Nexus Analysis as an Approach to Navigate Change

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Abstract
Spring 2020 ushered a new set of educational challenges for English language program administrators (ELPAs) ranging from the COVID-19 pandemic to social and racial injustices experienced by staff, faculty, and learners. Recognizing the lack of materials to support ELPA professional development, this article introduces the theoretical and methodological approach of Nexus Analysis as a possible approach for administrators when navigating complex educational ecosystems. Along with a review of literature that describes the role of ELPAs and their associated duties, this article positions the actions of language program administration, which range from policy creation to ordering supplies, as mediated by outside factors on the societal, community, and individual scale. Following this, the Nexus Analysis methodological approach of engagement, navigation, and change is reviewed and generalized to educational settings. To conclude, past research studies that have used Nexus Analysis are reviewed with the aim to connect with familiar ELPA management scenarios and practical considerations unique to our current time in history.

Keywords
English language program management, English language program administrators, Nexus Analysis

Background

English language program administrators (ELPAs) are no strangers to change nor the impacts that geopolitical forces can have on the stability of a successful school or program. Many would argue, however, that U.S. ELPAs are experiencing a new level of instability with the trifecta of COVID-19, racial injustice, and government policies that have attempted to restrict international student mobility or force F-1 students to attend in-person classes to maintain their status despite the health consequences. While government policies reacting or mitigating the public health response to COVID-19, police brutality, and immigration seem to be changing daily, ELPAs face immediate and long-term questions as a result. How do we use our own past experience as well as those from faculty, learners, and our community to navigate the current situation? How do we manage our language programs that in the past relied heavily on face-to-face interactions and networking to achieve aims to a situation now mediated by remote platforms? How do we address the institutional and societal ideas circulating as a result of top-down policies and proclamations about our students that ultimately impact our classrooms? Although these exact questions arise out of our new context, they highlight a familiar educational ecosystem and real-life challenges that exist within English language learning environments across scales and time (Blommaert, 2007; Pennington & Hoekje, 2010).

In this article, I will provide an overview of English language support programs (ELSPs), and the elements that ELPAs in leadership positions often have to consider in order to understand their role within their educational context or ecosystem. Following this discussion, I will introduce the theoretical framework of Nexus Analysis (Scollon & Scollon, 2004), an approach that aims to

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understand how semiotic resources mediate action, that can be used to navigate rapidly changing educational environments. To conclude, I will provide example studies that attempt to address navigating new educational policies, program management, and teacher professional development that ELPAs could use in their own practice.

English Language Program Administration

Guidance on what skills an ELPA must build through professional development as well as the factors that contribute to a successful language program has been understood primarily through business and psychology literature (Coombe et al., 2008; White et al., 2008). Suggestions from these publications encourage language program administrators to deepen their understanding of manager duties such as human resources, marketing, sales, financial management, along with academic management to varying degrees based on the particular context. Although not true in every case, many new ELPAs find themselves filling multiple roles simultaneously (e.g., admissions officer, facility manager, accountant, and teacher) with little time to self-reflect. To manage this difficult balance, ELPA professional development literature suggests primarily top-down solutions for ELPAs but often overlook the influence of individual stakeholders and interpersonal communication within the program that shapes the educational environment (Pennington & Hoekje, 2010; Walker, 2011; White et al., 2008). Even rarer within the professional development material for ELPAs is literature addressing individual leadership experiences or learned assumptions about managing and supervising that might guide the decision-making process of ELPAs.

The ELPA professional development literature does provides some useful tools for long-term strategic planning through general business leadership discourses, but rarely addresses the lived experiences of ELPAs who must move between multiple roles on a given day while responding to immediate and significant world events and policies that impact operations. Due to the variety and types of ELSPs, ELPAs understand that they may need to modify their management approach based on the audience an ELSP serves (e.g., immigrants, professionals, or pre-college or matriculated international students); the leadership skill set becomes even more complex when the school itself is a mix of audiences and must provide both supportive (ELSP course in parallel with core courses) and intensive (only ELSP courses) programs (Bhowmik & Kim, 2018). In addition to these complexities, rarely does that literature address the cultural, racial, or economic experiences of the students and staff that could impact the program. Financial factors may also influence an ELPA's experience as the language program may be entirely reliant on student tuition; thus, making the program's success vulnerable to the recent geopolitical forces and the pandemic. Beyond the students served and financial structure, an ELPA's management experience can be dictated by the position of the program within its given institution as an ELSP may exist as part of an academic department like an applied linguistics department, or situated in a student service office, writing program, or as a stand-alone unit (Bhowmik & Kim, 2018; Eaton, 2017). This variety has created a very unique community of practice for ELSPs (Lave & Wenger, 1991), but also has led to uneven understandings of what ELSPs do (Kaplan, 2003; Pennington & Hoekje, 2010) and where they belong.

