

Tensions at the University and Living in Liminality: English Language Teachers Navigating through New Research Expectations

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Article information	Abstract
<p>Article history: Received: 17 Dec 2023 Accepted: 18 Oct 2024 Available online: 21 Oct 2024</p> <p>Keywords: Tension Liminality Scholarship of teaching and learning Reflections Case study</p>	<p><i>This study examined tensions affecting university English language teachers, and subsequently the liminal space they occupied. In this study, tensions arose because of the introduction and promotion of Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) for conducting language pedagogical research. This move had inadvertently displaced existing research perspectives and approaches and compelled a reconfiguration of the teacher's professional sense of self. There were four English language teachers involved in this study, all of whom were teaching different types of English courses for academic purposes in a public university in Singapore. Data for this study comprised reflections written by the participants, which were analyzed as case studies. Through the examination of tensions and liminality affecting the participants, it became apparent that distinct strategies and coping mechanisms were enacted. There were those who sought to distinguish existing research perspectives, and those who embarked on a productive journey to navigate through the new research requirement. All these constituted professional development for the participants in personalized ways. The examination of the case studies also indicated how top-down research endeavors may be challenged, especially in a field like English language education, given its long-standing and established research traditions. Yet, the circumstance which saw novel research approaches being introduced illustrate how the professional community of English language teachers in the higher education setting remain on the fringes of academia. Future studies should consider taking an ecological approach to examining tension to gain a more comprehensive understanding of English language teachers' professional identity.</i></p>

INTRODUCTION

English language teachers are an integral group to any international higher education institution, especially in providing language support for students' academic communication development. This is reflected through English language centers or academic English language programs found in universities around the world (for example in Japan, see Anderson, 2021; for Australia, see Williamson, 2023; for Singapore, see Frattarola, 2023). While considered an essential group to the university, Fenton-Smith and Gurney (2022) argue these teachers encounter a myriad of problems. University English teachers face challenges because of students' notion of who or what these teachers should be (e.g., Lee & Chan, 2023), the ambiguous and often heavy teaching workload (e.g., Webster, 2022), or even the lack of professional support or recognition to engage in research work comparable to their subject-specific colleagues (Fitzpatrick et al., 2022).

These challenges have had an impact on the university English teachers' sense of self, and have inadvertently cast them in a space of liminality where their identity is in constant flux, especially with the sudden and urgent need to be tech-savvy (e.g., Burns, 2022) and the long-standing concern over the lack of clarity on what an EAP (English for academic purpose) instructor or practitioner is (see Du et al., 2022). In such a complex situation, tensions may arise. These unique circumstances are worth exploring as they may provide insights into the dynamic nature of English teachers' professional identity formation. With an interest in providing insights into the complexity of living in liminality, this study aims to examine the identity of university English language teachers residing in a discursive space where research expectations may be ambiguous and are prone to shifts (see Dijk et al., 2014).

Tension among teachers

Teachers at any educational level are susceptible to tension – a state of cognitive, emotion, or social dissonance brought about by conflicting variables found in the professional or even personal environment. Pillen, den Brok, and Beijaar (2013) state that “tensions are considered to be internal struggles between how a teacher sees him/herself as a person and as a professional. Such tensions may challenge a teacher's personal feelings, values, beliefs, or perceptions and, as a consequence, they are often not (easily) resolvable.” (pp. 86-87). Tension may be instigated by various factors found within the teaching and learning environment, which comprises students, colleagues, other stakeholders, as well as institutional expectations and policies. Moreover, tensions may be caused by pedagogical issues (Day et al., 2006); the inability to see eye-to-eye with colleagues (Arvaja, 2018) or institutional bureaucracy (Hutchinson et al., 2023). Tensions could also arise when teachers lack confidence (van Lankveld et al., 2017) or when they are stressed and overworked (Nickel & Crosby, 2022).

Due to the variability of factors that cause tension, the teacher's professional identity is rendered as dynamic – one that continually changes over time as the teacher encounters the subjectivities of students, colleagues, managers and the shifting educational landscape (Pillen, Beijaard, & den Brock, 2013). As such, tensions are valuable for teachers' professional development, as they prompt an extent of agentic responses or coping mechanisms (Day et al.,

2006). When faced with tension, teachers will attempt to establish coherence between their professional self with their surroundings to minimize or resolve problems. In some cases, such coherence may be achieved, but there will also be times when this may not be possible, either due to strong organizational pressure or high personal ambition (Arvaja, 2018). Those with more professional experience may also be able to identify sources or systems for support (Nickel & Crosby, 2022). Specifically, studies have reported how tensions were addressed and resolved overtly in groups, using narrative methods (Taylor et al., 2019) or implicitly by individual teachers themselves through reflection (Estrella, 2022; Prabjandee, 2019).

