

From EAP to ESP: Curriculum Redesign for IENs' L2 Literacy

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This article describes the process whereby MacEwan University modified an existing EAP course, consisting of broad reading and writing topics, into an ESP course with a more targeted focus on relevant nursing-related themes to better serve the unique literacy needs of internationally educated nurses (IENs). Differing from the existing EAP course, the newly devised ESP course drew on authentic, nursing-specific content provided by IENs themselves with a view toward tailoring the course to their academic and discipline-specific language and literacy needs. The new ESP course, piloted over two terms, was found to have strengthened student outcomes in their L2 literacy, while their disciplinary knowledge contributions also enriched the curriculum. These modifications also assisted in the identification of similarities and differences between EAP and ESP for the institution. In this article, we describe the modification and implementation of this newly devised ESP course, which drew on learner input—a “negotiated syllabus.” We also provide recommendations regarding determining and designing appropriate language pathways (EAP versus ESP course offering) to respond to the language and literacy needs of diverse student groups in the Canadian context.

Cet article décrit le processus de modification d'un cours existant d'anglais sur objectifs académiques (AOA) à MacEwan University, passant d'un cours abondant des thématiques larges de lecture et d'écriture à un cours d'anglais sur objectifs spécifiques (AOS) qui met l'accent sur des thèmes pertinents en soins infirmiers afin de mieux soutenir les besoins uniques de littératie des infirmières formées à l'international (IFI). Par contraste au cours d'AOA existant, le nouveau cours AOS s'est appuyé sur des contenus authentiques, spécifiques au contexte des soins infirmiers, fournis par les IFI elles-mêmes avec l'objectif d'adapter le cours à leurs besoins académiques ainsi que leurs besoins en matière de littératie et de langage spécifique à leur discipline. Le pilotage du nouveau cours AOS pendant deux sessions a permis de constater que les résultats en littératie de la langue seconde se sont améliorés et que la contribution en connaissances disciplinaires des IFI a enrichi le programme. Ces modifications ont aussi permis à l'institution de relever des similarités et différences entre les programmes d'AOA et d'AOS. Dans cet article, nous décrivons la modification et l'implantation de ce nouveau cours d'AOS qui s'est basé sur l'input des apprenants et qui constitue donc un « programme négocié. » Nous faisons également des recommandations quant à la détermination et l'élaboration des parcours linguistiques appropriés (l'offre de cours AOA versus AOS) afin de répondre aux besoins langagiers et de littératie des groupes d'étudiants diversifiés dans le contexte canadien.

Keywords: course design, English for academic purposes, English for specific purposes, internationally educated nurses, language pathways, L2 literacy

Canada remains a prime destination for internationally educated nurses (IENs) (Cornelissen, 2021; Covell et al., 2017). Trained abroad, IENs are typically practicing professionals in their respective countries before joining the global migration of healthcare personnel (Jeffreys, 2016; Lum et al., 2016). IENs' departures from their home countries can be driven by personal reasons including a desire to gain new skills, economic motives such as more favourable employment opportunities, or seeking a different political milieu (Higginbottom, 2011; Russell et al., 2010; Salami et al., 2018). Ample literature exists emphasizing the acculturation difficulties of IENs, ranging from settlement issues (Khanal & Gaulee, 2019; Lin, 2014), journeys toward certification (e.g., Alexis & Shillingford, 2015; Neiterman & Bourgeault, 2013), and professional experiences in the workplace (Salami et al., 2018; Thompson & Walton-Roberts, 2019) to potential attrition (Pressley et al., 2022). However, there is little available literature about the linguistic challenges and experiences of IENs beyond barriers to oral communication (see Carter et al., 2013; Lum et al., 2014, 2016). To the authors' knowledge, IENs' L2 literacy challenges and their experiences in bridging programs (EAP and ESP courses) remain largely unexplored (Saville-Troike, 2012; Schmitt and Hamp-Lyons, 2015; Walková & Bradford, 2022), as do other related areas in curriculum design, including the impact of learner input in a "negotiated syllabus" (Breen & Littlejohn, 2000; Prior, 2020). This can be in part due to ongoing debates over definitions and delineations between EAP and ESP (e.g., Flowerdew, 2016).