In contrast, ELPSs often know where their program and students stand in relation to their institution. They are also aware that the events that take place either outside or within their schools on a given day are by nature multidimensional and are often experienced simultaneously by the individuals in the school community (e.g., students, teachers, administrators), the program and its relation to other units in the school or university, and the local and global community (Hult, 2017;

Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008; Pennington & Hoekje, 2010), but find little guidance on managing this convergence of influences. Connecting multilingual speakers to the greater world is not a new idea for those interested in language and education. Haugen's (1972) work positioned languages as a central component to an ecosystem while Fill and Mühlhäusler (2001) expanded on the interconnectedness of languages and the necessity to maintain endangered languages to support a healthy ecosystem. Institutions of higher education or language programs can also be analogous to an ecosystem as suggested by Dafouz and Smit (2016) who recognize a multilingual university has features that include a "dynamic interrelatedness between the relevant languages (functions and forms) and their academic habitats, not least because these contain, and are constructed by, academics, students, and administrators in their actual and virtual university spaces" (pp. 400–401). If this perspective is adopted, ELPAs can deepen their understanding of what influences the administration of their language program to include not only top-down policies or societal issues, but also the experiences of faculty and learners and their interactions.

One way ELPAs can approach the co-construction of institutional ecosystems is through the concept of scales. The notion of scales is often attributed to Blommaert (2007) who suggested they were an excellent metaphor to explore how social events and processes move and develop. For instance, and related to our current context, a student attempting to complete a language learning assignment during a remote class can be connected to potentially related dimensions such as the work environment where the student is situated, the emotional and mental states of the student, and their classmates, and the initial university policy to move all classroom learning online among others (see also Dafouz & Smit, 2020; Hult, 2017; Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008; Martin-Jones et al., 2016). It is then through the appreciation of the institutional ecosystem and a multiple scale perspective that one can make connections across the organization the ELSPs exist in and how ELPAs' decisions are mediated. As described by Pennington and Hokje (2010):

> Language program leadership is situated in the context of a globalized world and complex and rapidly changing educational environments. The context of language program leadership is described in relation to the spread of English, the increase in international exchange, the language program as a community of practice, [and] the multiple functions of a language program. (p. 3)

Theoretical Perspectives of Nexus Analysis

Given that we understand ELSPs exist in an institutional ecosystem, and those administrating the programs not only participate in the co-construction of the program but are often the major decision-makers (Liddicoat, 2016), Nexus Analysis (NA) can be a useful approach in general and considering our current time in history. NA was developed by Scollon and Scollon (2004), to observe the connection between action, specifically social action (human actions that might be physical, verbal, visual, written, or multimodal), and the factors that mediate them (e.g., classroom size, meetings, signage, policies, orientation videos) that together ultimately guide results. Even a private action like an ELPA sitting in her office alone typing out a response to an email can be included and seen as socially situated carrying its own set of values and role in the meaning-making process (Hult, 2017; Scollon & Scollon, 2004; Wells & Wong, 2012). The factors that can mediate a social action become more apparent when we imagine how our ELPA's experience might change if rather than writing an email she picked up the phone, had a face-to-face conversation, or more currently relevant, joined a Zoom call to provide her response. This highlights the aim of NA, where it is not the text that is of interest, but "rather how language and other semiotic and material tools are used to mediate action" (Lane, 2014, p. 1).

