

Improving Academic Literacy for EAP Students at the Postsecondary Level: A Literature Review

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Abstract: English Language Learners (ELLs) encounter many difficulties in regards to academic literacy (reading and writing) at the postsecondary level. Strategies such as close reading, extensive reading, information literacy workshops, learning communities, and vocabulary work to effectively improve the academic literacy skills of ELLs.

English Language Learners (ELLs) face many challenges in academic settings. It takes ELLs five to seven years to fully develop the vocabulary and literacy skills necessary for success in academic disciplines. This is true for any ELL student, regardless of age, but adult ELLs studying English for Academic Purposes (EAP) at the post-secondary level have an even harder time. They need to be able to read, decontextualize, analyze, write about, and apply critical thinking strategies to multiple sources across various disciplines; they need to possess academic literacy skills. In order to help improve academic literacy for EAP students at the postsecondary level, accurate definitions of academic literacy and EAP students must be established, the needs and challenges of EAP students must be understood, and effective strategies specifically for EAP students must be addressed. First, the definitions of academic literacy and EAP students will be discussed. Then, their specific needs and challenges they face will be addressed. Finally, specific strategies for improving the academic literacy of EAP students at the postsecondary level will be presented.

Definition of Academic Literacy

Carrell and Carson (1997) reported that in regards to postsecondary educational settings for EAP students, there was no one set definition of academic literacy. The differences between academic and nonacademic activities were recognized, but what was considered “academic” was not defined. Instead, there were various academic literacies: different reading and writing activities determined by specific disciplines, instructors, and class settings and dynamics (Carrell & Carson, 1997). Thus, it seems that any reading and/or writing activity assigned in a post-secondary classroom for an academic purpose would be considered an academic literacy. EAP students will encounter numerous integrated reading and writing activities (academic literacies) as they progress through their post-secondary classroom experiences.

Curry (2004) provided a more specific definition. She explained that academic literacy involves “specialized practices of academic reading, writing, and speaking that characterize college-level communication” (Curry, 2004, p. 51). These practices helped ELL students develop a particular schema for specific academic disciplines and in order to develop academic literacy, ELLs needed to do more than just learn how to speak, read, or write in the target language. They must know how to engage with and balance various academic discourses. Without abilities in academic literacies, ELLs will have problems passing “gate-keeping examinations, are at a greater risk of dropping out, and face other educational challenges” (Curry, 2004, p. 52).

Mahoney (2003) defined academic literacy as “learning to read, write, and speak the

language of the academy [college/university]" (p. 685). In other words, academic literacy is the ability to read, write, speak, and understand language used in academic, postsecondary settings; it is the use of written and spoken language necessary for success in academics.

Definition of EAP Students

Whether referred to as ELL, EAP, or ESL (English as a Second Language) students, for the purposes of this literature review, these terms are used interchangeably. The authors used a different term but all agreed that they are college students who are nonnative speakers of English. Additionally, these students are all from different parts of the world. EAP students may be international students studying in their host country on a temporary visa, recent immigrants or the children of immigrants, or students learning the language of their colonizers while remaining in their native homeland.

Badke (2002) discussed international students studying in the United States or in other countries on student visas. This was an ever-growing population of students (both undergraduate and graduate) who need support in developing their academic literacy skills. Over half (54%) of all international students were from Asia, 15% were from Europe, and the remaining 31% came from other parts of the world. Although Badke (2002) did not classify international students as ESLs or ELLs, they technically were because they were still learning the academic usage of the English language.

Bealle, Cash-McConnell, and Garcia (2008) used the term ESL to refer to students for whom English was a second language and who were attending an EAP program at Suffolk County Community College (in Selden, New York). A portion of the ESL students were recent immigrants to the United States and received a college degree or attended some college courses in their native countries. These students had social language skills on par with native speakers were placed in developmental courses because they had not acquired academic language skills. Some of the students took ESL courses in high school, and others took English language courses in other educational settings. Additionally, their purposes for taking EAP classes were different.