Arguably, developing literacy skills in an additional language (L2, henceforth) can be especially challenging due to its complexity and labour-intensive nature (Cheng, 2004). For instance, multifaceted knowledge of L2 vocabulary and grammar and a persuasive voice are required (Douglas et al., 2022; Fithriani, 2018; Hyland, 2018; Zhou et al., 2022), with the compounded stressors of unfamiliar topics and timed assessments (Cheng, 2004). L2 literacy can also induce considerable anxiety for learners, significantly impacting their sense of confidence and progress (Cheng, 2004), particularly as it "performs an important gate-keeping role ... leading to [either] success ... [or] failure in the academy" (Flowerdew, 2016, p. 6).

In the Canadian context, IENs need to demonstrate language proficiency as part of their requirements for credentialing and professional certification, leading many IENs to enroll in postsecondary bridging programs such as English for Academic Purposes (EAP) or English for Specific Purposes (ESP) to obtain provincial certification to facilitate Canadian employment (Canadian Nurses Association, 2023). IENs must also enhance their English proficiency levels (Lum et al., 2016) as a mandatory requirement in the transition from post-arrival to working professionals (College of Registered Nurses of Alberta, 2022), and one potential obstacle to IENs' attainment of L2 literacy skills may be the type of content they receive (Bosher, 2006, 2010). The initiative described in this article, made possible by an internal grant at a western Canadian institution, describes the process of modifying an existing EAP course into an ESP offering, where the curriculum content and assessments were tailored towards the literacy needs of IENs in order to capitalize on their existing knowledge in nursing. It is worth noting that the term "L2 literacy" is used in this article as a general term to refer to L2 reading and writing. The two questions explored in this article are as follows:

1. Why was an EAP course inadequate for IENs' L2 literacy development?
2. How can institutions best decide whether to offer EAP or ESP language pathway programs?

EAP versus ESP: The Ongoing Debate

Before delving into the similarities and differences between and within EAP and ESP, it is important to note that there can be great confusion over their definitions. For instance, some may view both EAP and ESP as similar, if not synonymous, constructs, whereas others perceive them to be inherently different (Hopkins & Stephens, 2020). EAP can also be seen as a subsidiary, under the broader umbrella of ESP (Anthony, 2020; Hopkins & Stephens, 2020), while some propose the opposite approach (Walková & Bradford, 2022); the possibility of program hybridity between both constructs is also an option (Flowerdew, 2016). Despite varying perspectives, the overall consensus between practitioners and researchers seems to be that these programs do differ in their overarching aim and scope (Chang, 2017).

Adding to the definition difficulties are the multiplicity of subcategories, titles, and associated initialisms. For instance, EAP can also be known as English for General Academic Purposes (EGAP) and ESP as English for Specific Academic Purposes (ESAP) (Walková & Bradford, 2022). Other subcategories identified by Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998) include English for Business Purposes (EBP), English for Legal Purposes (ELP), English for Medical Purposes (EMP), and English for Science and Technology (EST). Robinson (1991) introduced English for Occupational Purposes (EOP), and there also exist English for Vocational Purposes (EVP) (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987) and English for Professional Purposes (EPP). Additional subtypes include English for Academic Legal Purposes (EALP), English for Hotel Management (EHM), Survival English for Immigrants (SEI), and English for Research and Publication Purposes (ERPP) (Hyland, 2022). This “‘jungle of jargon’ [can increase the struggle to] identify which course of action to follow” (Li & Wang, 2016, p. 10). Table 1 summarizes some of the identified subtypes of English language training pathways.

