

Enhancing the Academic Literacy Skills of ESL Adult Students in Professional Education

Introduction

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). Over a decade ago, a problem was recognized by the Workplace Preparation Branch of the Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities who stated that, "For many immigrants, the first and foremost issue is poor language skills" (Literacy Profile of Ontario Immigrants, May 2000). Furthermore, only 38% of adult immigrants demonstrated basic document literacy skills. Many immigrants report problems with labour market integration and believe that access to higher paying jobs, particularly those within the licensed professions, requires a thorough understanding of academic literacy. However, current research shows that there has been inadequate attention to the recognition of the uniqueness of English as a Second Language (ESL) learners within the Canadian higher education system.

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. With the contemporary emphasis on evidenced-based practice and the role of writing to learn in professional education in Canada, research is needed to develop a better understanding of how to assist ESL learners to develop the required level of English literacy in order to thrive in the current labour market. The problem is further confounded by recent evidence suggesting that higher education in Ontario lacks a futuristic, responsive educational strategy to address the need for increased academic literacy of all 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.

To succeed in university all students must demonstrate academic literacy, which encompasses a variety of language skills including reading, speaking, listening and writing. To succeed in training in the professions, students must master the academic literacy (Carter, Ferzli & Wiebe, 2007), and the distinct specialist language of their field (Woodward-Kron, 2008). 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). Developing academic writing competence in specialized disciplines is known to be a long term process that is not always well defined, the more so for ESL students (Gimenez, 2008). Because of the centrality of writing in academic success, the focus of this project synthesizes the state of knowledge regarding profession-specific writing in Canadian universities for a targeted population: students whose home language is not English.

The **overall objective of the project** will be to describe the current state of knowledge of educational strategies used by higher education institutions, such as universities, to develop adequate and sustainable curricular infrastructures that promote academic literacy skills for ESL students in health professions education programs. Since health professions programs prepare large numbers of both domestic and ESL higher education students, these professions provide an existing source of literature in which to explore academic literacy learning needs which could be applied to other academic programs. Specifically, the project will explore the extent to which

professional education programs rely on English, general writing or discipline-specific writing courses or other structures of writing support to help students become proficient academic writers in their discipline. The quality, depth and rigour of these approaches will be analyzed to identify gaps and promising practices. The questions to be addressed include: What types of writing instruction and supports are needed by ESL students in professional education programs? What types of learning outcomes should be expected from English writing strategies? What educational approaches to providing these supports are effective?

Background Literature

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, 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 (Adamatui-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 (Anisef et al., 2003; Guo and Herbert, 2014).

With the contemporary emphasis on evidenced-based practice and the role of writing to learn in professional education in Canada, identifying current knowledge gaps is required to better understand how to assist ESL learners. Educational strategies, such as writing courses within Canadian health professions, for example, nursing, vary greatly with mixed results in learning outcomes (Lum et al. 2014; Andre and Graves, 2013). Furthermore, teaching strategies which enhance the learning outcomes for ESL learners in university courses with multiple writing assignments are not well-developed (Weaver and Jackson, 2011).

Teaching linguistic competence to ESL students can be a difficult task for educators since most educational programs focus on the academic content and not English literacy skills, especially writing within academic and professional contexts. 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 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).

While developing students' writing expertise in the professions has been well researched in many contexts (Russell, et al., 2009; Thaiss and Porter, 2010), less attention has been paid to fostering writing competence on the part of ESL students in the professions (Hafernack and Wiant, 2012). The Canadian Nurses Association (2010) stated that writing papers in nursing programs promotes the critical thinking skills necessary to provide evidence-informed professional practice. Although writing challenges such as problems with paraphrasing, sentence and paragraph structure, grammar and use of transition signals have been identified, best

practices to enhance writing learning outcomes of ESL students have not been adequately explored in the professional education literature (Crawford and Candlin, 2013).

