

Theoretical Analysis, Classroom Practice, Opinion Essays

An Apology for EGAP: The Benefits of a General Approach to English for Academic Purposes in Canadian Post-Secondary Contexts

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Abstract

A wide range of English for academic purposes (EAP) programs are offered in British Columbia and across Canada. Understanding the advantages and disadvantages of an English for general academic purposes (EGAP) approach can provide important insights into how students might most benefit from their EAP program experiences. The insights in this article are based on a review of the literature related to EGAP in the Canadian context, with nine key sources informing an argument in favour of the general academic and holistic benefits that are often the focus of EGAP programs. It argues that the benefits provided by discipline-specific input, terminology, and tasks characteristic of an English for specific academic purposes (ESAP) approach, while useful, should not take priority over student wellbeing. In Canadian post-secondary settings, overall student wellbeing should be a key priority, and this priority can be achieved much more holistically by providing support of a cultural-, community-, campus-, and socio-emotional- nature. These are components typically present in many EGAP courses, but less typically emphasized in an ESAP approach.

Introduction

According to Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, international students contribute more than \$21 billion to the Canadian economy annually and create the necessity for around 200,000 jobs (IRCC, 2023). In 2022, over one million international students held study permits in Canada (CIMM, 2023). As international students make up an increasingly large proportion of students at Canadian universities (Cheng & Fox, 2008; El Masri & Khan, 2022; Liu, 2016), their wellbeing and retention is therefore more important than ever before, both to the students, themselves, and to the academic institutions that host them. Wellbeing is defined for the purpose of this paper as being related to concepts such as optimism, having a meaningful life, prosperity, success, thriving, and flourishing (Dodge et al., 2012).

There are a lot of obstacles for international students to overcome. They can be vulnerable due to loneliness (Wang & Zhou, 2021), financial and family pressure (Cheng & Fox, 2008; El Masri & Khan, 2022), and homesickness and stress (Fritz et al., 2008). Living in an environment where they are initially lost, and unable to function with a full understanding of the language and culture, can lead to stress and affect confidence (Douglas et al., 2022; Tweedie & Kim, 2015), in the most extreme cases leading to drug use and suicide (Sasitharan, 2023). There has even been negative rhetoric in the national media, blaming international students for the recent housing crisis (Passifiume, 2023), perhaps contributing to a perceived hostile atmosphere for international students.

Both the Canadian economy in general, and Canadian higher education institutions, benefit financially from international students. It seems reasonable to expect that educational institutions take responsibility for supporting these newcomers during challenging times (Avenido, 2023), if only to ensure that the supply of international students continues. One way to do this is through suitable university preparatory programs.

This essay offers an *apology* for EGAP, from the Greek “*apologia*,” meaning “a well-reasoned reply; a ‘thought-out response’ to the accusations made” (Online Etymology Dictionary, n.d., para. 1), or “a formal defence of one’s opinions or conduct” (Oxford University Press, 1998). It will weigh in on the ongoing debate around whether international students are best served by English for general academic purposes (EGAP) or English for specific academic purposes (ESAP) university preparation programs. It will argue that although focusing student preparation on a specific program of study may be beneficial in terms of discipline-specific input, terminology, and tasks, overall student wellbeing should be the priority. This priority can be achieved partly through the inclusion of course content that focuses on general academic benefits such as the ability to use language effectively in context (known as pragmatic competence) with university faculty, staff, students, and other members of the campus community. Finally, it will show that student wellbeing can be supported much more holistically by providing support of a cultural-, community-, campus-, and socio-emotional- nature; components present in many EGAP courses but often not the focus in ESAP courses.

What is English for Academic Purposes?

First coined by the British Council in 1975 (Alqahtani, 2011), the purpose of English for academic purposes (EAP) has traditionally been to provide multilingual students from language backgrounds other than English with the skills they need to become successful in their academic careers in English-speaking countries. Since the earliest days of EAP, as it is such an important part of academic life, writing has always been a key focus. Over the decades, oral skills, such as presentations, discussions, debates, and all the subskills that these necessitate, have been included to a greater extent in some EAP courses. Additionally, the receptive skills; reading and listening, have also been increasingly integrated over the years. All in all, the key focus of EAP is to prepare students for new academic and cultural contexts by focusing on student needs in terms of language, communication, and study skills related to post-secondary studies in English (Hyland & Hamp-Lyons, 2002).