Chimbganda (2011) described the ESL students at the University of Botswana as native speakers of the African languages Setswana and Kalanga. They were all first-year college students, they studied English as a second language for 10 to 12 years in their native schools, and they received a mean grade of C on their high school English language public examination. Despite having studied English in primary and secondary school, most of these students came from schools with poor resources and were lacking the academic literacy skills necessary for success at the post-secondary level.

Curry (2004) addressed both first-generation and 1.5 or second-generation ELLs. The first-generation ELLs were foreign born, middle-aged, migrated adults, and were seeking post-secondary education at community colleges. They were not looking to assimilate into American culture but were only seeking to improve their employment and economic status. In contrast, the 1.5 or second-generation ELLs migrated as young children or were born in the United States, have learned English as a second language in K-12 schooling, were more assimilated, and were entering college straight out of high school.

Unlike the articles by Bealle et al. (2008), Chimbganda (2011), and Curry (2004), Maloney (2003) reported on so-called "at-risk," first-year college students. However, many of these students were ESLs. They were 1.5 or second-generation immigrants, and they spoke English as their second or third language. They were included with "at-risk" students because of their educational and economic disadvantages, and were commonly "the best graduates of New

York City's worst public high schools" (Maloney, 2003, p. 665).

Needs and Challenges of EAP Students

Regardless of their immigration status, educational backgrounds, and aspirations, the needs of all ESL/EAP students are the same; they all need improvement with their academic literacy. As stated in the previous section, the term academic literacy is multi-faceted, so EAP students' specific needs with different aspects of academic literacy will be varied. The articles by Badke (2002), Bealle et al. (2008), Chimbganda (2011), Curry (2004), Hartwig (2015), and Marsh (2015) addressed these various needs.

Badke (2002) equated international students' needs for information literacy with academic literacy together. International students' needs in academic literacy arose from their limited English proficiency, unfamiliarity with technology and the North American/European library system, and their attitudes and tendency toward plagiarism which are quite different based on culture. When it came to asking for help or looking for answers, international students lacked the academic vocabulary and discourse to speak with their professors and feared being seen as ignorant. Thus, they struggled when it came to asking questions and conducting research. Another difficulty they faced was the overwhelming amount of resources available in their libraries. International students may only have had access to libraries with limited resources and "restrictive regulation on library use" (Badke, 2002, p. 61). Lastly, educational philosophies differed in their attitudes towards authority, and this created a conflict for them. North Americans/Europeans viewed information as a tool, not as a goal, that was meant to be analyzed and critiqued. However, some cultures viewed knowledge as an "informational heritage" (Badke, 2002, p. 62) that was to be honored and not questioned. To them, information was the goal and was meant to be passed on, so many international students misunderstood the concept of plagiarism and unintentionally plagiarized. They believed they were to simply pass on the information they learned through a more descriptive style of writing than rather than a persuasive one.

Bealle et al. (2008) also noted ESL students' struggles with academic vocabulary, research skills, and public speaking and presentation skills. They suggested that ELLs need explicit instruction on conducting academic research, using MLA-style citations, identifying main points, and making connections between multiple texts.

In order to determine the needs of ESL students at the University of Botswana, Chimbganda (2011) conducted a study in which he asked students what they felt their needs were and assessed their writing samples. The results of the students' surveys showed that they thought they needed to improve in their writing, reading, and speaking skills. Specifically, they felt they needed improvement with using sources, making connections, grammar, and writing style. When the students' essays were analyzed, their difficulties in organizing ideas and grammar structure were revealed, and the results were on target with what the ESL students felt their needs were.

It is obvious that EAP students need help with their academic writing, but Curry (2004) stressed that they needed to learn how to write across multiple disciplines in order to improve their academic literacy. She stated that students in EAP and developmental courses were encouraged to take a personal approach to writing and relate topics to themselves; however, this style of writing stifled their academic literacy development. She wrote that "while appropriate personal subjects can serve as a useful starting point, if assignments do not support the practices

and genres of the disciplines, ELLs will be underprepared for academic writing in disciplinary courses” (Curry, 2004, p. 55). In other words, personalized writing would not help students know how to structure and word papers for a science class, history class, or another content area class. Students would not be able to communicate what they knew and what they were learning in their academic courses and would perform poorly on their written assignments as a result.

