Acquiring English for Academic Purposes: Challenges ESL Students Experience in an English-Speaking Canadian University

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By
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Li Liu, candidate for the degree of Master of Education in Curriculum and Instruction, has presented a thesis titled, *Acquiring English for Academic Purposes: Challenges ESL Students Experience in an English-Speaking Canadian University*, in an oral examination held on June 7, 2007. The following committee members have found the thesis acceptable in form and content, and that the candidate demonstrated satisfactory knowledge of the subject material.

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I would like them to know that we are very responsible and we know why we come to college: to learn. We are learning English as well as the major of our choice. It is very hard sometimes and we don’t need professors who claim that they don’t understand us. The effort is double. We are very intelligent people. We deserve better consideration... ESL students are very competent and deserve to be in college. We made the step to college. Please make the other step to meet us.

Abstract

In recent years, more and more English as a second language (ESL) students are enrolling in English-medium post-secondary institutions in North America and other western countries. The academic performance of ESL students in their university academic studies is attracting the attention of researchers. Research literature indicates it is generally believed ESL students, in comparison with their native English-speaking counterparts, have more difficulties in dealing with various social and academic situations. In this study, five ESL students, three ESL instructors, and two university instructors shared their learning and teaching experience in English-speaking academic settings. Research participants reflected on their experience in two academic contexts: the ESL program and university academic studies.

The findings from this research demonstrated ESL students encountered a wide range of challenges in their transition to university studies. These challenges included: high demands of language proficiency, critical thinking skills, strong study skills, sufficient academic background knowledge in their areas of specialization, familiarity with western university culture and disciplinary subcultures, and the ability to adapt to western approaches to learning. Although completion of ESL programs has assisted ESL students to adjust to university academic studies, this research indicates there could be a gap between focuses of ESL programs and requirements of university academic programs. Consequently, this study could serve as a springboard for further research in order to assist ESL practitioners in enhancing the development of the ESL program.
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I dedicate this thesis to my parents. They taught me the value of hard work and to strive always for the best. Without their love, constant support and dedication, I would never have journeyed this far. I thank my sister, Yan Liu, and her husband, Dr. Lei Liu, for their support, understanding and care. A special thank-you to my niece, Wan Jing Liu, for her innocence, curiosity and laughter, which inspired and encouraged me on the dark days when motivation and inspiration were not my best friends.

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Chapter One: Introduction

You would certainly like to talk about things, but you just don’t know how to talk in English. You just don’t know the proper way to speak it out. I think the reason is just that English is a second language for us (ESL student participant interview, April 4, 2006).

1.1 Research Inspiration

The above statement from an English as a Second Language (ESL) student participating in the present study may be a typical description of the learning experiences, tensions and problems encountered by ESL students in western style, English-speaking university studies. As an ESL student pursuing my Master’s degree in a Canadian university, I share that experience.

Three years ago, I said “Goodbye” to my beloved parents and friends, left the place where I grew up and headed for Canada to follow my dream of getting a higher education. I was excited, but nervous too. I couldn’t imagine what life would be like in a place where people speak a different language and have a different lifestyle. I still remember how excited I was when the airplane landed at the beautiful snow-covered small town where I would begin my new adventure. My excitement, however, soon disappeared and was replaced by stress and frustration as I tried to adjust to a new social and academic environment.

I had been learning English for years. Besides, I had even taught ESL in China. Even so, I was still not feeling confident about my command of English due to the fact
that all of my English learning experience in China had been focused on grammar, reading and test-taking. The first few days were okay. I could handle daily routines, even though native English-speaking people talked faster and used words that I hadn't learned in my English textbooks. I experienced a lot of frustration, however, when I began my graduate studies. Professors and peers seemed to speak a different English language from the one I knew. Although I spent hours and hours looking up new vocabulary in the dictionary and trying to make sense of the reading assignments, it was still not enough. During the first few classes, it was very common for me to get lost in the lecture. I sometimes had no clue as to what the discussion was about because of language barriers and lack of relevant background knowledge. I remember clearly getting an assignment to write a 10-page reading response. I spent days reading the articles and papers in the library and summarized what I had understood. I was quite happy when I finished and handed in my paper, hoping for a satisfactory mark. Unfortunately, the mark I got was the lowest one I had ever had during my entire school career. I was very upset, and went to talk to the professor. It was through talking with him that I realized the expected format of a reading response was totally different from what I had been taught in China. Instead of summarizing the reading materials, I was expected to reflect on them and share my own opinions. I devoted all my time to studying in the library, consulting peers and professors about curriculum content and the requirements for the assignments, and working hard to adapt myself to the university culture. I survived, but I will never forget how difficult it was. I wish I had gone through an English program that had prepared me for academic studies.
As an ESL learner and a former ESL teacher, I have been interested in ESL teaching and ESL issues for years. I became increasingly interested in the topic of ESL students’ adjustment to a new culture and a new academic community because I have experienced and observed how hard many ESL students work and how they often struggle. I saw how upset they often were when their academic performance did not meet either their own or the instructors’ expectations. My interest in English preparation programs coupled with personal cross-cultural experiences drive this study. This study will help me gain a better understanding of challenges ESL students face in their adjustment to their university academic studies, and the impact of enrolment in English preparation programs in facilitating the transition of ESL students into academic disciplines.

1.2 Overview of the Field

In recent years, there has been a significant increase in the number of ESL students entering post-secondary institutions in Australia, England, North America and other English-speaking countries (Hyland & Hamp-Lyons, 2002; Newman, Trenchs-Parera & Pujol, 2003; Raymond & Parks, 2002; Shore, 2001). Although ESL students come from a variety of linguistic, cultural, social, religious, and educational backgrounds, all must have sufficient linguistic, cognitive and sociocultural knowledge and skills in order to be academically competent, and work with native English-speaking counterparts. ESL students, therefore, are challenged to develop their language knowledge and skills at a whole new level as they endeavor to fit into their new academic environment (Angelova...

