

Enhancing the Academic Literacy Skills of ESL Higher Education Students in Canada

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Abstract

To succeed in Canadian university education programs all students must demonstrate a required level of academic literacy which includes a variety of English language skills such as writing formal essays. With the growing number of immigrants in Canada enrolled in higher education, there is an increased demand for language supports for English as Second Language (ESL) students. The current research suggests that language issues pose one of the greatest challenges to academic success for ESL students. This paper describes the current state of knowledge of major literacy challenges experienced by ESL students within the higher education system in Canada and questions whether their literacy needs are being met. Educational strategies for enhancing the written literacy skills are discussed.

Keywords: academic literacy; written English; ESL learners; Canadian higher education

1. Introduction

UNESCO describes literacy as an essential skill enabling an individual to achieve his or her goals, to develop his or her knowledge and potential, and to participate more fully in the wider society. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2015) defines *literacy*, in a general sense, as the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate, compute and use printed and written materials associated with varying contexts.

To succeed in university education programs, all students must demonstrate a higher level of literacy, that is, *academic*

literacy, which encompasses a variety of language skills including reading, speaking, listening and writing which are reflective of academic scholarship in higher education. Academic writing is the means by which students learn how to locate, interpret and evaluate evidence, and contribute to the scholarship in their field (Andre and Graves, 2013). Writing becomes an essential tool for knowledge transformation and utilization in higher education programs (Scardamalia & Bereiter, 1987). To succeed in specialized professional education, students must master academic literacy (Carter, Ferzli & Wiebe, 2007) and the distinct specialist language of their field (Woodward-Kron, 2008).

Because of the centrality of writing in academic success for all students, exploring the current state of knowledge regarding writing in Canadian universities is necessary for improving higher education programs' ability to address future learning needs. This review is especially important in order to address the learning needs of non-native English speaking students in Canada. Research has highlighted continuing challenges for the growing number of higher English as second language (ESL) students. Developing academic writing competence in academic settings is known to be a long term process that is not always well defined, the more so for ESL students possessing various linguistic abilities and backgrounds (Kim, 2012; Gimenez, 2008). Immigration is the main source of Canada's population growth, with 20% of immigrants making up the Canadian workforce in 2001 (Alexander, Burleton and Fong, 2012).

Many seek higher education in order to improve their employment opportunities. Despite the large numbers of immigrants enrolled in higher education in large urban centres such as Ontario, Canada, there has been inadequate attention to the recognition of the uniqueness of ESL learners within the Canadian higher education system. In particular, developing a better

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understanding of their learning needs and educational strategies to promote the development of their academic literacy needs further research.

Systemic barriers may exist within the Canadian educational system which need to be addressed in order promote academic literacy for these students. Guo and Herbert (2014) argued that ESL learners' needs and rights tend to be marginalized due to the lack of recognition, adequate resources and effective educational approaches which accommodate potential language related challenges. The problem is further compounded by recent evidence suggesting that the higher education system as a whole in the province of Ontario lacks a futuristic, responsive educational strategy to address the need for increased academic literacy in all of its students (Dion and Maldonado, 2013). The timing is especially problematic given that strong literacy skills are critical to students as they graduate into a highly competitive and increasingly globalized labour market. Being responsive to the needs of the increasing numbers of ESL students becomes a greater challenge.

The benefits of literacy to society, which are generally accepted within English speaking higher education systems, have been highlighted in a recent UNESCO statement which states that, "a literate community is a

dynamic community, one that exchanges ideas and engages in debate. Illiteracy, however, is an obstacle to a better quality of life, and can even breed exclusion and violence (UNESCO, 2015). This paper contributes to the current state of knowledge by describing some of major challenges experienced by ESL students within higher education in Canada and questions whether their literacy needs are being met. It also illustrates how the broader educational policy context of a country can impact upon the delivery of higher education programs. The questions to be addressed include: What types of writing instruction and supports are needed by ESL students in higher education programs, what types of learning outcomes should be expected from English writing strategies and what educational approaches to providing these supports are effective? While this paper focuses only on the Canadian context, the issues and recommendations that have been identified could be applied to similar learning contexts in other countries.