In British Columbia, a number of higher education institutions offer EAP courses to students whose first language is not English. Students can take EAP alongside undergraduate courses and there are sometimes optional elective modules. These courses incorporate activities aimed at increasing wellbeing such as conversation, pronunciation, culture, and a variety of others with holistic objectives (English Language Institute, 2023; Thompson Rivers University, n.d.; University of British Columbia Okanagan Campus, n.d.; University of Victoria, 2024; Vancouver Island University, n.d.).

The EGAP vs ESAP Debate

EAP has a short history, relative to the teaching and learning of English as an additional language (EAL) in general (Benesch, 2001). Perhaps for this reason, there seem to be very diverse opinions about whether it is more beneficial for students to study EAP that is *specific* to their major course (i.e., ESAP) or EAP that is *general* (i.e., EGAP). In fact, since “at least the 1980s” (Bodin-Galvez & Ding, 2019, p. 79) there has been a dichotomy between EGAP and ESAP in the research literature. Advocates for each approach have criticized the ideological basis of the other, with some coming out strongly against “the death of General EAP” (Johnson & Tweedie, 2021, p. 102). Numerous studies, both in Canada and abroad, have produced results in support of ESAP, while others have come down in favour of EGAP. At least one study (Fedorova, 2021), would prefer to replace EAP altogether with general English. As is often the case, contextual factors play a significant role in each study, the results obtained, and the conclusions drawn.

Cheng and Fox (2008) found “little consensus” (p. 311) among EGAP and ESAP research in Canada. One common approach of research studies evaluating EAP is to compare students’ GPA with grades from their English courses (e.g., Crossman, 2018; Dyck, 2013; Johnson & Tweedie, 2021; Van Viegen & Russell, 2019). However, this approach ignores qualitative factors, such as wellbeing, and focuses entirely on academic performance. In contrast, another section of research is aimed at the collection of student perceptions or experiences (e.g., Douglas et al., 2022; Landry, Tweedie & Kim, 2015), and approach that can provide insights into the qualitative experiences of the students in these studies. Still more studies either focus on, or have findings which focus in some way on the acculturation of international students (Tweedie & Kim, 2015; Wilson-Forsberg et al., 2018; Zhang & Zhou, 2010; Zhou & Zhang, 2014).

It is also noticeable that many studies focus entirely or mostly on Chinese International students (Dyck, 2013; Landry, 2019; Ranson, 2016; Raymond & Des Brisay, 2000; Raymond & Parks, 2002; Zhang & Zhou, 2010; Zhou & Zhang, 2014). While Chinese students make up a large proportion of the international student community, it remains to be seen whether this proportion of the research is representative of the proportion of international students that are Chinese in origin (Cheng & Fox, 2008). El Masri & Khan (2022), for example, show that both Indian and Chinese international students comprise just over 50% of the total.

What are the Main Supporting Arguments for EGAP?

There is sometimes the misconception that the main approach underpinning EGAP is that it is focused on multidisciplinary academic skills. However, there is great proven value in providing international students with other *general* English skills. Myles and Cheng (2003) stated that “...international graduate students have difficulties adapting to a wide range of social and academic situations within the university community” (p.247). The skills needed to overcome this difficulty in adapting may not be essentially *academic* but might directly contribute to student wellbeing, and therefore indirectly increase the likelihood of their academic success.

The benefits of EGAP can perhaps most usefully be divided into specific academic benefits, general academic benefits, and student wellbeing benefits, which can also be indirectly

academically beneficial. In claiming to prove the value of EGAP or ESAP, the academic benefits cited are typically focused on writing (Flowerdew, 2016) and do not consider either the speaking and listening or the extralinguistic components of EAP courses. But clearly, some of the main benefits of EGAP courses lie in these often-overlooked general academic benefits and their effect on student wellbeing.

The need for general skills has been supported by students and researchers alike; students have stated their preference for more interaction with members of the host community (Tweedie & Kim, 2015), and coaching in and practice of suitable communication with English-speaking individuals (Scollon et al., 2012). Additionally, Boz et al. (2018) found that such communication with the host community is often overlooked by university preparation courses which generally adhere too strictly to content that is academically beneficial. Examples of some of the general academic benefits of EGAP courses could be learning and practising how to communicate with lecturers and supervisors, asking university support staff for help, socialising with other students, and so on (Tweedie & Kim, 2015). Landry (2019) also found that the teaching of independent study skills such as time management, reflective skills, and strategies for maintaining focus were considered useful by students in EGAP courses.