Significance, Expected Contributions and Impact

Specific skills such as numeracy and literacy have been shown to contribute to employment success and therefore the Canadian higher education institutions need to conceptualize, structure and deliver effective education (Dion and Maldonado, 2013). Academic writing in the educational programs of professions is the principal means of evaluating student progress, whether it be exams, essays or discipline specific documents such as case reports. Traditional ESL courses have proven to be less than effective in preparing ESL students to accomplish the discipline-specific coursework and meet professional employment standards. The significance of the project is the focus on promoting academic literacy which is a key strategy to resolving the high levels of mismatch between immigrants' previously acquired educational level and employment in Canada. The results could assist Canadian higher education institutions in re-examining the level of literacy skills expected of its students in professional programs as well as other disciplines by bringing more clarity to the issue of the types of literacy, learning outcomes and ways to measure them.

This project contributes to addressing the gaps in the current state of knowledge and the educational practices in professional higher education programs in order to answer whether the needs of ESL learners' writing development needs are being recognized and addressed. The unique contribution of this project is the cross-disciplinary, linguistic and professional education lenses. By synthesizing the published literature regarding how higher education in English-speaking countries can best develop discipline-specific academic literacy, we can establish a set of benchmarks by which to evaluate Canadian university efforts. Further, by documenting the current state of curricular demands and supports for writing that is available in Canadian universities we can identify both the models and the gaps in programs that create the next generation of professionals. Together, with these two sets of data—the analysis of the literature and the analysis of the national curricular situation—we can establish sound recommendations for developing adequate and sustainable curriculum that can lead to better educational outcomes for immigrant students in higher education.

Relevant expertise and experience of the applicants

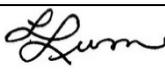
Dr. Lum is an Associate Professor in the School of Nursing and School of Health Policy and Management and current member of a regulated health profession. She is an experienced educator and researcher with extensive project leadership (eight funded projects focusing on immigrant integration and education) and knowledge mobilization skills. More recently, she completed a large, \$1.2 million, multi-institutional grant to study the oral English language competency challenges of internationally educated nurses. **Dr. Englander** is an applied linguist with 15 years experience teaching English as a second language in the Canadian context (York University) and English in the disciplines to scientists in Mexico (Universidad Autónoma de Baja California & Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México). She specializes in working with students in higher education whose first language is not English. She uses empirically sound pedagogical strategies based in the research of applied linguistics and writing-across-the-curriculum to foster their academic reading and writing skills.

Work Plan and Time Line: Two types of *pre-existing data* currently published and publicly available will be reviewed and synthesized to identify the current state of knowledge and research gaps.

Peer Reviewed Literature: An online search strategy will focus on databases including MEDLINE, HEALTHSTAR, CINAHL, PUBMED, Sociological Abstracts and Psychological Abstracts. Key words to guide the search include: academic literacy, higher education, writing tasks, writing programs, writing across the curriculum, discipline specific writing. The search will be guided by the following themes: writing challenges of ESL learners; expected learning outcomes of writing programs and courses in undergraduate health disciplines; effective teaching and learning strategies to promote writing skills in the health profession education; any additional educational supports. Inclusion criteria consist of findings published within the past ten years, in English in journals of the larger health professions such as medicine, nursing, pharmacy and in related linguistic journals. Canadian and American publications will be prioritized but other countries such as the U.K., Australia and New Zealand will be considered. A synthesis of the literature will include a discussion of the identified themes related to promoting written academic literacy, research results if applicable, missing or inadequate topics and critical analyses of the identified themes.

Program websites: Current profession specific information about academic literacy, with emphasis on writing skills, requirements for students published in existing undergraduate Canadian health professions programs will be also be examined. Any references to relevant reports or other types of grey literature will also be identified. The search will begin with health professions programs such as medicine, nursing, pharmacy at the larger research intensive educational institutions focusing on Vancouver, Calgary, Edmonton and Toronto as these are cities which attract the highest proportion of new adult immigrants. A synthesis of the program information will include a description and discussion of expected learning outcomes, curricular and English language requirements and available academic writing support services.

