

# Advancing Post-Admission Academic Language Support at a Canadian Polytechnic Institute

Brooks, DH, Devos, NJ

*British Columbia Institute of Technology*

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\***Innovation Spotlights** extremely brief contributions that highlight an innovative teaching practice, approach, or tool, and provide accompanying evidence that speaks to the effectiveness of the innovation.

## Abstract

This paper presents innovative post-admission language support initiatives at a polytechnic college. These initiatives address the challenges faced by higher education institutions in English-speaking countries regarding the linguistic preparedness of students for academic study in English. The rising number of English as an Additional Language (EAL) students in post-secondary institutes in Canada has prompted some institutions to prioritize the development of academic language abilities. This paper presents how one Canadian polytechnic institute has taken an innovative approach to support EAL students through flexible, faculty-led academic language support services that aim to improve students' grades, increase their language confidence, and prepare them for the Canadian workforce.

## Introduction

Higher education institutions in English-speaking countries around the world are finding that many current English as an Additional Language (EAL) students are not linguistically prepared for the rigour of post-secondary studies in English (Fox et al., 2016; Read, 2015, 2016). These at-risk students, which include both domestic and international (Edwards et al., 2021), are defined by Read (2016) as “those who have significant academic language needs (to the extent that they are at risk of failure or not achieving their academic potential)” (p. 4). Regarding internationals, these students face unique challenges related to their social adjustment and academic studies, including the challenge of language difficulties that often require specialized support services. Moreover, lack of language proficiency can significantly increase academic stress as well as significantly decrease academic success (Lin et al., 2019; Martirosyan et al., 2019). For example, according to Chen (2021), first-year international students at the University of Queensland showed lower final grades (4.89 on a 7-point scale) compared to their domestic counterparts (5.47). Fass-Holmes and Vaughn (2014) showed that up to 62.7% of international students at an American university were required to take community college English classes before commencing undergraduate studies. The authors concluded that as the number of international

students rises, so will the number of those who struggle academically.

Therefore, to address the increasing numbers of EAL students who are struggling to meet learning outcomes, post-secondary institutions are prioritizing the development of these students' academic language ability to equip them for successful workforce participation (Arkoudis et al., 2012; Read, 2015). There is evidence for the effectiveness of language support interventions. A study conducted by Urmston et al. (2016) at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University showed significant improvements over one year for students who made effective use of available supports. In another example, an Australian university analyzed outcomes from 2017 to 2019 for students who attended academic language support sessions compared to those who did not attend. Across five courses from five different disciplines, it was found that the former group performed better in terms of retention, pass rate, and GPA. Over the three years, passing rates for attendees were on average 11.8% higher than for non-attendees (Ashton-Hay & Doncaster, 2021).

## Background

Beynen (2020) states that in Canada, "post-secondary classrooms have become culturally and linguistically diverse due to internationalization efforts and decades of immigration" (p. 23). The number of international students in Canadian colleges more than doubled from 60,318 in 2015 to 153,360 in 2020, and international students made up 19.3% of Canadian college enrolments in 2019/2020 (Statistics Canada, 2021). These colleges include STEM-focused polytechnic institutes, and cultural and linguistic diversity is especially true in STEM programs (Beynen, 2020).

The context for this paper is a Canadian polytechnic institute, where data for 2021 showed that 21% of full-time students did not speak English as their primary language (British Columbia Institute of Technology, 2021). The paper specifically focuses on the institute's most common type of program: short-cycle tertiary education (SCTE) programs, which usually feature hands-on one- to two-year certificates or diplomas (Skolnik, 2021). And significantly, as is typical in higher education, SCTE programs require all students to learn the epistemology, vocabulary, texts, sociocultural context, and communication conventions of a discipline, collectively known as academic literacy (Wingate, 2015).

This can create substantial demands for EAL learners, who need to become literate not only in academic content but also in a new language, and all of this within a short timeframe of one to two years. And despite having been accepted into their programs and being deemed language-ready according to entrance criteria, some EAL learners may indeed not reach their academic potential due to deficits in their academic language development, according to Read's previously mentioned definition. In fact, Daller et al. (2021) argue that standardized entrance tests such as IELTS and TOEFL "provide a good cut-off point below which students are at risk of failing their studies, but that they are not meant to predict actual study success (the marks the students get)" (p. 1503). Thus, for many students, post-admission academic language support is required for academic success. This paper will examine how one Canadian polytechnic institution has endeavoured to assist its EAL students by developing post-admission academic English language support, defined as "extra support with their English comprehension and/or expression following their admission" (Knoch & Elder, 2016, p. 211). Before examining the current supports that are in place (Innovation Section), it will be helpful to place them in their historical context.

