Becoming a TESOL Practitioner: Disciplinary Languaging and the Socialization of International Students in UK Higher Education

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Abstract

This article proposes the concept of disciplinary languaging to account for the regulated forms of communication that are characteristic of TESOL master's preparatory programs in the UK. It does so with a view to the effects on the socialization of international students who are attracted by the global promotion of such programs and the promises of English teaching careers but who, nonetheless, are confronted with uncertainties arising from the interplay between the norms and values of TESOL as a discipline taught in UK higher education, on the one hand, and the changing demands of labor markets transnationally, on the other. Drawing on a 1-year ethnographic study, it adopts a trajectory-based sociolinguistic lens and focuses on the case of Lily, a Chinese international student enrolled in a TESOL master's program at a major university in the UK. Lily's engagement with TESOL's disciplinary languaging shaped her own positioning both as a university student and as a Chinese English teacher in significant ways. The analysis shifts the attention away from abstract considerations on what makes a "good" teacher, toward locally emerging practices and logics within which social actors make sense of TESOL preparatory programs and of the process of becoming English teaching practitioners in China.
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INTRODUCTION

The scholarship of language teacher education has over the last two decades provided social perspectives to better account for how language educators engage with learning in TESOL preparatory programs. A fundamental tenet in this line of work has been the conceptualization of language teacher education as a socially learned and sociohistorically situated activity (Freeman & Johnson, 1998), this paving the way to a "humanizing turn in language teacher education" (Peercy, Troyan, Fredricks, & Hardy-Skeberdis, 2024). As a result, existing literature has devoted great attention to practitioners' experiences and understandings of TESOL disciplinary knowledge as they negotiate and make sense of what constitutes "good" language teaching and learning across national contexts (e.g., Barnawi & Ahmed, 2020).

This includes closer examination of practitioners' learning of teaching materials development strategies (e.g., Carabantes, 2024), curriculum implementation policies (e.g., Randez, 2024), pedagogical practices (e.g., Liyanage & Canagarajah, 2019), medium of instruction (e.g., Phyak, 2024) or teacher identity formations (e.g., Aneja, 2016). But such a shift of attention has not fully explored how practitioners' learning processes are shaped by changing conditions of TESOL preparatory programs that entrench their professional development with competing sources of knowledge, interests, and orders of normativity within broader transnational infrastructures connecting higher education institutions, knowledge and people across geopolitical borders (but see Browning, 2020).

This is particularly evident in the UK where related master's programs in TESOL, Applied Linguistics, and Intercultural Communication have been predominantly composed of students from mainland China (HESA, 2023). These students, while generally attracted by the targeted promotion of UK TESOL programs and the promises of English teaching careers in China (Chowdhury & Le Ha, 2014), are continually confronted with uncertainties arising from the interplay – and often contradictions – between the norms and values of TESOL as a discipline taught in UK higher education and demands of the labor market in China. Yet, there is still a remarkable lack of in-depth, longitudinal and ethnographic studies shedding light on the trajectories of concerned students and teachers (De Costa, Green-Eneix, & Li, 2020), and in this article we address this gap through the lens of what we call "disciplinary languaging"; that is, institutionally regulated forms of communication that are characteristic of a specific academic discipline and which make an "expert" in the discipline socially recognizable.

Informed by recent sociolinguistic literature on trajectories of socialization, we approach Chinese students' learning in TESOL programs as mediated by how they communicatively speak about and position themselves as recognizable types of English teaching practitioners. This perspective, we argue, moves the focus away from the static expectations and requirements of TESOL programs toward how students negotiate the meaning and value of these programs for situated purposes. In so doing, our approach provides a timely framework to understand TESOL education as involving embodied processes of meaning-making and subject-making that are rooted in students' real-life experiences and struggles in their transnational educational endeavors.

In what follows, we first review key literature on disciplinary languaging within higher education settings (Section "Normative communication in higher education – disciplinary languaging"). After that, we offer a trajectory-based sociolinguistic lens to investigate students' engagement with disciplinary languaging and discuss the research background (Section "A trajectory-based sociolinguistic perspective"). Against the background of such literature debates and epistemological perspectives, we then focus on the case of Lily, a student from China whom Yunpeng Du (author) followed across her one-year TESOL master's program at a major university in the UK (Section "The case of Lily"). Finally, we conclude with a discussion of the implications of our analysis against the background of wider debates about TESOL's impact on the transnational mobility of knowledge and experts (Section "The circulation of knowledge and experts: TESOL as a terrain of struggle").

NORMATIVE COMMUNICATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION – DISCIPLINARY LANGUAGING

Research on the institutional regulation of language use within higher education settings has for long aimed to understand how normative communicative practices are constructed and managed as well as the effects these practices have on different social groups. This line of work has been instrumental to a view of language as tied to the production of power relations and interested knowledge, which, in turn, has inspired studies of the planning and policing of instructional languages (e.g., Bonacina-Pugh, Barakos, & Chen, 2022), linguistic codes for academic socialization (e.g., Cushing, 2019; Kobayashi, 2016), and other communicative patterns emerging out of larger processes of internationalization and neoliberalization of the social world (e.g., Piller & Cho, 2013).