2. The Canadian Literacy Context

Strong literacy skills have been associated

Medical Research Archives with a country's economic prosperity; therefore Canada and other developed countries have paid increasing attention to measuring and monitoring the literacy skill levels of its population. Variations in literacy skill levels in the general Canadian population have been reported by Statistics Canada (2005) and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2011) who have instituted surveys to track the evolution of reading and writing skills. Recognizing that literacy skills can vary significantly within any given population, English literacy in Canada has progressed beyond simply categorizing individuals into literate and illiterate groups. Instead, the OeCd sorts respondents' results into five categories, which it uses for all of its literacy-related surveys (Table 1). It is especially important to note that the OECD identifies level 3 as the *minimum proficiency* level needed to complete secondary school and cope with the demands of daily life. The results show that only a very small number, less than half, of the Canadian population can truly be called literate by international standards.

Table 1: Descriptions of International Literacy Levels*

Level 1	Read relatively short text, locate, and enter a piece of information into that text, and complete simple, one-step tasks such as counting, sorting dates, or performing simple arithmetic
Level 2	The ability to sort through "distracters" (plausible, but incorrect pieces of information), to integrate two or more pieces of information, to compare and contrast information and to interpret simple graphs
Level 3	Demonstrate the ability to integrate information from dense or lengthy text, to integrate multiple pieces of information and to demonstrate an understanding of mathematical information in a range of different forms. Level 3 tasks typically
Level 4	Tasks involve multiple steps to find solutions to abstract problems. Tasks require the ability to integrate and synthesize multiple pieces of information from lengthy or
Level 5	Requires the ability to search for information in dense text that has a number of distracters, to make high-level inferences or use specialized background knowledge and to understand complex representations of abstract formal and informal

*Source: Essential Skills Ontario, 2012a; Canadian Council on Learning, 2008

The International Adult Literacy Skills Survey (IALSS) results, using the same criteria as Table 1, reported by the Conference Board of Canada (2006) raise concerns about the literacy levels of Canadians in general. For example, 42% of Canadians score at levels 1 or 2 of the IALS prose literacy measure, thus, failing to meet the minimum required levels. The IALS also reported a high correlation between literacy skills and level of education. The most important predictor of literacy proficiency was educational attainment, with participants scoring approximately ten points higher for each additional year. In all countries surveyed, adults aged 20 to 25 who had completed high school scored higher than those who had not, while those who had completed tertiary education

scored even higher. Globally, the greatest number of participants scoring on the higher end of the literacy proficiency scale (levels 4 or 5) were employed in high-skilled white-collar jobs indicating that literacy levels are associated with greater employment success (Dion and Maldonado, 2013).

A limitation of these data from the IALSS is that it does not distinguish between native English and ESL speakers. Similar data reporting solely on the literacy levels of immigrants who are ESL speakers currently do not exist in Canada. However, the immigration policy documents provide some support for the trends reported in the IALSS report. Over a decade ago, a problem was recognized by the Workplace Preparation

Branch of the Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities stating that, " the first and foremost issue is poor (official) language skills and that only 38% of adult immigrants in Canada demonstrated basic document literacy skills" (Ontario Profile of Ontario Immigrants, May 2000). This trend existed despite the investment of funds for increased language assessment and training.

Recent research results also raised concerns about the need to address literacy skills. Adamuti-Trache et al.(2013) examined data of the immigrants who arrived in Canada between October 1, 2000 and September 30, 2001, finding that "the cumulative post-secondary (college and university) participation rates rose "10%, 33% and 44% within 6 months, 2 years and 4 years respectively of arrival" (Adamuti-Trache et al., 2013: 139) . Their study revealed that self-reported English language speaking ability changed over time and was one of the significant factors explaining an increase in their participation.They reported that with each increment in the language competency scale, the odds of participating are increased by approximately 11% for English speakers and 9% for French speakers. (Canada has two official languages, English and French.)

While the benefits of strong literacy skills are well established, obtaining such skills is often elusive for large numbers of Canadian immigrants (Alexander, Burleton & Fong,

Medical Research Archives 2012). Without adequate levels of English language competency, adult students seeking entry to the labour market face higher rates of failure (Akresh and Frank, 2010).