In 1996, the English and Communication Learning Centre at the institute was closed, leaving students with a lack of language support services. The need for these services was reflected in investigations by the Communication Department in 2001 and 2005, which suggested that approximately 22% of diploma program students were not linguistically prepared for post-secondary studies in English. To address this challenge, in 2009, the department began to offer Language Support classes (LS classes) to assist EAL students who were failing their program-specific Communication classes, which themselves focus on technical and business communication, including email writing, short technical report writing, professional presentations, and teamwork. This LS class intervention was in line with the department's role as the English-language gatekeeper for the programs into which it taught. This intervention had some success, as internal reports from 2011, 2013, and 2014 showed that failure rates in Communication classes were reduced by 25% because of students' attendance in LS classes. In 2021, moreover, a comprehensive analysis of 1,200 students' grades showed that students who were recommended for these classes and attended them had Communication grades that were

6% higher than students who received a recommendation but did not attend (see Devos, Nizonkiza, & Lynch, in press).

For LS classes to be effective, there needed to be a consistent and reliable assessment for determining which students required these classes. However, since such an assessment was not in place at the institute when LS classes began in 2009, instructors offered self-made writing diagnostic assessments to identify potentially at-risk students. Then in 2018, a research project published by Devos (2019) led to the development of the English Screening Test for Polytechnics-Online (ESTP-O) (see also Innovation Section), a more centralized and standardized online post-admission assessment that used measures of vocabulary, grammar, and writing. By 2022, more than 20 programs had used the ESTP-O to help them identify and refer students to the LS classes.

In 2021, the Language Success Team (LST) was founded with external research and curriculum development funds. The funding allowed for the development, maintenance, and administration of the ESTP-O, and also for the development of additional, more flexible faculty-led language learning services to complement and augment the LS classes, which were not available to all students. At present, language support at the institute is offered through collaboration between the LST and the Communication department. The current supports will be described in Innovation Section.

Wingate (2018) strongly recommends that post-admission support program researchers share pertinent details, including the contributions of language specialists and discipline instructors. She notes that without such information, it is “difficult for institutions and individual practitioners to learn from these examples and develop similar approaches” (Wingate, 2018, p. 6). Thus, in the following sections we provide details of our approach to supporting EAL students in SCTE programs. Our key question was: *How could we provide effective research-based language support (including skills of reading, writing, listening, and speaking) that fits within the local context and that improves EAL students’ grades, increases their language confidence, and prepares them for success in the Canadian workplace?*

## Innovation

This section examines the following six language supports at the authors’ institute: (1) English Screening Test for

Polytechnics—Online (ESTP-O), (2) Language Support (LS), (3) 1-on-1 English Help, (4) English Conversation Group, (5) Online Language Learning Resources, (6) Job Application and Interview Online Course.

### English Screening Test for Polytechnics-Online (ESTP-O)

Given that some students are arriving in their programs without the academic literacy and language skills needed for academic success, many post-secondary institutes’ post-admission language support efforts are beginning with a post-entry language assessment (PELA) (for a review of PELAs internationally, see Devos, Nizonkiza, & Lynch, in press, or Read, 2015). PELAs are low-stakes language tests (Read, 2015) whose goal is to determine the language readiness of new students for post-secondary programs in English (Fox, von Randow, & Volkov, 2016). They often serve as the first step in an institution’s academic support efforts and are typically followed by language support based on a student’s needs (Read, 2015).

The English Screening Test for Polytechnics—Online (ESTP-O) is a PELA with a two-step screening and diagnostic procedure—similar to that found in the Diagnostic English Language Needs Assessment (DELNA) at the University of Auckland (Erlam & Botelho de Magalhães, 2021; Elder & Erlam, 2001). The ESTP-O is delivered before the term begins. All students in 14 programs<sup>1</sup> are asked to complete the ESTP-O regardless of language background and enrolment status, i.e., domestic or international. The purpose of the test is to identify and recommend students for non-credit LS classes that augment their Communication courses.

The ESTP-O is delivered online via the institution’s learning management system (LMS) and contains two main parts: firstly, an auto-graded screening, consisting of a short vocabulary and grammar test, and secondly, a diagnostic, which involves two short reading tasks as well as a writing task (i.e., a brief email response). The development and validation of the ESTP-O are explained in detail by Devos, Nizonkiza, & Lynch (in press) and Devos (in press). The writing diagnostic portion is read and marked by

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1 In 2022 and 2023, 14 programs, ranging from Accounting to Food Technology, participated in the ESTP-O and follow-up Language Support classes. Although this is a fraction of the institution’s programs, due to current language support resources, it is currently a reasonable and manageable amount.

Communication instructors, who then recommend possibly at-risk students to attend LS classes.

Since its regular use in 2021, about 20% of all ESTP-O test takers have been recommended to these classes for additional academic support. The role of the LST is to develop, administer, research, and report on the ESTP-O so that it remains a standardized, objective, and fair test for the test-takers (i.e., students) and test users (i.e., instructors).