Hartwig (2015) also noted that first-year students were underprepared for college curriculum, particularly in regards to freshman composition. They entered college “with little knowledge of research or citation” (Hartwig, 2015, p. 39), especially in knowing that paraphrasing requires citations. This led to students unintentionally plagiarizing; most of their issues with plagiarism derived from their “lack of knowledge and skill rather than intentional subterfuge” (Hartwig, 2015, p. 38). Thus, students needed explicit instruction on how to use and when to cite references. Although Hartwig (2015) was not writing about EAP students, his observations about the needs of first-year college students also hold true for EAP students since many first-year students are at-risk English as a Second Language Learners (ESLLs) as reported by Curry (2004).

Another reason for plagiarism is the lack of connections students make between reading and writing. Many at-risk and ESLL first-year composition students do not know how to critique and cite evidence from their reading to support thesis statements in their writing. They may only know how to summarize or paraphrase and do not know how to isolate text for only relevant information. Marsh (2015) explained that successful students knew how to select relevant sources, how to make connections between multiple sources and how to incorporate sources into their own writing. Thus, at-risk and ESLL students do not fit into the profile of successful students because they lack these academic literacy skills.

Lei, Berger, Allen, Plummer, and Rosenberg (2010) addressed another area of concern for the academic literacy skills of ELLs: vocabulary. Limited vocabulary knowledge, particularly in academic, discipline-specific vocabulary, stifles the reading comprehension of EAP students in content areas. Lei et al. (2010) explained that while many ELLs had fluent Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS), they struggled with Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP), and postsecondary instructors must somehow fill the gap.

Strategies for Improving Academic Literacy in EAP Students

There are a number of strategies to help EAP students improve their academic literacy skills. These strategies mainly focus on integrating reading and writing together, and a few of them work on these skills in isolation. These strategies include close reading, extensive reading, information literacy workshops, learning communities, and vocabulary.

Close Reading

Close reading is a strategy that helps students see connections between reading and writing, and see how what is read can be incorporated into writing assignments. In a survey given to first-year composition instructors, many responded that “‘close reading develops the skills to analyze and critically think’; reading ‘encourages students to develop their own ideas’ and ‘prove their point of view—WITH EVIDENCE’” (Marsh, 2015, p. 63), which is what students do when connecting their reading to their written assignments. When using a close reading strategy, students are able to “replicate” the text structure of what they read into what they write (Marsh, 2015, p. 63). Furthermore, close “reading ‘prompts one to write and that writing helps one understand and analyze what one reads’” (Marsh, 2015, p. 63).

A close reading strategy involves students annotating and taking notes on what they read

(while reading) in order to make connections between the text and oneself, the text and other texts, and the text and the outside world; it involves an interactive approach to reading (Marsh, 2015). Annotation and notetaking are essential to close reading because they help to move “students beyond superficial understandings of both texts and the issues raised in texts” (Marsh, 2015, p. 64). These effective reading strategies are then transferred to effective writing strategies as students examine and elaborate on the issues in the texts and model the structure of the texts they read in their own writing (Marsh, 2015).