Table 1
Subtypes of English Language Training Pathways with Initialisms

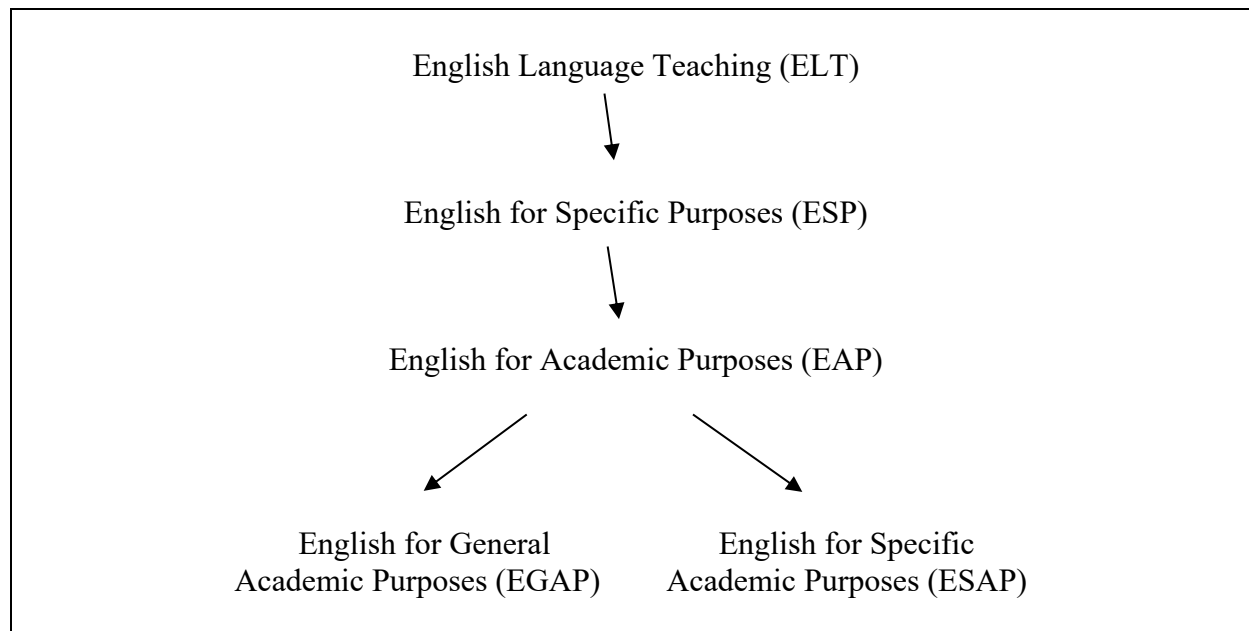
English Pathways	Initialisms
English for Academic Legal Purposes	EALP
English for Business Purposes	EBP
English for Hotel Management	EHM
English for Legal Purposes	ELP
English for Medical Purposes	EMP
English for Occupational Purposes	EOP
English for Professional Purposes	EPP
English for Research and Publication Purposes	ERPP
English for Science and Technology	EST
English for Vocational Purposes	EVP

Figure 1 attempts to clarify some English language jargon with respect to EAP and ESP and to present a commonly accepted hierarchy, which will be used for this article. It is important to note that it is not the aim, nor within the scope, of this article to resolve existing debates between EAP and ESP. Rather, a very broad overview of EAP/EGAP and ESP/ESAP is offered in direct relation to the purposes of this

present initiative. We simply point out how the lack of firm demarcations between EAP and ESP is often problematic, as it affects programming rationale, approaches, and the resources used (Flowerdew, 2016; Mpofo & Maphalala, 2021; Wette, 2018).

Figure 1

The Proposed Hierarchy of English Language Teaching



In the simplest terms, EAP/EGAP and ESP/ESAP programming are often preparatory pathways for students to meet target language proficiency requirements for further tertiary studies or professional credentialing (Keefe & Shi, 2017; Walková & Bradford, 2022). Both pathway programs provide numerous benefits to students, such as opportunities for the formation of friendships during a period of cultural transition, along with the development of target language skills (Douglas et al., 2022). However, EAP/EGAP students vary considerably and have distinct individual backgrounds where “age, cultural, and religious differences are the norm ... [along with] a wide range of abilities and motivations” (Abdul-Jabbar & Yeung, 2023, p. 49). As a result, a broad curriculum that addresses a range of disciplinary topics is meant to capture various interests yet may still fall outside of students’ disciplinary knowledge and interests (Abdul-Jabbar & Yeung, 2023). In contrast, ESP/ESAP students share similar academic and professional backgrounds and have goals of continuing and/or furthering their careers. Moreover, the curriculum is specialized and directed to refine student skills (Ahmad, 2012; Javid, 2016) in specific professional fields such as business, medicine, and tourism (Hopkins & Stephens, 2020). Having touched upon the relevant ongoing debates over EAP and ESP, we now turn to the description of the pilot initiative.