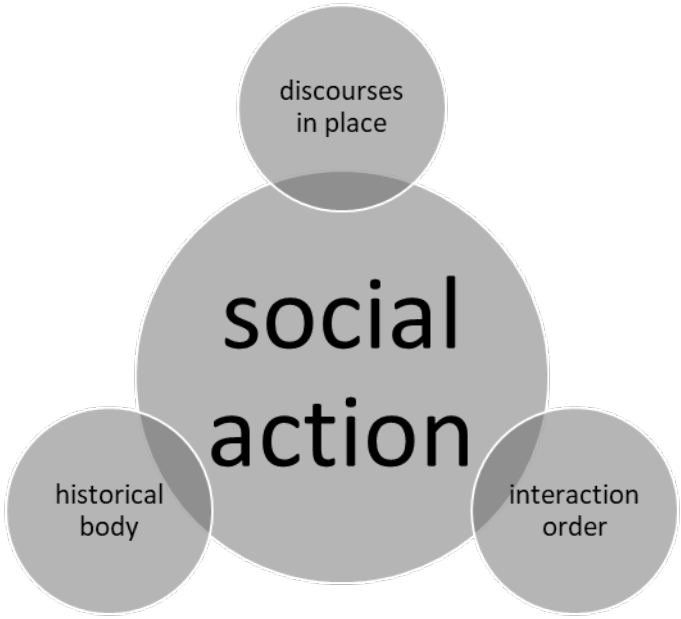
According to Scollon and Scollon (2004), any social action is always mediated by three intersecting levels of discourse: *discourses in place*, the *interaction order*, and *historical body*. Here discourse is understood not just as written or spoken language, but meaning systems that include historical, institutional, socially shared habits, behaviors, and perceptions (Dafouz & Smit, 2016; Lane, 2014; Scollon & Scollon, 2004), or what Gee (2011) refers to as discourse with a capital D to capture the complex multimodal semiotic system enacted by individuals. It also happens that these three discourse levels correspond to the different scales of influence. Starting at the largest scale, Discourse in Place includes all societal discourses that are present (Scollon & Scollon, 2004) and are considered in-place because they are situated contextually to mediate the social action under study (Blommaert & Huang, 2011; Hult, 2015; Scollon & Scollon, 2004). This scale taps into both explicit and non-explicit discourses that have become norms for a given society ranging from the physical configurations of a space (classrooms, offices, lecterns) to the larger assumed social views on a topic (education policy, race, class, gender; Hult, 2017; Palviainen & Mård-Miettinen, 2015; Scollon & Scollon, 2004). To analyze this level of discourse, approaches associated with critical discourse analysis can be useful (Hult, 2015). For language programs, actions mediated by discourses in place could include the accepted norms and ideas around admissions, hiring practices, or program handbooks. These could also include language specific topics such as the notion of Standard English, the materials and curriculum used by the language school, and placement tests.

The second level of discourse is called Interaction Order and represents the community scale. When developing this approach, Scollon and Scollon (2004) pulled heavily from the work of Goffman (1983) who focused on the power dynamics or mutual relations between individuals over different social situations (Goffman, 1983; Kuure et al., 2018). An example of this might be observed when a group of instructors discuss a challenging classroom lesson. Factors such as familiarity, seniority, collegiality all could potentially contribute to the power dynamics between the individuals and co-construct the conversation (Lane, 2014). Other, more damaging, examples could include the negative interactions Asian students experienced when COVD-19 hit the United States (Noel, 2020). NA researchers suggest locating a site, like a meeting room or classroom and employing the tools from the ethnography of communication (Hymes, 1974) in order to observe how individuals foreground or background ideas (Scollon & Scollon, 2004). Ultimately, the interaction order can reveal how individuals have different levels of influence depending on the situation and in relation to the context of the interaction (Shohamy, 2006).

The final level of discourse is Historical Bodies that represents the individual scale including past experiences, memories, and the accustomed practices of the participants. Within this scale, it is observed that "different people may play the same role differently" (Scollon & Scollon, 2004, p. 13) as they approach the situation with different experiences. When engaging in any social action, individuals may face unique contexts but always bring with them habitual ways of acting and thinking that are influenced by their past experiences. To access this scale, researchers should tap into introspective data and may use tools like ethnographic interviewing or surveys to obtain it (Hult, 2015). For ELPAs, the historical bodies might reveal itself through unnoticed actions, such as the habits that guide individuals to act as a student or know how a school is run "without seemingly being told what to do" (Scollon & Scollon, 2004, p. 13) or equally reveal inequalities in access to educational systems. However, at the same time, the final result of a social action is at least, in part, a product of an individual's efforts with the potential to impact society suggesting a level of agency within this scale (Hult, 2017; Lane, 2014; Nishida, 1958).

As one might assume, a social action is best understood by observing how all three scales intersect within the social system or a "nexus of practice" (Hult, 2017; Lane, 2014; Scollon & Scollon, 2004) as represented in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1
Nexus of Practice for Social Action



Note. Adapted from *Nexus Analysis: Discourse and the Emerging Internet* (p. 154), by R. Scollon and S. W. Scollon (2004), Routledge.