However, and while helping to trace how the promotion and regulation of language constitute students' learning experiences, sense of self, and access (or lack of it) to available resources within higher education, this research has not paid enough attention to the regulated forms of communicative practices that are characteristic of an academic discipline such as TESOL. These practices, which we refer to as disciplinary languaging, not only entail linguistic features such as technical jargon or idioms but also index wider social, political, and moral norms and values associated with the production and teaching/learning of the knowledge seen as unique to a given subject area (Becher, 1987; Bourdieu, 1975). Although previous literature has argued for decades that the development of disciplinary knowledge entails institutional regulation at both individual and organizational levels (Bernstein, 2000; Cazden, John, & Hymes, 1972; Latour & Woolgar, 1979), the role of language in this process is often downplayed. This lack of attention resonates with the long-established modernist imagination of scientific disciplines as independent of external circumstances, and of expert forms of communication as purified linguistic codes that develop autonomously and which are indispensable for scientists to describe reality objectively and to discover universal truths (Latour, 1999).

In contrast, if we conceptualize the university as a mediating institution that is actively involved in disciplinary education via gatekeeping, planning, and valorizing who gets to learn which forms of disciplinary communication (Gibbons et al., 1994), then the act of learning and using these forms appears not as neutral academic endeavors but, rather, as socially situated communicative practices tied to larger institutional configurations (Vepa & Pérez-Milans, 2024). In other words, learning to speak like a member of the target discipline – in this case TESOL – is to us not just about using its linguistic codes, but also about aligning with the broader ways of thinking, doing, and self-identifying that are deemed normative in the institutional spaces where it is taught and learned.

Following up on this, we propose a view of disciplinary languaging as both a product and medium of this regulation, thereby contributing to the production and enforcement of norms through which students make sense of and negotiate their social and institutional positions while navigating the target academic field. This perspective reveals how disciplinary communicative practices, specialized and technical as they may seem, play an integral role in shaping students' life trajectories within and beyond higher education settings, as evidenced by foundational studies examining classroom conversations, professional training activities, and students' socialization outside of formal educational spaces.

In the classroom context, Philips ([1982](#)) and Mertz ([2007](#)) document how tutors in American law schools teach by consistently correcting students' language use for analyzing legal cases until they demonstrate full awareness and mastery of the language of law. Students, then, are trained to speak and think as professional lawyers communicating legal matters only with those in the same profession, eventually aligning with authoritative legal institutions to define social justice as equal to legal justice. In this process, they are pushed to treat the ethical and moral considerations as disruptive to the objective judgment of reality by, for example, not considering the systematic inequality faced by the victims.

Beyond the classroom context, Cicourel ([1990](#)) examines how medical students learn the medical language through daily social interactions during hospital internships. He traces how students are trained to communicate in the medical language across encounters with different stakeholders while crafting and maintaining their professional identity. With this analysis, Cicourel argues that the medical language subjectifies students to the power dynamics normalized in medical education. That is, they are expected to establish their voice in using the medical language to practice and protect what is institutionally depicted as "good" medical standards and detach themselves from the humanistic aspects of medical care.

Outside of formal educational spaces, Nespor ([1994](#)) examines how business and management programs teach students to speak like real-world businesspersons. This is achieved by pushing students to go beyond theories and textbooks to observe and internalize the ways of self-representation desired by real-world employers. This includes, for example, using business terminology to brand themselves in job interviews, emphasizing institutional titles to expand networks in social and professional events, and more semiotically, conforming to the business dress code for general image-building. Such a disciplinary promotion of market-oriented language use blurs the boundary between students' disciplinary education and their social lives, which shapes their long-term choice of higher education and career.

Despite the insights, this body of literature tends to focus on how higher education institutions regulate disciplinary languages to socialize students into pre-established institutional orders of specific disciplines and programs, with limited attention to how students engage with it in local contexts and for purposes of their own. To address this, we draw on recent linguistic anthropological and sociolinguistic literature on trajectories of socialization, highlighting how students reflexively engage with disciplinary languaging in often unexpected ways while navigating their university studies.

A TRAJECTORY-BASED SOCIOLINGUISTIC PERSPECTIVE

Linguistic anthropological and sociolinguistic ethnographic work on the intersection of discourse, institutions, and personhood has long argued for an "actor-centered" view on the normative ordering of communicative practices as "infinitely detailed and regulated by a variety of actors" (Blommaert et al., 2009, p. 203). This addresses the meaning and effects of disciplinary languaging as well as individuals' experiences and practices as mutually constitutive, paving the way for a nuanced account of how individuals navigate the institutional ordering of social life and the everyday communicative practices that enable it. Following this tradition, we draw on recent literature on trajectories of socialization and becomingness that trace the links between individuals' changing positionings through their interactions with institutionalized communication over time and across space, on the one hand, and identifiable types of person, on the other (e.g., Garrido & Sabaté-Dalmau, 2020; Highet, 2022; Pérez-Milans & Soto, 2017; Sunyol & Browning, 2024; Wortham & Reyes, 2015). This rests on two key analytical standpoints, namely: (1) normative communication is invoked performatively in situated interactional events; and (2) these events constitute meaning-making pathways through which individuals speak about and position themselves and others in recognizable ways within institutional spaces.