Unlike Marsh (2015), Maloney (2003) provided an overview of how to model close reading strategies for students. This included how to read critically, annotate text, generate questions based on annotations, and summarize. She described how she took a thematic approach to her composition classes while pairing fiction with non-fiction texts and taught students “to take active control of their learning through the instructional strategy of critical inquiry” (Maloney, 2003, p. 667), which included close reading. Maloney (2003) explained that “critical inquiry refers to a set of active reading techniques that compel students, particularly those academically at risk, to preview texts, take layers of notes from those texts, and to formulate questions from their notes” (p. 667), which they accomplished through multiple readings of the same text. During the first reading, students were explicitly taught (through scaffolding) how to skim in order to create familiarity with the text and then make their first annotations. They were instructed on which details to take note of (like plot features, main events, and confusing passages) and then they shared their annotations with one another. In the second reading, students were asked to look at the language for patterns, symbols, vocabulary (both familiar and unfamiliar), connections to other texts, and other literary elements, and for items of importance or interest. Annotations made during the second reading were then structured into questions for discussion and comparison to other works. Maloney (2003) argued that “by transforming the text in their annotations, students read with purpose and take ownership of comprehension” (p. 668). It was left up to the students how they wanted to annotate text; highlighting, underlining, bracketing, circling, drawing lines and arrows, numbering, and writing in the margins were all encouraged. If students could not write in their books, they also had the option of using Post-It notes. Questions based on these annotations were used “as guidelines for thinking about text” (Maloney, 2003, p. 668) and were related back into class discussions, written assignments, and assessments. In a follow-up activity (using narratives), students were explicitly taught how to summarize text, which they did working in small groups or working alone, following a four-step procedure. First, they listed events and then grouped those events into different episodes. These episodes were written in sentence form and were finally expanded into paragraphs. The summaries were then graded and could be rewritten for a better grade. Maloney (2003) concluded that through this approach “what may have been difficult at first becomes recognizable and solvable” (p. 669).

Extensive Reading

Close reading alone will not improve the academic literacy skills of EAP students. Not every text read can or will be closely read; reading multiple texts for multiple purposes, especially when done for personal enjoyment, can be beneficial. Carrell and Carson (1997) and Lei et al. (2010) elaborated on this.

Carrell and Carson (1997) stated that extensive reading involves rapidly reading large quantities of text for general understanding. The focus of the reading assignment is on seeking information or for entertainment, rather than in-depth analysis of the text. The benefits of this

kind of reading include increased enjoyment, improved automatic word recognition, enlarged vocabulary, built up background knowledge, sharpened comprehension, and cultivated motivation for continued reading on one's own (Carrell & Carson, 1997).

Lei et al. (2010) added that motivation is essential for “gaining a positive attitude toward reading” and that “reading attitude is an integral part of the development and use of lifelong reading skills” (p. 93). Extensive reading helps to encourage this motivation as well as to increase ELL students' reading fluency, vocabulary knowledge, spelling, grammar, and writing development. However, “extensive reading can only occur where there are 95% to 98% of the runnings [sic] words in the text are already familiar to ELL students” (Lei et al., 2010, p. 99), and teachers should allow class time for discussion and questions about what students read during extensive reading.

Information Literacy Workshops

In order to find literature to annotate and read extensively, EAP students need to know where and how to find accurate, credible information. However, many of them are quickly overwhelmed by the vast amounts of information online, in libraries, and in academic databases. They lack skills in knowing how to conduct specific keyword searches, to evaluate sources for relevance and bias, and to cite sources to be used as evidence in their academic writing. Badke (2002), Bealle et al. (2008), and Hartwig (2015) proposed information literacy workshops for teaching students these skills.

As stated previously, Badke (2002) related that many ELLs were unfamiliar with North American/European library systems and may have had a different understanding of what “knowledge” is. Thus, they often ended up plagiarizing unintentionally. In order to overcome these challenges, Badke (2002) suggested that librarians conduct training sessions on formulating keywords for searches and on how to navigate online databases such as LexisNexis. He added that ELLs also needed an introduction to North American/European academic culture in which the expectation is for students to question, criticize, and analyze sources. When students do this in written form, they need explicit instruction from their instructors on different citation styles and models of persuasive, rather than descriptive, writing (Badke, 2002).

Bealle et al. (2008) described specific information literacy workshops that they used in their ESL classes. They explained that they “developed a learning environment that requires students to: analyze and evaluate resources, explore the ‘learning resources in their technological and traditional environments;’ and create learning communities so students can engage with each other, [and] their professor” (as cited in Bealle et al., 2008, p. 56). In their first workshop, Bealle et al. (2008) introduced students to academic databases, but focused on databases with factual information such as almanacs and the U.S. Census Bureau. In the second workshop, students were directed to sources with more statistical information, and the authors described teaching how to evaluate and categorize information from such sources. During the third workshop, students learned how to evaluate websites for “authority and currency of the information” (Bealle et al., 2008, p. 57) and how to cite according to MLA guidelines.