Setting: The Process from EAP/EGAP to ESP/ESAP

At MacEwan University, where this initiative took place, the non-credit EAP/EGAP program offers five levels of instructional core skills where students are placed in courses via an entrance test measuring their proficiency in speaking, listening, reading, and writing. Some students start at the beginning of the

program, while others can be placed midway. The students must pass with a percentage grade of 65% to progress to the next level. Optional courses are also available in two levels for grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary, which aim to improve academic performance in the core courses. Each course consists of 90 one-hour segments occurring two to three times a week throughout the term, so students with a full course load receive a total of nine instructional hours every week. Many of the students have mixed immigration status and include refugees, sponsored or permanent residents, and international students. After the EAP/EGAP program, many students enroll into academic upgrading to pursue their chosen fields based on program requirements.

In response to the institution's influx of IENs seeking English language and literacy support, there was a collaboration between the Department of Academic and Language Preparation and the Professional Health Education unit to change the English language requirement from English 30-1¹ to an exit-level 90-hour EAP/EGAP reading and writing course. Admission into the Post Diploma Certificate: Gerontology and Hospice Palliative Care required an IELTS entrance score of a minimum 6.0 band score in speaking, and 5.5 in the other areas of listening, reading, and writing. The impetus for the change was both administrative restructuring and increasing the academic morale and performance exhibited by previous IEN cohorts.

The initiative to develop the new ESP course was underpinned largely by the anecdotal reports and feedback received from previous cohorts of IENs, which indicated their dissatisfaction with the generic nature of the EAP/EGAP course and its lack of relevance to their disciplinary background and professional needs, which was also corroborated by the first-hand observations made by the course instructor (first author). To this end, a proposal for a new and innovative ESP course was submitted and an internal grant was awarded, which enabled the hiring of an instructional designer to assist with assessing the readability levels of content and setting up the course on the digital platform. The department's associate dean (second author) and the course instructor (first author) sourced and modified the necessary resources to ensure adherence to the institution's master course syllabus, following provincial guidelines. For instance, the reading component required a poetry unit and a novel study, whereas the writing component required compare/contrast, argumentative, cause and effect, and literary style essays.² The difference between the EAP/EGAP and the ESP/ESAP course offering was based on modifying the course content and assessment outcomes to be specifically nursing focused, in order to capitalize upon the existing disciplinary knowledge of the IENs. This "negotiated syllabus" aimed to encourage students to contribute their input voluntarily, enriching the class while also acquiring scaffolded knowledge. As the instructor did not possess relevant disciplinary expertise, the students provided the content, aligned with the precepts of a "negotiated syllabus." Many other related decisions were also negotiated, including the course schedule, to accommodate assessments around employment and religious events. In short, there were continuous adjustments based on course participants' needs. A negotiated syllabus was significant in this context because students were afforded more autonomy over their learning environment and had more latitude to contribute their ideas to the course due to their nursing expertise.

The newly developed ESP course was piloted over two intensive seven-week terms during the spring and summer of 2022. The course met in person every weekday for 150 minutes each time. The participants comprised 29 IENs, with 13 and 16 participants enrolled in the first and second offerings of the

¹ English 30-1 is a required provincial language and literature course in Alberta secondary schools. For more information, see <https://education.alberta.ca/english-language-arts-10-12/programs-of-study/>

² Though it may seem counterproductive for IENs to study literature reading and poetry, the study of different genres is a valuable tool in language development. It also provides focused exposure into another culture which may not be readily available within medical textbooks (Harvey et al., 2016).

course, respectively. Both cohorts were predominantly female, with no males in the first-term cohort and only two males in the second-term group. Most enrollees were from India (65.5%), followed by the Philippines (34.5%), with the approximate age varying from 25 to 50. It should be noted that enrollment of the interested IENs in the ESP course was facilitated by an external recruiting agency contracted by the university.

Course Modifications

The following elements of the EAP/EGAP course were altered:

1. The Modern Language Association (MLA) citation was changed to the American Psychological Association (APA), following the Gerontology Hospice and Palliative Care program. This allowed for consistency, as a subsequent course within their program required a research paper utilizing the APA style, thus streamlining the learning process as IENs did not have to learn two citation systems.
2. The novel study was changed from Ernest Hemingway's *Old Man and the Sea* to Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*, which addresses themes of immigration, alienation, and adaptation to a new country, as this book was more relatable for the IENs. The novel study booklet was adapted from two purchased sources from TeachersPayTeachers (<https://www.teacherspayteachers.com/>).
3. Previously, the short story/poetry requirements were based on instructor interests. The change involved carefully selected texts to ensure inclusion of nursing-themed and culturally relevant materials within the course textbook (Rock & Phadke, 2007).
4. In the previous EAP course, the reading assessments reflected instructor interests. For the ESP/ESAP course, various potential readings were sourced and then measured with Flesch-Kincaid reading scores (McClure, 1987) to determine the appropriate proficiency level.
5. The essay samples and assessment prompts were also previously based on instructor interests. The course modification required the instructor to rewrite each essay sample to better fit the nursing discipline. The writing assessment topics and prompts were also revised to be in alignment with students' nursing backgrounds. For example, in the previous EAP course, the students were given a general topic in EAP (such as air pollution) to write their cause-and-effect essay. In the new ESP course, the topic shifted to causes and effects of diabetes (or other diseases), to render the written assignments relevant to IENs' background and interests, as far as possible.
6. The final exam was also rewritten using sourced fictional and non-fictional readings. The associated questions of comprehension, vocabulary, and critical thinking were modified if they were present in the original resource, or were otherwise created.
7. Upon completion, the entire course underwent a thorough review by administration, the instructional designer, the research assistant, and the course

instructor. Any issues encountered (technical or otherwise) during the first offering of the piloted course were addressed.

Table 2 provides an overview of the course modification from EAP/EGAP to ESP/ESAP and the accompanying changes in course content, and Table 3 specifies the topics and themes used in the new ESP/ESAP course.

Table 2
Content Overview

Course content	EAP/EGAP	ESP/ESAP
novel study	Hemingway	Lahiri
citation style	MLA	APA
essays	instructor-chosen topics	instructor-created medical topics
short story/poetry	instructor personal interests	medically/culturally focused
reading assessments	instructor personal interests	selected/modified readings
final exam	departmental exam	team-created exam

Findings and Discussion

Upon conclusion of the ESP/ESAP course, the IENs in both piloted courses provided positive feedback and reported high satisfaction with the course and its content and assessments. They particularly valued the disciplinary relevance and potential applicability of the course to their future careers. It was further reported that familiarity with topics and content reduced their anxiety and provided a comfortable foundation where they were able to practice additional grammar and vocabulary usage.

The consensus was that the complexities and challenges of L2 reading and writing content were more manageable in the course due to association with their specific discipline and their increased confidence levels. The instructor's observations also attested to a higher level of student engagement in the new course.

Providing the IENs with the opportunity to contribute disciplinary input to the curriculum and incorporating nursing-related content and culturally relevant materials in the course assisted students in identifying their learning gaps, allowing for meaningful practice. Based on the positive feedback, the administrative decision was not only to maintain the ESP/ESAP course offering for the IENs but also to branch out into other specific fields based on departmental demands.

Resonating with the relevant literature, the findings suggest that the validation of learner input further enhanced engagement (Abdul-Jabbar & Yeung, 2023; Douglas et al., 2022) and led to more meaningful learning (Gay, 2018; Velasco & García, 2014) as well as increased autonomy (Hyland, 2018; Van Viegen & Russell, 2019), motivation (e.g., Anjomshoa & Sadighi, 2015; Flowerdew, 2016) and confidence levels (Douglas et al., 2022; Walková & Bradford, 2022). Drawing on IENs' existing background knowledge as an asset allowed for further focus and scaffolding of their L2 writing skills (e.g., Cenoz & Gorter, 2020) students were able to focus on the organization of ideas leading to coherent and persuasive arguments in the development of their voices and style in L2 writing (e.g., He, 2020; Uludag, 2021; Walková & Bradford, 2022).

Table 3

ESP/ESAP Course Modifications

Course content	Topics/themes
novel study	immigration, cultural alienation/adaptation
argumentative essays	smoking, euthanasia, plastic surgery for cosmetic purposes, disclosing medical diagnosis to family members, quality of life, organ donation
compare/contrast essays	cats/dogs for pet therapy, nurses/doctors, native nursing training in native country/Canada, Western/Eastern approaches to treatment, educational differences in native country/Canada
cause/effect essays	ebola, quarantine, diabetes, depression, schizophrenia, obesity
literary essays	How does the protagonist's name determine their life journey? Choose a character and describe their alienation within a foreign culture; in what ways do the protagonist's parents navigate between two cultures?
short stories/poetry	<i>In Flanders Fields</i> by John McCrae <i>A Kite is a Victim</i> by Leonard Cohen <i>Sonnet XLIII</i> by Elizabeth Browning <i>Old Habits Die Hard</i> by Makeda Silvera <i>The Story of an Hour</i> by Kate Chopin
reading assessments	medically focused
final exam	fictional reading: culturally focused; non-fiction reading: nursing focused; writing: nursing focused