Regarding the invocation of norms, we do not take institutional regulation of communication as impacting individuals externally but, instead, as invoked by individuals as they negotiate with institutions on what counts as "appropriate" language practices in order to achieve situated purposes (Duranti, 1985). Rather than treating immediate communicative contexts as static, pre-given background knowledge (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000) against which language is structured and meaning conveyed, we privilege an approach to individuals as social actors who play an active, reflexive role in mobilizing the norms and values associated with such contexts as resources to reshape the contextual framework and to make meaning in locally recognizable ways.

As to the pathways, we align with researchers who observe that the above-mentioned negotiation between individuals and institutions generates chains of meaning-making practices in space and time through which social actors socialize each other into recognizing certain sets of communicative practices as emblematic of specific ways of being, thinking and doing in the social world (Agha, 2007; Silverstein, 2005; Wortham, 2005, 2006). Compared with the traditional emphasis on

confined speech events, this approach provides us with better affordances to capture how and why individual positionings on relevant categories of language and knowledge emerge, solidify, and change across the interactional events as students become recognizable persons in and through studying in university programs (Ou & Gu, 2018; Wortham & Reyes, 2015). It also allows us to examine individuals' stance-taking practices and sense of alignment as devices that mediate between institutional policies, narratives/texts, conventions, and social actors' situated experiences and practices (Du Bois, 2007; Jaffe, 2009).

Put together, these two analytical standpoints urge us to follow students across interactional events for an in-depth, longitudinal understanding of how disciplinary languaging shapes their institutional lives. Our analysis draws on a data corpus built upon a one-year fieldwork carried out by Yunpeng under Miguel's supervision, during the 2019–2020 academic year, in the TESOL master's program at a major UK university that claims to enhance the professional development of experienced English language teachers. Our corpus includes fieldnotes from classroom auditing, institutional information from official sources, additional onsite fieldnotes and reflections, and data from shadowing individual students that involve periodical ethnographic conversations, daily casual chats, personal documents, and informal observations of their daily activities on and off the university campus. Among these, Yunpeng followed very closely the trajectories of six Chinese students through the academic year to explore their socialization in the field of TESOL and Applied Linguistics, including Lily, a student from mainland China who we shall zoom in on in this article.

In the case of Lily, Yunpeng generated 17 hours of recorded ethnographic conversations, texts from phone chats over 200 days, fieldnotes on her classroom participation that amount to 20,000 words, and personal documents such as statements, CVs, academic transcripts, and drafts of module assignments and dissertation. In the process, Yunpeng was in constant conversation with Miguel, a tutor working at the same university, discussing potential analytical directions. Miguel, however, was not made aware of Lily's identity to avoid ethical concerns. Due to their similar age and contextual understanding of each other's professional lives, Yunpeng and Lily built an open and relaxed interpersonal relationship. As such, their conversations were marked by unreserved debates, emotional responses, and personal opinions on what counts as "good" Chinese English teachers which went beyond what is often expected in researcher–participant relationships. This created a rare but analytically productive interactional space that allowed Yunpeng to participate in Lily's learning trajectory and capture the nuanced transitions of her views and experiences. Lily, in

turn, welcomed Yunpeng as a fellow TESOL student/researcher with whom she could have critical discussions.

Drawing on Heller, Pietikäinen, and Pujolar's (2017) ethnographic sociolinguistic framework, we sequenced the analysis into three steps for the purpose of this article. First, we mapped the orders of TESOL disciplinary languaging that were invoked at different times and spaces. We did so by triangulating classroom observations, the official description of the program, and Lily's reported experiences, aiming to identify how these emerging orders interlocked and constituted recognizable ways of doing and being that Lily enacted during her studies. Second, we explored how such enactments were institutionally regulated in ways that shaped Lily's trajectory. Based on the recorded conversations and daily observations, we analyzed how Lily mobilized institutional norms as resources to position herself as a "good" TESOL student and "good" Chinese English teaching practitioner, with an interest to document how these positionings solidified and changed over time. Third, taking a holistic perspective, we examined the intersection of Lily's trajectory and the TESOL program's organizational logics, considering the implications for Lily's professional development.

THE CASE OF LILY

Lily worked as an English teacher in China for 9 years before pausing her career and joining the TESOL program. She claimed to have two specific reasons for doing so. On the one hand, she wanted to boost her educational qualification to seek better job opportunities in major urban cities in China like Shanghai, ideally at a university as she did before. On the other, as a teacher without formal TESOL training, she was keen to learn about the latest TESOL literature and theories to transform her teaching practices from, in her terms, "intuition-based" to "theory/evidence-based." Thus, Lily found the TESOL program suited her well because it offered a wide range of modules on various TESOL research traditions. Among them, she chose the following: Basics, which offers an overview of the broad field of TESOL; SLA, which introduces theories of second language acquisition; and Materials and Assessment on designing and critiquing English teaching materials and exams, respectively. In addition, Lily undertook a compulsory Dissertation module that guided students toward completing a dissertation research project (see Lily's schedule in Table 1).

Despite different curricular contents, all of these modules shared a common feature in Lily's eyes, namely: the expectation that the

TABLE 1
Lily's Schedule

Term 1	Basics
Oct–Dec 2019	SLA
11 teaching weeks	Dissertation (part 1)
Term 2	Materials
Jan–Mar 2020	Assessment
11 teaching weeks	Dissertation (part 2)
Term 3–4	Supervision
Apr–Sep 2020	Dissertation writing
Dissertation period	Submission/graduate

students would become critical TESOL researchers. Invoked across classroom activities, this pedagogical focus that Lily struggled with from the start of the academic year modeled participation and speaking in particular ways. In the following subsections, we first describe this form of modeling, or disciplinary languaging, offered in the TESOL program. Then, we analyze the effects that this institutional form of communication had on Lily's socialization at three key stages of her trajectory.

