

Understanding EAL Writers' Needs in Canadian First-Year Composition (FYC) Courses: A Critical Literature Review

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Abstract: In recent years, Canadian universities and colleges have experienced increased enrollment in students who speak English as an additional language (EAL). Although previous scholarship has focused on the academic challenges that EAL learners encounter in academic writing, little attention has been paid to their holistic writing experiences in First-year Composition (FYC) courses in a Canadian context. Drawing on the impact of higher education internationalization, academic writing scholarship of EAL students, as well as features of Canadian composition courses, this critical review argues for the need to reframe EAL writers' experiences from a holistic view and concludes with practical suggestions for supporting EAL students in improving their academic writing experiences.

Keywords: EAL writers; Academic Writing needs and resources; Canadian FYC context

Introduction

Faced with the increased presence of EAL (English as an additional language) students in Canadian classrooms, researchers have found that EAL learners encounter both successes and challenges in their academic studies (Anderson, 2017; Leki, 2007; Zhang & Zhou, 2010). In particular, EAL students often cite academic writing as a critical factor impacting their academic performance (Heng, 2018; Huang, 2010; Zhang & Zhou, 2010). For example, Leki's (2007) multiple-case study discovered EAL students struggled with academic writing, which was mainly impacted by their lack of engagement in their language courses. , Zhang and Zhou's (2010) study reported that 76 Chinese international EAL participants had difficulties adjusting to the academic communication requirements in Canadian classrooms, especially in terms of academic writing due to educational and cultural differences.

Although previous studies on EAL students' writing challenges and needs are informative and insightful, there are currently few research initiatives that specifically address how EAL students navigate their writing in the context of Canadian First-year composition (FYC) courses. First-year composition (FYC) or writing, also known as freshman composition, is a core curriculum in colleges or universities across North America. Such courses provide students with opportunities to negotiate their academic and social situations through writing and move to higher-level work in most academic disciplines (Matsuda et al., 2006). Compared to the FYC context in the United States, which has a variety of writing programs and well-developed research based on the writing experiences of EAL writers, composition programs and research in a Canadian context have been investigated less (Graves & Graves, 2012; Landry, 2016). With regards to EAL issues, little research has focused on how EAL students navigate their writing trajectories and progress in the context of Canadian FYC courses. A recent study by Haggerty (2019) showed EAL participants experienced confusion and struggled to meet their academic writing expectation due to the unfamiliar design features of academic courses.

Currently, the default model of teaching FYC courses in many Canadian universities is still mainstream. In effect, EAL students take their composition studies side-by-side with L1 English native students without special provision. In order to addressing the gap of understanding EAL writing issues in Canadian FYC context, this paper provides a critical literature review emphasizing three foci: (a) impact of internationalization on Canadian higher education (b) academic writing issues of EAL writers, (c) unique features of Canadian composition courses. Based on these discussions, this review argues for a holistic understanding of the writing needs and resources of EAL issues in Canadian FYC context and puts forward some suggestions to support EAL students in improving their academic writing.

Impact of Internationalization on Canadian Higher Education

An exploration of the macro context of internationalization in Canadian higher education can help contextualize an understanding of international EAL students. While the concept of internationalization is regarded as a buzz word with different interpretations and rationales, a widely-recognized definition by Knight (2004) has interpreted it as a process of integration of postsecondary education from international, national, and local dimensions. With the global increase of international students enrolled in English-speaking countries such as the USA, Canada, the UK, and

Australia, internationalization has become a core strategy and priority of many higher education institutions in countries dedicated to attracting more international students. Among these countries, Canada has become a major destination and has attracted international students at a substantial rate in recent years (Anderson, 2020).

In addition to boosting the revenue of the local economy because of their highly paid tuition, the recruitment of international students has a positive impact on other sociocultural and academic factors at a national level in Canada (Anderson, 2020; Surtees, 2019). At an institutional level, internationalization also contributes to campus diversity. Benefiting from the policy, international students gain the opportunity to improve their English proficiency, experience different educational styles, and gain disciplinary knowledge and skills. As well, domestic students benefit from international students' offerings of new knowledge, perspectives, and other resources (Knight, 2004). In a general sense, the global and national picture of international students is positive and optimistic.

