



# SUPPORTING EAL LEARNERS



## Who are EAL Learners?

Different literacy backgrounds mean that EAL students will face different challenges when learning to master academic English. Children of newcomers to Canada may fall under either of the following two groups:

- **International students:** Grew up in a foreign country, learned English as a second language but had the majority of literacy instruction in another language.  
**Considerations:**
  - Likely to have strong literacy background in first language (L1) and this knowledge transfers to L2 literacy.
  - Usually have explicit grammar knowledge through learning English as a second language in formal classroom settings.
  - May use a writing style that is unfamiliar to North American academic audiences.
  - May never have had to speak English, as importance was not placed on this.
- **Generation 1.5:** Born in a foreign country and may have some literacy instruction in a foreign language, but moved to Canada in grade school or high school and had more recent literacy instruction in English. **Considerations:**
  - May have strong oral proficiency in multiple languages, but because of interrupted schooling, may lack the literacy development of other students.
  - May not have the explicit grammar knowledge that international students have.
  - May have various mechanical issues that appear in their writing, e.g. for Spanish speakers, these include problems with prepositions, articles, commas.

## *Challenges Faced by EAL Learners*

- **New Language & New Culture:** Many EAL learners may be navigating not only a new language, but also a foreign culture. Literacy is *socially constructed and locally negotiated* (Norton, 2010), and successful students must not just become fluent in a new language, but also learn to negotiate a different set of institutional and cultural expectations. Academic conventions tend to vary depending on country of origin, and instructors need to be aware of this if they are to help their students understand the *hidden expectations* built into Canadian higher education (Heatley, 2011).
- **Critical Thinking:** Although EAL learners are a heterogeneous group, there are some issues that have come up repeatedly in the university classroom. One common problem faced by EAL learners centres around critical thinking. Faced with the issue of students merely summarizing material without offering any analytical comments, Galetcaia and Thiessen (2010) note that there is often a gap between how students and teachers envision the concept of critical thinking. The Western concept of individualistic problem-solving often confuses students who hold different ideas about individual and collective

achievement and the role of the student in class. Students who never go beyond restating the professor's ideas and are reluctant to speak in class may have been socialized in a system where instructors are undisputed authority figures and students are expected to remain in a passive role (Heatley, 2011).

- **Limited Vocabulary:** A limited vocabulary results in students being unable to express their mastery of course content due to a lack of necessary words, as well as an inability to comprehend test questions. Exams can be a great source of anxiety for EAL students. In a study by Teemant (2010), EAL students reported vocabulary as their greatest weakness, with their failure in a testing situation attributed, in many cases, to being tripped up by unfamiliar words. Students also expressed frustration with professors who judged their answers based on grammar, vocabulary, and their ability to write in a Western style, rather than on a mastery of content (Teemant, 2010).

### *Preventing Problems Before They Arise*

- **Know your students:** Teemant (2010) suggests that **anxiety over tests can be reduced** when faculty include a note on EAL testing accommodations in their syllabi, including a willingness to meet with students, provide study guides, provide vocabulary lists for tests, or allow dictionaries. Stress was also reduced when faculty committed to using **familiar, high frequency words** in test questions, as well as **speaking more deliberately, explaining difficult concepts twice, providing study guides, previewing tests, and meeting with struggling students.**

Students also benefit when they have a greater understanding of academic expectations and assessment criteria (Heatley et al, 2011). The addition of a note in the syllabus or a short lesson on citation requirements can prevent students from being accused of unintentional plagiarism.

#### **Learn more about assignment design:**

- Assessment and Grading Resources  
<http://www.ryerson.ca/lt/resources/assessment/index.html>
  - Creating Effective Assessments [pdf]  
<http://www.ryerson.ca/content/dam/lt/resources/handouts/NFOeffectiveassessments.pdf>
  - Assessment and Academic Integrity Resources  
<http://www.ryerson.ca/lt/resources/informationliteracy/index.html#integrity>
  - Assessing Group Work Resources  
<http://www.ryerson.ca/lt/resources/learningstrategies/collaborative/index.html#Assessment>
- **Providing Support:** In the study by Heatley et al. (2010), students tended to seek support from academic staff who had **open-door policies** and who offered support and encouragement favouring instructors who gave **clear and specific feedback** on their

work. Students respond well to regular informative, appropriate feedback while they are learning. The feedback needs to be specific and focused on how they can improve.

### Learn more about providing helpful feedback

- Marking Essays and Short Answer Questions [pdf]  
<http://www.ryerson.ca/content/dam/lt/resources/handouts/MarkingEssays.pdf>
- Marking Lab Reports [pdf]  
<http://www.ryerson.ca/content/dam/lt/resources/handouts/MarkingLabReports.pdf>
- **Universal Instructional Design:** Although this guide is aimed specifically at those who work with EAL learners, it is worth noting that the best practices provided in this document also adhere to the principles of universal instructional design. As stated in the **Universal Design Faculty Workbook**, "anticipating and planning for the diverse needs of students... results in a better learning experience for all students."

Taking time to explain issues of information literacy and academic integrity, distributing a syllabus that clearly outlines course goals and expectations, and providing helpful feedback on assignments will assist non-EAL learners as well. Making sure that assignments and exam questions are phrased concisely and clearly, and that grading rubrics are effective and fair, will reduce student frustration, as well as the risk of plagiarism and appeals.

### Learn more about Universal Instructional Design

- Universal Instructional Design Resources  
<http://www.ryerson.ca/lt/resources/instructionaldesign/index.html>
- **Refer students to English Language Support:** ELS supports multilingual students in all the language skill areas, i.e. reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Individual appointments, group sessions, and distance learning is provided. Encourage your students to make contact with ELS early in the semester, well before the first assignment is due – ELS staff will provide guidance at any stage of the writing process, e.g. understanding the assignment task, making an essay outline, or revising the various drafts. Email [els@ryerson.ca](mailto:els@ryerson.ca) or check the website: [www.ryerson.ca/els](http://www.ryerson.ca/els)

## References

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