English language teachers' tensions: Being in a liminal space

Tensions affecting English language teachers have been a point of research interest. Besides the factors mentioned in the previous section, there are other issues that specifically affect English language teachers. Some recent issues include the heavier demands for them to have greater research and publication output (Yang et al., 2022) or quickly conform to national-level language curriculum reforms (Gao et al., 2022). The English language may be a source of tension, too, where critical examinations of how it is used have surfaced ideologies and privileges afforded to certain groups of people (Jahan & Obaidul Hamid, 2019). Faced with these tensions, it is recognized that English language teachers may assume multiple professional identities (Bell, 2023; Dijk et al., 2014; Fairley, 2020; McCune, 2021). The investment into these identities is time-consuming and can be mentally and emotionally draining, as teachers need to go through socialization processes to understand the parameters of a new identity (Sang, 2022).

When a teacher finds him- or her-self negotiating through multiple identities, it is said that the teacher is residing in a liminal space (Winstone & Moore, 2017). Occupying a liminal space is not a static process nor is it terminal; it is one where the teacher experiences many encounters, which include engaging with others with whom the new identity is associated. The liminal space is also considered the in-between space for identities, especially when moving towards a new identity that is not entirely familiar. The movement from one identity unto another in the liminal space is recognized as being awkward, and in this state of discomfort will teachers find their footing to navigate through a new identity (Pierce, 2007). Liminality has affected teachers in various circumstances; for instance, when engaging in professional development (Aharonian, 2021); going through certification examinations to be qualified as an English teacher (Chang, 2018); taking on a new research identity in the area of Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) (Simmons et al., 2013); or shifting between the identity of a doctoral student and that of a tutor (Winstone & Moore, 2017).

Being in a liminal space may also be exciting, as it signals a transition towards a new identity; nevertheless, it is also “troublesome in one way or another, giving rise to conflicts, discomfort, risk-taking, and transformative and integrative experiences” (Simmons et al., 2013, p. 16). This is why being in a liminal space requires resilience to address challenges or resolve conflicts, especially if there are dissonances between the established identities of the teacher and those which are new (see Loo et al., 2023). While being in liminality, the teacher may also discover problems in the epistemology of the institution associated with the new identity. When this

occurs, it is up to the teacher to accept, to a certain extent, those problems, or even employ coping strategies linked with other established identities to address or reconcile those problems. While being in a liminal space may seem daunting, it may be essential to help teachers “learn to be comfortable in the discomfoting spaces” to “develop new hybrid, multiple, or alternative identities” (Simmons et al., 2013, p. 17).

Being in liminality can affect a teacher’s self-perception. They may be led to think that they are not taken seriously or viewed as less important (Aharonian, 2021). It should be noted, however, that the sense of being excluded is partially derived from the ecology of university English teachers, where their academic status has not necessarily been clear. Through a Bernsteinian analysis, Bell (2023) states that “[i]t should come as no great surprise that when compared to academics from other subject disciplines, EAP practitioners will find themselves placed lower down the academic pecking order”, “owing to [the field’s] weak classification, weak framing, and a tendency to follow an integrated pedagogic code”. (p. 1837). This is because English language teachers at the university have been found to be constantly adjusting to changes happening in their professional environment, as discussed in previous sections. They may also have difficulty finding a distinct community as they seem to inhabit a grey interdisciplinary area between English, applied linguistics, and education.

THE STUDY

This study aims to shed light on the space of liminality resulting from tensions affecting university English teachers. The study employs a qualitative case study approach and examines discourse data derived from reflections and group discussion. It is hoped that findings from this study will add to research on university English teachers, such as that by Fenton-Smith and Gurney (2022) and Simmons et al. (2013), by providing an examination of the experiences navigating through various stakeholder and institutional expectations. In doing so, the study aims to address the concern raised by Bell (2023), where there is still insufficient understanding of EAP teaching academics or practitioners. This lack of understanding has resulted in an incomplete and perhaps negative perception towards the academic status of English teachers at the university setting (Kamali & Nazari, 2023).

Participants and study context

Premised upon the view that a university English teacher may have multiple roles, this study explores tensions made apparent through discourse data. The participants of this study, who are the authors of this paper, were teaching different academic English courses at a language center of a public university in Singapore (see table below). These participants shared concerns regarding SoTL. Initially, they had interacted separately to share about their experiences in an informal manner. After some time, a collective decision was made to have a more formal examination of their experiences, which was the impetus for the current study.