Activity	Date Completed	Responsibility
1. Recruit two graduate research assistants 2. Meeting with SSHRC	April 30, 2015	PI and Co-applicant
Literature and program website information search	May – June 2015	Research Assistants, PI and co-applicant
Data Analyses	July –August 2015	PI and co-applicant
Preparation of Project Report and manuscripts	September-October 2015	PI and co-applicant with assistance from research assistants
Knowledge Synthesis Report	Submit October 31, 2015	PI and Co-applicant

Signature: 

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Project Budget

Category	Description/Justification	Amount
Personnel Costs:	Sub-total	\$ 15, 960
Graduate Assistant (Masters) M.A., who has prior experience with applied linguistics projects; available for summer 2015 and has worked with the co-applicant on similar types of literature searches and analyses	<p>Activities</p> <p>Under supervision of applicant and co-applicant, to conduct literature search and assist with analyses of search results to create a synthesis of existing published knowledge</p> <p>Salary</p> <p>1 term summer 2015 plus half fall term (175 hours @ \$40 per hour plus 4% vacation and 10% benefits*) = \$7, 980</p> <p>*York University rates</p>	
Graduate Assistant (Doctoral) P.D., who has prior experience with immigrant student research projects and website content analyses; and worked with PI for over 6 years	<p>Activities</p> <p>Under supervision of applicant, will conduct a search and critical discourse analyses of relevant website program information; assist with reporting writing and data management.</p> <p>Salary</p> <p>1 term summer 2015 plus half fall term (175 hours @ \$40 per hour plus 4% vacation and 10% benefits*) = \$7, 980</p> <p>*York University rates</p>	
Knowledge Mobilization	Sub-total	\$8, 000
Conference Expenses for Applicant and Co-Applicant	<p>Applicant: Lillie Lum (\$4, 400)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Canadian Society for Studies in Higher Education meeting at Congress (registration \$600, travel ie. airfare and taxis \$800 and accommodation and meals \$800, 00) 2. National 2016 Internationally Educated Nurses Educators' conference (registration \$400), travel ie. airfare and taxis within Canada (\$600) and accommodation and meals (\$600) 3. Meeting with SSHRC-return airfare, Toronto-Ottawa (\$600) <p>Co-Applicant: Karen Englander (\$3, 600)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Canadian Association for the Study of Discourse and Writing (CASDW) at Congress (registration \$300), travel ie. Airfare and taxis (\$800) and accommodation and meals (\$500) 2. TESL Canada conference (registration \$300), travel, ie. Airfare and taxis (\$500), and accommodation and meals (\$600) 3. Meeting with SSHRC-return airfare, Toronto-Ottawa (\$600) 	
Equipment	Sub-total	\$1,040
Research Supplies	Computer to be shared by 2 Graduate assistants (\$900) Printing and Paper \$ 140	
<i>Grand Total</i>	\$ 25, 000	

KNOWLEDGE MOBILIZATION PLAN

Proposed Audiences and Activities

The major goal of knowledge mobilization will be to disseminate the synthesis to both researchers and other knowledge users such as educators and policy makers.

- a. Research Users and Educators:
 - 1) The Canadian Society for the Study of Higher Education (CSSHE) members represents a key national audience consisting of university educators and researchers from a variety of professional disciplines. This scholarly association widely disseminates research which addresses to the globalization of higher education and to developing students' overall linguistic, literacy and numeracy skills. A paper will be presented at the annual national meeting.
 - 2) The Canadian Association for the Study of Discourse and Writing (CASDW) is a bilingual scholarly association dedicated to advancing the study and teaching of discourse, writing, and communication in academic settings. The national conference brings together educators who provide writing instruction in general and professional programs across the curriculum.
- b. English Language Educators: Teachers of English as a Second Language consists of a membership of several thousand language educators in Canada. The national conference meets every 18 months to promote the professional teaching of English as a Second Language across Canada to share innovations in teaching academic language.
- c. Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO)-provincial focus; mandate to fund and disseminate research which promotes an increased understanding of higher learning outcomes such as numeracy and literacy; a brief knowledge synthesis report will be made available on their website which is accessed by Ontario administrators in higher education institution and government policy makers
- d. Teaching Commons, York University: this teaching and learning centre provides educational support for the university. A short knowledge synthesis can be posted on the centre website to disseminate results to educators, TAs, and administrators.

