

English for Academic Purposes in Ontario: Results from an exploratory survey

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Abstract

The on-going “internationalization” of Canadian post-secondary institutions has resulted in significant demographic changes in these institutions’ student bodies, creating a need for more effective support of students using English as an additional language both during these students’ transitions to university and during their degree programs. Currently this type of support is offered across a wide range of contexts in Canadian institutions of higher education, often embedded in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) programs. Given the increasing demand for EAP, investigation of the features of existing programs and the experiences of EAP practitioners is necessary for improving equity and efficacy within the field. The following article provides initial results from a recent Canada-wide survey aimed at better understanding Canadian EAP programs and the practitioners working therein, with a specific focus on the Ontario context.

Keywords/Phrases: English for academic purposes; English as a second language; higher education; internationalization; Canadian EAP survey research

Introduction

Categorized as a sub-disciplinary area within English for Specific Purposes (Anthony, 2018), English for Academic Purposes (EAP) is a “specialist, theory- and research-informed branch of English language and literacy education” (Ding & Bruce, 2017, p. 53). Though there is ongoing debate among scholars whether



EAP is indeed a distinct field of research rather than simply a specialized branch of English language teaching (Charles, 2013; Hyland, 2018), a growing body of empirical work implies the former (see Hyland, 2021). However, despite a global uptick in EAP research (Ding & Bruce, 2017; Hyland & Wong, 2019), and the increasing internationalization of Canadian post-secondary institutions (MacDonald, 2016; McKenzie, 2018), there is still relatively little understanding of EAP programs and practitioners across Canada. How many practitioners work in the area of EAP? Where are EAP programs located? What program models are most common? What are the professional profiles of EAP practitioners? What is the professional satisfaction of EAP practitioners working in post-secondary institutions?

Our mixed-methods, multi-phase research project explores the breadth and depth of Canadian EAP programming, responding to recent calls for greater research in this burgeoning field (Galante et al., 2020; Huang, 2018; Van Viegen & Zappa-Hollman, 2019). In this article, we present data from the first phase of this research project—a Canada-wide survey of EAP directors and instructors across three types of institutions and five geographical regions—and highlight salient findings with respect to EAP in Ontario.

The study: Context, participants, data collection and analysis

The first phase of our mixed methods investigation surveyed EAP practitioners across Canada regarding their programs of instruction, educational backgrounds, employment status, and job satisfaction levels. In the fall of 2019, we recruited participants via official messages posted on national (TESL Canada; Languages Canada) and provincial (e.g., TESL Ontario) TESL organization listservs, and via emails sent to EAP program administrators across Canadian universities, colleges, and language institutes. We received responses from 481 EAP practitioners¹ (75% Instructors; 25% Directors), 53% of whom work in Ontario. Survey respondents were affiliated with three different types of institutions and worked across five different Canadian regions (see Table 1). Following data collection, we analyzed the survey responses, identifying similarities and differences among the programs and practitioners based on role (director vs. instructor), institutional affiliation (university vs. college vs. private English language institute), and region (B.C. vs. Prairies vs. Ontario vs. Quebec vs. Atlantic).

Table 1: Survey respondents

	University	College	Private ELI	Population %
British Columbia	36	31	11	18
Prairies	36	27	15	18
Ontario	83	119	30	53
Quebec	6	3	5	3
Atlantic	23	7	8	9

¹ We estimate an approximate 25% response rate based on a combination of public-facing data (e.g., EAP program websites) and survey responses, putting the total Canadian EAP practitioner population at 1,933, and the Ontario EAP population at 1,037.



Survey results

In the following sub-sections, we outline the survey findings most salient to this Ontario readership, answering our three research questions: (1) Where, how, and by whom is EAP programming delivered across Canadian post-secondary contexts? (2) What are the profiles of practitioners working in EAP contexts? (3) What are the levels of professional satisfaction among EAP practitioners?