Unfamiliarity with citation guidelines often leads to students unintentionally plagiarizing. To combat this tendency, Hartwig (2015) stated that students need workshops on conducting research and citing sources. A strategy known as patchwriting can be particularly effective for teaching these skills. Patchwriting refers to copying text while making slight changes such as a deleting or adding words and punctuation marks. However, patchwriting is only the first step in the learning process. To help students graduate past patchwriting, students need assistance in

synthesizing text for use in their writing. Librarians can assist by leading workshops on avoiding plagiarism, MLA and APA citations, and close reading (Hartwig, 2015).

Learning Communities

During the information literacy workshops designed by Bealle et al. (2008), students were grouped into learning communities. As students conducted research they “work together to sort through information, prioritize key points, and make connections in their research” (Bealle et al., 2008, p. 57). EAP students discussed their findings with one another and their instructor. In the learning community set-up, dialogue with open-ended question was encouraged.

Curry (2004) explained that learning communities are intentionally restructured to encourage active engagement between students and faculty over long periods of time. Learning communities can exist in any configuration but are most commonly made up of two to three linked classes with the same cohort of students. These communities are linked together by theme or discipline and prove to be more academically successful for students in the communities when compared to students not participating in them. Furthermore, when linked by discipline, learning communities improve the academic literacy skills of ELLs by “deepening [their] understanding of content” (Curry, 2004, p. 63).

Kasper and Weiss (2005) also linked ESL classes by content. They found that linking classes thematically in learning communities improved students’ English language skills, expanded students’ knowledge base, and developed students’ analytical and critical thinking skills. In their courses, students conducted discipline-based research for their semester projects; these disciplines came from ten content areas in the course textbook. Students arranged the ten different groups by disciplines. In their respective groups, students researched and wrote individually but came together to discuss and clarify their readings and to critique each other’s writing. Kasper and Weiss (2005) stated that they meet with their students separately, at first, in order to model and scaffold information and academic literacy skills. Kasper’s class was blended and utilized computer technology while Weiss’ class was face-to-face and used traditional, paper-based articles. Later on in the semester, both classes met together several times for students to work with their groups. Kasper and Weiss (2005) have found “that the peer group provides a comfortable context in which students feel freer and more able to express their ideas on complex issues” (p. 285).

Vocabulary

EAP students are unable to analyze what they read if they do not understand the words they are reading. Lei et al. (2010) devised strategies for improving the academic vocabulary skills of ELLs. They suggested that extensive reading was an effective way of increasing knowledge. In order to build their vocabulary as they read, Lei et al. (2010) recommended that ELLs be trained on how to use dictionaries and to keep vocabulary notebooks and word cards for new words they encounter as they read.

Conclusion and Recommendations for Further Study

The strategies and issues mentioned in these ten articles are not complete by any means. Academic literacy involves both reading and writing, so strategies are needed for both. The articles only mention a few strategies for improving reading but hardly mention any for writing. Furthermore, instructors may have a hard time implementing the suggested strategies in their own classes. Descriptions of the strategies were primarily given, and only a few explained exactly how the strategies were used in relation to curricula. EAP instructors unfamiliar with these strategies (particularly reading strategies like close reading), or those looking for directions

on how to use the strategies, may struggle with developing lesson plans of their own. They will be required to research the strategies and to develop their own activities and lessons based the strategies. However, the needs of EAP students discussed here provide a thorough guide for instructors.

Since strategies for academic writing were not discussed much, this would be a necessary area for further study. Strategies such as a writing workshop approach, using outlines and graphic organizers (for both reading and writing), analyzing different text structures and genres (also for both reading and writing), exploring purposes for writing and the writing process, and implementing peer evaluation would all serve as topics for further exploration.

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