Table 1
Participants of this study and types of EAP courses taught

Participant	Type of English course taught
Jinat	Content-based academic writing for undergraduate students
Debbie	Foundational English for academic purposes course to undergraduate students
Daron	Proficiency course on English academic writing for postgraduate international students
Jonathan	Academic literacy course with a focus on critical thinking for engineering students

The language center offered various English language and academic communication courses to both undergraduate and postgraduate students. There were between 50-60 full-time teaching staff, and about the same number of part-time staff. At the time of this study, the university was promoting an educational research paradigm called Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) to academic staff whose main responsibility was to teach. This effort was taken to encourage research deemed valuable to teaching and learning in the higher education context (see Felten, 2013). Not only were the teaching staff's annual appraisal partially shaped by their engagement with SoTL, but there was also an implicit expectation to participate in internal SoTL conferences and submit papers to the institutional journal on SoTL.

SoTL is an approach that was introduced by Boyer (1990). In his book, Boyer calls for the reconceptualization of scholarship at the university to extend beyond 'prized publications'. This movement has resonated with many academics, mainly to counter the overt and narrow focus on research. Very briefly, SoTL may be defined by these principles: driven by student learning; contextualized pedagogical research; appropriate methodology; involvement of students as collaborators; and shared with the relevant community (Felten, 2013). SoTL is meant to be inclusive through its acceptance of various perspectives and methodologies (Kensington-Miller et al., 2021) and for this reason it has been embraced by many, with some requiring SoTL engagement as a prerequisite for promotion purposes (Marcketti & Freeman, 2016). In the context of this study, SoTL has emerged as a useful research perspective that may bring together different disciplines to examine the sciences of learning in a collective manner. It is also through SoTL where emphasis is placed upon ensuring quality learning experiences of university students (Tan & Chen, 2020). The introduction of SoTL into the Singaporean context took place through the establishment of SoTL-Asia in 2016. This effort was spearheaded by the National University of Singapore and Nanyang Technological University that aimed to bring together experienced and expert educators from the Asian region to contribute distinct teaching and learning perspectives to the International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (ISSOTL) based in the United States of America. More than this, SoTL-Asia also sought to promote teaching practices that are informed by evidence and are impactful to students' learning (Chng et al., 2020).

In recent years, however, voices critical towards SoTL have emerged, mainly due to the lack of clarity of its place in educational research and its purported failure in promoting inclusivity. For the former, SoTL has yet to identify research paradigms peculiar to the field. Moreover, academics in the field of education remain skeptical towards SoTL, mainly because this approach claims to be distinct from educational research, which is a long-established field (Haigh & Withell, 2020). The lack of a clear definition for SoTL may have led academics to

impose ideas of what SoTL research should look like, leading to preferences that do not encourage inclusivity (Canning & Masika, 2022; Löfgreen, 2023; McSweeney & Schnurr, 2023; Potter & Raffoul, 2023). The expectation to engage in SoTL meant that teaching staff had to take on the scholarly practices sanctioned by SoTL. However, taking on practices that are new may not be easy, such as that discussed in the study of Bennett et al. (2016), where assuming the SoTL identity was likened to doing another PhD degree and a messy compromise.

Data collection and analysis

The study uses a qualitative case study approach, due to its interest in a phenomenon that is relatively unknown and unique (Baškarada, 2014). Using a case study analysis would afford an exploratory space to identify and discuss unexpected observations. Furthermore, a case study need not be a standalone examination; multiple-case studies may be considered to see how the phenomenon of interest takes shape in slightly varying contexts (Baxter & Jack, 2008). This presents an opportunity for links to be drawn to form a story constellation. In other related studies, the case study approach has been used by Nazari and Molana (2022) in their examination of tensions affecting Iranian English teachers towards top-down language assessment policies; Her and De Costa (2022) also used the case study approach to examine tension affecting a group of Californian community college teachers when faced with a new language policy enacted by the state; meanwhile, Cheung and Hennebry-Leung (2023) used the case study approach on a case participant to better understand how literary texts are included in English as a second language (ESL) teaching materials in a Hong Kong classroom, as well as the ensuing challenges of such efforts.

The primary data for the case study was from reflections written by the authors. Discourse data is considered suitable for the examination of teacher experience and their professional identity, as stories allow distinct individuality (Craig, 2007). Recognizing that tensions affect teachers differently, this study did not provide any specific narrative prompts or questions; instead, the authors had the liberty to write about their feelings and experiences with the implementation and advocacy of SoTL. After the individual reflections were written, the four participants got together to engage in a discussion. This was guided by the work of Glazer et al. (2004), where each individual could elaborate on particular instances shared in their earlier narratives. This process was facilitated by the second author. The group discussion was also a form of member check to ensure that the reflections were understood.

