



English Language Learners (ELL) Undergraduate Program Development at OCAD University

Needs Assessment Summary and Recommendations

Report at a Glance



Introduction

(page 3)*

OCAD University’s student body is becoming even more linguistically and culturally diverse. It is vital for the institution to actively foster an environment that respects diverse ways of knowing and provides students with language-learning support and resources that enable them to succeed academically and contribute to their critical and creative communities. *English Language Learners (ELL) Undergraduate Program Development at OCAD University: Needs Assessment Summary and Recommendations* documents the current status of OCAD U’s English Language Learner (ELL) student support and makes recommendations for future resource development at the undergraduate level.

English Language Learners at OCAD University

(pages 3–6)

As of 2014, an estimated 22% of OCAD U students need explicit support with language-learning. Such students come from a variety of educational and sociocultural backgrounds and may self-identify different language-learning needs and challenges. Effective language-learning support must accommodate the linguistic and educational diversity of the student population by providing an array of support types in a variety of formats, as well as multiple opportunities to access them.

Who Are Language Learners?

Recently arrived non-native English Speakers (0–4 years of education in Canada)

- May have completed a significant amount of education in their own country
- May struggle with oral comprehension and cultural adaptation, socially and academically
- May have strong academic skills in their first language that can transfer into their new linguistic and academic contexts

Recently arrived World English Speakers (0–4 years of education in Canada)

- May identify as native English speakers
- May be fully fluent and linguistically proficient
- May face linguistic, cultural, and academic challenges as varieties of World English differ from North American varieties, as do disciplinary and academic conventions

Generation 1.5 (5–8 years of education in Canada)

- May be conversationally fluent and culturally Canadian
- May struggle with study skills, reading, and writing at a post-secondary level

Native English Speakers (not included in the 22%)

- May struggle with reading and writing at a post-secondary level, disciplinary and academic vocabulary and conventions

* Page numbers indicate where this information can be found in the full version of the report.

Current ELL Resources and Supports at OCAD University

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A review of current ELL resources and supports at OCAD U revealed that the majority are concentrated within first year and serve relatively small numbers of students. While the co-curricular support offered through the Writing & Learning Centre (WLC) spans all four years, ELL students have no curricular opportunities to develop their disciplinary language skills beyond first year. Yet curricular support is of particular importance at the university level—and especially vital given the disciplinary diversity of art and design education—since language learning is most effective when grounded in the context within which the learner must use the language.

Models for ELL Program Development

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Established curricular support models (sheltered and adjunct) can be adapted to serve the OCAD U context by having a language specialist work closely with content-specialist faculty to ensure language support is tailored to the disciplinary context, enable faculty to develop an inclusive pedagogy, and provide ELL students with opportunities to develop their language skills with native-English-speaking (NES) peers. Opportunities for discipline-specific sheltered support at the first-year level (where it has the most benefit) can also be explored, where appropriate for the program context and the needs of its students

Prior to First Year

Non-credit

English for Art & Design

1st Year

Curricular

Essay & Argument (ESL)
 English Language Pathway

Co-Curricular

Writing & Learning Centre (WLC)

2nd Year

Co-Curricular

Writing & Learning Centre (WLC)

3rd Year

Co-Curricular

Writing & Learning Centre (WLC)

4th Year

Co-Curricular

Writing & Learning Centre (WLC)

Needs Assessment

(pages 12–17)

A needs assessment, conducted to ascertain student and faculty perceptions of the current discipline-specific communication needs of ELL students underscored the importance of systematic curricular language-learning support at all year levels; identified specific linguistic and disciplinary challenges; and suggested directions for refining and/or developing non-credit, co-curricular, and curricular programming, as well as faculty professional-learning opportunities.

Interviews with faculty revealed several shared areas of concern at all year levels:

- *the acquisition and use of disciplinary and theoretical vocabulary;*
- *participation in critique and interactive classroom activities;*
- *listening and reading comprehension; and*
- *writing skills.*

Faculty also expressed concern about the ways in which differing approaches to creative pedagogy and assumptions about creativity impact the experience of ELL students in studio classrooms. Many faculty also requested more professional learning activities about supporting ELLs in the classroom, assessing their written and visual work and developing inclusive pedagogy, particularly within program-specific contexts.

A student survey revealed that the majority of students perceived themselves as quite/very proficient with many skills faculty had identified as areas of concern. Students and faculty may have divergent understandings of what constitutes proficiency. However, survey data in conjunction with previously existing data sources from OCAD U suggest ELL students report difficulty with:

- *expectations around autonomous learning;*
- *acquiring and applying disciplinary and technical vocabulary;*
- *engaging in various forms of active participation in the classroom;*
- *post-secondary level reading and writing.*

ELL students expressed a need for explicit support of vocabulary acquisition in the classroom and more curricular and co-curricular resources; they also suggested providing additional resources to faculty about facilitating an inclusive teaching environment.

Student Voices

"It is difficult to understand the course content where there are a lot of new terms introduced."

"Define some technical words that may not be so obvious to non-english native speakers..."

"I appreciate the help that WLC provided and I'm glad it actually exists in the school, the only thing is there is not much extra time to seek for help sometimes . . . I know it sounds ridiculous and we're suppose to improve the English level by self... I want and wish to learn better."

"I think instructors should have training on how to treat students who speak other languages. Sometimes profs embarrass students in front of everyone and this is uncomfortable to witness."

Overview: Recommendations

The following recommendations articulate a vision for fostering a university culture that recognizes and respects culturally and linguistically diverse students and for creating a learning environment that enables ELLs to attain the linguistic proficiency necessary for their academic success. They suggest a strategy that builds on existing structures, where available, engages an array of support types, and provides multiple ways of accessing this support to ensure it effectively and systematically serves the diverse needs of OCAD U's language learners throughout their time at university. Finally, while the recommendations focus explicitly on language support at the undergraduate level, the strategies they articulate are also relevant for graduate language support, adjusted appropriately for that context.

Guiding Principles

The recommendations are grounded in best practices in post-secondary language-teaching and the understanding of OCAD U's unique context gathered through the needs assessment. They are guided by the following principles:

- language-learning happens over time; students continue to develop their skills throughout their university education, not just in first year;
- language support should address the range of communication needs (reading, writing, listening, and speaking) necessary for success at OCAD U;
- language support should address needs of ELL students at all levels of language proficiency;
- language skills are context and discipline specific and are best learned in that context.

Recommendations

(pages 17–20)

In summary, the recommendations are as follows (for a full version, see Section 9, page 18):

1. In keeping with OCAD University's commitment to inclusivity and diversity, ensure that cultural and linguistic diversity is recognized and valued within the university community.
2. Build support for the cultural and linguistic diversity of English Language Learners in academic and curricular planning.
3. Continue to integrate support for English Language Learners throughout the implementation of Writing Across the Curriculum.
4. Redevelop the current program model of the first-year English Language Pathway program to enable more students to access discipline-specific sheltered support at the first-and second-year levels, as appropriate to ELL student needs and program context.
5. Create opportunities for faculty dialogue and professional learning to support English Language Learners.
6. Develop discipline-specific WLC programming that supports the acquisition of disciplinary vocabulary, critical reading skills and oral proficiency.
7. Review and redevelop current post-admission and non-credit supports for English Language Learners; explore opportunities to expand programming.
8. Review and reassess language proficiency requirement policies and pathways to admission.

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