Doing TESOL, Becoming a Critical Researcher

Through their studies in the focal master's program, the students were expected to learn to speak, think, and position themselves as "critical TESOL researchers," a key recurrent category in our corpus. They were encouraged to immerse themselves in TESOL literature to develop a critical, comprehensive understanding of existing theories and research findings. This traversed the five modules that Lily selected and was consistently signposted in official documents (e.g., handbook), tutors' monitoring of classroom conversations, and assessment activities.

In the first session of the Basics module, for example, the tutors introduced a list of prestigious journals in the field, encouraging them to explore the latest publications and develop their research interests. One thing to avoid, as the tutors underlined, was relying only on the small number of compulsory readings selected for the module. Instead, students were expected to cultivate the habit of extensive reading to embrace the complexities, limitations, and contradictions of the field's knowledge production – from broad arguments to theories, and to individual concepts – to critically inform their teaching practices. In line with this expectation, the tutors monitored the

classroom conversations to model students' language use for talking about TESOL literature while discussing pre-readings, which constituted a recurrent type of classroom activity. In one session focused on teaching and learning English pronunciation, for instance, and after overviewing previous studies, the tutor asked students to discuss in detail a summative article on the curriculum issues of teaching pronunciation. By offering a list of guiding questions, one being "What learner and contextual factors may affect the success of pronunciation instruction?," the tutor encouraged students to not only locate the factors proposed by the author in the text but also assess the limitations of these factors in explaining successful pronunciation teaching.

This latter part was achieved in two steps. First, students were asked to consider the factors as an academic argument made by a specific author based on specific research projects. They were requested to focus their discussion on deconstructing the chain of evidence that the author provided, during which they learned to use communicative markers to speak about the factors as grounded in the article. They included, for example, "according to the author on page (number) . . . ," "the article references (author name)'s work to argue that . . . ," and "(author name)'s research in year (year number) shows that . . . ." After that, they discussed whether and to what extent the factors proposed by the author corresponded with their own teaching experiences, for which they picked out specifics from the article and critiqued the generalizability of them. The next and second step, as the tutor recommended, was to explore the literature that resonated with students' critiques and, if pointing to a research gap, to treat them as topics for module assignments or dissertations.

After group discussions, the tutors often invited students to share their conclusions. This was where monitoring how students talked about TESOL literature became often more explicit. In the session on defining human language of the Basics module, the opening activity featured a video about a primatologist arguing that bonobos have human language because they can communicate with humans using a specially designed keyboard. Students were asked to debate in groups whether they agreed with the researcher. At the reporting stage, the tutor asked a series of follow-up questions to push students to elaborate on their statements. The pedagogical functions of these questions included pushing students to take explicit stances (e.g., "good, bad, or you are just thinking?"), base their stances on the details of the video (e.g., "Can you pinpoint the problem of what the researcher said?"), theorize their stances (e.g., "What is your hypothesis on human language?"), and justify their stances (e.g., "What makes you say that?"). Altogether, these questions propelled students to seek concrete, rigorous evidence to support or critique the researcher's arguments in the

video and experience the theoretical and empirical complexities of defining a seemingly straightforward concept of "human language."

To demonstrate this approach, following on the students' reports, the tutor challenged one of the researcher's claims: bonobos possess the language competence of a 6-year-old human child. Referring to a language acquisition study that shows the vocabulary of a 6-year-old child to be over 14,000 words, the tutor argued that the researcher failed to exhibit the same capacity in bonobos. In so doing, the tutor illustrated the integral role of previous literature in approaching TESOL concepts critically, training students to draw on existing studies to formulate their arguments while recognizing these studies as nodes of a large network of interrelated and often contested knowledge sources.

The modeling of students' critical engagement with TESOL literature was continued into assessment activities. In the SLA module, for example, students were put into groups to deliver presentations about one of the SLA theories discussed in the module. With this activity, the tutor encouraged students not to confine their understanding of SLA theories to the module's broad introduction but instead select one theory and look deeper into its history and complexities. Accordingly, the primary criterion for assessing the presentation was the extent to which students integrated the multifaceted strands of research on the chosen theory. Built on this, the final assignment for the SLA module was a literature review on an SLA-related topic, which required students to explore SLA literature independently to fulfill their research interests. As in the presentation, students needed to unpack the connections and contradictions among multiple research strands and, in this way, demonstrate their critical understanding of the focal topic.

Being critical TESOL researchers in the way described above constituted a major component of the TESOL program. As we shall see, in Lily's case, this disciplinary languaging played a significant role in shaping how she spoke about herself as a TESOL student and an experienced English teacher from China. This began early in the first term when she claimed to have what she called "an ideal start" to her studies.

An Ideal Start: Pursuing a Critical Understanding of TESOL Theories

Four weeks into the first term, Lily claimed to find the TESOL program fulfilling her long-term wish to learn about TESOL theories. She

was particularly pleased with the SLA module, which she believed offered direction for her future career. This is shown in Extract 1 below, translated from mandarin Chinese, where Lily discusses with Yunpeng what she learned from the module. Before the point where this extract begins, Lily talked about how impressed she was by the hypothesis of language acquisition key stages. Yunpeng found this intriguing, given that Lily had taught and planned to teach university students for exams, whereas the hypothesis was more specifically concerned with children's natural language acquisition.