It is also significant that almost all research into EGAP and ESAP emphasises how essential *context* is in making decisions about course content (Bodin-Galvez & Ding, 2019; de Chazal, 2012). This being the case, it is difficult to argue against the idea that effective academic English courses ought to incorporate aspects of the context outside the classroom as well as inside. This approach allows students to benefit from local insights, which might include knowledge of colloquialisms, slang, and cultural norms, and could be applicable within or outside an educational institution. This recognition of the wider context is likely to have a significant impact on the ability of international students to communicate in all contexts because, according to Myles and Cheng (2003), “studies have also shown that NNES students do not always follow the norms of politeness and appropriateness in various speech acts common to their host culture community” (p. 250).

Moving onto the purely wellbeing-oriented benefits of EGAP, well-designed courses emphasize friendship and social support between international students, and encourage interactions with and guidance from teaching assistants who have knowledge and experience of the institution, local area and local culture. Forging interactions and connections such as these has been found to be significant for social adjustment (Jackson et al., 2013; Misra et al., 2003).

What are the Main Supporting Arguments for ESAP?

ESAP is based on the idea that students require more *specific* skills for certain areas of study in higher education that are not applicable to all fields of study. Some examples of these might be describing statistical data or a knowledge of a particular referencing convention. Proponents of ESAP (e.g., Bodin-Galvez & Ding, 2019) sometimes believe that the students would be wasting their time learning *general* essay structures, vocabulary, and so on, because they will only have to replace this learning with the discipline-specific conventions of their field later on. EGAP course designers and teachers can, of course, take these things into consideration and provide examples exhibiting, and activities practising, the norms in a variety of fields.

One of the main arguments used by ESAP proponents is that those in favour of EGAP are usually forced into their conclusions due to contextual constrictions rather than ideological factors (Bodin-Galvez & Ding, 2019). In some contexts, EGAP is a contingency option due to the reality that there might also be an insufficient number of students to justify EAP courses that are specific to certain fields of study. While this might be true, this argument ignores the general academic and wellbeing benefits, such as communicating with university faculty and staff, which were described in the previous section.

In another argument, Pojanapunya (2019) identified vocabulary that is inter-disciplinary and discipline-specific within a variety of academic publications. She concluded, in support of a focus on ESAP, that more lexis is discipline-specific than inter-disciplinary and that this is even more significant for the hard sciences than social sciences.

Additionally, Flowerdew (2016), who conducted a review of research into ESAP writing, argued that certain conventions and practices are discipline-specific and therefore need to be taught separately in ESAP courses. He argued about the necessity for ESAP writing because each field of study has different vocabulary, styles of lab reports, and referencing systems.

Overall, it may seem that the decision to focus on ESAP is an appropriate one in contexts where international students have already decided on the degree program they will study or are allowed to study EAP and their major programs concurrently. This will allow them to focus on gaining the subject-specific knowledge that they need to succeed academically. However, the key benefits of an EGAP approach are outlined in the next section, showing how promoting general English language learning better prepares students for realising their overall potential.

EAP Studies conducted in Canadian contexts

For the purposes of this paper, a review of research conducted into EAP in the Canadian context was conducted. To carry out this review of the literature, the key words, and their acronyms, “English for academic purposes,” “English for general academic purposes,” “English for specific academic purposes,” and “Canada” were entered into the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) database. The literature found from this search reveals that multiple benefits of EGAP have been shown to exist in a wide variety of contexts from a range of perspectives. An overview of these articles is provided in Table 1.

Providing evidence for the acculturation benefits of EAP, Cheng and Fox (2008) used semi-structured interviews to collect the opinions of 56 multilingual students from language backgrounds other than English at three Canadian universities about how EAP courses assist with adjusting to the academic culture of where they are studying. They found that, overall, students who learned and applied social skills as well as learning strategies considered themselves successful in this acculturation process. Similarly, Fox et al. (2006) carried out volunteer semi-structured interviews with 13 undergraduates, five in-session general EAP students and 10 pre-university EAL students, one EAP instructor, and 10 discipline-specific professors all from a wide variety of majors and year groups from three universities. Employing a grounded theory approach to data analysis, seven groups of factors in academic acculturation were identified. The study concluded that EAL “students’ experiences are varied and their

academic acculturation depends on a lot of external and internal factors” (p. 87). Then, in a much larger follow-up study, Fox et al. (2014) surveyed 641 students studying in a wide variety of 36 EAL and EAP programs at 26 Canadian universities, using questionnaires to gather perceptions on the impact of these courses. The responses were analyzed using quantitative methods to measure any moderating effect of these courses on academic and social engagement. Variations in language “programs were found to account for variations in strategies which mediated academic and social engagement. However, the impact was moderated by three personal background factors: anxiety, stress, and motivation” (p. 57).