Each case study will be first presented separately. Here, tensions are identified based on the dissonance or competing perspectives that were emergent in the reflections of the participants (Barkhuizen, 2021). Living in liminality, on the other hand, is considered as the outcome of experiencing tension, where participants found themselves in a moment of in-betweenness arising out of situations of uncertainty or hesitancy (Winstone & Moore, 2017). Next, the analysis of the case study would involve interrogating meanings (of tension and liminality) from the reflections with relevant literature, particularly that of SoTL. These would then be drawn together to form a story constellation. This step consolidates seemingly disparate stories to demonstrate how the lived experiences of the participants are in fact complementary and relational (Craig, 2007).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In this section, we present the reflections of Jinat, Debbie, Daron, and Jonathan. Specifically, we highlight instances of tension and living in liminality as a result of responding to and navigating through institutional discourses of SoTL. These are also discussed in light of relevant literature, especially that of SoTL.

Jinat

How SoTL was explained to Jinat was contrary to what she knows of pedagogical research. The tension here may be a result of the conflict between Jinat's personal knowledge and experience with pedagogical research with information told to her about SoTL, which is thought to be similar given its emphasis on pedagogical research (Extract 1). Such conflict has been discussed by researchers examining the position of SoTL in educational research in the higher education setting. To illustrate, McSweeney and Schnurr (2023) argue that SoTL has not yet been able to produce educational research that is of comparable quality to established educational research approaches as it has been heavily invested in drawing out a niche for disciplinary-specific academic research. This has resulted in the preoccupation of SoTL practitioners with distinguishing themselves from others based mainly on disciplinary epistemologies. Along the way, certain educational research methods were relegated to being inappropriate or unsuitable (see Potter & Raffoul, 2023).

Extract 1

When I was interviewed for my current position, I was asked if I knew what SoTL was. I did not, and as the acronym provided no clue, admitted my ignorance. When it was explained to me in some detail, I was mystified. How was the scholarship of teaching and learning any different from pedagogical studies? I remained in this state of confusion for some time. I was told there was to be more reflective practice and theorising in SoTL. As I had spent several years teaching in primary and secondary schools and then teaching pedagogy to student teachers in an institute of education this explanation perplexed me further. Was there not sufficient theorising and reflection in pedagogical studies?

The tension may have been exacerbated when colleagues suggested that SoTL would include more engagement with reflection, which is something that has been established in other educational research contexts; in fact, reflection, to Jinat, is considered a staple in pedagogical research (Extract 2). However, at a later point, Jinat found out that the SoTL approach preferred a quantitative research methodology. Not only did this conflict with what Jinat knew about educational research, but also with her professional identity.

Extract 2

On several occasions, as I listened to my colleagues give SoTL papers or share their SoTL research, I understood only that SoTL required quantitative analysis. Every time I listened to a talk involving corpus studies, surveys and interviews carefully mapped

using statistical software, I developed my own understandings of what respectable and acceptable SoTL practice looks like. This ran counter to the literature I was reading and the advice I was given by colleagues who told me to just ‘reflect’ on my teaching. There was also the problem of my training as a literary historicist. This informs both my inability to conduct quantitative research competently and my resistance to qualitative SoTL studies. My own research into teaching, which has often strayed away from SoTL scholarship into education studies, indicated to me that qualitative papers based on teacher reflections were subjective and therefore, less rigorous.

The competing discourses that Jinat confronted had inevitably placed Jinat in a place of liminality. It may be assuring to know, however, that the challenge faced by Jinat was also experienced by other academic teaching staff in the field of humanities, who are struggling to find acceptance within SoTL due to the lack of acknowledgement given their research approach (Potter & Raffoul, 2023). This was highlighted in Jinat’s perception that studies based on her reflection as a teacher would be ‘less rigorous’ - an issue discussed by Cook-Sather et al. (2019). The place of reflection in SoTL has been challenged by some due to the claim that reflection portrays the teaching and learning environment as messy, which does not lend itself to the systematic analysis of teaching and learning; nonetheless, Cook-Sather et al. (2019) argue that reflections are highly valuable, given their contextual relevance and emotional proximity to the teaching and learning experience.

Debbie

For Debbie, tension arose for several reasons, one of which was the way in which SoTL was introduced and explained to her. From Debbie’s reflection, we could see the lack of consensus on what SoTL is, which is an issue raised by Löfgreen (2023) in that disciplinary circles reconfigure SoTL to emulate their own research epistemologies. While such efforts may be deemed contextually necessary, it has led them to value SoTL work that is done in a way that was familiar to them, and disregard those done by other disciplinary communities. This could have led to conflicting information presented by researchers who use SoTL, as they try to distinguish themselves. The uncertainties in the way SoTL was conceptualized may have pushed Debbie into liminality. Furthermore, competing discourses about what SoTL should be does not only create confusion, but it also depicts an extent of unwillingness between academic circles to work together (Extract 3).