Canadian EAP programs

One of the more salient findings from the survey is the diversity of Canadian EAP programs and practitioners, from the plethora of public-facing names describing these programs (e.g., English for academic purposes, English as a second language, Academic English), to where EAP programs were “housed” on post-secondary campuses (e.g., English; Applied Linguistics; Education; International Education), to the reported cultural and linguistic diversity of practitioners and students. Ontario EAP programs and practitioners were particularly diverse in their profiles. In Ontario, respondents hailed from 88 programs across 20 universities, 24 colleges, and 13 private English language institutes/schools. Ontario-based programs ranged in size from fewer than 100 students (e.g., Cambrian College; Stafford House International) to more than 1000 students (e.g., Carleton University; Renison University College, University of Waterloo; York University; Centennial College; Conestoga College). Overall, Ontario EAP programs trend large, accounting for eight of the fourteen “supersized” (over 1000 students) EAP programs in the country. Ontario-based EAP programs also diverged in terms of model, with a plurality of institutions containing multiple types (e.g., English for academic purposes “pre-sessional” certificate programs; content and language integrated “bridging” programs; “sheltered” credit-bearing EAP courses; etc.). Of the programs surveyed, 58% identified as falling under the “credit-bearing” category, with 74% of Universities, 61% of Colleges, and 7% of English language institutes suggesting that at least some sort of post-secondary credit was available to students enrolled in their EAP programs. Finally, students at Ontario EAP programs also displayed the highest levels of linguistic and cultural diversity relative to other Canadian regions, with the six most prevalent first languages being Mandarin (44%), Arabic (9%), Korean (8%), Cantonese (5%), Spanish (4%), and Punjabi (4%). These descriptive survey data are potentially useful to EAP researchers and/or administrators managing EAP program planning. However, it is clear from our results that to accurately capture and respond to EAP program nuances, additional investigation of similarities and differences at a more granular level is essential. The second phase of our research will provide this detail via more in-depth interviews and examination of specific programs. We also contend that EAP research in Canada would benefit greatly from additional comparative, institutional, and program case studies.



Practitioner profiles

Other noteworthy findings from this survey were the median range of respondents' post-secondary teaching experience (6–10 years), and the number of respondents who claimed to have more than 16 years' experience (40%). Practitioners working at colleges and universities tended to have more experience, with those working at ELIs reporting more international language teaching experience. With respect to educational background, all practitioners had at minimum an undergraduate degree and more than two-thirds had a graduate degree, including 79% of those working at universities, 67% of those working at colleges, and 53% of those working at private English language institutes. Directors were slightly more likely to have a graduate degree (81%) than instructors (68%). Unsurprisingly, the primary disciplinary backgrounds of EAP practitioners were the Humanities, Social Sciences, and Education (89%). Only a small number of respondents reported having an undergraduate degree (11%) or graduate degree (1.5%) in Science, Technology, Engineering, or Math (STEM) disciplines. With respect to language teaching certification, 47% received certification from a provincial TESL association, 34% from a national TESL association, and 19% from a private/international TESL association. Linguistic backgrounds of EAP practitioners were diverse across Canada, with certain regions skewing more native English speaker (NES)-dominant than others. NES numbers were highest in Atlantic Canada and the Prairies, while Ontario was the most linguistically-diverse region, with 66% of practitioners identifying as native English speakers, 23% as non-native English speakers, and 11% identifying as “both or neither.” The most common “other” first languages among practitioners in Ontario were French, Spanish, German, and Japanese.

EAP practitioners across Canada reported only 59% full-time employment. Part-time-employed EAP practitioners reported balancing multiple jobs simultaneously, both within and outside the field. Among practitioners, EAP directors reported high levels of job security, with 89% reporting full-time employment, 80% reporting permanent contract status, and 96% reporting full-year employment. In contrast, instructors reported 50% full-time employment, 56% permanent contract status, and 57% full-year employment. In Ontario, this difference was accentuated; the province has the highest rate of part-time, temporary contract, and partial-year employment of any region in the country. Though our survey data with respect to EAP practitioner backgrounds and employment status are potentially informative for a range of EAP stakeholders, more data is needed on instructor workloads, especially with respect to those practitioners who are working in more precarious situations (i.e., those with part-time, temporary, or partial-year contracts) across institutional contexts.