## **Language Support (LS) Classes**

Students who are identified via the ESTP-O are recommended for LS classes. These are free, non-credit, discipline-specific classes that are offered weekly for one to two hours and taught by Communication faculty members with training and/or experience in teaching EAL. Classes function as an early intervention for EAL students to help them experience academic success early in their studies. Students are offered 12 to 15 hours of LS classes each term. Having these classes taught by faculty members as opposed to language specialists offers a closer integration with specific disciplines as the LS classes primarily offer support for students' program-specific Communication courses. Moreover, for the most part, the LS class instructors also teach the specific Communication classes for which the LS classes offer support. These small group classes offer students individual feedback on writing and speaking skills. Also, instructors have an opportunity in these classes to "triage" when a student's language skills fall far below expectations.

About 250 students from the 14 programs are recommended to LS classes each term, with about the same number attending. Not all attendees arrive at LS classes via ESTP-O, but rather some attend because of an instructor's recommendation or because they self-select to attend. Student feedback indicates that the classes are effective. In student feedback received from November 2021 to January 2023, 90% of the respondents felt the classes had a positive impact on their academic performance in their Communication courses and 70% felt the LS classes had a positive impact on their academic performance in classes other than Communication. In a post-term survey for the same period, 63 students responded to questions about their experience in LS classes. Some comments included:

*This class helped me a lot in COMM classes.*

*I was more confident writing texts and doing midterms.*

*It [LS class] has helped me with my presentation, my resume, and my cover letter, the instructor is very helpful.*

*By reviewing my work and giving recommendations to improve as well as breaking down some of the assignments to make them more clear.*

As previously mentioned, research by the LST shows that of those who were recommended for these classes, students who attended had better grades in their Communication courses than those who did not attend (Devos, Nizonkiza, & Lynch, in press). Thus, the role of the LST is to not only research the efficacy of these classes but also to collect and report on the utilization data of LS classes.

## **1-on-1 English Help**

The LST also coordinates and promotes 1-on-1 English Help at the institution. 1-on-1 English Help involves individual consultations with language advisors who are also Communication faculty members. These language advisors diagnose and advise learners, which may include offering additional feedback on assignments, providing additional learning resources, brainstorming topics or ideas for assignments, or working with students to revise grammar and writing in assignments. These 15-minute sessions are bookable through an online portal, and students can then meet with an advisor online or in person. Since LS classes are not available in all programs, and since students have very full and demanding schedules, 1-on-1 English Help offers them an opportunity to receive individual language skills feedback and advice.

In sum, these sessions provide an opportunity for students to discuss a language development plan, which can be motivating for them (Knoch et al., 2016). 1-on-1 English Help was piloted in the 2022/2023 terms and had 65 visits between September and May.

## **English Conversation Group**

The LST also coordinates, promotes, and reports on an informal peer conversation group. The English Conversation Group (formerly English Lounge) is available to all full- and part-time students. These weekly one-hour sessions allow participants to practise their speaking and listening skills on school and work-related topics. The faculty instructor often chooses a topic with the participants the week before and prepares questions and activities related to the topic. Reports from students suggest they appreciate the speaking



opportunities this group offers. One regular participant (a first-year civil engineering EAL student) stressed that his participation in the group led to getting a job offer:

*I got several job interviews in this term. Of course, my English is not perfect, but all interviewers – we had real communication. That's why I got a job offer. That's the best thing I got from English Lounge, is confidence speaking in English.*

Important for this peer conversation group is that participants get to have multiple turns to speak, as they often find themselves unable to take speaking turns in larger, fast-paced classroom situations. About five to ten students attend the English Conversation Group each week.

### Online English Exercises

The LST also developed a free, online language learning resource for all students. The Online English Exercises course is in the institution's LMS and offers support that includes self-access and self-paced learning materials. This resource was created by an EAL curriculum development specialist with input from Communication faculty instructors. It focuses on workplace communication skills, such as body language for professional presentations, writing for short reports, and vocabulary and grammar in technical and business contexts. The resources are interactive, and students learn from videos, audio clips, infographics, and learning activities.

Students self-register for the course through a simple, two-step process and earn shareable, digital awards and a non-credit certificate for completing self-selected modules. This individual and flexible e-learning affords learners more direction and agency over their learning (Boettcher & Conrad, 2016), and also allows students to interact with content in unique ways that are not provided in the classroom (Bell & Federman, 2013). Finally, the content applies principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) to make the materials relevant and accessible for all learners (Fovet, 2021; Novak, 2016).

The LST monitors and maintains this resource, as well as reports on its utilization to the institute through the number of students who self-register, receive digital awards, and complete module quizzes. Since August 2023, 573 students have self-registered for the resource, 45 digital badges have been awarded, and 162 quizzes completed.

