhang* show that previous educational experiences and culturally shaped understandings of education continued to influence how students approached learning, interacted with teachers and peers, and developed a sense of belonging. AI also emerged as a means of coping with linguistic and academic demands, allowing established learning orientations to persist within the technology-mediated educational environment. In Japan, *Jacobs and Weinmann* identify a related tension between changing understandings of English and learners' perceptions of their own English use. Although most participants recognised English as belonging to everyone and demonstrated awareness of different English varieties, many continued to evaluate their abilities against established native-speaker norms and expressed limited confidence in communicating in English. Across these studies, therefore, improvement in English, access to English-medium environments, and confidence or belonging as an English user cannot be assumed to develop in parallel.

This distinction becomes particularly important in the contributions that foreground learner agency and participation. *Dewi, Manuhutu and Lestari* show that situated practice informed by multiliteracies can create opportunities for university EFL learners to connect classroom activities with their own experiences, collaborate with peers and make choices in completing tasks. At the same time, their study presents autonomy as supported rather than wholly independent: students' agency developed within activities and choices structured by the teacher. *Creely's* thematic literature review of drama-based pedagogies with adult migrant and refugee learners broadens this understanding of participation beyond formal classroom learning. Across the studies reviewed, drama provides opportunities for learners to use language through interaction, embodiment and shared experience, while also supporting voice, identity and social connection. The two contributions thus converge in showing that learner agency is not simply an individual attribute. It can be strengthened or constrained by the types of activities, relationships and opportunities for participation that educational settings provide.

Taken together, these five contributions broaden our understanding of learner development beyond proficiency alone. Learners differ not only in linguistic ability, but also in prior experiences, identities, expectations, confidence, and opportunities to participate. These differences have direct implications for pedagogy, requiring TESOL educators to recognise and respond to learner diversity through context-sensitive decisions and practices. The next section therefore turns to the resources, evidence, and professional judgement through which more responsive learning opportunities can be developed.

Pedagogical resources, evidence and responsive TESOL practice

Attention to learners' identities, experiences, and participation raises a related pedagogical question: how can educators draw on available resources, evidence, and professional

judgement to respond to diverse learner needs and contexts? This question is particularly salient across a collection that engages with TESOL in seven primary national contexts including Australia, China, Georgia, Indonesia, Japan, the United Kingdom, and Vietnam, alongside review-based contributions drawing on wider international scholarship. Across the studies in this theme, a common message emerges: pedagogical responsiveness depends not simply on what tools, technologies, or evidence are available, but on how they are interpreted, mediated, and adapted for particular learners, purposes, and settings.

Across the contributions, technology can be seen as expanding both the evidence available about learner language and the resources available for learning. *Shen and co-authors'* review of Error Analysis (EA), for example, traces how developments in learner corpora, annotation and computational approaches have enabled larger-scale and more replicable analyses of learner language. At the same time, while EA and related technological advances can make learner difficulties more systematic and visible, professional judgement is still needed in deciding what those patterns mean and how they should inform teaching. This is particularly important when EA is used primarily as a diagnostic resource, and when contemporary communication extends beyond spoken and written language to include multimodal and interactional resources. *Pattemore's* review of Lee's work (2025), *Social media and language learning: Using TikTok and Instagram*, speaks to this broader view of communication from another direction, showing how everyday digital spaces such as TikTok and Instagram can be brought into language learning. These spaces extend pedagogical resources beyond the formal classroom and into learners' informal, multimodal communication practices.

The opportunities and uncertainties associated with AI make the role of teacher judgement even more visible. *Kintsurashvili and co-authors* show how an AI chatbot can extend opportunities for speaking practice and provide a low-stakes environment for learners to experiment with language, supporting confidence and reducing anxiety. Yet the chatbot also generated inconsistent or inappropriately difficult feedback at times, requiring teachers to interpret its suggestions, design suitable tasks and mediate its limitations. AI integration therefore strengthens, rather than reduces, the need for teacher involvement, while also prompting some reconsideration of established teaching practices.

Tran's study offers an interesting counterpoint. Recorded human voices, reflective learning and learners' own written work were brought together to support oracy development, collaboration and confidence. AI was deliberately excluded from assignment preparation, while the study identifies comparison between human and AI-generated voices as a direction for future research. As research increasingly explores the affordances of AI in language teaching, it is equally important not to overlook non-AI resources that may serve similar pedagogical purposes. Comparing what human- and AI-mediated resources each afford across different language-learning activities may help avoid assuming that AI is necessarily the most appropriate option in every context.

This caution also resonates with *Hoffman and co-authors'* study, which shows that even established assessment tools may provide incomplete or misleading evidence when linguistic

and cultural diversity is insufficiently represented. In such cases, EAL/D teachers' professional experience becomes central to interpreting learner needs. As AI-supported assessment and learning tools continue to develop, similar questions of representation, diversity and equity will require close attention. Across these contributions, technological change does not diminish the importance of teacher judgement; rather, in a period of expanding possibilities and uncertainties around AI, it makes the critical, contextual and relational dimensions of teaching increasingly visible.