Language program management is a series of doings (reserving classrooms, attending meetings, hiring and training new instructors, writing and implementing policy) and each of these actions are mediated by societal and institutional norms, the interaction of our students and faculty, and the personal experiences of the ELPA and individuals involved. Many times, an ELPA will take action to resolve a quick issue, but each task is understood to be accumulative undertaken to manage and improve the program, and ultimately the students' experience. Those who do NA often choose to study practical matters and practical problems that individuals need to solve aligning well with the daily expectations and pressures an ELPA often feels to get things done and deliver (Jones, 2012; Scollon & Scollon, 2004, 2009). In practical terms this could be any type of action - from ordering supplies to demonstrating student performance to supervisors. To add to the appeal for ELPAs, NA is based on the desire to improve a situation, so it naturally aligns with the ongoing needs analysis required to run good language programs.

ELPAs know that the students that ELSPs serve and the type of programs we run have always been situated amongst challenging social issues (e.g., immigration, educational access, and linguistic hegemony) and ELPAs may find themselves in the role to mitigate those challenges. NA practitioners suggest when adopting an NA approach, one is often engaged or driven by a social problem with a desire to solve it (Jones, 2012; Lane, 2014; Scollon & Scollon, 2004). This positions NA as an approach with tendencies towards critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1993; Flowerdew & Richardson, 2018); which could address the pressures resulting from the current

pandemic and lack of social justice currently experienced outside and in the ELSP. In the next section, I will review how to conduct an NA as well as previous studies that illustrate the benefits.

Nexus Analysis and Managing Change

NA researchers recommend one should engage in a NA when faced with dynamic, complex education problems (Hult, 2015; Scollon & Scollon, 2004). NAs are traditionally accomplished through qualitative traditions from interactional sociolinguistics, linguistic anthropology, and critical discourse analysis (Hult, 2017; Lane, 2014; Scollon & Scollon, 2004). Scollon and Scollon (2004) recommend three stages to conduct a NA study: *engagement*, *navigation*, and *change*. The engagement stage is characterized by five steps (Scollon & Scollon, 2004, p.154):

1. Establish the social issue
2. Find the crucial social actors
3. Observe the interaction order
4. Determine significant cycles of discourse
5. Identify the zone of identification

A detailed description of these steps is in Scollon and Scollon (2004) on pp. 153–159. Specifically, the engagement state is a period for an NA researcher to identify a topic that they are passionate about or one that needs to be solved, gain access to the context, identify participants (social actors), locate important discourses, and gain an understanding of the context through activities such as participating in casual conversations with participants, deepening relationships with stakeholders, attending to the local and national news and so on in order to discover language program development itself (Hult, 2017; Lane, 2014; Wells & Wong, 2012). According to Scollon and Scollon (2004), the engagement phase can take up to two months to complete. It could be argued, however, that an ELPA is already a full member of his or her community and may have already identified areas in need of improvement, and the particular participants involved truncating the time needed for the engagement phase.

The next stage identified by Scollon and Scollon (2004) is navigating the nexus of practice, or the social system in place. The concept of Nexus of Practice is similar to what social-cultural theorists would call a Community of Practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) except that since NA is focused on social action, any actor could be a member of the system even if they are not directly involved (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 1992; Lane, 2014; Scollon & Scollon, 2004).

As NA is centrally an ethnographic tradition, navigating the nexus of practice can take up to eight months (see full description Scollon & Scollon, 2004, pp. 159-177). At this stage, a researcher navigates the nexus to observe how the three types of discourses (discourses in place, interaction order, and historical bodies) flow through a social action. This can be done through collecting data at each scale using participant observation, critical discourse analysis, interviews and surveys, video and images, and journals to name a few. Once collected, a researcher may observe how the discourses occur and intersect across at any moment or evolve and change over time. NA is also interested in how discourses mediating those actions are taken up and shifted as they move between written, spoken, and other semiotic tools. This calls on researchers to look at how respective cycles develop within the Nexus of Practice or intersect with a moment of social action (Hult, 2015, 2017; Scollon & Scollon, 2004). In either case, the goal of an NA is to map the cycles of the people, places, discourses, objects, and concepts that circulate through the moment when the social action takes place (Scollon & Scollon 2004, p. 159) and discover "anticipations, time scales, or transformations and resemiotizations" (p. 170). The observation of connections between texts, or intertextuality (Duff, 2002; Kristeva, 1980), connections between discourses or interdiscursivity

(Bhatia, 2010), and finally resemiotization where discourse can transform across "events, spaces, times, modes and media" (Scollon, 2008, p. 241) illustrated in the work of Iedema (2003).