### Job Application and Interview Online Course

From 2021 to 2023, the LST established partnerships with two local companies to help international students and students who were newcomers to Canada with their subject-specific job preparation and interview skills. These partnerships aimed to promote more hiring diversity and inclusion in companies while increasing EAL students' confidence for their first job interview experience. This service was made available to students in several different programs that had entry-level skills related to the companies involved. Students voluntarily participated in weekly, one-hour online mentoring sessions with one of the LST members to hone their personal brand, resumes, and cover letters. After eight weeks, students then had mock interviews with real hiring managers at one of the two companies.

Students shared their experiences via blog posts on the LST website. One student shared that they:

*learnt many things from these mock interviews, such as being ready for the unexpected, and trying to structure my answers before I talk. I think this is a very precious opportunity for a new graduate because the more he/she practises, the more confident he/she is.*

Another student shared some important personal development ideas after participating in the mock interview:

*After the interview, I noticed that giving personal examples to illustrate answers is really important in an interview. Thus, I came up with an idea to create a folder in my note-taking system to consistently note my experiences. I will name this folder "Who am I?" to list all my personalities, strengths, and weaknesses, and then frequently update my real-life situation to show each trait.*

In total, ten students have participated in the job application preparation and mock interview initiative.

### Discussion

Across Canada over the past 20 years, higher education institutions, which include polytechnics, have been turning to different forms of language support to help rising numbers of international and domestic EAL students meet the demands of post-secondary study in English and prepare them with workplace-ready communication skills. In this paper, we have outlined some innovative approaches to supporting EAL students at a polytechnic institute. Although

international or national variations of these supports exist, it is the direct faculty involvement and the establishment of the LST within the Communication Department that make the outlined approaches unique. Additionally, to the best of our knowledge, the development, administration, and research of a PELA at a college or institute in Canada is also novel.

The forms of support presented here are from one polytechnic's perspective, and although they are currently operational, the supports at this institution are also in development. Although short-term funding can spur language support initiatives, long-term institutional funding is required for research, personnel, curriculum development, and other resources to maintain and develop these forms of support on an ongoing basis. Without long-term funding, there is a risk that important language support services will not be sustainable. For example, the Job Application and Interview Online course (see Innovation Section) could not be maintained long-term and thus, students are currently missing an opportunity to prepare for job searches and have mock interviews with real hiring managers.

The newness and small size of the LST, and the wide diversity of program needs have led to the current support model being what Goldsmith and Hunter (2021) describe as "practice by practice" (p. 6), as opposed to an institution-wide model. The LST also works under the motto of what Kift (2015) considers "just in time, just-for-me tailored support" (p. 54). That is, it aims to offer flexible, multidimensional, and multimodal services that accommodate students' busy schedules and are available right at the moment when students need them.

## Impact

By presenting examples of post-entry language support as applied to a local polytechnic context, we hope to assist other institutes in examining which forms of academic language support can be developed within their own contexts. We recognize that every institution is unique and there is no set prescription for what type of forms will work best in any given context. However, it is valuable for institutes to share their experiences and update their language support as post-secondary realities evolve. Therefore, along with Wingate (2018), we put out a call for other academics to continue to report on their local experiences in developing language supports for their students.

## Conclusion

This paper has presented different forms of post-admission language supports and their unique application at one Canadian polytechnic institute. Our key question was: *How could we provide effective research-based language support (including skills of reading, writing, listening, and speaking) that fits within the local context and that improves EAL students' grades, increases their language confidence, and prepares them for success in the Canadian workplace?* Although the answer to this question will be ongoing, several unique language support features emerged that provide a foundation for future support work in our particular context. Key among these features is the direct involvement of faculty, program by program support, and flexibility that allows for just in time tailored student support. Through reporting on our context-specific experiences, institutions can assist one another with the important goal of helping EAL students thrive in both their post-secondary programs and in their future workplaces.

## Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that no conflict of interest or monetary interest exists.

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## Note on Contributors

**David H. Brooks**, M.Ed., M.A.

[dhb.brooks@gmail.com](mailto:dhb.brooks@gmail.com)

David has 20 years of experience as an instructor of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) at the post-secondary level, and has taught in Canada, Japan, and Qatar. In addition, he has extensive experience in curriculum and course development, including the creation of two online MOOC courses. He has worked as an EAP instructor, curriculum

and course designer, and language support project assistant with the British Columbia Institute of Technology since 2015.

**Nathan J. Devos**, M.Ed., Ph.D.

[ndevos1@bcit.ca](mailto:ndevos1@bcit.ca)

Nathan has researched and published about post-admission support since 2018. In 2021, he founded the Language Success Team to develop and support post-admission supports for English as an Additional Language (EAL) students in diploma programs. He has also taught second language acquisition and content and integrated learning in Germany as well as business and technical communication in Canada.

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