According to research, challenges ESL graduates encounter in English-speaking university academic programs include: high demands for language proficiency, critical thinking skills (e.g., synthesizing, analyzing and evaluating), strong study skills (for instance, note/test-taking and managing the workload effectively), sufficient academic background knowledge in their areas of specialization, familiarity with western university culture and disciplinary subcultures, and the ability to adapt to western approaches to learning. The latter include differences in teaching styles, instructors’ expectations of students’ roles in their own learning, and relationships with instructors and native English-speaking counterparts (Abel, 2002; Ballard, 1996; Bush, 1997; Ferris and Tagg, 1996; Flowerdew & Peacock, 2001; Hyland & Hamp-Lyons, 2002; Johns, 1997; Leki, 1995; Newman, Trenchs-Parera & Pujol, 2003; Pennycook, 1996; Raymond & Parks, 2002; Schneider & Fujishima, 1995; Spack, 1988). Considering the complex nature of the academic knowledge and skills ESL students need to have, it could be useful for ESL practitioners to know how ESL students cope with academic studies at university. Indeed, the academic performance of ESL graduates in their university courses has increasingly attracted the interest of ESL practitioners (Bacha, 2003; Hyland & Hamp-Lyons, 2002).

Traditionally, the goal of ESL instruction was to prepare ESL students of limited English proficiency with the grammar, vocabulary, reading, and writing skills necessary to succeed in academic coursework (Wrigley, 1994). Today, many ESL teachers at the post-secondary level acknowledge that it is not enough for ESL students to become fluent in English, they also have to learn to adapt to sociocultural, discursive, and academic
norms and practices in their academic discipline studies (Bacha, 2003; Hyland & Hamp-Lyons, 2002). Hence, the work of ESL departments is shaped by a dual concern: to help ESL students develop high English language proficiency, and to support their development of “academic literacy” in order to assist in their transition to their university discipline programs (Hyland & Hamp-Lyons, 2002, p.4). Concerns with language and cultural adjustment have led ESL educators to seek ways in which they could design a better ESL program to ensure a smooth transition for ESL students to their university academic studies. In order to meet the particular needs of these ESL students, English for Academic Purposes (EAP) programs are offered using various approaches. The following are probably quite familiar to ESL practitioners: Skill-Based Instruction, Task-Based Approach (Ellis, 2003), Content-Based Instruction (Brown, 2004; Burger & Chretien, 2001; Flowerdew & Peacock, 2001), Theme-Based Instruction, Sheltered Instruction and Adjunct Courses (Benesch, 2001; Flowerdew & Peacock, 2001; Todd, 2003). These approaches are all intended to initiate more links between ESL programs and university discipline content courses in order to facilitate the adjustment of ESL students to their university studies.

Research indicates that ESL programs facilitate the transition of ESL students to their university academic studies, and ESL graduates feel more comfortable and confident when they enter university (Benesch, 2001; Brown, 2000; Burger & Chretien, 2001; Flowerdew & Peacock, 2001). Research studies, nevertheless, also indicate that ESL graduates still face a number of diverse challenges in their adjustment to university (Abel, 2002; Ballard, 1996; Burke & Wyatt-Smith, 1996; Casanave, 1995; Choi, 1997; Lacina, 2002; Leki & Carson, 1993; Ramsey, Barker & Jones, 1999; Raymond & Parks,
These difficulties ESL students encounter include insufficient language proficiency, a lack of critical thinking skills and especially lack of familiarity with the university culture.

Extensive second language teaching and learning research identifies the differences in ESL students’ performance on reading and writing tasks compared to their native English-speaking counterparts (Brown, 2000; Connor & Kramer, 1995; Krashen, 2003; Nguyen, 1999; Raymond, 1999; Savignon, 1997). There are only a few studies addressing how ESL students themselves perceive their learning experience in both ESL and university programs (Canagarajah, 2002; Choi, 1997; Leki & Carson, 1997; Raymond & Parks, 2002; Zamel, 1995). There is also very little research on how ESL instructors and university instructors interpret their teaching in these two contexts and understand the academic language demands on ESL students (Zamel, 1995). Thus, there is a need to conduct research and provide information to contribute to more appropriate and efficient ESL training programs to better facilitate the transition of ESL graduates to university (see, for instance: Duff, 2001; Hyland & Hamp-Lyons, 2002; Raymond & Parks, 2002).

1.3 Purposes of this Study

In order to address concerns regarding the difficulties encountered by ESL students engaged in post-secondary education in Canada, this research was conducted in a Canadian English-speaking university and the ESL Centre in that university. Qualitative
research was identified as research methodology for this study. In-depth interviews and document review were used to gather research data. Data were analyzed inductively using the constant comparison method (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 1990). The following research questions were addressed:

1. What are some of the challenges ESL students face, regarding their academic performance in an English-speaking post-secondary institution?
2. What are the perceptions of ESL instructors and university instructors of the English abilities ESL students have in dealing with academic studies?
3. What academic English language abilities are necessary for ESL students to undertake a post-secondary university program in an English-speaking Canadian university?
4. What is the impact of ESL program completion on academic language abilities of ESL students?
5. What changes could enhance the ESL program in order to address the cultural diversity of ESL students and support ESL students' transition to the academic discipline studies?

1.4 Organization of this Study

This thesis is presented in six chapters. Chapter One provides an introduction to this study, explaining the research purposes and the potential significance of this research for ESL students and ESL programs.
Chapter Two reviews literature associated with theories of second language acquisition, communicative competence, the social constructivist view of knowledge, the concept of Discourse Community and EAP programs. Chapter Three describes the research design, including the setting, participants, and procedures used to collect and analyze data for this study.

Chapters Four and Five present the findings of this research. Data gathered throughout the study focus on examining language practices in both ESL programs and university academic studies, and on identifying problems encountered by ESL students in both contexts. Data gathered from interviews and document reviews are presented for further discussion of the impact of ESL program completion on the transition of ESL students to an English-speaking Canadian university. Chapter Six discusses educational implications of this research and offers suggestions for further research.

1.5 Limitations of this Study

This study has the following limitations:

1. This study is based on the opinions, interpretations and perceptions of five ESL students, three ESL instructors and two university instructors. Results of this research cannot be generalized to apply to all ESL students, ESL instructors and university instructors. This study involved participants at one Canadian university and the ESL Centre where the research was conducted. Therefore, results are valid only for the time period of this study in a particular location.

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2. Research participants in this study were informed their names would not be revealed so that they would not be identified. Nevertheless, it is possible participants were reluctant to offer criticism of their teachers or peers, either in the ESL Centre or the university.