This lack of attention to language difficulties is of particular concern because many adult immigrants seek higher education following migration to Canada as a pre-labour market integration strategy (Adamuti-Trache et al., 2013). This is evident in the large groups of adult immigrants seeking entry to the licensed health professions through higher education programs (Crawford and Candlin, 2013; Neiterman and Bourgeault, 2013). Yet, there has been insufficient attention to the needs of ESL students despite such early evidence that higher literacy skills have been shown to be related to employment success and higher earnings in many different occupations (Anisef et al., 2003; Guo and Herbert, 2014).

3. ESL Students and Challenges with Academic English

ESL students in English speaking higher education systems have been noted to experience distinct challenges with academic writing that is "appropriate and natural to the native-English speaking audience" (Kim, 2012). Some studies revealed lower achievement in educational

systems and higher drop-out rates for immigrant students who are ESL speakers (Kanu, 2008; Roessingh, 2004; Toohey and Derwing, 2008). Kanu (2008) examined the educational needs and barriers for diverse African refugee students. These students reported language issues as one of the greatest academic barriers they faced that had negatively impacted their ability to integrate into the educational system. Their limited English language proficiency negatively affected their writing, comprehension of reading material, produced a fear to speak out in class through a lack of "Canadian accent", and resulted in a grade placement based on age and English language assessment tests rather than on academic abilities (Kanu, 2008).

One of the problems ESL students face completing their studies and participating effectively in Canadian university classrooms appears to be related to the higher level of academic language requirements. Lacking a basic knowledge of the composition of an academic essay or that there are different types of essays can be a major hindrance. Higher level English required in university settings refers to functioning at the higher level on Bloom's taxonomy (1956, as cited in Jacques, 2000) of educational objectives which includes tasks of analysis, synthesis and evaluation. Thus, basic elements of academic writing,

Medical Research Archives such as paragraphs, topic sentences, thesis statements, synthesis and supporting details may be new concepts for many of these students and negatively affect their writing ability (Kim, 2012). Abriam-Yago et al. (1999) argued that cognitively demanding oral and written English, and interpretation of abstract concepts presented in text books is required in lectures and class discussions. Writing challenges such as problems with paraphrasing, sentence and paragraph structure, grammar and use of transition signals have been identified and best practices to enhance writing learning outcomes of ESL students need to be further explored (Crawford and Candlin, 2013).

A language learning behavior that is not commonly recognized by higher education institutions and by individual instructors is that most students with ESL backgrounds have only conversational mastery of English, also referred to as Basic Interpersonal Communication (BICS), the social language used in face to face conversation which most students acquire in their interaction with peers at school and work (Cummins, 1991). These students may also have met the language benchmark requirements for admission to academic programs, but academic literacy requires more than basic interpersonal communication ability. They also need the Cognitive Academic Language

Proficiency (CALP) (Cummins, 1991) in order to demonstrate understanding of concepts or abstractions in written materials.

Mastering the syntax and morphology of a second language, such as written English, is far more complicated than conversational language or mastering a finite set of writing techniques. Within the academic context, ESL student may be hindered due to their lack of familiarity with 'low-frequency words' which are necessary for CALP. Abstract words, which are uncommon in everyday spoken English but commonly used in academic settings can pose a serious lexical challenge especially for students who do not come from a Romance or Germanic language background. In addition, Kim (2012) writes that "learning new words involves not only learning their meanings but also how to use them by understanding different shades of meaning, collocations, synonyms, superordinates, and various morphological transformations, as well as grammatical categories of those words" (p. 36). Common examples of these types of problems include *hunger children* instead of *hungry children* or *high building* instead of *tall building*.

Another important factor to recognize is that there is a tendency for ESL students to master essay writing by composing an essay in their first language and then translating it into English. Although this is inherently a

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more time consuming process of composition, the real problem lies in the fact that the native language emerges as being more dominant than the English composition. Kim (2012) concludes that the sentences often do not express the intended message because the essay writer "depends on their meager lexical resources and inadequately controlled phrase structures to convey meanings formed in their first language". As a result, the written essay does not contain the written evidence of critical analyses of ideas described by Andre and Graves in order to be considered academic literacy.