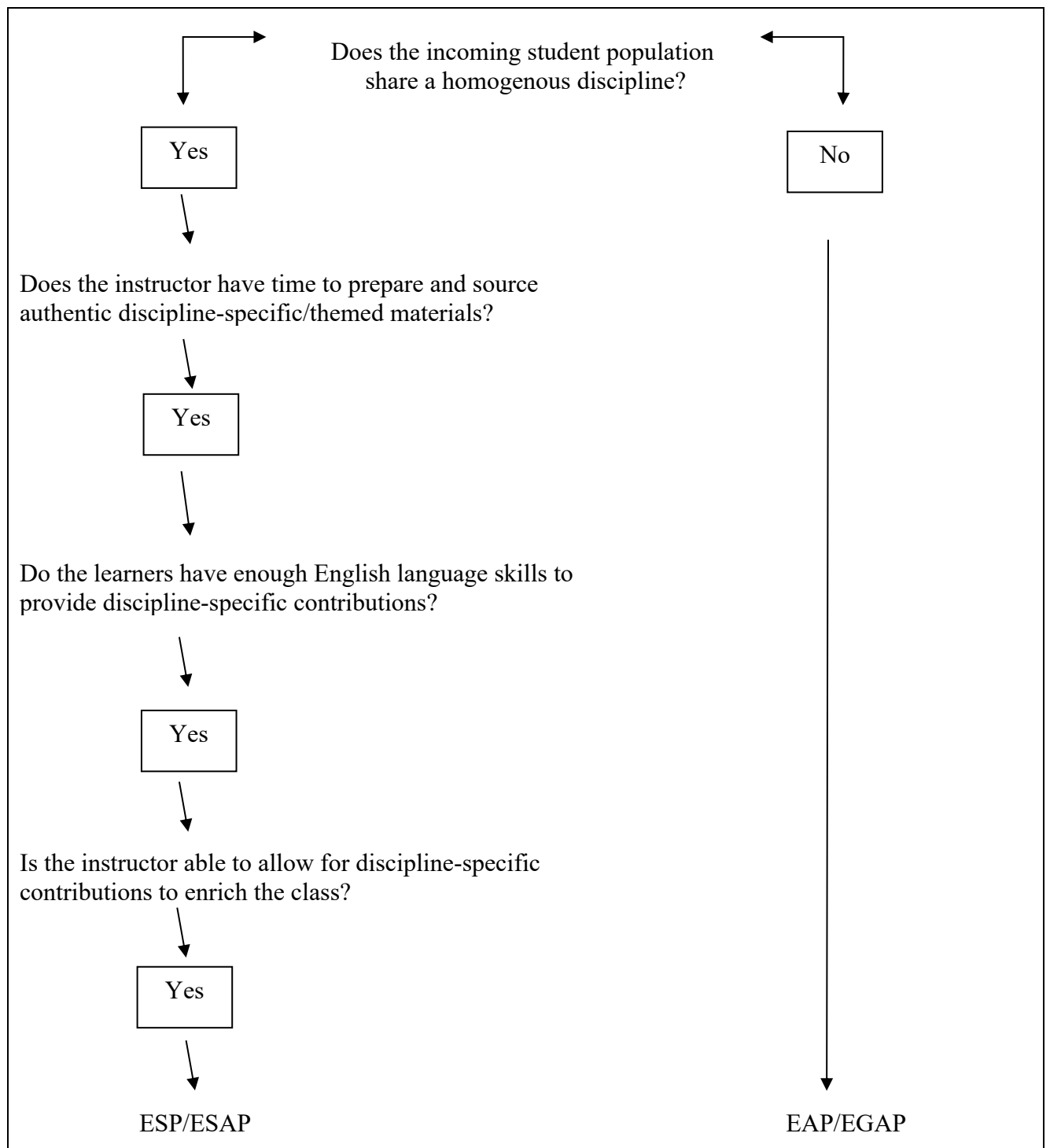
Implications and Recommendations for Language Pathway Programming: EAP/EGAP or ESP/ESAP?