Despite the priority of Canada's federal policies and the accompanying institutional focus on internationalization at various Canadian universities, studies on international students' experiences show a different picture. Situating Canadian higher education in recent global trends, a study by Anderson (2020) argues that there are unsolved dilemmas posing challenges for Canadian universities since the accommodation of international students is insufficiently managed and relatively slower compared to the increase and influx of their presence. Guo and Guo (2017) also reported discrepancies from international students' perspectives between what internationalization policies advocated for and what students' actual experiences in the classroom were. To be specific, despite universities broadly advocating for the enrichment of teaching and learning resources for international students, students indicated that they encountered challenges following the course curriculum and, in their words, "there were few teaching and learning resources that were related to their experience" (p. 859). Students reported feeling upset when their home countries were portrayed as "backward" or violent in learning materials. Similarly, Surtees' (2019) study noted tension brought on by the trend of internationalization on Canadian campuses. According to Surtees', although students may benefit from opportunities for campus diversity, segregation along linguistic and ethnic lines was also often created. In addition to some unfavourable external factors, EAL learners' individual factors such as unwillingness to communicate or resistance to enculturation may also intensify their segregation. Nevertheless, these empirical studies indicate that the mere increase of the presence of international students does not lead to effective student interaction and mutual understanding between local students and international ones in local classrooms and on campus, as ideally envisioned in the policy goals for the internationalization of Canadian higher education. Therefore, it is important for researchers and educators to understand EAL students' lived classroom experiences in local contexts. Against the broad context of internationalization, a narrowed focus on EAL students' academic writing issues can further illustrate their struggles in studying abroad.

Academic Writing Issues of EAL Writers

English broadly functions as the dominant language for academic communication and scholarship. Writing appropriately in English is therefore important but poses significant challenges for students who use English as an additional language (Hyland, 2013). As Hyland (2013) indicates "we are what we write" (p. 53), and students and researchers are defined and judged by how they write as academics. Furthermore, academic writing practices are basic forms of language socialization and may exclude EAL writers from academic success (Duff & Anderson, 2015). Since EAL writers are new to the disciplinary conventions and rules in their target languages and academic settings, they may feel more challenged with new roles, identities, and ways of writing to conform in their disciplinary communities. Academic writing, therefore, plays a central role for EAL writers in navigating their academic studies and poses great challenges for them. In this section, I will review the academic writing issues from a historical perspective. To clarify, EAL and L2 (second language) are used interchangeably in this manuscript.

Historically, there has been disciplinary division between composition studies and L2 writing concerning EAL writers. Although L2 writing courses have been adapted from the theoretical framework and instructional methods in first language (L1) composition, L2 specialists and scholars have actively attempted to move beyond the research paradigms of L1 composition by focusing on the unique needs and challenges of L2 writers. With the flourishing of English as a Second language (ESL) programs in L2 studies, L1 compositionists ceased to address the issues related to L2 writers, leaving it to L2 specialists and programs that remediated grammar mistakes or improved language proficiency (Matsuda, 2003; Matsuda & Matsuda, 2010).

However, such creation of a “division of labour” between L1 and L2 composition studies has proven problematic. From an L1 composition studies perspective, even though addressing the needs of L2 writers may not be among their research and instructional priorities, post-secondary instructors face increasing numbers of diverse students. Mainstream first-year composition instructors who used to teach to English native speakers may feel unprepared to work with L2 writers with diverse linguistic, educational, and cultural backgrounds and learning needs. In the field of L2 writing studies, although EAL specialists and instructors pay close attention to L2 students across different settings in higher education, the primary efforts are targeted at those students who are within an ESL context. Also, L2 specialists, instructors, or researchers might find it challenging to communicate with L1 compositionists and instructors about the writing needs of EAL learners (Matsuda, 2003). The absence of collaboration between the two fields can also be felt by EAL students when they transfer from typical L2 writing courses in ESL programs to first-year composition courses as university students. Since the two programs are usually administered by different departments with different objectives and teaching practices, students who are used to L2 contexts may find it hard to adapt to mainstream classes and feel relatively disadvantaged compared to Native English-speaking (NES) peers.

