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Article abstract

English Language Learners (ELLs) have long been targets for linguicism (i.e., linguistic racism) as they are often subjected to judgement based on deficit models of language proficiency. To support ELLs during the COVID-19 pandemic, a long-running, co-curricular writing support program based on a Learner-Driven, Instructor-Facilitated (LeD-InF) approach was modified for fully online participation. Through this approach, ELLs develop academic reading, writing, and critical thinking skills, using their respective course materials and personalized responses from their writing instructors who provide inclusive learning opportunities that specifically address ELLs' unique individual needs. This innovative anti-deficit, proactive, and risk-free approach not only increased learners' willingness to write and volume of written output in their academic journal entries (objectively tracked through word count), but also developed learner identity, agency, autonomy, as well as confidence. Analysis of written output volume combined with learners' end-of-program reflections provide pedagogical insights for addressing and redressing deficit models as well as combating linguicism, contributing important steps toward ensuring equity, justice, and transformative inclusivity so that diverse voices can be heard in the teaching and learning space.

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Article

Toward Transformative Inclusivity through Learner-Driven and Instructor-Facilitated Writing Support: An Innovative Approach to Empowering English Language Learners

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Abstract

English Language Learners (ELLs) have long been targets for linguicism (i.e., linguistic racism) as they are often subjected to judgement based on deficit models of language proficiency. To support ELLs during the COVID-19 pandemic, a long-running, co-curricular writing support program based on a Learner-Driven, Instructor-Facilitated (LeD-InF) approach was modified for fully online participation. Through this approach, ELLs develop academic reading, writing, and critical thinking skills, using their respective course materials and personalized responses from their writing instructors who provide inclusive learning opportunities that specifically address ELLs' unique individual needs. This innovative anti-deficit, proactive, and risk-free approach not only increased learners' willingness to write and volume of written output in their academic journal entries (objectively tracked through word count), but also developed learner identity, agency, autonomy, as well as confidence. Analysis of written output volume combined with learners' end-of-program reflections provide pedagogical insights for addressing and redressing deficit models as well as combating linguicism, contributing important steps toward ensuring equity, justice, and transformative inclusivity so that diverse voices can be heard in the teaching and learning space.

Introduction

Since mastery of academic English is critical to success in higher education, English Language Learners (ELLs) with low Academic English proficiency face multiple challenges in their transition to university, arising from factors such as their diverse educational experiences and structural obstacles due to racial, cultural, or socio-economic status. Deficiency models of language proficiency contribute to ELLs' difficulties by positioning them as outsiders to academic discourses at university. Linguicism, paralleling racism, "refers exclusively to ideologies and structures where language is the means for effecting or maintaining an unequal allocation of power and resources" (Holliday, 2005, p. 55). Standard English can be regarded "as an idea in the mind rather than a reality" (J. Milroy & L. Milroy, 1999). Being judged against the standard native English speakers' norm, ELLs are often regarded as being deficient. MacKenzie (2014) points out that within conventional methodology used in English as a Foreign Language contexts, "there is an inbuilt ideological positioning of the students as outsider and failure—however proficient they become" (p. 8). Valencia (2010) notes that deficit-model adherents posit that students' underperformance at school is caused by their internal deficiencies, which emerge (they claim) as "limited intellectual abilities, linguistic shortcomings, lack of motivation to learn, and immoral behavior" (pp. 6-7). Deficit models position ELLs as cultural "Others" (Marginson & Sawir, 2011, p. 35), and treat them as problems and burdens to support. Consequently, these deficit models have a harmful self-actualization impact as ELLs internalize and perpetuate negative stereotypes.

Leask (2006) advocates that deficit thinking be challenged. Although institutions have increasingly acknowledged that ELLs should be supported and though they have implemented various initiatives to this end, the pinpointing of ELLs as a problem persists, and needs to be questioned. This issue calls attention to the distinction between *consumptive access* and *transformative access* where the former "involves allowing people to enter a space or access a text" while the latter "questions and re-thinks the very construct of allowing" (Brewer et al., 2014, pp. 153–154). Smit (2012) argues that "What learners need is access to the 'ways of being' in the disciplines that take into account what matters in higher education" (p. 375).