Furthermore, several studies have suggested additional benefits which are not necessarily included under the title *acculturation*, but are also more likely to be included in EGAP, rather than ESAP courses. Landry (2019) collected questionnaires from seven general EAP (IELTS band 5) students studying a variety of undergraduate fields, who had completed a module titled *Skills for Independent Learning*. A focus group was conducted with five additional students who had completed the EAP and skills in independent learning course a year earlier. Results showed that “time management, reflective skills, and strategies for maintaining focus were identified as three transferable skills taught in the module” (p. 1). In a later study, Landry (2023) used questionnaires, interviews, focus groups, student portfolios, and interviews with teaching assistants to collect perceptions about the effectiveness of online asynchronous modules in intercultural communication for students studying in an EGAP program. Results suggested that the online course influenced students’ “language learning, intercultural competence, and socialization into new communities” (p. 1), which, in turn, led to increased wellbeing.

With evidence specifically related to student confidence, Keefe and Shi (2017) interviewed eight NNEST students about the effectiveness of EAP courses in preparing them for their undergraduate courses at a Canadian university. Interviews were conducted during the EAP course and during the first term of undergraduate studies. Results showed that “students’ responses to the EAP program were mostly positive—all eight reported improvements and increased confidence in speaking and writing” despite challenges (p. 1). Challenges were perceived to be reduced by the EAP course. At the University of Manitoba, Dyck (2013) compared the grade point averages (GPAs) of international students with those of domestic students and compared international students from China who completed a general EAP course with those who met the English language requirements in other ways. Results showed that Chinese international students were equal to their Canadian counterparts in terms of grades initially, but that they began to fall behind in the second and third years. However, the study also showed that international students who completed EAP level 5 were actually performing better in terms of academic outcomes than the Canadian students on average.

In Johnson and Tweedie’s (2021) study, they referenced the predicted “‘death’ of General EAP” (p. 102) that is common in the field; however, they found that standardized test scores, such as IELTS and TOEFL, are not a predictor of student success at the tertiary level. Rather, their findings showed that university preparation programs including EGAP were a predictor of student success at the tertiary level. They concluded from this that the prediction of “the death of General EAP” may have been “premature” (p. 101).

Table 1*Studies Conducted in Canadian Contexts Showing the Benefits of EGAP*

Authors	Key Information
Cheng and Fox (2008)	Qualitative 56 non-native English-speaking students 3 Canadian universities Learning and social skills contribute to academic success
Dyck (2013)	Quantitative GPA comparison of Chinese & domestic students, and Chinese EAP / non-EAP students
Fox et al. (2006)	Qualitative—grounded theory 28 EGAP students Volunteer semi-structured interviews Many factors contribute to engagement with undergraduate study
Fox, Cheng & Zumbo (2014)	Quantitative 641 students of 36 EAL & EAP programs 26 Canadian universities Anxiety, stress & motivation influence social engagement
Johnson and Tweedie (2021)	Quantitative 1918 International students 1 Canadian university EAP courses contribute to academic achievement
Keefe and Shi (2017)	Qualitative 8 NNES students Before & After interviews EGAP led to increase in spoken & written confidence
Landry (2019)	Qualitative 12 international EGAP students who completed a Skills for Independent Learning course Transferable EGAP skills: time management, reflection, strategies for maintaining focus
Landry (2023)	Qualitative EGAP students Questionnaires, interviews, focus groups & student portfolios Online asynchronous learning & additional language socialization led to language, culture & socialization benefits and increased well-being
Tweedie and Kim (2015)	Qualitative 7 undergraduate EAP students Support with acculturation is a perceived need in EAP curriculum

Finally, exploring student opinions about the shortfalls of some EAP courses, Tweedie and Kim (2015) used semi-structured interviews to survey perceptions about whether university preparation courses align with first-year undergraduate course requirements. Participants were

from a range of faculties and had all completed EAP courses before moving on to undergraduate study. Students' responses indicated that they felt that more support with social issues, such as language and culture, was needed; hallmarks of an EGAP approach.