Encouragingly, as EAL learners increasingly enroll in mainstream composition courses in North America, L1 composition studies have also begun to acknowledge the needs of L2 writers. In response to such needs, the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC), the world’s largest professional organization for researching and teaching composition, published the “CCCC statement on Second-language Writing and Writers” in 2001. This statement urged writing specialists, especially L1 compositionists, “to recognize and take responsibility for the regular presence of second language writers in writing classes, understand their characteristics, and develop instructional and administrative practices that are sensitive to their linguistic and cultural needs” (2001, p. 1). This statement has been regarded as the formal recognition of L2 writers as part of mainstream composition classes in the U.S. In addition to reminding compositionists of their responsibility to understand and meet the needs of linguistically and culturally diverse students, this statement recognized the needs of EAL writers in instruction and assessment.

Given the increased presence of EAL writers in composition classrooms, research concerns focus on the placement and ethical treatment of EAL students, challenges they face in navigating their writing courses, and their coping strategies. In response to the diversified needs of EAL writers, a wealth of research draws attention to placement issues and how to treat EAL students ethically in mainstream composition environments (e.g., Matsuda & Matsuda, 2010; Silva, 1993; Tardy & Whittig, 2017). Silva (1993) first focused attention to issues surrounding placement and identified four options for EAL writers: mainstreaming, basic writing, ESL writing, and cross-cultural composition courses. The “mainstreaming” option is also described as the “sink or swim” approach. Such a model might put administrators at ease but can leave EAL writers to suffer through the loss of confidence and academic failure due to their special features and needs going unattended (Silva, 1993). In recent years, the traditional paradigm of first-year composition courses has been challenged by both compositionists and L2 scholars for many reasons. These include disconnection from the core disciplines and limitations of status quo arrangement when including EAL writers (Matsuda & Matsuda, 2010). Despite its problematic nature, the mainstream approach remains dominant in North America.

In addition to placement and ethical treatment issues, scholarship on EAL writers focuses on the writing needs and challenges they encounter and how they navigate their learning journey from either the perspective of students or writing faculty or both. Focusing on six EAL students from Mexico, Zappa-Hollman’s (2007) multiple-case study reported that the participants struggled in meeting academic writing expectations, such as adhering to the required format and length. Similarly, drawing from a language socialization perspective, a recent study by Haggerty (2019) investigated six EAL writers’ perceptions and practices in a newly established academic program at a Canadian university. In addition to reporting that students made a relatively smooth transition into their mainstream studies, this study also revealed learners’ confusion and frustration in meeting academic writing expectations and examined issues of agency and identity in the process of academic discourse socialization. In a similar context of an undergraduate first year composition course, Godfrey’s (2015) multiple-case study reported EAL learners’ challenges in their academic socialization experiences, for instance, how they interacted and responded to their feedback on written assignments. By utilizing ethnographic-oriented academic discourse socialization (ADS), Godfrey’s findings highlighted the role of FYC as a site of academic socialization, especially the instructor’s guidance with unfamiliar academic discourse and academic expectations.

Empirical research efforts also increasingly explore how L2 writers differentiate from L1 peers and how they use different strategies to improve their writing performances (e.g., Eckstein & Ferris, 2018; Stuart, 2012). By comparing L2 and L1 writers in the context of FYC courses, Stuart (2012) focused on uncovering the challenges and changes that L2 students experienced. In this study, L2 students experienced a more transformative sense of learning in overcoming uncertainties and gaining confidence during interactions with instructors and peers within social and academic contexts. By directly comparing the texts produced by L1 and L2 writers and their self-perceptions in a mixed FYC context, Eckstein and Ferris's (2018) study observed self-perceived language needs of L2 writers, including "linguistic accuracy, lexical diversity, and language-related anxiety" (p. 137). Accounts showed L2 writers are significantly different from their L1 counterparts who obtained higher scores measuring the effectiveness of language uses despite the commonalities between the two groups. In their study, L2 writers with advanced proficiency in lexical complexity and syntactic sophistication were observed having many surface errors and struggling with self-confidence. These findings provide insights for composition instructors on better supporting EAL learners in L1/EAL mixed contexts.