To combat linguicism and deficit discourse, it is imperative to create inclusive learning opportunities so that ELLs can experience a sense of success when participating in the teaching-learning dynamics at university. ELLs can be given the agency to customize support to serve their unique learning needs. In other words, the anti-deficit approach would involve making conditions

conducive to scaffolding ELLs' success at being able to function as learners who can bring their whole being into their language learning experience. The Learner-Driven, Instructor-Facilitated (LeD-InF) approach described in this paper aims to help ELLs (a) expand their linguistic repertoire needed for academic reading and writing, (b) acquire familiarity with Canadian universities' academic writing norms and conventions, and (c) develop a more positive learner identity for academic writing.

Overview of the Learner-Driven, Instructor-Facilitated Writing Approach

Since 2006, the LeD-InF approach has been used at our institution to support ELLs through anti-deficit, inclusive, proactive, risk-free practice in academic reading and writing using course texts of learners' choice. Participation is voluntary and learners can stop any time when they do not feel the support is serving their needs. This co-curricular support program, offered through the university's Centre for Teaching and Learning, is staffed by professional writing instructors, most of whom also work at the Writing Centre in the same institution. Learners in this program are encouraged to read their own course materials for 40 minutes and write for 20 minutes daily to their assigned instructor. The instructor responds 2 to 3 times asynchronously per week to learners' ideas and meets learners one-on-one virtually for 30 minutes every fortnight. Due to the pandemic and the anticipation of increased demand from learners living in globally distributed locations, the regular 8-week program was shortened to a 4-week version, with academic integrity introduced on Day 2 of the program so that learners could begin to practice and uphold academic integrity. From Day 3 onwards, learners briefly summarized their readings and made inferences as well as shared their own perspectives on the topics of their disciplinary texts.

Need for Inclusive Learning Opportunities

ELLs from non-Western countries may not be aware of the expectation that they write in an "assertive and self-confident" way (Hutchings, 2014, p. 312), as well as in alignment with Anglo-European values of source-based academic writing, involving "paraphrasing, judicious use of quotations and giving credit to authors for their ideas" (Gullifer & Tyson, 2010, p. 464). Learners who are unfamiliar with these Eurocentric values are deemed deficient (Vavrus, 2008) as they do not have the linguistic repertoire to execute the kind of intertextuality that is not considered transgressive (Chandrasoma et al., 2004). Given that learners have called for opportunities to develop their

competence in academic writing without worrying about sanctions for plagiarism (Power, 2009), it is important to provide a safe, inclusive, and supportive space to facilitate learners' academic language development.

As such, with the LeD-InF approach, instructors who respond to learners' self-introductions and subsequent academic journal entries communicate genuine empathy, support, and warmth in order to build a relationship of trust and care that enables learners to feel their thoughts are valued and to experience a sense of belonging. An analysis of this approach from the perspective of *academic integrity socialization* (Khoo and Kang, 2022) showed that opportunities to develop personal connections with academic integrity practice contributed to learners voluntarily writing more than 6,000 words within a month in their co-curricular writing support program. When culturally responsive pedagogy (Gay, 2018) was integrated with the LeD-InF approach, Huo and Khoo (2022) reported that of the 14 low-proficiency learners in their study, eight wrote on average 11,454 words and three wrote on average 6,437 words in one month. Since participation in the co-curricular program was voluntary, the authors interpreted this high volume of written output as an indication of learners' engagement with the program and its usefulness to them. Learners thus continued to write and receive feedback from instructors through the month-long program .

Customized Support to Motivate and Sustain Learner-Driven Reading and Writing

Supporting learners with developing discipline-specific language and knowledge

One-on-one appointments at Writing Centres have been essential support that ELLs depend on for their course assignments. However, during peak periods, the significant demand-supply mismatch results in many ELLs not being able to access the assistance they need with their essays. Thus, it is vital to support ELLs in a personalized manner so that ELLs who receive support to develop their reading and writing skills early in the semester develop their ability to produce better assignments later in the semester, and thus reap the benefits of a diversity-enriched teaching-learning environment.

Meeting learners' needs and sustaining their interest

Unlike deficit models that simplistically assume that ELLs' language needs can be fixed by mandatory remedial programs, the LeD-InF program acknowledges that language and identity are intertwined (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005), and thus mobilizes self-regulation (Zimmerman, 2002) in giving learners agency. Since terminology, academic language usage constructions, and disciplinary ways of knowing are quite diverse, the agency to choose their texts allows ELLs to acquire and practice language expressions most relevant to their respective courses, thus proactively helping ELLs to be prepared for upcoming assignments. This echoes Silva's (1997) finding that self-selected materials often produce "well(-)informed, skilfully crafted, very persuasive" texts (p. 362). This flexible "instructional option" (p. 362) empowers learners to develop the content and linguistic capital required to write their assignments on their own later in the semester.