Extract 3

There have been 3 main phases of my SoTL journey. I was first introduced to SoTL around 2016. Introductory discussions about SoTL left me feeling confused about what it was. They were abstract and focused more on what it was not rather than on what it was. However, I was interested to give it a try and believed that with time, the meaning would become clearer. However, I struggled to identify sources that could give me a clear picture of what is meant by the Scholarship of teaching and learning and how it differs from other established approaches to education.

Debbie's experience with SoTL was also shaped by her interaction with her colleagues (Extract 4). She reflected on how working with a group was not necessarily productive. The issue of SoTL being reconfigured to be exclusive to certain disciplinary circles could have led to Debbie being uncertain on how her classroom practices might inform the practices or perspectives of the larger community. This has actually been discussed by McSweeney and Schnurr (2023), in that SoTL has ended up being too concerned with remaining in the discipline, at the expense of quality educational research. This has subsequently resulted in the ambiguous position of SoTL as an approach in the broader field.

Extract 4

In January 2021, I was invited to participate in a small HERDSA Special Interest Group led by experienced colleagues. Discussion topics included foundations of SoTL, concept identification and design, and summarizing and dissemination of findings. While intended to help us develop our understanding and application of SoTL, I struggled in 2 main ways. Firstly, good SoTL practice requires a relational network of colleagues to support, encourage and engage with. The relationships among the other novice participants never seemed to develop beyond the 5 sessions. Secondly, for me, this struggle to grasp the meaning and use of SoTL was compounded by a lack of self-confidence. My career has been founded upon principles of "good teaching" which have undergirded my classroom decisions. However, I lack the confidence to design and apply inquiry which is intended to be applied to the broader teaching community. This need for careful design culminating in sharing with others in the field is one of the essential elements of SoTL.

Things seem to change for the better for Debbie after attending a talk by a prominent person in the field of language education, where Debbie was made aware of how SoTL is distinct through its focus on evidence, rather than principles (Extract 5). What was picked up by Debbie here is aligned with a recent discussion on SoTL. Specifically, Löfgreen (2023) argues that while many are quick to compare or compartmentalize SoTL in educational research, it is in fact different as its focus is in supporting and enhancing students' experience of learning, rather than in producing knowledge about teaching and learning processes. Having this realization helped Debbie imagine herself as a different type of academic teacher. In the study of English teacher identity, the imagined self is a construct that has been generally accepted, given the availability of multiple identities. Barkhuizen (2016) states that this is evident among English teachers, as the object of teaching – the English language – is an intermediary between various factors found in the classroom and broader educational context. Furthermore, in the teaching of English, both teacher and students will encounter cultures and languages, as well as ideas and perspectives from other parts of the world.

Extract 5

*March 2022 - Interestingly, a critical insight into SoTL came for me during March 2022 when I attended an online talk by Henk Huijser titled *Evidenced-based and Evidence-informed Teaching and Learning* arranged by the Faculty Development Committee. It was during this discussion that I came to realize that SoTL is about those who are*

teaching in Higher Education examining and evaluating themselves and the strategies for teaching and learning. It is about applying a scholarly systematic approach (emphasis on systematic) to the identification of areas for improvement, designing remedies or ways to measure changes in effective teaching and learning. This differs from a principles-based approach to teaching in that, as the educator, I am the one exploring the improvement of teaching and learning and learning environment. Although this view stretches my concept of who I am as a teacher, I now find this empowering.

While it seemed reassuring that Debbie was able to form a clearer sense of what SoTL research is supposed to be, the reality of research, especially that in the field of English language education, is not as clear cut. As discussed by McKinley (2019), research in the field of English language teaching is messy, given the inherent nature of the language classroom and school environment where various distinct variables are present and may be in competition with one another.

Daron

Daron's reflections showed tension arising from the seemingly impossibility of reconciling his personal professional identity with the professional identity expected of his workplace (Extract 6). In Daron's context, this may be something that has been acknowledged, as a colleague had also encouraged him to maintain his existing research work. This has led to tension stemming from distinct yet related incidents regarding research, where he thought his research experience was aligned with what his superiors had in mind. What Daron experienced here is not novel, as other studies in similar contexts had also reported a mismatch between personal professional perceptions with institutional expectations (Benesch, 2020; Yang et al., 2022).

Extract 6

When I first joined the Centre in 2016, I was advised informally by a colleague that I should continue to pursue my own research interests, which are situated within the realms of English language education and applied linguistics. It was also at this point when I was told of SoTL. At a quick glance, I did not sense a whole lot of disparity between the research that I had already been doing with SoTL. I had already been dabbling in issues of teaching and learning perspectives and practices in the English language classroom, and I felt that these were aligned with the fundamental principles of SoTL, which comprised the scholarly reflection and reaction towards one's own teaching practices and professional rapport with students. However, my initial assumption was quickly thwarted when I was told at my annual appraisal that the research I did was not sufficiently SoTL. Furthermore, I had to consider using quantitative methodologies. Receiving these comments at the same time made me consider them in tandem – that I had to do something less focused on English language education (or applied linguistics), and that whatever I did I had to use quantitative methodologies. This set me up in a quandary, as I did not want to give up on my research trajectory thus far, and I am cautious towards quantitative research, due to how it has been overused and overextended in the region and in my research interests.