Extract 1: "I will think about doing research to investigate and solve them."

1 2 3 4	Yunpeng	Do you think the theories from the SLA module are relevant to your learners? I remember you said your learners were mainly university students. For them, things like the key stage of language acquisition have long gone.
5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15	Lily	Yes, they are helpful. For example, when I was teaching, I cared about teacher–learner interaction. I cared because I did not want learners to feel abandoned. I wanted to make them feel included and raise their learning motivation. But I did not know about the theoretical logic behind this interaction, and I did not know if there was any research on it. In the session this week, we talked about how interactions facilitated the development of second language acquisition. I got to know what research has been done to prove the benefits of interactions. Now, if I encounter teaching problems in the future, I will think about doing research to investigate and solve them. The module provided me with theoretical guidance to do so.
16 17 18 19	Yunpeng	But are the theories too idealist? As you said before, you were under constant pressure to follow the curriculum and impart knowledge. Is it too ideal to apply the theory of interaction if your learners need to pass the traditional grammar test tomorrow?
20 21 22 23 24 25	Lily	But the theory of interaction can help learners develop ways of thinking that benefit them in the long run. I think it can facilitate the teaching of grammar if used appropriately. Also, theories are being developed. They might be changed or disproved in the future. One reason for me to come here is to learn about the latest theories and research to optimize my teaching practices and to do my own research.

In this extract, Lily displays her emerging alignment with the role of a critical researcher. This is accomplished in two moves. First, to answer Yunpeng's question about the relevance of SLA theories to her target students (i.e., university students) (line 1–4), she describes how one of the theories covered in the SLA module – namely the theory of interaction – helped justify her teaching in the past (line 5–15). While doing so, Lily initiates a sense of progress from her subjective, emotion-based teaching practices in the past ("I did not want students to feel abandoned") to a more research-based approach ("I will think about doing research to investigate and solve them"), showing her attempt to envision a better professional future by engaging with the TESOL literature.

But Yunpeng raises his concerns about the applicability of SLA theories in the teaching context of China, especially theories related to increasing classroom interactions (line 16–19). In her response, as the second move, Lily demonstrates her critical, progressive view on TESOL literature (line 20–25). She does so by aligning herself with the continuous development of TESOL theories and research ("They might be changed or disproved in the future"), claiming the responsibility of contributing to such development ("and to do my own research") rather than passively implementing existing research findings.

Beyond such reflections, Lily was keen to create opportunities within the TESOL program to deepen her critical understanding of newly taught theories. After attending the session on the theory of Task-Based Language Teaching (hereinafter TBLT), for example, Lily began to observe how the tutors implemented TBLT in their own module sessions. Taking the role of an experienced teacher auditing the sessions for professional development, she evaluated TBLT's contribution to her own classroom and documented the potential issues (e.g., some of her classmates found TBLT inefficient with postgraduate students). In so doing, Lily claimed to have boosted her confidence in tailoring theories for diverse teaching contexts and exploring the connections and differences between them (e.g., the differences between TBLT and the theory of interaction).

Overall, Lily seemed to align well with the role of a critical TESOL researcher by the middle of the first term. She not only demonstrated her critical engagement with TESOL theories but also contemplated the linkage between these theories and her teaching career in China with both theoretical and practical considerations. This emerging alignment indicated that Lily had a successful initial socialization in the program for her intended professional development (i.e., seeking "theory/evidence-based" teaching practices), but things shifted unexpectedly soon after.

Shifting to an Instrumental Perspective on Learning Theories

Entering the second half of the first term, Lily felt overwhelmed by the teaching content of the TESOL program. She found it difficult to follow the growing number of theories introduced in the modules, and she no longer had the time or patience to explore each of them as thoroughly and critically as the theories of interaction and TBLT, especially after the Dissertation module began and added another layer of workload. Indeed, Lily had worked as a teaching practitioner for 9 years. She knew that she needed time to readjust to reading

academic papers and doing research as a university student – at times, she was daunted by the fact that it took her one or two whole days to read one prereading. In addition, although Lily was interested in learning about theories, her main purpose remained to use these theories to improve her practical teaching skills. Thus, when Lily encountered more theories than she could handle, she tended to focus on the one that she thought related most to practical teaching. This was where she started to view the teaching of the module sessions differently, and she shared her concerns with Yunpeng about the program's continuous, non-stop focus on pushing students to immerse themselves in TESOL literature broadly and explore multiple strands of research. This is shown in Extract 2 below, where Lily complained about what she perceived as the tutors' approach to teaching theories.

Extract 2: "Because they are not perfect!"