3. Student participants had been in university programs for various lengths of the time, and their perceptions of ESL programs might have been altered by the passing of time.

4. Research participants were given the opportunity to ask for clarification, and all the participants responded in English. For ESL student participants, English is their second language. Therefore, it is possible that their responses do not accurately convey their thoughts, due to language problems.

5. This study only seeks information on how a particular ESL program could better serve ESL students in coping with higher education at one Canadian university. A study of other ESL learners from different cultural backgrounds might not confirm the data or findings of this study.

1.6 Significance of this Study

Increasing enrolment of ESL students in English-speaking western universities has caught the attention of educational researchers regarding the performance of ESL students in their chosen field of university academic studies (Bacha, 2003; Hyland & Hamp-Lyons, 2002; Newman, Trenchs-Parera, & Paujol, 2003; Thompson, 2000). Previous research findings indicate ESL students face many challenges while adjusting to
their new English learning environment at university. Such adjustment is challenging due to the complexity of content materials to be learned and the corresponding linguistic and cognitive proficiencies required in university academic studies (Collier, 1995). Sitting together with native English-speaking counterparts in university content courses, many ESL students discover they are unable to compete successfully with their peers in these courses. Studies indicate ESL students rank among the lowest in academic achievement and expectations (Reifsnyder, 2003). The struggles of ESL students trying to fit in their academic community, combined with disappointment in academic performance could lead to a sense of failure. Lack of academic success is a significant concern for the university where the present research was carried out.

There is a considerable body of research literature that surveys the development of various ESL programs, addresses the issues of success and failure of ESL students, and asserts the importance of the discourse community (see Chapter Two). Research exploring both the ESL program and the university context seems to be relatively limited.

This research was conducted to understand the perceived effectiveness of ESL programs, individual perceptions of ESL students and instructors about learning and teaching in different contexts, and the academic expectations the university community places on ESL students. The intention of this study is to provide ESL educators with first-hand information and a greater understanding of the difficulties ESL graduates face. This could be vital in assisting ESL faculty to develop programs that better meet the needs of ESL students, ease the confusion and frustration felt by ESL students and teaching staff, and better facilitate the successful adjustment of ESL students to the university culture.
This chapter began with an explanation of how I became interested in this topic. This was followed by a brief overview of some of the issues around ESL student success in English-language western universities. The purposes and overall organization of the study were then laid out. The limitations of the study were presented. Finally, the potential significance of the study was discussed. In the next chapter, related literature will be reviewed.
Chapter Two: Review of the Literature

In this chapter, literature relating to English as a Second Language (ESL), English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and other associated research is reviewed to provide a theoretical background to contextualize the present study. The literature review starts with an overview of theories on Second Language Acquisition (SLA). Communicative Competence and Intercultural Communicative Competence within the field of SLA are highlighted due to their direct implication for EAP programs. The second section is devoted to the discussion of Social Constructivism. The educational philosophy that "knowledge is socially constructed" (Benesch, 2001, p.4) is reflected in both EAP education and the concept of Discourse Community. Emphasis is thus given to Discourse Community as a context where the transition of ESL students to English-speaking universities takes place. The third section explores literature related to EAP programs themselves. Finally, the focus turns to ESL, English for Academic Purposes (EAP) in particular. Literature on defining EAP, as well as methodological concerns in EAP programs is reviewed.
2.1 Theories of Second Language Acquisition, Communicative Competence and Intercultural Communicative Competence

2.1.1 Second Language Acquisition

As the number of ESL students studying in post-secondary institutions in North America is significantly increasing, an understanding of theories on second language acquisition (SLA) could enable EAP practitioners and university discipline-specific instructors to better serve students who are linguistically and culturally diverse (Brown, 2000; Freeman & Freeman, 2004; Krashen, 2003). Current theories of SLA are based on years of research in the fields of linguistics, psychology, sociology, anthropology, and neurolinguistics (Freeman & Freeman, 2001, 2004). Although the theoretical development of SLA is beyond the scope of this thesis, some key concepts are presented as background.

Within the field of ESL instruction, according to Krashen (1981, 2003), there are five dominant hypotheses: the Acquisition-Learning Hypothesis, the Natural Order Hypothesis, the Monitor Hypothesis, the Input / Comprehension Hypothesis and the Affective Hypothesis (Krashen, 1981, 2003). Two of these hypotheses, the Acquisition-Learning Hypothesis and the Input / Comprehension Hypothesis, are highlighted in this thesis due to their significance to the present study.

Krashen’s Acquisition-Learning Hypothesis (Krashen, 1981, 2003) distinguishes between learning and acquiring a language. According to Krashen, language learners’ “conscious” attention to language forms is considered as a “learning” process. Language
acquisition, on the other hand, is a "subconscious" process in which learners seem to just "pick up" the language (Krashen, 2003, p.1). To explain how language acquisition takes place, Krashen proposes his Input/Comprehension Hypothesis. Comprehensible input means that language learners should be able to understand the essence of what is being said or presented to them (Krashen, 1981, 2003). The key concept in this hypothesis is that "comprehensible input" should be "slightly beyond [the learner's] current level [of competence]" (Freeman & Freeman, 2004, p.38). Krashen (1981) refers to this as "i+1" (input +1). If the input is below (< 1) or too far beyond the students' current level (> 1), there would be either nothing new to acquire for students or the input would not be comprehensible any more. When language learners receive meaningful and relevant comprehensible input, they acquire language. In other words, when language teachers provide students with an appropriate linguistic and cognitive challenge, language acquisition happens (Freeman & Freeman, 2004; Krashen, 1981, 2003).

According to Krashen, his hypotheses of Acquisition-Learning and Input/Comprehension (1981, 2003) have a direct influence on ESL instruction (Brown, 2000; Freeman & Freeman, 2001, 2004; Krashen, 2003). Within ESL classrooms, in order to promote the language acquisition of ESL students, ESL teachers select authentic texts, provide ESL students with comprehensible input and encourage ESL students to use language for a variety of purposes. Participating in these activities in the ESL classroom, ESL students gradually acquire English and develop their communicative competence.
2.1.2 Communicative Competence

Language is "a means of communication" (Musumeci, 2004, p.89). Many researchers in SLA agree that language should be used for real communication. Therefore, the goal of language teaching is to develop the communicative competence of ESL students (Brown, 2000; Freeman & Freeman, 2001, 2004; Krashen, 2003; McKeon, 1994; Savignon, 1997, 2004). As McKeon (1994) argues, “the first thing the research on language acquisition has taught us to remember about language learning..., is that people learn language because they are in real situations communicating about important and interesting things” (p. 16).