The coping strategies that learners develop from their learning experiences help them overcome their writing difficulties, complete writing tasks, and articulate their real writing needs (Gu, 2012; Hirano, 2014; Leki, 2007). Focusing on the strategies that L2 writers employ to respond to various social and academic contexts, some L2 scholars, such as Leki (2007), have categorized a set of coping strategies from cognitive and sociocultural dimensions, which include relying on past experiences, making use of their first language, looking for models, and accommodating instructors' requirements among others. Focusing on refugee EAL students in their first-year composition studies, Hirano (2014) found that students could draw on resources including writing tutors and peer support to deal with their academic writing in a highly supportive environment. Based on previously identified coping strategies, Gu (2012) investigated Chinese EAL students' perceptions and strategies in a Canadian university and identified five types of strategies employed by participants, including sociocultural strategies, adapting strategies, applying (previous learning experiences) strategies, individualized strategies, and self-improvement strategies. These studies offer L2 and composition instructors a better understanding of how EAL students' cope.

Features of Canadian First-Year Composition Courses

Compared to literature targeting freshman composition in American higher education settings, little scholarly work addresses the features of first-year composition courses in Canada. First-year writing courses in higher education in the U.S., offered first at Harvard almost 150 years ago, have been described as ubiquitous and generic, and called the "most required, most taught, and the most taken course" (Fleming, 2011, p. 1). Given the history of FYC courses in the U.S, there are various composition programs and unified research sites for composition theories and teacher training. Unlike the situation in the U.S., writing studies in Canada has different distinct features. As Brooks (2002) notes, "the nature of the first-year English curriculum in Canada is significantly different from the typical composition requirement in American colleges and universities" (p. 673). The main characteristics of Canadian writing studies are summarized in the following two paragraphs.

Firstly, writing and literature are closely linked in Canadian universities and colleges historically. The history of first-year writing courses in Canadian postsecondary institutions can be traced back to first-year literature courses, or literature/composition hybrid, traditionally associated with English Departments in the twentieth century (Landry, 2016). This literature-based approach aimed not to teach writing directly but to impart cultural knowledge and values by cultivating good reading and aesthetic taste. Such histories significantly impact instructional approaches despite gradual changes in recent decades.

Secondly, writing instruction in a Canadian context occurs in diverse disciplinary and institutional settings. As notably described by Smith (2006), composition programs and courses are "carried out in a variety of disciplinary settings outside of first-year English courses, and indeed often outside of English departments" (p. 2). The decentralized and interdisciplinary nature of Canadian writing instruction and studies differs from freshman composition models in the U.S. These multiple settings for writing instruction have both advantages and disadvantages. According to Brooks (2002) and Smith (2006), the lack of a united disciplinary context for composition inquiries and scholarship creates difficulties for compositionists to establish consistent protocols within their writing programs and courses. Paradoxically, such a "lack of a center" also creates opportunities for the diversification of writing instruction and cross-disciplinary cooperation through the introductions of fresh ideas and

innovation. Therefore, the unique features of Canadian writing studies create both barriers and opportunities for innovation in composition instruction and research.

In terms of the pedagogical approaches, Canadian writing scholarship has a clear focus on academic and technical writing over popular writing forms (Strachan, 2008; Stouck, 2019). Strachan (2008) summarized Canadian approaches to genre theory as productive, successful, and unique. By valuing learning in context and use, genre theories draw students' attention to the patterns that suffice in different situations as well as the cultural and social values associated with the production of texts in specific disciplines. Indeed, a genre-based approach may help students familiarize themselves with the norms and expectations of writers working in different disciplines, rather than prescribing a standardized principle of good writing (Stouck, 2019).