1	Lily	The tutor skipped many concepts in the sessions. It seems that they want us
2		to read about them by ourselves.
3	Yunpeng	Yes. I felt the same in the classroom.
4	Lily	The tutor did not really teach those concepts. Remember when the tutor
5		showed us a business dialogue and asked us what register the dialogue was?
6		No one knew the answer. Everyone was silent, so quiet that you could hear a
7		pin drop. At that time, I was thinking to myself, "could you just explain it a
8		little bit?" I found after the session that many students did not understand
9		the difference between register and genre either. Some students asked the
10		tutor about it. The tutor answered, "they are totally different," without
11		explaining how exactly they were different. I also asked the tutor myself.
12		Based on the response I received, the tutor did not find my question
13		meaningful.
14	Yunpeng	But it is complicated to tell the difference, right? I do not think it is possible
15		to fully understand any of the concepts within one session. You need to do
16		more work.
17	Lily	But the tutor should anticipate what concepts would be difficult for students
18		to understand. And they should ask us if we have understood the concepts
19		before moving on. If not, they should offer more explanations.
20		
21	…	
22	Lily	The teaching methods are different from my expectations. I think teaching
23		should be about solving students' problems. Whenever students have
24		questions, the tutor should offer explanations and design exercises for
25		understanding. Now I feel frustrated. I feel like I am reading some of this
26		and some of that, but I will never know if my understanding of the theories
27		is right.
28	Yunpeng	But that is the point, right? Remember the session on vocabulary of the
29		Basics module? The tutor said that the theories were not perfect and there
30		was no right or wrong. You probably need to read more to find out.
31		
32	Lily	Not perfect?! Being not perfect is fine. But the tutor should tell us clearly
33		why the theories are perfect and why not. I want to know immediately the
34		specific reasons for both sides. If the tutor just tells me the theories are not
35		perfect without doing anything else, I will think it is unnecessary to learn
36		about them. Because they are not perfect!

In this extract, Lily adopts what seems to be an instrumental view on learning TESOL theories. This distances her from the role of a critical researcher she displayed earlier. The extract starts with Lily's description of what Yunpeng observed as a recognizable classroom routine: rather than giving out one-off definitions of new concepts, which risked simplifying the theoretical complexities, the tutors encouraged students to explore further literature on these concepts themselves (line 1–13). This routine, as previously discussed, constituted the training of students to engage with concepts critically and avoid restricting their understanding to isolated module readings or tutors' answers. Here, however, Lily depicts this training leaving the burden of learning to the students themselves ("they want us to read about them by ourselves"). And by borrowing a Chinese idiom to portray a vivid picture of the classroom ("so quiet that you could hear a pin drop"), she artistically upscales this problem from her personal observation to a salient obstacle faced by all the students (line 6–12). In so doing, Lily critiques what she perceives to be the tutors' inactivity in addressing students' concerns about definition and clarification, which indicates her desire for more direct knowledge input.

While Yunpeng understands Lily's struggles, he emphasizes the limitation of relying on one-off module sessions and tutors' input in learning concepts, hoping to trigger Lily's reflections on the embedded complexities (line 14–16). Lily, however, reshapes the interactional framework into a debate on what counts as "good" ways of teaching TESOL concepts (line 17–27). She proposes a model of teaching centered on the tutor's authoritative, exhaustive explanations of each knowledge point within the session time (line 23–25). When doing so, she stands against the open learning space created by the tutor ("I will never know if my understanding of the theories is right"), a move through which she distances herself from an active exploration of the complexities of TESOL concepts.

Worrying that Lily has resorted to a simplistic approach to the curricular content, Yunpeng makes an explicit reference to what he interprets as the tutor's intention to push for a critical understanding of concepts (line 28–31). This time, Lily rearticulates the meaning of Yunpeng's use of the term "perfect" – which he borrows from the tutor – to justify her insistence on immediate, clear-cut answers from the tutor ("I will think it is unnecessary to learn about them") (lines 32–36). In so doing, Lily positions herself as a student feeling increasingly unfit to the teaching method, associating a sense of displacement in which she has neither the choice nor voice in deciding what she can learn from the TESOL program.

The sense of displacement became more evident when Lily was doing the assignment for the SLA module. As mentioned earlier, the

assignment was a literature review on an SLA-related topic chosen by the students, such as a specific theory or concept. Lily wanted to focus on the theory of interaction, a topic that, as shown in Extract 1, had interested her for a long time. Initially, Lily planned to review all the major strands of research on classroom interaction, including teacher–learner, learner–teacher, and learner–learner interactions. She explained this plan by describing the assignment as an opportunity to build a knowledge foundation in this area for her future career. As soon as she began reviewing literature, however, Lily realized that each of these three models of interactions pointed to a well-established strand of literature, with each going far beyond the coverage of a module assignment in her view. As a compromise, she narrowed her topic to teacher–learner interaction – back to the aspect that interested her the most in her previous career.

But while reviewing literature, Lily encountered a vast number of concepts under the umbrella term "teacher–student interaction" (e.g., motivation, cooperation, and feedback). To produce an in-depth review, she found it necessary to learn about each of them from the beginning, which led to more readings that contained more derivative concepts. As such, Lily lost her confidence in figuring out the theoretical complexities of TESOL concepts. Although she managed to complete the assignment by discussing teacher's corrective feedback in teacher–student interaction, she was convinced that she fitted better as a classroom teacher than a TESOL researcher dedicated to theories and research.

By the end of the first term, Lily's emerging alignment with the role of a critical researcher seemed to have been unsettled. Rather than seeing the curricular content as resources for her professional development, she started to interpret it as a particular set of institutional standards for being a TESOL student that she failed to meet due to her focus on practical classroom teaching. This interpretation intersected with her growing sense of displacement in the program, causing further challenges to her studies.