Potential Peer-Reviewed Publications

- 1) Publications will provide dissemination to a wider audience
Higher education journals such as Nursing Education Today, Teaching and Learning in Nursing, Medical Teacher, and the Canadian Journal of Higher Education, and 2) journals focused on writing issues in higher education such as the Journal of Writing Research, TESL Canada, English for Specific Purposes.

Previous Knowledge Mobilization Activities: Conferences, Workshops and Publications

1. The 14th National Metropolis Conference (February 2012, Toronto, Ontario) funded by a conference grant from SSHRC with **L. Lum** as the principal applicant and the conference chair. The Metropolis conference attended by 1, 200 delegates provided different constituents from across Canada and internationally to explore research issues regarding immigration and cultural diversity. An outcome included an edited book (Immigrant Integration: Research Implications for Future Policy) containing the key conference papers and the development of new research networks.
2. *Language Matters: Exploring Communication Challenges in Bridging Education for Immigrant Professionals Conference* (May 2014, Toronto, Ontario) Provincial conference, attended by 120 delegates, funded by the Ontario Ministry of Citizenship and Immigration and chaired by **L. Lum**. This conference provided an opportunity for professional regulatory colleges, government policy makers and researchers to explore research requirements for regulated health professionals. An outcome is a proposal for regulatory colleges to host future language focused conferences.

Invited Workshops

Englander, K. (January & November 2014). Teaching the Trainers: Academic Writing in English for Mexican Scholars. Universidad Autónoma Nacional México. Mexico City, Mexico. Invited by the National University of Mexico to work with graduate students to improve their academic writing skills to meet English language demands.

Englander, K., Lawrence, G., & Valeo, A. (August 2014). Supporting and engaging ESL learner diversity at York. Three applied linguistics in the Department of Languages, Literatures and Linguistics were invited to present a seminar at the York University Teaching Commons professional development workshop to enhance professors' abilities to support and engage the ESL students who attend their classes.

Peer Reviewed Publications and Reports

- Englander, K., & Uzuner-Smith, S. (under review). The Power of 'I,' 'You,' 'We': Socializing Graduate Students into Tacit Knowledge of their Discipline. *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*.
- Lum, L., Vu, J. and Sharawy, K. (2015) Exploring Immigrant Nursing Students' Attitudes towards Online English Language Tutoring (in press *International Journal of Technology, Knowledge and Society*).
- Lum, L., Dowedoff, P., Bradley, P., Kerekes, J. and Valeo, A. (2014), Oral Communication Challenges for Internationally Educated Nurses. *The Journal of Transcultural Nursing*, DOI: 10.1177/1043659614524792.
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Project Summary

The ability to understand written information and to communicate clearly in writing in the professional workplace is a critical to the profession advancement of the individual and the effectiveness of a profession. It therefore becomes essential for higher education institutions, like universities, who prepare professionals to practice, to ensure that their graduates develop the necessary writing skills. Writing presents a challenge for many Canadian-born students but even more so for immigrant students educated outside of Canada because they may lack familiarity with communicating in the Canadian professional context. Although the importance of teaching students how to write in academic programs has been well documented, much less is known about how to improve the writing ability of the English as a Second Language (ESL) learner. Approaches to teaching effective writing skills vary from profession to profession and between higher education programs. While the approaches are frequently reported, their effectiveness is not well understood.

This project will identify and summarize current information in the published literature about teaching and learning strategies that promote effective academic writing in professional education. Professional education program websites will also be examined to identify any gaps between the findings in the literature and current program expectations. The information gained will assist in identifying recommendations for changes in the way the writing needs of large numbers of ESL students are being addressed in Canadian higher education. This will not only be of benefit to ESL students within their programs but also increase the likelihood of their success in future employment. Effective academic writing is a skill that is important to learn because it provides students with the ability to identify, understand and use new knowledge, and is essential in the Canadian workplace.

Discipline Codes

Adult, Continuing, Community Education61202
Bilingual Education, Second Language Education 61204
Health Sciences Education61256
Higher Education61228
Writing Systems62442
Bilingualism and Second Language Learning62402