The term, *Communicative Competence*, was originally introduced by Dell Hymes (1972) to refer to that “aspect of our competence that enables us to convey and interpret messages and to negotiate meanings interpersonally within specific contexts” (Hymes, 1972, cited in Brown, 2000, p. 246). Hymes’s definition of communicative competence (1972) seems to interpret competence as ability. In other words, communicative competence is the ability to use the language correctly and appropriately in order to achieve communication goals in various social contexts. A more specific definition of communicative competence is provided by Canale and Swain (1980) and later updated by Canale (1983). Canale and Swain (1980) define communicative competence as having four components:

1. *Grammatical competence* – the knowledge of the linguistic code of the language, such as lexical items, syntax, sentence-grammar semantics, and phonology.
2. *Discourse competence* – the ability to connect sentences into stretches of discourse and to form a meaningful whole out of a series of utterances.
Discourse includes everything from simple spoken conversation to lengthy written texts.

3. **Sociolinguistic competence** — the knowledge of the sociocultural rules of language and discourse.

4. **Strategic competence** — the verbal and nonverbal communication strategies that may be called into action to compensate for breakdowns in communication due to performance variables or due to insufficient competence. (Canale & Swain, 1980, in Brown, 2000, p. 247)

Hymes’ (1972) original notion of communicative competence, and Canale and Swain’s (1980) refined one both call for the consideration of the social context in which language is acquired. That is to say, communicative competence is “context-specific” (Savignon, 1997, p.8). In other words, “to speak competently not only involves knowing the grammar of a language, but also knowing what to say to whom, when, and in what circumstances” (Hymes, 1972, in Freeman & Freeman, 2001, p.61).

Savignon (2004) states that the central concept of communicative competence is “the expression, interpretation and negotiation of meaning” (Savignon, 2004, p.72). Developing communicative competence for ESL students means that ESL students not only have to be equipped with strong linguistic knowledge of the language, but also need to “develop the knowledge [and skills] of how to use the language appropriately in different social situations” (Freeman & Freeman, 2001, p.61), have an understanding of the cultural assumptions and social practices of the particular disciplinary community, and make appropriate choices in register and style to fit the situation in which the communication occurs (Canagarajah, 2002; Savignon, 1997).
2.1.3 Culture and Language: From Communicative Competence to Intercultural Communicative Competence

Language can be considered as a way “to describe and represent human experience and understanding of the world” (Sapir, 1961, in Hinkel, 1999, p.3). Members of a culture share similar beliefs, views of objective phenomena, customs, assumptions and values, all of which are expressed and communicated through language. Applied linguists and language teachers have long argued “a second language can rarely be learned or taught without addressing the culture of the community in which it is used” (Hinkel, 1999, p.2). In other words, language and culture cannot be separated (Brown, 2000; Flowerdew & Miller, 1995; Hinkel, 1999; Jiang, 2000). The intertwined relationship between language and culture is also addressed by Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) in their guidelines for ESL teachers.

Patterns of language usage vary across cultures and reflect differences in values, norms, and beliefs about social roles and relationships in each culture. When children learn their first language, they learn the cultural values, norms, and beliefs that are characteristic of their cultures. To learn another language is to learn new norms, behaviours and beliefs that are appropriate in the new culture, and thus to extend one’s sociocultural competence to new environments. (Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages, 1997, p. 7)

The TESOL guidelines recognize varied functions and social characteristics of language through stating that language learning is cultural learning. Communicative competence involves “appropriate language use [in social contexts], which in part at least, is culture specific” (Byram, 1989, in Hinkel, 1999, p.6). Thus culture plays a role
in shaping the communicative competence of language learners (Savignon, 2004). Communicative competence is explored, reinforced and enlarged in current second language teaching theory. For instance, Sercu (2004) argues “the objective of [second] language teaching is how [to develop ESL students’] intercultural communicative competence” (p.115).

Language reflects the cognitive code of a particular culture or community (Brown, 2000). It cannot be assumed that a native speaker of one language, coming from a background influenced by its cultural, geographic, religious, and other factors, will perceive the world or interpret a text in the same way as a speaker of another language (Brown, 2000, Sercu, 2004). In order to communicate competently and successfully, ESL students need to develop sufficient linguistic, sociolinguistic knowledge and the ability to communicate, as well as be able to “adapt to the foreign culture and learn the foreign customs, conventions, world views, attitudes and values” (Sercu, 2004, p.115). ESL students who come to an English-speaking country with educational purposes have to adjust themselves to the new culture in general, as well as to the academic and disciplinary subcultures (Flowerdew & Miller, 1995). In order to acquire effective communication skills, ESL students need to engage in a given academic community and have an understanding of its cultural assumptions and social practices (Sercu, 2004). Helping ESL students familiarize themselves with the society and culture of the community is thus considered an important objective of ESL instruction (Flowerdew & Miller, 1995; Hinkel, 1999; Jiang, 2000; Sercu, 2004).

In summary, a review of theories of SLA and interrelated concepts within the field of SLA reveals the complexity of ESL teaching and learning, and suggests the need
for an integrated view of second language learning and teaching. Such a view would involve linguistic knowledge and skills, and would be “interwoven with second culture learning, and the gaining of discourse and communicative functions of a language” (Brown, 2000, p.271).

2.2 A Social Constructivist View of Knowledge

In the first section of this chapter, related theories on SLA are reviewed in order to provide background information on ESL teaching and learning. The notions of comprehensible input, communicative competence and intercultural communicative competence emphasize that “communicative interaction is culture-bound or culture-specific” (Sercu, 2004, p.117).