Back to Be a Teaching Practitioner: "Big Theories" Versus "Small Things"

Entering the second term, Lily was under growing pressure to consider her career options. She gradually shifted her attention from gaining broad educational insights (e.g., learning theories) toward evaluating whether what she learned in the program could make her a competitive job candidate for real-life teaching. This new focus

intensified her sense of displacement, as shown in Extract 3 below, a segment of her conversation with Yunpeng at the end of the second term where she expressed her concerns about the applicability of the TESOL program's curricular content in China.

Extract 3: "But as a teacher, I can only care about small things."

1	Lily	In one of the sessions of the Materials module, we discussed an article about
2		how LGBT topics are rarely included in mainstream teaching materials. The
3		main theory is to problematize the social invisibility of LGBT and promote
4		their recognition.
5	Yunpeng	That is a good point.
6	Lily	Yes. But it is the only point! The article reaches this conclusion, and that is
7		it! This is not enough. We should go deeper and explore something more.
8		But no. We just talked about the article in groups, and then one student
9		represented the group to summarize the discussion. Everyone had the same
10		argument in the end, which is to pay more attention to minorities.
11		
12	Yunpeng	Yes. But it is a historical issue, very complicated. It is more than LGBT and
13		more than teaching materials.
14	Lily	But it is superficial knowledge. I want to know what we can do to solve the
15		problem. If LGBT is not well represented in materials, how can we change
16		that? Also, there is a political issue. Our government will never allow such
17		topics. We can never include LGBT topics in teaching materials in China.
18		
19	…	
20	Lily	After the session on the politics and policies of teaching materials, for
21		another example, one student had an outburst. The student ran around the
22		room and asked everyone why the tutor was teaching us about policies. I
23		think we all felt the same. We knew that the point was good. We knew that
24		we needed to change the policies to change the teaching materials. But in
25		China we do not have the right to change the policies. We cannot criticize
26		the policies either.
27	Yunpeng	What is your perspective on this?
28	Lily	It was painful for me to attend a session like that. I realized that what I
29		learned from the Materials module was not something I could use. It might
30		expand my vision and even my large worldview. But as a teacher, I can only
31		care about small things, not the big theories far away from real life. So I
32		agree with the student who had the outburst. We need to learn more
33		practical knowledge.
34	Yunpeng	What do you mean by practical knowledge? Does a new worldview not have
35		practical implications for your teaching?
36	Lily	You are right, yes. But worldviews are just worldviews. We do not need more
37		than a general, basic understanding of them. In China, we cannot always
38		apply our world views to teaching. They might broaden our horizons, but we
39		cannot change anything in the classroom. So, if promoting a worldview is
40		the session's final goal, I will not learn much. And I certainly do not want to
41		spend so much time discussing a worldview that can be summarized into one
42		sentence.

In this extract, Lily reenacts her instrumental view on TESOL theories to make sense of the relevance of the Materials module to her career. In so doing, she aligns with the role of a teaching practitioner prioritizing the practical implications of TESOL literature over the theoretical complexities, excluding herself from the intended audience of

the TESOL program. The extract begins with Lily's complaint that the session on gender inclusion was limited to a recognition of problems, and that the discussion-based session design did not help in this regard (line 1–11). Despite Yunpeng's counterargument about the underlying complexities (line 12–13), Lily takes a strong stance on the lack of "what to do" in the teaching of the module, speaking about herself as a helpless teacher too constrained by external factors to engage with the topic ("We can never include LGBT topics in teaching materials in China") (line 14–18).

Several turns later, Lily reinforces this self-presentation by voicing a student who reacted to the problem that Lily identified (line 20–26). She portrays an emotional figure devastated by the gap between what is taught in the module and what Chinese English teachers can do in their teaching, creating a sense of alienation shared by her and her fellow Chinese students. Building on this, Lily uses two contrastive sets of signs to describe the resulting challenges for her studies (line 28–42): Lily, a "teacher" who desires "practical knowledge" to deal with "small things" in "real life"; and the curricular content of the module which cultivates students' "vision," "world views," "big theories," and "horizons." Through this contrast, Lily portrays the target students of the Materials module as those either in power to change the policies or those focusing on the theoretical aspects of TESOL knowledge (e.g., PhD students), and she distances herself from both. As such, she positions herself as a practice-oriented teacher struggling with the purpose of the TESOL program, a move that echoes and consolidates her lost sense of displacement from the second half of the first term.

This positioning was further developed as Lily proceeded to the dissertation stage. Because of her own experiences of studying in the UK, she wanted to explore the reading anxiety of Chinese university students studying abroad. Like the assignment for the SLA module, Lily intended her dissertation to be practice oriented. Specifically, she wanted to find out what strategies Chinese international students adopted to mitigate their reading anxiety and what guidance tutors could offer. The feedback she received from the tutors of the program, however, discouraged her from following her idea through. During a teaching event that allowed students to share their dissertation ideas, the tutors – as Lily perceived – had a common suggestion for her research design: to focus on a theoretical exploration of the concept. They had two recommendations. The first was to identify to what extent existing theories explained the forms of reading anxiety that international students experienced. The second was to identify the limitations of existing theories in anticipating how university students' reading anxiety evolved. Both recommendations, in Lily's view, encouraged her to look away from proposing solutions to improve practical

teaching, making her wonder whether the TESOL program did not prefer practice-oriented dissertation projects.