The final stage is changing the nexus of practice. Change comes about both naturally and as a result of the researcher revisiting their original motivations for engaging with the nexus of practice (Lane, 2014; Scollon & Scollon, 2007; Soukup & Kordon, 2012). The change stage also should reflect the original motivation for conducting an NA that may be rooted in an attempt to solve a social issue or challenge. As a result, NA is often characterized as an approach that is either activist or "a project to promote social change" (Kuure et al., 2018, p. 76). The daily and long-term social actions are numerous for ELPAs and may include creating and implementing policy, overseeing curriculum development, negotiating a budget, and often teaching (Coombe et al., 2008; Pennington & Hoekje, 2010; White et al., 2008) with each representing a potential nexus point that is mediated.

Now that the central theory of NA has been introduced, several past studies illustrate how NA reveals the benefits of the approach and how it can assist in navigating new educational policies, program development, and teacher professional development.

Navigating Education Policies

Most ELSPs have their own educational policies crafted to manage multilingual students such as placement testing and subsequent required courses (Finn & Avni, 2016; Menken, 2008); however, it is also well understood that policies originating from outside the school, both explicit and de facto, can impact educational settings in general (Hult, 2014; Shohamy, 2006; Wiley & García, 2016). Social and institutional policies such as social distancing, remote learning, visa regulations, as well as media coverage of the police and protests can have an impact on language programs, the learning environment, and the individuals. Often, as a result, ELPA's may find themselves needing to react and shape new policies for their particular context and program. If an NA approach is adopted, an ELPA may be better positioned to understand their own role as agents of policy creation while identifying and addressing the various mediated discourses at play (Fenton-Smith & Gurney, 2016; Liddicoat, 2016; Menken & Garcia, 2010; Shohamy, 2006).

At times, the ability of ELPAs to moderate or change policy may be limited. This was surely the case when most universities transitioned to online learning. At the same time, however, the current challenges for educational institutions provide ELPAs an opportunity to reflect on their own agency as well as those within their program in shaping policy (Baldauf & Chua, 2012; Fenton-Smith & Gurney, 2016; Liddicoat, 2016; Menken & Garcia, 2010). An example of this can be found in Källkvist and Hult (2016), who investigated a Swedish university's language planning process related to English-Swedish parallel language. In this context, Swedish universities were called upon to establish language policies for their respective institutions to enact an English language policy set forth by the Swedish national government (discourses in place). The researchers gathered data such as meeting notes and official government documents (discourses in place), the interaction of the participants during the meetings (interaction order), and information about participants professional experiences and the individual statements made by participants during the meetings (historical body). Using ethnographic and discourse analytic approaches, the researchers observed how the language new policy was co-constructed by three different scales of discourse. Since ELPAs are often managing meetings or invited to meetings the Källkvist and Hult (2016) study highlights how ELPAs could take a more critical eye towards how top-down policies or initiatives evoke action by participants and then change shape over time and across genres (e.g., from written to spoken back to written) as well as the roles individuals play in applying and

evolving the language to describe policies through process of resemiotization and co-construction (Hult, 2015; Scollon, 2008). In their own context, ELPAs facing policy changes observing how individuals are describing new policies or modifying them through their interactions (like returning to campus or social distance guidelines) and shifting them to fit needs or localized contexts will assist in identifying potential future challenges or opportunities for success.

Managing ELSPs

Pennington and Hoekje (2010) suggest that the real work of an ELPA is their ability to leverage the available resources to achieve the aims of the program. A few studies addressing the complexities of managing an ELSP as social action have been conducted, but mostly within the context of international university partnerships (Bristow, 2020; Dafouz & Smit, 2016, 2020); however, they still address the experiences of ELPAs including obtaining space or supplies, hiring instructors, or leveraging a network (Johnston & Peterson, 1994; Pennington & Hoekje, 2010). Currently, how ELPA identify resources and what mediates them has changes since most programs have budgets set at zero with classes continuing remotely or in-person with personal protective gear. Despite these changes, ELPAs can still recognize their programs as encompassing diverse and multilingual learners and teachers who continue to benefit from administrative support that recognizes their needs.