What was shared by Daron in his reflection shows the definitive view towards SoTL that was taken up by the institution (Extract 7). This had inevitably positioned SoTL as an exclusive approach, where only certain research perspectives and practices would be accepted. Promoting such a narrow view of SoTL, however, may only bring about scholarship that lacks quality and impact to shape learning for the better (McSweeney & Schnurr, 2023). This may have resulted in hesitancy as to how a SoTL approach may be integrated into Daron's professional identity. Being in the liminal space where the principles of SoTL were in competition with the identity of Daron, he subsequently decided to separate his personal professional identity with what was expected by the institution.

Extract 7

[...] what I decided on finally was that I could not marry my research expertise and interest with the expectations of my workplace. So, I kept my research interests and SoTL studies separate. This was peculiar, I thought, given that research in teacher identity talk about how there is an inter-weaving of personas; what I see here instead, is the distancing between identities – the personal professional and the workplace professional identities.

To compartmentalize related areas of research as distinct is problematic, given that this would entail the process of naming a field and setting boundaries around it. This may be unnecessarily complex in a broad field such as education, given the myriad of variables and perspectives found within the teaching and learning setting. Similarly, in the related field of applied linguistics, Pennycook (2010) argues that such effort is futile, as it restricts the study of language to decontextualized systems and structures, when in fact language and the study of it is inherently practice-based, where there are socially-driven meanings that shape how language is used and understood.

The risk of uncertainty increases if the academic staff is not supported, or is unable to relate the area of expertise with the expectations of the institution. In fact, this has been reported in institutions where SoTL has been promoted, where there seems to be a resistance towards conducting research on teaching and learning that is perceived as lacking in value (Webb, 2019). This issue of uncertainty is also compounded when there are overt efforts in distinguishing SoTL as a stand-alone discipline in education, distinct from other educational research efforts already being carried out by subject experts (see Asarta et al., 2018). Furthermore, gaining recognition in the field of SoTL appeared to be only possible with communities and outlets external to the institution where work on SoTL work was carried out (Billot et al., 2017).

Jonathan

The field of English language teaching has largely been research-driven. Before the emergence of SoTL, various research topics and paradigms have been taken on by English language teaching practitioners (Hyland & Jiang, 2021). This was reflected upon by Jonathan, as seen in Extract 8.

Extract 8

I joined the department at a time about two years before the Educator Track was officially instituted. I have not heard of SoTL at that time, and nobody asked me about SoTL or told me about it. I continued to take an interest in applied linguistics and undertake pedagogical research on English Language Teaching.

Research by English teachers in the university context could be impactful to their professional identity. This is mainly due to their immediate surrounding which places importance on doing research and having research output (Bell, 2023), which subsequently determines how teaching is done in line with existing and emerging scholarship related to language education (Rose & McKinley, 2022). Nonetheless, as seen in the other authors' reflections, SoTL was an institutionalized movement which they had to consider taking up. In Jonathan's work context, SoTL was legitimized as a type of research that was specific to higher education and one that could be impactful to other academic teachers (Extract 9).

Extract 9

Suddenly, SoTL seemed to become a big thing in the department. The way it was presented to us by the head of department was that SoTL was that kind of research that was specific to Higher Education (but it was not as if we had been researching ELT in a K-12 context). And that it should interest educators beyond ELT to the wider university community. Now, that wouldn't be easy. Why would other educators care about language instructional issues if they didn't teach the language? Did SoTL then mean dumbing down of the research we had been doing? The idea of regression did not go down well with me.

The efforts to legitimize SoTL grew, with the removal and reconfiguration of spaces for ELT research. This is not surprising, given the ancillary position that ELT inhabits within the higher education setting. Bell (2023) contends that the role of an English language teacher at the university is rather precarious, partly due to the heavy teaching load; the lack of recognition towards excellent teaching; and the demands for visible research output in the form of publications. As such, engaging in scholarly work or doing research in ELT may be deemed lacking in symbolic capital, perhaps due to the lack of distinctiveness of the field in the higher education realm. In contrast, SoTL has been pitched as one that is exclusive to university academic teachers, as has been the case when this approach was first conceived in the early 1990s (Canning & Masika, 2022) (Extract 10).