Nevertheless, Lily stuck to her original idea because she believed her research would have no value if it proposed no solutions (i.e., what reading strategies to teach) to the focal problem (i.e., reading anxiety). As a result, she had to make constant compromises in her dissertation to give more weight to theoretical discussions, in ways such as engaging with the literature on metacognitive reading strategies and regressive correlation between foreign language reading anxiety and strategies. Although she received a distinction for her dissertation, Lily reported that the final version of her dissertation diverged from her intention to speak to teaching practitioners. On another note, she was glad that she immersed herself in the literature on reading anxiety and embraced the theoretical complexities one more time, as she reflected at the end of the academic year, although whether and to what extent this effort made her a "good" TESOL graduate remained unclear.

THE CIRCULATION OF KNOWLEDGE AND EXPERTS: TESOL AS A TERRAIN OF STRUGGLE

Though not very often reported in the existing literature, Lily's case is far from unique. Having researched and worked in TESOL and Applied Linguistics master's programs in the UK ourselves, we find Lily's experience resonating strongly with that of many other TESOL practitioners who move transnationally to further their university education with the aim of later returning to continue with their teaching careers in their contexts of origin, particularly China. This is so partly because, as Barnawi (2020) states, TESOL as a field is more and more expected to respond to the increasing global circulation of people, knowledge, and institutions (see also Barnawi & Ahmed, 2020). In this article, this is evidenced in how Lily interacted with the norms and values embedded in her training as an institutionally recognized TESOL expert and the associated experiences that she had in seeking English teaching professional development.

But our attention to the disciplinary languaging of TESOL practitioners is insightful in, at least, three important regards. First, and in contrast to abstract notions of "expertise," it reveals the extent to which expert knowledge is deeply embedded in socialization processes institutionally regulated that turn sets of meaning-making practices (e.g., talking about, reporting on, assessing and presenting TESOL literature in particular ways deemed as "critical" or "practical") into

emblems of recognizable (and moralized) types of people (e.g., a "good" TESOL student). Second, it showcases how learning can hardly be disentangled from trajectories of identification whereby practitioners not only engage with curricular content, but also (re)enact changing stances with respect to (un)imaginable and/or (un)desirable social worlds (e.g., can/should teachers aim to change or challenge governmental policies?). Third, it brings all of the above in a relational fashion that makes long-standing hierarchies of value (re)surface through ideas about "theory/criticality" and "practicality" that are associated with opposing moral figures (e.g., the successful vs. failed "good student") and contrasting geopolitical locations (e.g., Chinese English language teachers in China vs. UK-based universities/lecturers).

Against this background, we argue for an intensification of efforts to move beyond recognition of the transnational nature of TESOL endeavors and the emphasis on native speakerism that have centered much of the critical work (see Kubota & Lin, 2006; Tupas, 2022, for in-depth analysis of language ideologies underpinning these programs and their colonial and capitalist histories). While acknowledging the key importance of examining TESOL's views on what counts as (il)legitimate English, a disciplinary languaging approach shows the emergence of TESOL as a discursive space (Heller, 2007) of struggle where meaning-making practices, authoritative knowledge on language teaching/learning and moralized categories of personhood are continuously produced, enacted, circulated and attributed unequal value. In our study, this discursive space appears as connecting higher education institutions in the UK with the job market in China through the trajectories of mobility of Chinese nationals as they make it into the UK as "international students" and later return to China to work as certified English language teachers.

Most importantly for Lily, the nature of such space as a terrain of struggle is epitomized in a process of academic socialization whereby she comes to embody the social person of a failed TESOL student, not on grounds of how she speaks English but, rather, on the basis of what she sees as her inability to interactionally enact ways of *doing* and *being* that count as "critical" at her UK university and which are institutionally recognized as emblematic of a "good" student. As such, and in contrast to Browning's (2020) findings in Colombia, *being critical* is not mobilized as an "oppositional stance" to transnationalism in TESOL teacher education (see also Pinilla-Portiño, 2025, for a similar account in Chile). Instead, the figure of the critical TESOL student within Lily's program is enacted in a "supporting stance" that enables the very transnational infrastructure of English language education which brings her temporarily into the UK with the hope of becoming a certified TESOL practitioner in China (see also Du, 2024).

In light of this, we turn to recent sociolinguistic scholarship on the re-imagination of alternative futures (e.g., Deumert & Mabandla, 2017; Garrido & Pérez-Milans, 2025; Heller & McElhinny, 2017) to advocate for a re-definition of the everyday practices and social relations that make it possible for institutions to do the work that they do, as a powerful practice of social transformation. In our context of study, this offers a shift away from abstract pedagogical considerations, toward a greater focus on the key categories of expert knowledge (i.e., "criticality") upon which communicative practices (i.e., ways of talking, reporting, presenting information) and moralized figures of personhood (i.e., the "good" TESOL student) are arranged and normalized in the daily life of TESOL preparatory programs. Against universalistic understandings anchored in the socio-economic and political realities of key centers in the Global North, a disciplinary languaging lens like this opens the door to further discussions on how to possibly re-arrange the relationship between such categories, practices and figures, thus contributing to enable alternative definitions of expertise and, in turn, alternative transnational infrastructures of English language where sources of authority and normativity are distributed differently.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors do not have any conflicts of interest to declare.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared.

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