Socially and culturally appropriate language use is a reflection of the ideas of social constructivism. Social constructivism is based on a relativistic theory of knowledge. In other words, knowledge is socially constructed, shaped by sociocultural practices, and therefore relative to different communities (Canagarajah, 2002; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Canagarajah (2002) compares knowledge to a “language game”, in which members of a particular community in their interaction “debate, revise, and legitimize the ‘paradigms’ that make sense to them…. It is in this linguistic activity, [that] knowledge is constituted” (Canagarajah, 2002, p.30). According to Bruffee (1984), social constructivist views of knowledge are reflected in language teaching. Bruffee (1984) argues that the task of language teachers is to
[engage students in ongoing conversations] among themselves at as many points in both the writing and reading process as possible, ensure that students’ conversations about what they read and write are similar in as many ways as possible to the way we would like them eventually to read and write. (p.642)

Social constructivist perspectives of knowledge are increasingly acknowledged among educational researchers and ESL instructors. Much research has been conducted to explore the effect of the socially constructed nature of literacy on the transition of ESL students to their new university disciplinary communities (Blanton, 1994; Cazden, 2000; Johns, 1997; Leki, 1995; Parry, 1996; Ramanathan & Atkinson, 1999). According to Angelova and Riazantseva (1999), “one of the major concepts in this socio-constructivist approach is that of the discourse community” (p.492).

2.3 Discourse Community

2.3.1 Notions of Discourse Community

When ESL students graduate from ESL programs, they gain their “ticket” to enter the university and join a new community - their particular academic disciplinary community (Ballard, 1996, p.155). Community can be defined as “an association of individuals sharing and creating ways of interpreting their experiences…” (Romero, 1998, p.53). Communities differ from one another socially and cognitively (Hyland & Hamp-Lyons, 2002), and can be considered as “stabilizing framework[s] for which discourse occurs” (Swales, 1990, p.69). Discourse is “written or spoken [texts]”, which
include “conversations, novels, interviews, narratives, journal articles, speeches, instruction manuals, advertisements, and so on” (Borg, 2003, p.399). Based on the social constructivist view of knowledge discussed in the previous section, texts are developed and evaluated according to the shared standards of the members using them (Johnson, Johnson & Holubec, 1994). Therefore, discourse “is connected to the notion of community” (Romero, 1998, p.52). A discussion of the terms discourse and community serves as a starting point for exploring and understanding the notion of discourse community.

According to Blanton (1994), discourse community can be defined as “a social group that shares certain behaviors, values, interests, underlying assumptions, and language use” (Blanton, 1994). Swales (1990) defines discourse community more specifically by presenting six characteristics. According to Swales, a discourse community:

1. has a broadly agreed set of common public goals,
2. has mechanisms of intercommunication among its members,
3. uses its participatory mechanisms primarily to provide information and feedback,
4. utilizes and hence possesses one or more genres in the communicative utterance of its aims,
5. has acquired some specific lexis (specialized terminology, acronyms),
6. has a threshold level of members with a suitable degree of relevant content and discoursal expertise. (p. 204)

These definitions of discourse community at either a general or a more specific level, reflect a perspective that different discourse communities are bound not only by language, but also by shared beliefs and values (Blanton, 1994; Brog, 2003; Hyland &
According to many researchers, the importance of understanding the concept of discourse community cannot be over-emphasized (Blanton, 1994; Bartholomae, 1986; Borg, 2003; Hyland & Hamp-Lyons, 2002; Majerus, 1996; Romero, 1998; Swales, 1990; Woodward-Kron, 2004). "It is through discourse, that new members are initiated into the group or ... are excluded from the group" (Starfield, 2001, p.134), and the shared knowledge, beliefs and values "allow entrance, acceptance... in any given community" (Majerus, 1996, p.2).

Bartholomae (1986) explains what such “entrance” and “acceptance” could mean to university freshmen.

The students have to appropriate (or be appropriated by) a specialized discourse, and they have to do this as though they were members of the academy, or historians or anthropologists or economists; they have to invent the university by assembling and mimicking its language. . . They must learn to speak our language. (pp. 4-5)

ESL students participating in this study came to Canada with an education purpose. Therefore, after graduating from the academic preparation program at the ESL centre, ESL students all chose their own academic disciplines and entered the university, a “complex social world [discourse community]”, to pursue their academic degrees (Starfield, 2001, p.132). There is no academic discourse community with “unified standards and expectations but rather every specific discipline has its own conventions, values, and practices” (Angelova & Riazantseva, 1999, p.493). That is to say, each academic discipline represents a unique academic discourse community. Each academic discourse community has its own culture, values, norms, conventions and practice. It is
these values, norms, conventions and practice that place expectations on ESL students regarding what terms to use, which subjects are important, and how language should be organized to convey information. In order to participate effectively in any academic disciplinary community, ESL students need to know and meet these expectations.

2.3.2 From Basic Communicative Demands to Academic Language Demands of ESL

Most adult ESL students come to study at English-speaking post-secondary institutions with previous English education experiences (Freeman & Freeman, 2001, 2004). These ESL students have already learned English in areas where another language, e.g., Mandarin or Japanese, is their everyday means of communication. Under such conditions, there are fewer opportunities and fewer reasons for them to practise English. Once ESL students come to study and live in an English-speaking country, however, their language needs change. English is no longer an academic exercise to pass a written “foreign language examination” (e.g., in China), it becomes a means for academic survival. ESL students studying in English-speaking higher education are expected to read books and articles, comprehend lectures, take notes, compose reports and essays, participate in discussions and give presentations... and all of these academic activities demand high English language proficiency. These academic activities require that ESL students have a different sort of English than everyday English. Cummins (1994) names these two types of language proficiency as: Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP).
Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) refers to the language skills that people need to develop in order to communicate in everyday contexts (Brown, 2000; Cummins, 1994; Roessingh, 2004; Roessingh & Kover, 2003). In this kind of communication, the situation provides assistance to comprehension, and factors other than linguistic knowledge (such as pictures, objects, body language) assist understanding. Hence, there is minimal analyzing, reasoning and critical thinking required in the communication. BICS are context-embedded and cognitively undemanding (Brown, 2000; Cummins, 1994; Roessingh, 2004; Roessingh & Kover, 2003). Having BICS allows ESL students to live their everyday life in an English-speaking country (Roessingh & Kover, 2003). When they begin their academic studies in a particular discipline in an English-speaking university, however, ESL students need to move beyond continuing to improve their competence in BICS to developing a greater competence in CALP.

Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) refers to the concepts and skills which ESL students need to acquire for their academic studies (Brown, 2000; Cummins, 1994; Roessingh, 2004; Roessingh & Kover, 2003). ESL students need to listen, speak, read, and write about their disciplinary content materials. Academic language acquisition goes beyond just the understanding of content area vocabulary. It also involves a high level of cognitive skills such as analyzing, comparing, classifying, reasoning, synthesizing, evaluating, and inferring (Roessingh, 2004). During the process of gaining CALP, ESL students shift from “learning to read” to “reading to learn” (Roessingh, 2004, p.2). New ideas, concepts and language uses are presented and conveyed in the textbooks students read. Students are also expected to analyze and synthesize information quickly. Academic practice is more abstract, context-reduced and...
cognitively demanding than everyday communication and there are fewer communicative clues to assist students’ comprehension. In order to attend academic content classes and perform academic tasks successfully, ESL students have to gain CALP (Brown, 2000; Cummins, 1994; Roessingh, 2004; Roessingh & Kover, 2003).

The notions of BICS and CALP have been adopted by many researchers to illustrate the continuing development of English language proficiency (Roessingh, 2004). Research has indicated that BICS may only represent about 10% of the overall proficiency of an academically competent student (Roessingh, 2004) and that the average student can develop BICS within two years. Developing CALP, however, could take five to seven years (Cummins, 1981, 1996; Hakuta, Butler, & Witt, 2000; Roessingh, 2004; Roessingh & Kover, 2003; Thomas & Collier, 1997). Understanding the notions of BICS and CALP can help ESL teachers develop appropriate instructional strategies and assessments that guide ESL students along a continuum of language development, from cognitively undemanding, context-embedded curricula, to cognitively demanding, context-reduced curricula (Roessingh & Kover, 2003). An investigation of the components that make up CALP, however, reveals that the abilities, knowledge, and skills that enable ESL students to adjust to the new culture and university subculture seem to be neglected. Therefore, it can be argued that in order to fully and competently engage in specific institutional practice, ESL students need to be equipped with efficient “cognitive”, “social” and “linguistic” knowledge and skills of “specific academic disciplines” (Hyland & Hamp-Lyons, 2002, p.2). Hyland and Hamp-Lyons (2002) refer to this as “academic literacy” (Hyland & Hamp-Lyons, 2002, p.4).
The complex nature of academic literacy leads to a discussion of the following questions: are there any tailored ESL training programs aimed at meeting the particular need of ESL students to develop their academic literacy? If so, when ESL students immerse themselves in an educational situation where they must use English to succeed academically and function socially, do they feel their English preparation program is useful? The next section of this literature review will focus on an academic preparation program, known as English for Academic Purposes (EAP).

2.4 Research on English for Academic Purposes (EAP)

2.4.1 EAP

EAP is one of the two major branches of English for Specific Purposes (ESP). Hutchinson and Waters (1987) describes ESP as "an approach to language teaching in which all decisions as to content and method are based on the learner’s reason for learning" (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987, p.19, in Anthony, 1998, p.2). The following figure (Figure 1) illustrates the relationship of EAP with English for Occupational Purposes (EOP), the other type of ESP.
From the above figure (Figure 1), it can be noted that the distinction of the types of ESP is based on the “context and [target] situation” (such as academic study or workplace), and emphasis on the learner’s needs (Bacha, 2003, p.37). Emerging from ESP, EAP focuses particularly on academic contexts, with the purpose of meeting “the [students’] specific communicative needs and practices of particular groups in academic contexts” (Hyland & Hamp-Lyons, 2002, p.2). Flowerdew and Peacock (2001) define EAP as “teaching English with the specific aim of helping learners to study, conduct research or teach in that language” (Flowerdew & Peacock, 2001, p.8). Since EAP is associated with the English required for the specific purpose of academic studies, “its importance to [students’] academic success can not be denied” (Bacha, 2003, p.3; Turner, 2004).

In order to study or work in mainstream or English-dominant contexts requiring a high level of English proficiency, increasing numbers of children and adults must learn ESL [EAP] both as an object of study and as a means for learning and doing other things. (Duff, 2001, p.606)
Considering that the purpose of EAP programs is to prepare ESL students for their future academic studies in an English-speaking university, the particular knowledge and skills ESL students need to obtain in order to take their university disciplinary courses is of interest to researchers. Therefore, it would be useful to conduct studies on needs analysis, particularly target situation analysis, which is to discover “the skills and assignments ESL students [are] likely encounter in future academic [study at the university]” (Benesch, 2001, p.9). Abundant research on target situation analysis exists within the EAP literature (c.f., Benesch, 2001; Flowerdew & Peacock, 2001). Target situation analysis, however, has been criticized for neglecting learners’ “learning needs”, in other words, “what the learner needs to do in order to learn” (Benesch, 2001, p.42). Learning needs can be subdivided into learners’ “lacks (what they don’t know)” and learners’ “wants (what they wish to learn)” (Flowerdew & Peacock, 2001, p.178). Needs analysis is considered as a starting point for designing EAP syllabus, tasks and materials (Benesch, 2001; Flowerdew & Peacock, 2001).

2.4.2 EAP Methodology

The previous section of this chapter was devoted to the definition and the importance of EAP. This section focuses on methodological considerations. Todd (2003), in his paper: *EAP or TEAP?*, reviews literature regarding EAP methodology and identifies six key approaches to teaching EAP (i.e., TEAP): inductive learning, process syllabuses, learner autonomy, authenticity, technology, and team teaching.
1. **Inductive learning** is manifested in several ways. The widespread use of concordancing in EAP (e.g., Jordan, 1997; Stevens, 1991, both in Todd, 2003), the teaching of reading focusing on text analysis (e.g., Holme, 1996; Paltridge, 2001, 2002, all in Todd, 2003), and approaches where students are encouraged to act as researchers investigating academic communities (e.g., Johns, 1997; Starfield, 2001, both in Todd, 2003) all place a particular emphasis on induction.


3. **Learner autonomy** includes self-access learning (e.g., Jordan, 1997; Lynch, 2001, both in Todd, 2003), the use of negotiated syllabuses (e.g., Martyn, 2000; Savage & Storer, 2001, both in Todd, 2003), and an emphasis on self and peer assessment and feedback (e.g., Chan, 1999; Ferris, 2001, both in Todd, 2003). All of these aim to promote learner autonomy.