Teaching linguistic competence to ESL students can also be a difficult task for educators since most educational programs focus on the academic content and not English literacy skills, especially writing within professional contexts. These students' needs may be neglected if instructors do not recognize their literacy needs or hold unrealistic expectations regarding students' writing abilities. The ability to write to meet the demands of university instructors is crucial to academic success. Writing serves two crucial ends: it promotes the integration of course content by demanding evidence of the students' transformation of knowledge and not merely the retelling of knowledge, and it functions as the principal means for evaluating students' knowledge through

written products such as essays and exams. In specialized occupation-specific programs such as nursing and medicine, research and writing skills are essential for academic success and employment (Andre and Graves, 2013; Song and Stewart, 2012). In light of the combined importance of course content and the promotion of literacy skills, more attention needs to be directed to understanding how ESL students learning needs could be better addressed.

4. Institutional Challenges within Higher Education

Many university students who score at the lowest levels of literacy on international assessments are new immigrants, both long-term and recently arrived in Canada (Essential Skills Ontario, 2012). The increasing internationalization of higher education provides many opportunities for multicultural education but it also brings with it some challenges in terms of promoting language ability of ESL learners. Higher education institutions do not exist simply to teach applied career skills or discipline-specific knowledge but need to strengthen basic skills, including reading and writing at levels which are comparable to those of native speakers. While universities may expect that standardized tests such as TOEFL or IELTS will guarantee English fluency, the increasing use of these exams has also given rise to

Medical Research Archives methods for circumventing them, including the existence of English proficiency "cram schools" that prepare students to score well on exams without necessarily strengthening overall fluency or academic literacy (Dion and Maldonado, 2013).

Setting appropriate literacy standards within and between higher education institutions can be a major systems challenge. Appropriate writing standard for all students entering higher education within a given country varies considerable between institutions. Although the OECD's international standards identify level 3 as a *minimum* functioning level of English literacy, this may not be adequate in the knowledge intensive societies. Program specific requirements need to be accommodated as well as the need for higher levels of literacy necessary for specialized programs and eventual employment.

Several key institutional factors and practices influencing academic literacy in general have been reported in the literature drawing attention to the need to address the specific challenges experienced by ESL learners. Pre-admission assessment of students' language skills is used inconsistently by Ontario universities. One environmental scan of writing assessments by Brown et al. (2012) demonstrates that even then only six

universities in the province of Ontario required mandatory post-admission assessment, three required non-binding post-admission assessment, and twelve had little or no post-admission literacy assessment. Factors such as increased cost of administering language tests and offering remedial courses have been cited as impediments. Several universities with specialized occupation-specific bridging programs provide writing courses but the effectiveness of these types of programs has not been evaluated (Lum et al., 2014). In cases where developmental English courses are offered as non-credit options, students often are required to pay for extra courses in an attempt to meet their program's communication requirements which can deter students from taking these initiatives.

The variability of academic program requirements may also have an impact upon students' academic literacy. For example, physical science programs tend to be less writing intensive (Graves, Hyland & Samuels, 2010). The results of a review of 179 syllabi from courses taught in one academic year, across program areas and academic levels, showed that on average 2.5 writing assignments were assigned per course, with almost half of all assignment being four pages in length or less. Courses in mathematics and economics required no writing assignments while others, in French

Medical Research Archives for example, required at least four assignments per course. Writing assignments tended to be short and low-risk, worth 10% or less of the final grade. The average number of pages required per assignment in the humanities (4.30) was double that in the social sciences (2.04). While humanities writing assignments spanned the range from short to long, social sciences assignments were much more likely to be short - one page or less. It becomes clear from these results that a student's exposure to writing requirements can differ considerably based on the program, raising questions for the authors about some students' preparation to work in their field after graduation (Dion and Maldonado, 2013).

Many Canadian universities provide some form of writing support such as a writing centre where students can receive help with written assignments. What is less common are writing supports that are designed to address the needs of ESL learners or profession-specific writing. While there may be a distinction between the needs of undergraduate and graduate students, the unique challenges experienced by non-native English speakers have received less attention.