Editorial reflection and conclusion

Looking across the contributions in this issue, we are struck not only by their geographical, methodological, and thematic diversity, but also by a shared reminder that TESOL remains, above all, a deeply human practice. At a time when AI and other emerging technologies are rapidly expanding what can be produced, analysed, and mediated in language education, these studies bring us back to the people at the centre of the field: teachers and learners, and the relationships, judgements, and practices through which they work and learn together.

The prominence of teacher-focused studies is especially telling. Across different settings, teachers appear not as neutral deliverers of curriculum, but as professionals continually negotiating identity, resilience, institutional pressures, and changing pedagogical possibilities. Learners, likewise, are not simply recipients of instruction or measurable bundles of proficiency gains. They bring histories, expectations, emotions, aspirations, and prior experiences into learning, and their opportunities for belonging, agency, and development are shaped by the environments and relationships around them. Practices, in turn, are more than techniques, tools, or technologies; they are where teacher judgement, learner participation, and contextual conditions come together.

Figure 1 brings these interconnections into view, positioning teachers, learners, and practices within broader social, cultural, institutional, technological, and educational contexts. At the centre are five human dimensions that cut across these relationships: identity and agency shape how teachers and learners understand their roles and act within particular settings; judgement informs how they interpret situations and make decisions; participation reflects how they engage in teaching, learning, and social interaction; and responsiveness captures how they adapt to particular needs, circumstances, and emerging possibilities.

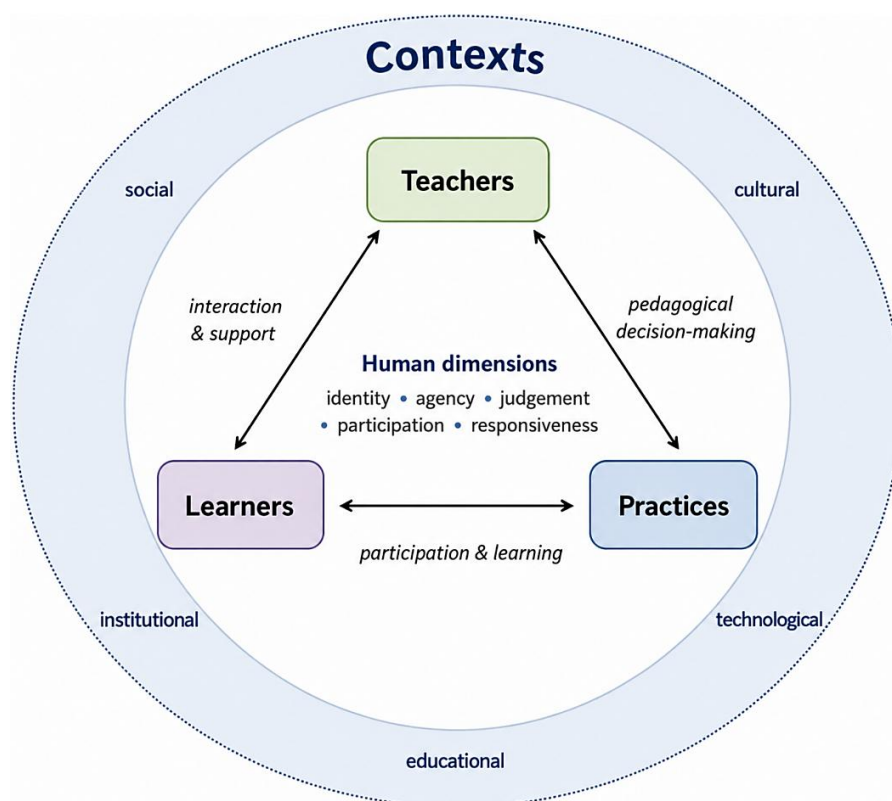


Figure 1. Situated lives and human-centred practices in TESOL.

Seen in this way, identity and agency are not peripheral to language education but part of how pedagogy itself is enacted, with teachers' identities shaping instructional practices and responsive pedagogy requiring attention to the lived experiences and possibilities learners bring to educational encounters (De Costa, 2025). This orientation also extends to the production of TESOL knowledge, where reflexivity and positionality draw attention to how researchers' histories and sociopolitical locations shape the research process (Consoli, 2026). For us, these perspectives reinforce one of the central messages emerging from the collection: at a time when TESOL is often discussed through the language of disruption, innovation, and technological change, the significance of new technologies lies in how people engage with them, adapt them, question them, and situate them within particular educational and social realities. Teacher judgement, learner voice, relationships of trust, responsive pedagogy, and attention to institutional and social conditions remain essential, even, and perhaps especially, when technologies promise efficiency, scale, or innovation. The contributions in this issue therefore invite us to see TESOL not simply as a field responding to change, but as one grounded in the ongoing work of teaching, learning, researching, and making meaning together.

To conclude this editorial, we would like to thank the authors and reviewers for their work in bringing this issue together. The review and editorial process is itself inherently human-centred, grounded in the time, care, dialogue, and mutual support through which authors, reviewers, and editors work together to develop the contributions that make up the issue.

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