4. **Authenticity.** Since the teaching of subjects like business, law, medicine and engineering often uses case studies (e.g., Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998; Jackson, 2002, both in Todd, 2003) to increase authenticity, authenticity has been used in EAP teaching, with a desire to increase authenticity of EAP learning materials and tasks.

5. **Technology.** As computers and other technological changes come into educational settings, the use of CD-ROMs and computer-mediated communication (e.g., Warschauer, 2002, in Todd, 2003) have already been integrated into EAP teaching.

6. **Team teaching** or cooperating with content teachers, is an approach closely linked to the nature of EAP teaching. (see Dudley-Evans, 2001; Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998, all in Todd, 2003, pp. 5-6)

Other EAP approaches, such as the Learner-Centred approach, the Skills-Based approach, the Task-Based approach and the Content-Based approach have also been developed and have found their way into the EAP classroom (Flowerdew & Peacock, 2001).

*The Learner-Centered Approach* does not emphasize the language items and skills students need, but concentrates on what students have to do in EAP classes in order to learn. The emphasis is placed on meaningful and appropriate content, and

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communication is encouraged within the classroom. The *Skills-Based Approach* focuses on particular skills that students need to gain (Flowerdew & Peacock, 2001).

The *Task-Based Approach* was developed in response to the emphasis on "purposeful" interaction and "authentic" materials within EAP methodology (Flowerdew & Peacock, 2001, p.183). Ellis (2003) reviews related literature and summarizes the features of task-based teaching. According to Ellis (2003), a task in general must have: primary focus on meaning, authentic situations and/or language interaction. In a task-based EAP classroom, ESL students are responsible for ultimate language use, and the EAP teacher acts as a "guide" or "advisor" rather than "omniscient source of knowledge" to help the ESL students' learning process (Flowerdew & Peacock, 2001, p.184).

Another important approach to EAP is *Content-Based Language Instruction* (CBI). Content-based ESL is the integration of academic content instruction with language instruction (Brown, 2004; Burger & Chretien, 2001; Flowerdew & Peacock, 2001). CBI focuses not only on learning a second language, but using that language as a medium to master knowledge of academic subjects. CBI is based on Krashen's (1981, 2003) theory of "comprehensible input", that is, language acquisition based on input that is meaningful and understandable to the language learner (Brown, 2004). This approach has been used for many years with ESL learners at the secondary level, and has been gaining popularity in programs preparing adult ESL learners in postsecondary contexts (Brown, 2004; Burger & Chretien, 2001; Flowerdew & Peacock, 2001). CBI is usually linked to a theme-based, sheltered or adjunct course format (Flowerdew & Peacock, 2001). *Theme-Based Instruction* refers to a language curriculum developed around selected topics drawn from one content area (e.g., marketing) or from across the
curriculum (e.g., the environment). The goal is to assist learners in developing general academic language skills through interesting and relevant content. *Sheltered Courses* refers to instruction in which a content instructor groups second language learners for modified instruction, with language support provided by a language teacher. *Adjunct Courses* are those where language and content courses are linked directly, with students integrated in the content course offered for native speakers but sheltered as a group in a separate credit language course related to the content courses (Burger & Chretien, 2001). Research has documented considerable success in adopting CBI to promote ESL learners’ academic achievement and second language learning (Burger & Chretien, 2001; Flowerdew & Peacock, 2001).

Flowerdew and Peacock (2001) claim there is no single specific methodology that works better than others. Although EAP instructors deliver EAP programs using different instructional approaches, their teaching aims to facilitate the transition of ESL students to their university academic studies by providing sufficient preparation of linguistic, cognitive and sociocultural knowledge and skills.

In summary, literature reviews of EAP programs and approaches adopted by EAP practitioners help us understand the challenges ESL students face. Given that the main purpose of EAP programs is to “prepare [ESL] learners for the sort of activities [practices] they will be confronted with within their real-life program of study” (Flowerdew & Peacock, 2001, pp.183-184), it is important to know how well ESL graduates cope with their university studies. It is therefore necessary to enter the university context of ESL students.
2.4.3 Research on University Academic Performance of ESL Students

In this section I review literature on the university academic performance of ESL students. Research indicates that ESL students face many challenges in their adjustment to higher education in university (Ballard, 1996; Choi, 1997; Lacina, 2002; Leki, 2001; Nation & Waring, 2004; Ramsey, Barker & Jones, 1999; Schmitt, 2001). First of all, their main challenge comes from increasing demands for English proficiency. Schmitt (2001) argues "learning language is probably the most cognitively... challenging task a person goes through" (Schmitt, 2001, p.4). Pursuing a higher education, both second language and native language speakers face the same language and literacy demands (Roessingh, 2004). Whereas a university graduate can have a vocabulary of about 20,000 word families, an adult ESL learner generally has fewer than 5000 word families (Nation & Waring, 2004; Schmitt, 2001). This gap can challenge ESL students in their listening abilities during lectures, reading academic material and writing essays, and "impede the academic progress of ESL learners of all ages" (Roessingh, 2004, p.2).

Writing is one of the most important skills for second language learners in academic contexts. Written language in university academic studies is often packaged as reports, abstracts, analyses, proposals, briefs, articles, essays, monographs, books, reviews, and bibliographies. To be successful writers, students must know English rhetorical organization, written sentence structure, punctuation, and word cohesion (Johns, 1995).

In addition to these language barriers, which can impede effective communication, many ESL students are also challenged by a lack of critical thinking skills (such as synthesis, analysis and evaluation) and academic skills of note / test-taking
and managing the workload effectively, insufficient academic background knowledge in their areas of specialization, and lack of familiarity with the university culture. These challenges are important factors affecting adjustment and progress in university studies of ESL students (Abel, 2002; Flowerdew & Peacock, 2001; Johns, 1997). Due to language limitations, ESL students could require additional attention from their ESL instructors.

The academic challenges outlined above highlight difficulties ESL students have in undertaking academic studies. Therefore, researchers are exploring how ESL students cope with the academic challenges awaiting them (Casanave, 1995, 2002; Lea & Street, 1999; Newman, 2001; Spack, 1997; Schneider & Fujishima, 1995; Woodward-Kron, 2002).

