

ENHANCING THE ACADEMIC LITERACY SKILLS OF ESL STUDENTS IN HEALTH PROFESSIONS EDUCATION

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KEY MESSAGES

The ability to read and communicate clearly in writing in the health workplace is critical to the professional advancement of individuals and their effectiveness in their profession. It is essential that postsecondary learning institutions ensure their students develop the necessary skills. 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 importance of the project is its focus on promoting academic literacy which is a key strategy in resolving the high levels of mismatch between immigrants' previously acquired educational level and the required level for employment in Canada.

Academic writing presents a challenge for many Canadian-born students but it is an even greater challenge for immigrant students educated outside of Canada since English is an additional language in that they lack familiarity with communicating in a Canadian professional context. An additional factor creating more challenges is in developing academic literacy including the fact that every academic community has specific ways of constructing knowledge and expressing opinions. The overall objective of the project was to synthesize the current state of knowledge of educational strategies in order to develop adequate and sustainable curricular infrastructures that promote academic literacy skills for ESL students in pre-employment programs.

Of the three health professions studied in this review, nursing has conducted the majority of research into ESL student learning needs. Pharmacy and medicine may require similar levels or types of academic literacy. However, the current information does not provide sufficient evidence to draw any conclusions. Several promising practices to promote academic literacy of health professions students in general that could be applied to the ESL population were identified. These include discipline specific and reflective writing, and writing across the curriculum assignments.

Analyses of health professions program websites illustrated that while all academic programs recognized the diversity of the educational backgrounds and language learning history of their potential students, the English language requirements, that is, the level of competency, varied widely across professions and between institutions. Academic literacy can be assessed using a variety of methods. Although the use of standardized language tests such as TOEFL and IELTS tests is commonly used, there is little evidence supporting their effectiveness. Effective methods to evaluate the English language histories and program readiness need to be developed.

The literature review illustrated that there are substantial knowledge and research gaps addressing the academic literacy needs of ESL students in health professions higher education programs in Canada and other English-speaking countries. A key finding highlighted that the development of academic literacy by ESL learners is a long term process, possibly taking up to seven years and requires skilled educational strategies to assist them in acquiring these skills. This suggests that program changes are needed to accommodate the longer learning process and the need for strategic educational interventions. There is insufficient recognition of this finding in the health professions programs examined in this review.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The ability to read and communicate clearly in writing in the health workplace is critical to the professional advancement of the individual and their effectiveness in their profession. It is essential that postsecondary learning institutions ensure their students develop the necessary skills. With the continued increase of new immigrant professional enrolled in health professions program in Canada, new approaches to addressing their unique learning needs are required.

Academic writing presents a challenge for many Canadian-born students but it is an even greater challenge for immigrant students educated outside of Canada since English is an additional language and the lack of familiarity with communicating in a Canadian professional context. An additional factor creating more challenges is in developing academic literacy including the fact that every academic community has specific ways of constructing knowledge and expressing opinions. The importance of teaching students how to write in academic programs is well documented, but much less is known about how to improve the writing ability of the English-as-a-second-language (ESL) learner.

Academic literacy and effective academic writing in general requires students to complete complex higher-order analytical tasks at a much higher level than required at the high school level. Professional academic writing, however, requires not only a certain level of knowledge and comprehension but also the ability to critically analyse and integrate ideas, as well as appropriately draw on and reference what has been read. However, for the ESL learner who is less familiar with academic English, the challenge is not just the construction of the writing assignment but also the difficulty in understanding assignment questions and grading expectations. Weaver and Jackson (2011) identified two major areas of difficulty for ESL health professions students relating to academic writing: 1) problems understanding course content in English, and 2) problems expressing their understanding of that content in English.

The *overall objective of the project* was 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. The research questions included:

1. What academic literacy demands are required in the pre-admission and post-admission policies of ESL and/or International students by Canadian universities' health education programs?
2. What types of academic literacy demands are placed on students in professional health education programs?
3. What kinds of academic approaches and supports have been implemented in university programs in North America/(Europe?/Asia/) to meet the needs of ESL students in professional health education?

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. Three large health professions, medicine, nursing and pharmacy, requiring academic literacy in order for students to become licensed professionals in Canada were studied.

Specifically, the project explored the extent to which these 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 were analyzed to identify promising practices and gaps.

The *literature review* resulted in the identification of three types of knowledge: 1) English writing challenges of ESL students in health professions programs; 2) types of academic writing assignments and 3) writing strategies used to facilitate academic professional writing skills. The review supports the vital role of academic literacy and academic writing for students' success in higher education in general and in health care professions education in particular. Although the number of relevant, current publications was limited, those that were identified suggest that more research is needed to better understand the unique learning needs of ESL students.

The literature review illustrated that there are a substantial knowledge and research gap addressing the academic literacy needs of ESL students in health professions higher education programs in Canada and other English-speaking countries. A key finding highlighted that the development of academic literacy by ESL learners is a long term process, possibly up to seven years and requires skilled educational strategies to assist them in acquiring these skills. This suggests that program changes are needed to accommodate the longer learning process and the need for strategic educational interventions. There is insufficient recognition of this finding in the health professions programs examined in this review.

Of the three health professions studied in this review, nursing has conducted the majority of research into ESL student learning needs. Pharmacy and medicine may require similar levels or types of academic literacy however the current information does not provide sufficient evidence to draw any conclusions. Within these programs, several promising practices to promote academic literacy of health professions students in general could be applied to the ESL population. These include discipline specific and reflective writing, and writing across the curriculum assignments. High levels of critical analyses were found to be associated with technology-enhanced writing courses.

Academic literacy is necessary for admission to health professions programs. Content analyses of health professions *program websites* illustrated that while all academic programs recognized the diversity of the educational backgrounds and language learning history of their potential students, the English language requirements, that is, the required level of competency, varied widely across professions and between institutions. Academic literacy can be assessed using a variety of methods. Although the use of standardized language tests such as TOEFL and IELTS tests is commonly used, with the inclusion of other strategies such as interviews, there is little evidence supporting their effectiveness. Effective methods to evaluate the English language histories and program readiness need to be developed. Research is needed to determine the

reliability of these assessment procedures and their effect upon ESL student success during the educational programs.

Access to this key information required both substantial amounts of technological skill, effort and time to search through detailed websites but it also required an understanding of the structure of program sites and where information could be found, for example, frequently asked questions, academic calendars, etc. The level of English language and computer literacy required to access and understand program information may present initial challenges for ESL learners even prior to admission.

Finally, regarding writing centres, more research is needed in order to evaluate their benefits to ESL students in health professions programs. It is important to note that the wide selection of ways in which applicants can satisfy the English language admission requirements acknowledges the varied backgrounds of incoming students. This acknowledgement is surely one of the tenets behind the design of the language requirements and ensures that students are not excluded. However, this approach to inclusiveness may detract from establishing and maintaining rigorous, achievable language requirements for all students.

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 levels 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.

Recommendations for institutions

- Create admission criteria for English language learners that retain inclusiveness but are reliable indicators of language level.
- Create opportunities for collaboration between Writing centres and faculty to be prepared for the specific needs of ESL students and within health professions.

Recommendations for programs

- Incorporate writing courses that continue discipline-specific writing development beyond entry level.
- Foster reflective writing across the entire program curriculum.
- Collaborate with Writing Centres to prepare staff for the discipline-specific needs of ESL students.
- Add faculty-specific language requirements for program admission to address elevated language needs of health professions.

Recommendations for educators

- Teach academic writing explicitly and differentiate between types of writing assignments.