Extract 10

Then the departmental stance on SoTL hardened, as it appeared to me. The head of department offered to mentor staff on their proposed SoTL projects, and later she also initiated SoTL projects for staff to be selected to join. The departmental ELT journal was terminated, and its reason was not communicated. Our flagship symposium was rebranded as a SoTL Roundtable. Although from time to time there seemed to be efforts

to support staff in the transition, the unsettling question that failed to be addressed in my mind was, why such a hard sell? And did adopting SoTL mean we had to abandon our disciplinary identities? My suspicion was no, but I could not be sure. This hunch would later provide the impetus for my PhD study: I decided that one way to re-orient myself in this unsettling transition was to undertake a systematic and rigorous study of SoTL. This may not be an option for colleagues who have already earned a PhD or EdD, but it was for me. I am not in the last lap of my PhD journey. I dare not claim that I now have all the answers to my uncertainties about SoTL, but for sure I am now feeling more confident in my border-crossing.

From Jonathan's reflections, we could see him enacting agency to address tensions arising from institutional expectations towards SoTL. This led him to deepen his understanding of his situation by embarking on further studies. English teachers' agentic actions as a response to tension may be considered a common response, and what is seen in the case of Jonathan may be a form of positive coping mechanism that fosters intellectual proximity with SoTL. Such investment is common among English teachers, whether it be responding to curriculum reform (Yip et al., 2022), adapting novel teaching practices (Querol-Julián, 2023), or doing research (Bao & Feng, 2022). Given the dynamicity of English language teaching, it becomes essential for teachers to be able to 'border-cross', as reflected on by Jonathan. While the notion of border-crossing was typically associated with transnational English language teachers who had physically traversed geographical and national borders to teach English, it has now been accepted that this notion also involves professional identity work and reconfiguration. Yazan et al. (2022) discuss the phenomenon as destabilizing fixed notions about English language teaching to afford new ways of negotiating and defining the identities of English language teachers. Such a fluid conception of professional identity is actually a principle in SoTL as well, as this research approach is meant to traverse boundaries to broker different pedagogical practices that may support the creation of more meaningful learning environments for students (Kensington-Miller et al., 2021).

The EAP practitioner: Being in constant liminality?

The discourse data of the participants reflected the space of liminality which they occupied. Jinat experienced competing yet unclear discourses regarding SoTL. She was given the impression that SoTL was distinct and that other research methods commonly associated with studies on language education would not be accepted. This was illustrated when Jinat mentioned how on the one hand, she was told to do quantitative research, yet on the other, was told that reflection-based studies would suffice. Debbie also reported a lack of clarity in the conceptualization of SoTL. This challenge was particularly pronounced at the beginning when SoTL was introduced. For Debbie, institutional discourse seemed to position SoTL as distinct, yet what it is actually was never made clear. While there seemed to be support from colleagues, Debbie still had to work out what SoTL was on her own. A pivotal moment was when she realized that the interest of SoTL is in the evidence of learning, rather than principles of teaching. Daron's experience with SoTL was also similar, in that it was being presented as something that was distinct. This created a dissonance for Daron, given his insistence on maintaining his existing professional experience with regard to research on language education.

In contrast, Jonathan sought to deepen his understanding on SoTL by conducting a doctoral study on it. This was prompted by the institutional discourse surrounding SoTL, where various efforts had been initiated to encourage its uptake among the teaching staff.

The experiences of the participants created a contextual constellation of discourse about SoTL. In particular, SoTL was positioned as an exclusive research approach which the participants had to adopt. Its value was seemingly unquestionable, as there was no provision given for how it might coexist with other research approaches or conventions. This had subsequently compelled the participants to reexamine and reconfigure their professional identities through agentic actions. This may be seen as a deference to the expectations of the institution; yet, at the same time, it also illustrated resilience and coping mechanisms. Jinat continued engaging with colleagues; Debbie attended relevant talks and sought opportunities to work with others; Daron continued to do SoTL research in ways that were familiar to him; and Jonathan began a postgraduate journey to better understand the notion of SoTL. The range of responses evidenced by participants of how they negotiated the liminal space suggests the need for personalized approaches to academic professional development that recognize their personal histories, values and aspirations. Our experience in co-constructing this paper has also informed us that dialogue and a sense of community do go some way towards easing the anxieties and vulnerabilities that come with being positioned in a liminal space: in engaging with one another's stories openly and respectfully, we have found the strength and provisional stability to help us manage those liminal emotions.