In the past, an ELPA may have considered how the physical space of the ELSP supported and welcomed learners. As NA recognizes meaningful communication goes beyond what is written and spoken, ELPAs may benefit from pulling from studies that describe multilingual physical learning or living environments such as Dressler (2015) and Pietikäinen et al. (2011), who leveraged approaches from linguistic landscape along with NA. In both these respective studies, researchers took photographs of the physical signage in a bilingual school and town, respectively, and analyzed the interaction order of the languages uncovering what language was privileged over another. Ultimately these studies mediated understandings of linguistic representation and emotional wellness for the students and communities. Addressing the multimodal physical and visual resources that shape the language learning environment (Dooly, 2017; Norris, 2004) could be applicable for ELPAs who want to understand how their ELSP currently represents the diversity of their learners.

This could be done through photographing the physical or online classrooms to analyze what images or languages are being forefronted. This would assist in understanding the current visual or linguistic choices made in the school or classroom and can help ELPAs and faculty develop new, inclusive visual choices (such as enabling virtual backgrounds or logos on PowerPoints) to represent the physical presence of the school and/or select images that represent the diversity of its faculty and student body.

At the same time, with technology and technological access being the main resource during the pandemic, an ELPA must be aware of individual needs. Scollon and Scollon's (2004) original work establishing NA reveals the authors' experiences using computers to facilitate technology-assisted classes in Alaska in the 1980s. Focusing primarily on Native American populations, Scollon and Scollon (2004) identified the various discourses mediating the introduction of electronic educational experiences on university students through analyzing legal and educational documents, participant-observation, and interviews. As a result of their research, they noted factors such as background, economic status, language, and culture (all mediating discourses) greatly influenced the success of the students.

Although most ELAPs already take the time to listen to challenges faculty and students are encountering challenges with working from home or teaching/learning with protective equipment, they may miss solutions by only focusing on one mediating factor. Through following a more systematic approach, such as NA, that observes the intersection of the institutional policy, classroom interaction, and individual present and past experiences better solutions may arise.

Teacher Development

ELPAs who provide the time and support for teacher professional development find NA can support change and explore the intersection of the individual, beliefs, and practice (Hult, 2018; Koivistoinen et al., 2016; Kuure et al., 2018; Räisänen & Korkeamäki, 2015). Many ELPAs find themselves intrinsically involved with introducing or implementing a new curriculum without much guidance on how to support the individual needs of the faculty. Räisänen and Korkeamäki (2015) provide one example of a faculty-led self-development practice driven by a top-down curriculum change in Finland. Here, the first author analyzed her own experience in implementing the new required teaching approach through a nexus of classroom room interactions (interaction order), self-reflection on curriculum (historical bodies), and expectations of traditional classroom teaching in contrast to new teaching practices (discourses in place). Over a year, through journaling and analyzing video recordings of the classroom, the instructor documented her transformation of old practices to new which included altering the physical layout of the classroom and favoring new approaches in teaching. The journaling in particular was useful for the instructor as it helped her uncover opinions and expectations around teaching that had been built over years (historical body).

Current classroom practices embodied by ELSP faculty are challenged by all new technology and class delivery (Dooly & Sadler, 2013; Kuure et al., 2018) brought on by COVID-19. Providing time for instructors to engage in professional development through journaling or analyzing video is not that uncommon, but ELPAs can take this process a step further through observing and listening to what discourses may be mediating the instructors' experience of teaching in the current context. Through addressing all three scales, the ELPA may be able to support professional development process more fully and understand why a particular skill might take longer to master.

Conclusion

Although Nexus Analysis is not the only way to navigate change, it provides ELPAs with the framework to address practical problems and identify solutions that reflect the local context. ELPAs are already full members of their nexus of practice and are motivated to introduce positive change within their organization making them excellent NA practitioners. Once engaged, and ELPA can identify the mediating forces within top-down policies, the interaction of the individuals, their own agency and leadership role, and the past experiences of colleagues that intersect within an array of social actions embedded with the language program. Although this article covered several tasks that an ELPA must address, navigating education policies, managing ESLPs, and teacher development, there remains ample room for ELPAs to learn from NA in order to identify what discourses might mediate decision-making processes and professional development. Through a process like NA, and ELPA may discover a tool that can help describe their own experiences as well as analyze their programs to find balanced solutions and co-construct beneficial changes with colleagues, faculty, and learners for their program as a whole.

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