Frequency and Quality of Instructor-Learner Interactions

All asynchronous interactions between learners and instructors take place through the discussion function of the Canvas learning management system (LMS). Unlike the usual discussion function used in courses to encourage learners to participate in online discussion as class members, in the LeD-InF program, the discussion function is set up strictly between one learner and one instructor to ensure confidentiality. After viewing a designated instructor's welcome video and message, the learner responds with a self-introduction as their first journal entry. In the second journal entry, learners explore a librarian-curated website with audio-visual resources and texts about academic integrity presented in a learner-friendly tone, and then write about what they found to be new to them. From Journal 3 onwards, learners wrote a summary of their disciplinary text followed by their reflections on the text.

In order to ensure that ELLs feel the inclusivity of the support and have positive learning experiences, a relational pedagogy that helps each learner understand that they matter (Gravett & Winstone, 2020) was used. Writing instructors were encouraged to follow the guidelines below to respond to learners' self-introductions:

1. Have I warmly welcomed learners to this risk-free, positive, supportive online learning space, and assured them of my mission to help them develop?
2. Have I ensured that I have taught something useful and necessary to the learner at this stage?

3. Have I motivated the learner to want to fully engage with this program and keep building this relationship with me?
4. Have I communicated in vocabulary accessible to the learner (i.e. not speaking above their heads)?

Scaffolding learners' development of their skills to express the richness of their ideas is implemented through writing instructor feedback in the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (Vygotsky, 1978). ZPD is the space where learners are most ready for learning uptake: "the area between what a student firmly knows and what the learner would not be able to grasp even with assistance" (Nordlof, 2020, p. 12).

In order to develop learners' confidence and fuel their motivation to express their thoughts in their journal entries, instructor guidelines for responding to journal entries were:

1. Have I given my primary attention to engaging with the ideas that the learner presented in the post? Am I functioning adequately as a target-level educated reader to improve learners' critical thinking, and language competence in the Zone of Proximal Development?
2. Have I taught something useful or provided feedback that helps learners improve in their next piece of writing?
3. Have I kept an encouraging and supportive tone that motivates learners to continue investing effort since they are progressing in their ability?

Results and Discussion

Impact of Learner-Driven and Instructor-Facilitated Interactions

During the four weeks of the LeD-InF program, 77 low English proficiency undergraduates voluntarily wrote journal entries amounting to an average word count of over 10,400 words per learner in one month. Word count output is a direct and objective source of data on learners' language usage practice through the program and has been used as a measure of fluency (Crossley et al., 2013). This high volume of writing output suggests that there have been effective communication of ideas and dialogic interactions with writing instructors that empowered the learners to share a multitude of thoughts. Moreover, this high volume of writing, taken together with learners' sustained voluntary participation, indicates that low-proficiency learners felt comfortable to have been invited to this space and to transform their language usage experience by engaging in academic conversations with the writing instructor about their disciplinary topics. This high volume of output transforms not only

learners' abilities to write their own assignments later in the semester, but also their self-efficacy and identity to function in their new academic learning environment in a non-deficit way.

Learners' Self-identification of Transformation

Learners' end-of-program reflections indicate transformation in the way learners view academic reading and writing after being engaged in the daily dialogic interactions with their writing instructors, as illustrated by learner reflections excerpted below:

> The most significant change I have noticed is that I don't let academic texts dominate or scare me anymore. I am now confident in expressing my opinions, beliefs and thoughts pertaining to a text. (Student A)
>
> I used to hate writing because it is too hard for me. Though the process in the program was hard, I gradually overcome this barrier and get more used to reflect on what I read. Moreover, I become more confident in expressing my ideas in scientific writings… I become more aware what critical thinking is and is making changes. (Student B)
>
> My tutor replies to my posts..., and the comments are very helpful to me. The feedback helped me write, even more, helped me figure out what's wrong with my writing and what should I do in order for my ideas to be clear. I started to enjoy reading, and last but not least, I feel more comfortable in writing and reading assignments for my courses. (Student C)

These reflections provide insights into learners' readiness to write when conditions are conducive. This means writing in an environment that is (a) proactive and risk-free, and characterized by (b) timely response and non-deficit discourse.