The constant need to find a professional footing may be an ongoing issue faced by English teachers at the university. This may be due to the lack of legitimacy afforded to their line of work or research (Vu, 2021) or even the (lack of) importance ascribed to a language center at a university (Dijk et al., 2014). Notwithstanding the introduction of SoTL or any new research frameworks for that matter, the professional identity of English language teachers has been accepted to be dynamic – being constantly contested and reconfigured. Barkhuizen (2016) states that “[l]anguage teacher identities are multiple, and they change, short-term and over time—discursively in social interaction with teacher educators, learners, other teachers, administrators, and the broader community, and in material interaction with spaces, places, and objects in classrooms and institutions.” (p. 659). As such, it may be the case that EAP teaching academics or practitioners find themselves in perpetual liminality. To address this concern, some researchers have looked into the possibility of collaborating with others (Alhassan et al., 2022; Bell, 2023). While this may seem like a productive step for English teachers, it still reflects the lack of recognition afforded to their professional identity. This challenge may be further compounded when new research ideas are introduced without any careful consideration for how they may fit into existing language education research paradigms. This was observed in this current study, as the participants reflected on how SoTL did not coincide with the types of professional work they were already engaged in (Fitzpatrick et al., 2022). If this persists, English teachers may be misled to believe that their status is undermined (Bell, 2023), such as that observed in this study. These issues may be contradictory to the goal of SoTL, which is meant to be inclusive of different disciplines and their research approaches. In particular, the introduction of a new research direction or expectation may sow discomfort among university academics, especially if the direction is one that disregards or displaces an academic's teaching and research experience and achievements (Miller-Young et al., 2018).

While the space of liminality can be confusing or daunting, it should not be considered an entirely negative experience. As seen in this study, all the participants resorted to identifying ways that would help them cope with the expectations of the institution. Occupying a space of liminality may be temporal, yet it may be potent enough to shape the resilience of the teacher (Loo et al., 2023). This may contribute to the teacher's professional growth, including a clearer understanding of the personal "link between identity and agency, the contextual factors that promote or hinder the construction of identity, and ultimately the responsibility of teacher education programs to create opportunities for the exploration of new and developing teacher identities" (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009, p. 176). Based on the findings of this study, participants resorted to banding together in a sensemaking exercise to better understand their circumstances. This did not necessarily end with a definitive resolution of how they were going to manage their professional identities in light of SoTL, but it did give them a clearer sense of what they could do to carry on. This allowed for each participant to explore the potential academic or research pathways pertinent to their professional selves. The agentic actions taken by the participants may illustrate resilience, but they also highlight other potential shortcomings. In the context of this study, what may be missing is a real leadership for SoTL, which is supposed to provide guidance on how existing pedagogical and research practices may be aligned with the principles of SoTL (Webb, 2019). How SoTL was introduced to the participants may have been distressing, especially when it became an expectation with ambiguous policies or strategies. When SoTL is introduced by means of institutional mandates, it demonstrates how its assumptions are not questioned. This would lead to the exclusion of those who are already doing pedagogical research that is interested in the enhancement of students' learning progress and experience (Potter & Raffoul, 2023). In response, practitioners would need to independently navigate their own way towards a space where there is a reconciliation between what is expected of the institution and what they intend to do or can do (Kensington-Miller et al., 2021).

The experiences of the participants operating in a space of liminality should not be seen as a surprise, given the neoliberalization of higher education institutions. Across the globe, universities are transforming due to boundaries being redrawn to accommodate business-driven initiatives. This may engender the pressure to compete, where hyper-individuality and performative selves among the academic community are promoted (Blum & Ullman, 2012). In such circumstances, Larsen and Brandenburg (2023) argue that academic staff whose positions are not well-defined may be more vulnerable to, and may need a more concerted effort to reconfigure their sense of professional identity. Nonetheless, such an effort may not be readily supported by their institutions. Not only are academic staff not necessarily given the space to navigate through new expectations, they also need to quickly acclimatize to shifts brought about by the neoliberalization of higher education. The continuous reconfiguration of the professional self would be exhausting and it would also affect one's ability to relate or commit to a community of practice. This is because the varied perspectives and practices taken up to cope with new pedagogical or research expectations may not be aligned with those of the community.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to examine tensions affecting university English language teachers as they grappled with policy changes relating to research undertakings expected of them. While this study does not claim to offer any generalized observations, it was able to present a constellation of stories where conflict emerged through the introduction of a new scholarly approach on researching language pedagogy. In the context of this study, SoTL was not necessarily pitched as something lesser; however, there was silence on how it would coexist with other educational research work that may already be happening in classrooms and the wider educational context. This reflects the critical discussions put forth by scholars in recent times, such as Canning and Masika (2022), who argue that SoTL had relegated educational research to being something less, even though the field has long been established. Based on the findings and discussion of this study, it may be observed that EAP teaching academics remain in a liminal space where they are expected to reconfigure their professional identity to accommodate shifts in educational and institutional aspirations. Recognizing that the circumstances of English teachers at the university are shaped by forces beyond the language education realm, future studies should consider exploring the larger professional ecology. This may not only reveal new insights into factors that may create tension and liminality, but also provide new perspectives into EAP professionals' propensity for resilience whilst perceived to occupy the fringes of higher education.

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