In addition to the above three distinctive features, scholars debate whether Canadian institutions should borrow or imitate specific patterns or models found in American freshman writing courses. In fact, opposition to American models of freshman composition is unique to the Canadian context (Landry, 2016). Significant changes have taken place in composition instruction along with the changing landscape of higher education in Canada. With the rapid increase of students who do not speak English as their first language, many universities have launched active initiatives for institutional and disciplinary innovation. Citing the University of Alberta as an illustration, Smith (2006) documented the institutional challenges and opportunities for improvements to writing instruction, especially for serving L2 or EAL learners (as cited by Graves & Graves, 2012). According to their historical snapshots and analyses from 1995 to 2005, no credit composition courses were offered separately to undergraduate ESL writers to address their writing needs. Those who struggled with academic writing were referred to fee-based remedial non-credit writing courses outside the classroom. Since 2005, the marginal status of first-year writing instruction and lack of support for EAL learners has been improved through a joint-effort task force at the University of Alberta. Upon its formation, this taskforce examined the needs of L2 writers and established a full-time writer center, which offered one-on-one tutoring and workshops (Graves & Graves, 2012). Although the case of the University of Alberta may not be representative of other Canadian universities, it is important to note that more research and pedagogical attention was paid to Canadian FYC contexts.

Conclusion and Recommendations

As this overview has shown, while existing literature on EAL students' academic writing experiences is informative and insightful, a holistic understanding of the writing needs and resources of EAL students is crucial. Furthermore, FYC courses in a Canadian context have their own features and have recently undergone changes and innovations (Landry, 2016; Stouck, 2019). Situated within the site of Canadian FYC, an examination of EAL writers' individualized perceptions and practices can provide a glimpse into their real-life experiences, including both their perceived challenges and needs, as well as their efforts and progress on how they work their way through first-year composition courses by interacting and engaging with various resources in their learning environment.

Although the mainstreaming model of teaching FYC courses are identified problematic and may disserve EAL students in some way, it would be unrealistic to create new programs or pedagogical models for EAL students given the constraints of institutional policies and lack of funding. Based on the current circumstances, this review puts forward three practical recommendations for composition instructors and administrators:

- Reframe EAL writers' challenges from a holistic perspective. Given that EAL students' writing difficulties have often been the primary targets for many previous studies, it is crucial for composition faculty and researchers to take a holistic and balanced perspective toward the nature and complexities of the challenges that EAL students face. Situated in a holistic and sociocultural perspective, studies have shown that some of the challenges that EAL students face are temporary and found EAL students can learn new writing conventions and even transform challenges into potential learning opportunities over time (Heng, 2018; Stuart, 2012). Additionally, since EAL students may feel emotionally pressured when entering mainstream composition studies beyond language issues (Mao, 2021), instructors could connect students' needs with appropriate support. For example, instructors can guide EAL students on how to access campus resources and provide opportunities to meet face-to-face, which would be incredibly beneficial for alleviating stress related to their writing studies. Therefore, holistically viewing EAL students' experiences by acknowledging and appreciating their overall experiences and the challenges they encounter in new academic environment is crucial.

- Build a productive network of support for EAL writers. It is essential to note that each academic support or student service centre on campus plays a crucial role in addressing EAL learners' various needs, including EAL students' academic writing practices. Practical support for EAL learners is maximized when these services are offered as a network in a productive way. As proposed by Knoblock and Gorman (2018), these services could function as "a productive network," which is not determined by "human factors" but "institutional practices" (p. 291). As an illustration, instructors can play a role by inviting EAL specialists, writing tutors, and expert students to be guest speakers or embedded writing tutors for peer review activities regularly in classrooms. Exposure to new information and engagement in cooperative activities can help students make informed decisions on what kind of support they need and practice seeking help from available resources.
- Cultivate EAL writers' learner agency. Aligned with empirical studies, this review calls on instructors to value the knowledge and linguistic resources that EAL students bring to their courses and create opportunities for EAL learners to contribute as members in their composition studies. It would be beneficial for EAL students if instructors could cultivate EAL learner agency by optimizing the learning conditions from the design of curriculum and syllabus, arrangement of classroom activities, as well as methods of assessment. For example, instructors could consider including multimodality and digital components in writing activities, such as writing a blog post. EAL students may feel encouraged to practice writing by exploring multiple literacies and rhetorical strategies. Writing instructors could also create spaces for students to exercise their decision-making capacity with respect and trust. Accordingly, EAL learners could feel empowered to engage in new activities when provided with options and spaces to make independent decisions.

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