Proactive risk-free opportunity

Unlike course assignments learners submit to be evaluated, their 20-minute journal writing in this program is not graded and thus is free of the risk of being judged negatively or given low marks, in line with Silva's (1997) principles of "ethical treatment of ESL writers" (p. 359). These principles include: understanding ELL learners, providing "suitable learning contexts," instructing them properly, and assessing their work fairly (p. 360). This opportunity acts like a linguistic sandbox in allowing ELLs freedom to practice summarizing what they have read to provide their instructor with the main ideas of their readings or texts, and then discussing their perspectives and critical thoughts. Such practice helps learners avoid the lack-of-confidence-in-language-usage fear that may result in

many ELLs' incorporating large chunks of text from their sources (Keck, 2014) or resorting to contract cheating. Start-of-semester participation in this program has proactively developed learners' abilities to write about their course topics daily and has prepared them to cope with their course assignments in upcoming weeks. For ELLs from countries where their education systems are exam-oriented and they had no opportunity to develop the writing skills needed for their course assignments, the LeD-InF support enables them to learn what is valued when writing in their new academic environment.

Timely supportive responses and non-deficit discourse

ELLs are motivated to keep up with writing as they receive supportive responses to their journal entries within a few days. Instructor responses focus on developing learners' critical thinking and communication of ideas. This quick turnaround, focused on developing learners as writers, is in stark contrast to feedback they receive on course assignments weeks after submission. For ELLs living in their home communities during the pandemic, this timely supportive response from the instructor with whom the learner may have developed a warm and trusting relationship is important, because this interaction may be their only venue for support with written English.

Given the unprecedented challenges of supporting globally located learners during the pandemic, Leask's (2006) advocacy for practising more inclusivity and embracing diversity in our student population is particularly salient:

> If we accept that all students (domestic and international students) are in many ways 'cultural others' seeking acceptance into the academic community through an undergraduate or postgraduate award or diploma; if we accept that one of the principal roles of the academy is to assist students to make this transition; if we recognise that it is our difference from them, as much as their difference from us, that we need to address, then we must reflect on how we might change the way we think as well as the way we do things in response to the diverse needs of students, rather than focusing primarily on how we can make them think and be more like us. (Leask, 2006, p. 189)

The shift from deficit discourse about ELLs to transformative inclusivity is evidenced by how ELLs in the LeD-InF program embraced the opportunity to exercise agency and customize the support. Doing this helped them bring their diverse experience and perspectives to their reading and writing of their disciplinary topics as well as helped develop their identities. Learners' extraordinary volume of written output from having engaged in critical thinking about course topics with others outside

the class—considered "educationally purposeful" activity (Kuh et al., 2008, p. 558)—also enhanced critical thinking skills and academic integrity awareness.

One limitation of this study may be that it was conducted as a retrospective analysis, making secondary use of data anonymized for program evaluation after gaining REB approval (No. 40911). In future research, we hope to interview students and instructors about their verbal synchronous online sessions and written interactions as well as their intercultural experiences resulting from the intervention.

Conclusion

Addressing deficit models about ELLs is essential to giving these students an equitable chance to participate actively in the academic community. Students' high level of engagement in the LeD-InF approach indicates that this anti-deficit, proactive, and risk-free approach resonates with their needs for expanding their linguistic repertoire, gaining familiarity with course texts and writing about disciplinary topics, as well as developing positive learner identities in their new academic environment. Students' sustained month-long intensive interactions with their writing instructors enabled them to discover the breadth and depth of their ideas about their course readings. This practice raises learners' awareness that they have access to ways of being: ways of being that involve successfully communicating their thoughts about course topics, and gaining resources and experience that they can draw upon to combat linguicism and inequitable learning conditions they may encounter at university.

Pedagogical insights gained from investigating this LeD-InF approach include the value of (a) giving students agency to self-regulate and customize the support according to their individual learning needs, (b) providing opportunities for risk-free personalized support to get students started on the path of language development, and (c) promoting inclusivity by encouraging students to share their diverse perspectives and experiences during their daily reading and writing language usage communications. The successful and active participation of ELLs in turn contributes to program diversity and transformative inclusivity.

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