5. Strategies for Enhancing Academic Literacy

Numerous articles address various writing

issues related to ESL learners and it is beyond of the scope of this paper to cite them in great detail. Several effective strategies that would be applicable to the Canadian professional education context and potentially applicable to other types of programs are described. Writing courses that are additional to content-specific courses, that provide learners with the opportunities for students to learn how to locate, interpret and evaluate relevant sources on a question and to summarize, synthesize and critique research findings could be utilized. Andre and Graves (2013) noted that in order to enhance the writing components of academic literacy in nursing education programs, instructors have initiated writing-across-the-curriculum assignments at a programmatic level. As a result, curricular changes can be implemented and writing assignments can be coordinated across courses and assignments sequenced according to cognitive load (p. 97).

Contrary to the positive results reported by some authors of the benefits of writing courses, Starr (2009) found that additional English classes are often not effective in promoting academic literacy because of the simplicity of content or the lack of context related to students' needs. Crawford and Candlin (2012) also noted that ESL students' lack of recognition of the

Medical Research Archives importance of English skills or the lack of participation in all of the writing classes negatively influenced their skill development. Many higher education institutions provide the services of writing centers which are available to both native and ESL students. Swain (2000) highlighted the benefits of these student services as providing a forum for students to engage in one-on-one tutoring which is essential for learning a new language since it provides an opportunity for the student to become more aware of the differences in writing styles and techniques between their native language and English. However, it is important that the use of the writing center is coordinated with the needs of the course writing assignments by setting clear goals which have been discussed with the course instructor in order to maximize the benefits of additional language tutoring.

Kovach, Miley and Ramos (2012) reported that the use of online writing studios in business and economic courses can lead to improved student performance and enhanced perceptions about the writing process, in particular, developing an increased ability to clearly articulate their ideas in written form. The writing studio methodology consists of small writing groups of five to seven students who meet on a regular basis throughout the semester to discuss course assignments. The students

participating in this studio receive feedback from their peers and an assigned instructor from the campus writing center. Through discussion of their writing throughout the process with their peers who understand the course content and a facilitator who understands the rhetorical nature of writing, the students are better able to understand the accepted format of the writing assignments (p.366). The results of this study showed that the process of drafting as well as giving feedback is associated with improved students' perceptions of their confidence in their ability to write, their competence as writers, and their tendency to revise written assignments prior to final submission. Although no research has been conducted on the use of writing studios with ESL students, either in a face to face or online format, this learning strategy could be applied within courses which are writing intensive. Students' ability to write academic essays requires conscious effort, in discussing ideas and developing language phrases in order to express their thoughts freely. Kim (2012) suggests that it is important for ESL students to increase their lexical repertoire in order to be more proficient in conveying their ideas in writing. She proposed that these students need opportunities to attend to the linguistic features of and clusters of words used by native English speaking writers. A major benefit of this strategy would be to enhance

Medical Research Archives students' awareness of and explicit attention to the need to develop writing skill. A basic consideration when marking written assignments include the student's ability to develop a focused argument, to write a coherent paragraph, to compose clear and logical sentences, and to employ proper writing mechanics, including grammar, spelling and punctuation.

6. Conclusion

Specific skills such as numeracy and literacy have been shown to contribute to employment success. Therefore, Canadian higher education institutions need to conceptualize, structure and deliver effective education (Dion and Maldonado, 2013). Academic writing in higher educational programs is the principal means of evaluating student progress, whether it be exams, essays or discipline specific documents such as case reports. While there is general recognition by higher education institutions that students must have a basic competency in written English in order to prosper in their university studies, the recognition of the additional needs of ESL learners has not been adequately recognized or addressed in Canada. With increasing cultural diversity in Canadian higher education, it is essential for Canadian higher education institutions to re-examine the level of literacy skills expected of their students in both general

and professional programs and the challenges experienced by ESL students in their attempts to meet established standards. There is also a need to establish sound recommendations for developing adequate and sustainable curriculum that can lead to better educational outcomes for ESL students in higher education. The literature has highlighted a variety of complex and interrelated challenges for students with ESL backgrounds in adjusting to Western academic literacy demands. Mixed results regarding the success of English support programs demonstrate that further research is needed to develop and refine educational strategies and institutional supports for these students.

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