Practitioner satisfaction & legitimacy

To better understand Canadian EAP practitioners' sense of professional satisfaction and legitimacy, we created a "satisfaction" scale, based on responses to eight Likert-scale questions, accompanied by an open-ended space for qualitative responses. Salient findings include significant differences in mean satisfaction scores between i) directors and instructors; ii) those employed full-time vs. part-time; and iii) those working at colleges/universities vs. at private English language institutes. In the qualitative data, directors and instructors from across institutions highlighted various areas of satisfaction and dissatisfaction (see Table 2). Many practitioners highlighted their professional satisfaction with respect to the impact of their respective EAP programming on students and the institution: "English for Academic Purposes continues to be a very fulfilling area to work in. Faculty (at least in my experience) are highly engaged in student learning and collaboratively look for opportunities to improve the program (curriculum and student experience)" (Anonymous EAP Program Director). From the qualitative responses provided by practitioners—and in line with the quantitative data—much of the reported professional dissatisfaction appears to be correlated to employment precarity. As one anonymous EAP instructor explained: "I am not satisfied with the precariousness of contract teaching. After some time, it does take a toll on my mental health. With no job security, I have come to view my role as a job rather than a career. It's disappointing". EAP instructor dissatisfaction—particularly from those working part-time—is a potentially important finding with employment equity implications that requires greater elucidation through ethnographic investigation. Our survey findings support previous research in Ontario ELT (e.g., Valeo & Faez, 2013) and EAP in other Canadian locales (e.g., Breshears, 2019) with respect to the precarious working conditions of many in the sector.

Table 2: Professional satisfaction and dissatisfaction

	Instructors	Directors
Satisfaction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Engagement and interaction with students Autonomy Intra-program respect 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Employment stability Program impact Program growth and innovation
Dissatisfaction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Employment precarity Poor remuneration and benefits Student lack of motivation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of respect for EAP within institution Workload Sector / program instability



Discussion, limitations, and future avenues

The first phase of this research project has yielded survey results that point to a diverse set of Canadian EAP programs across three major institutional post-secondary contexts. Based on survey results, Ontario is the region with the largest, most diverse set of programs and practitioners. However, our charting of the breadth and depth of EAP programs—while potentially instructional for EAP researchers, administrators, and practitioners—is far from definitive, and raises as many questions as it answers. Despite our best efforts, questions remain regarding EAP program structures, approaches, and impact, as well as EAP practitioners' lived experiences. Importantly, our survey is only the first of a two-part study, with the second phase seeking to highlight some of the more common EAP program models via qualitative interviews with purposefully selected EAP practitioners from across the three types of institutions. Ultimately, more research is necessary across regional and institutional contexts in order to paint a complete picture of this area of post-secondary language support.

With respect to better understanding EAP practitioner populations across Canada and in Ontario, our survey has outlined the extensive professional experience and the cultural and linguistic diversity of this under-researched cadre of language support professionals. In addition, survey results point to segregated levels of satisfaction between directors and instructors, and those working in private ELIs versus colleges and universities. Although Ontario, along with British Columbia, reports the highest level of overall satisfaction across regions, qualitative data pointing to employment precarity and related dissatisfaction among EAP instructors is concerning. We aim to provide greater levels of clarity as to the divide in satisfaction between those with different professional roles, as well as those working in different sectors, via interviews in Phase II of this research project.

Ultimately, despite some clear limitations (e.g., lack of elucidation on practitioner workloads; unorthodox identification of total practitioner population; lack of data on gender identification; low response rate from Quebec-based EAP practitioners), the survey phase of our project has yielded a useful baseline for subsequent data collection in our efforts to better understand the EAP sector in Ontario and across Canada. As neoliberal institutions of higher education continue to court increasing numbers of international students using English as an additional language, more research on EAP practitioners' perspectives and experiences is crucial. Better understanding of the lived experiences of EAP professionals—including how they navigate precarious professional waters—may not only add to the growing body of work in this area, but potentially lead to improved employment conditions for EAP practitioners working in Ontario and across Canada.



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Author Bios



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Julia Williams is an experienced EAP instructor with over 30 years of teaching in second language contexts. She is the author of *LEAP Reading and Writing*, levels 3 and 4 (published by Pearson), and the Director of English Language Studies at Renison University College, University of Waterloo. She is interested in how EAP programs are structured in academic contexts.