Discussion

It is an interesting and salient point, noted by Cheng and Fox (2008), that “conflict within the field of EAP is occurring at a time when Canadian universities are increasingly focused on program accountability and measurable outcomes” (p. 312). While it is of course essential to encourage accountability through measurable outcomes, the limitations of the measurable outcomes used may not only lead to the preference of ESAP programs over EGAP, but they may also disadvantage students.

One of the paradoxes of the recent investment in student wellbeing by governments and educational institutions in Canada, is that not only is there “no universally agreed-upon definition for wellness or wellbeing” (The Alberta Teachers' Association, 2018, p. 20), but unfortunately for international students, general wellbeing is also not a directly measurable outcome (The Alberta Teachers' Association, 2018). It would appear that such policies are dictated by the perception that wellbeing is generally considered a good idea, even if it is not measurable or provable. However, there are other outcomes that are measurable, with investment in them able to be held more accountable, leading to them competing favorably with investment in wellbeing. This lack of measurability for qualitative aspects of students' wellbeing might be a contributing factor to why the EGAP versus ESAP debate has not been settled in favour of the former. The remainder of this discussion section will therefore focus on the measurable benefits of EGAP.

Supporting this exploration of the benefits of EGAP, two studies are of particular importance (McMeniman & Evans, 1997; Sun & Chen, 1997). Despite the perceived greater specific academic benefits of ESAP courses, academic proficiency alone is insufficient for students to become comfortable in a new cultural setting (McMeniman & Evans, 1997; Sun and Chen, 1997). McMeniman and Evans (1997) stated that proficiency in dealing with interactions with local individuals is not generally gained through classroom language learning. For example, Sun and Chen (1997) interviewed Chinese international students in the United States and found that studying for and achieving impressive TOEFL scores had very little impact on their ability to communicate with people in the local community, either in academic or non-academic settings. In essence, these communication challenges mean that EAP courses with a narrow focus on standardised testing were failing students by not providing necessary education in how to survive socially in a new community and culture, and that this lack of educational outcomes related to community and culture might lead to serious consequences; they were ignoring the general academic benefits, and benefits for student wellbeing outlined above.

In terms of positive measurable benefits related to EGAP, in a study about acculturation at three universities in Canada, Cheng and Fox (2008) conducted semi-structured interviews with 56 international students and found that “the students who characterized their academic engagement as successful had typically developed more strategic learning and social skills as part of their acculturation process” (p. 307). Studies by both Keefe and Shi (2017), and Douglas

et al. (2022) recorded positive student reactions to EGAP programs, with students citing improvements in confidence, friendships, and local culture as some of their reasons.

Conclusion

To summarise, “accusations made” (Online Etymology Dictionary, N.D.) against EGAP can sometimes be viewed as accusations against the holistic side of education and against welcoming international students to participate in Canada socially rather than just academically. It is hoped that this *apology* has managed to shed some light on the potential of EGAP in achieving a more compassionate and holistic approach to EAL teaching and learning for post-secondary students. It appears that educational institutions ascribing to an ESAP approach have judged that because students are linguistically able within a narrow academic set of outcomes, they must also be socially apt. As seen throughout the discussion above, in response to the results of research into students’ needs, EGAP provides international students with a human element that is above and beyond what is often provided by ESAP courses. While wellbeing is not necessarily a measurable outcome, the benefits for student wellbeing provided by EGAP courses are of overriding importance to international students.

University preparatory courses that focus on the specifics of a certain field of study may be useful in some contexts, but reduce language learning to a purely functional role, with the narrow goal of academic success. Courses such as these may serve a particular purpose, but they may also serve to neglect international students’ needs for higher-level, holistic skills and knowledge to allow them to live well in a new community. Not incorporating wellbeing as an aim in EAP courses in Canada would mean ignoring the benefits of international students developing a holistic set of skills related to linguistic, cultural, and social competence. This article calls on readers, whether teachers, administrators, and/or researchers, to embrace wellbeing for international students as a way to mitigate the loneliness, pressure, homesickness, and stress that may accompany their academic adventures in Canada and support them as they develop the well-rounded skills that accompany living well in a new place.

Finally, while many of the papers mentioned in this essay are pivotal works (Cheng and Fox, 2008; Keefe and Shi, 2017), there is a need to replicate some of the older studies to show whether the situations observed and the results obtained are still true today. It could also be valuable to the debate if research was conducted into the holistic and wellbeing benefits of ESAP programs.

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