Drawing on the experiences from this pilot initiative, in Figure 2 we offer a model depicting suggested recommendations for how to determine whether to offer EAP/EGAP or ESP/ESAP pathway programs. This can have potential implications for course and curriculum design, particularly for bridging programs in institutions across Canada, which is home to many professionals seeking to have their language and literacy skills met.

The process of EAP/EGAP course modification to an ESP/ESAP can be challenging, so prior to embarking on such an endeavour, it is vital to determine various key factors. Figure 2 indicates the suggested considerations such as student population, the preparation time available, student language proficiencies, and instructor willingness to allow for contributions to determine whether an EAP/EGAP or an ESP/ESAP pathway would be most suitable to meet student needs.

Figure 2

Considerations for an EAP or an ESP Course



Regarding the considerations of an EAP/EGAP and ESP/ESAP course pathway, the initial question is if students share a homogenous disciplinary background. If the answer is “no,” then an EAP/EGAP should be followed. However, if the answer is “yes,” then one can proceed to ask if the instructor has the time and expertise to prepare and devise authentic discipline-themed materials. If the answer is affirmative, then the next question to ask is if the learners have enough English language skills to be able to provide input and make discipline-specific contributions to the instructor. It is possible that learners may possess the knowledge but likely lack the English vocabulary and/or overall proficiency to be able to articulate their ideas clearly and accurately. If the answer is still “yes,” then the last question to consider is if the instructor is willing and open to incorporating learner contributions into the course. Should this last condition be met, then an ESP/ESAP could be a viable option for development and delivery.

Conclusion and Further Recommendations

In this article, we have described the modification and implementation of a newly devised ESP course, which drew on learner input—a “negotiated syllabus” (Breen & Littlejohn, 2000; Prior, 2020). Funded by an internal grant, MacEwan University undertook an initiative to repurpose and revamp an existing generic EAP course to a new ESP course to better suit the literacy needs and interests of IENs. The piloting of the newly devised ESP course with 29 participants over two terms yielded highly favourable feedback from both cohorts of the participating IENs, as well as from the course instructor. The participants reported appreciation that their nursing expertise and cultural backgrounds were taken into consideration and valued. They were also pleased to have participated in an exchange of knowledge and to have contributed to the course content. The findings, though anecdotal in nature, suggest that EAP/EGAP and ESP/ESAP programs, while merited in their own right, serve different functions and purposes (e.g., Flowerdew, 2016).

Due to the continued evolution of learners’ needs (Hyland, 2022), the traditional views and approaches where input is solely the instructors’ responsibility may no longer serve and, in fact, may hinder progress (Ferreira, 2022). It is important to bear in mind that L2 learners are not “empty receptacles but capable stakeholders” (Bhowmik & Chaudhuri, 2022, p. 1414), possessing individual and collective assets of education and experience (Covell et al., 2017; Kim & Guo, 2022). As a result, perhaps the time has come for the adoption of English language teaching methods that place learner contributions at the forefront in a collaborative “negotiated syllabus” where instructors and students engage in more equitable reciprocity (Breen & Littlejohn, 2000; Clarke, 1991; Pakdaman et al., 2022; Prior, 2020). This would ensure that the devised language pathway is in alignment with learner outcomes, needs, and future goals (Douglas et al., 2022; Tweedie & Kim, 2015; Walková & Bradford, 2022) with an “appropriate balance of language and subject knowledge” (Shi, 2018, p. 20). With careful consideration of student backgrounds and their target language and literacy needs and goals, relevant and meaningful content can be created in collaboration with students and drawing on their disciplinary background and desired goals and needs. Developing and delivering needs-responsive courses and curricula can potentially be conducive to optimizing student success.

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Eaman Mah holds a Bachelor of Education and a Master's degree from the University of Alberta. After beginning her career at the high-school level, she discovered her passion for teaching English as an additional language in Japan. Upon her return, she shifted focus to adult learners at MacEwan University. She recently celebrated a milestone 25-year career and was also a proud recipient of the Distinguished Teaching Award in 2021. Currently the Associate Dean of the School of Continuing Education, Eaman is dedicated to enhancing tertiary programs and services to assist students to reach their potential. Her research interests include bilingualism, grammar, and task-based language teaching.

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