Casanave (1995) investigated first-year ESL students enrolled in English-speaking university disciplinary classes, with the purpose of understanding how ESL students learn to think and complete written tasks in their disciplinary community. Research findings revealed ESL students think and write in different ways from the dominant discourse community. ESL students encountered problems with critical analysis, participation in academic practice and adjustment to their university sub-culture. Similar research findings were uncovered in Spack's (1997) longitudinal study with an undergraduate ESL student.

In order to participate successfully in academic practice, ESL students need to have sufficient language knowledge and skills, but also need to gain the cognitive skills to cope with their academic study in a western university. Critical analysis, for instance, is considered as one of the “most desirable characteristics of undergraduate writing” (Woodward-Kron, 2002, p.121). Research findings indicate, however, that ESL students
from other cultures and educational systems, lack critical thinking skills (Casanave, 2002; Lea & Street, 1999; Newman, 2001; Woodward-Kron, 2002).

The challenges ESL students face in adjusting to their new culture and university sub-culture and in effectively interacting with the community are highlighted in numerous studies (e.g., Al-Sharideh & Goe, 1998; Schneider & Fujishima, 1995; Sun & Chen, 1997). Schneider and Fujishima (1995) conducted research focusing on one ESL student who encountered difficulties in coping with the academic culture, and ultimately failed to complete his graduate program. While proficiency in English greatly affects the academic success of foreign students, Schneider and Fujishima’s (1995) research proposed that familiarity with the target university culture and disciplinary subcultures, including accepted patterns of interaction, is also essential. Schneider and Fujishima (1995) also raise questions about the role of academic communities (both ESL and the university) in an ESL student’s adjustment to new university and social contexts. Other researchers share the same concerns. Sun and Chen (1997), in their interviews with students from Mainland China studying in the United States, found that although the students had high TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) scores, they confronted serious problems communicating with Americans academically and socially and had difficulty adapting to a new academic environment.

Some studies investigate the perceptions of university instructors working with ESL students. Zamel (1995) surveyed university professors about their experiences working with non-native speakers of English. The responses from the university professors revealed a persistent complaint that ESL students were inadequately prepared for university studies.
The challenges ESL students confront, together with the difficulties these ESL students have in their adjustment to their university disciplinary studies, call for an academic preparation program. Success of ESL students in English-medium higher education becomes of critical importance because of the increasing number of ESL students enrolled in these institutions, and has led to a new focus in ESL research (Bacha, 2003; Hirsch, 1996; Hyland & Hamp-Lyons, 2002; Lacina, 2002; Raymond & Parks 2002).

2.5 Impact of Culture and Previous Education Experiences on ESL Learning

The previous section reviewed literature regarding difficulties ESL students encounter in their university academic studies. The challenges ESL students face also call for attention to the influence of the diversity of cultural backgrounds and previous education experience of ESL students on how they approach learning in a western university.

Brown (2000) argues that the backgrounds and experiences of ESL students are culture-rooted, and this might result in their holding different values and attitudes towards knowledge and education. Ballard and Clanchy's (1991, in Ballard, 1996) model illustrates the relationship between cultural attitudes to knowledge and the development of different approaches to teaching and learning.
As illustrated in this model, two attitudes, *conserving* and *extending*, form a continuum of attitude towards knowledge. Ballard (1996) argues that these two attitudes could be found to different degrees, in all societies. According to Ballard (1996), people develop and
adopt a particular attitude to knowledge because it is the “socially appropriate attitude” (Ballard, 1996, p.152). When people hold different attitudes to knowledge, they approach teaching and learning differently. These different approaches are categorized as reproductive, analytical and speculative (Ballard, 1996). As illustrated in the above model, within the reproductive approach, teachers are perceived as the exclusive source of knowledge. They select and transmit knowledge. Students, in a reproductive-approach classroom, are normally expected to replicate what they are taught through memorizing and imitating.

The analytical approach aims to “develop independent and analytical styles of thinking and the capacity for handling theory and abstraction”. Instructors in western universities are not the “directors” or “transmitters” of knowledge, but act as “guides” to lead students to question, challenge, explore and evaluate the topic they are studying and to develop their own ideas of knowledge (Ballard, 1996, p.152). In an analytical approach, students tend to take more responsibility for their own learning, and are expected to be creative and critical. Students are constantly required to evaluate, question established knowledge, and defend their own opinions.

The speculative approach is more concerned with the intellectual demands of academic tasks. This is probably more suited to post-graduate study and research (Ballard, 1996). Because the focus of this study is on undergraduate ESL students, it is beyond the scope of this thesis.

Chapter Two has provided a theoretical background to this study. Literature regarding Second Language Acquisition, Communicative Competence, and Intercultural Communicative Competence was reviewed. Next, the concept of Discourse Community
was presented to illustrate the complexity of the learning experience of ESL students.

Then, the literature concerning English for Academic Purposes was reviewed. Finally, the impact of culture and previous education experiences on the approach to learning of ESL students was highlighted. This will be further discussed in Chapter Six.
Chapter Three: Research Methodology

This study explores challenges ESL students encounter in their transition to western English-speaking university studies and the impact of EAP completion on the academic language abilities of ESL students enrolled at a Canadian university. This chapter is devoted to providing information about the methodological approach to addressing the questions of this research study.

3.1 Qualitative Research Methodology: Theoretical Paradigm

[Qualitative research is] an inquiry process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore a social or human problem. The researcher builds a complex, holistic picture, analyzes words, reports detailed views of informants, and conducts the study in a natural setting. (Creswell, 1998, p.15)

Qualitative research is often associated with the collection and analysis of the “verbal” or “written” texts produced by research participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003, p.30), and takes place in naturalistic settings (Creswell, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 2003; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In contrast to quantitative research, qualitative research is carried out to explore the targeted phenomenon in a situation, and acknowledges the socially constructed nature of knowledge (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Social constructivists state that knowledge or reality is gained only through social constructions such as language, consciousness, shared meanings, documents and other artifacts (see Chapter Two). Flick (1998) states that the qualitative researcher is concerned with “constructions of reality -
its own constructions and in particular those constructions it meets in the fields or in the people it studies" (p.11).

One of the essential characteristics of qualitative research is the incorporation of the “perspectives of the participants and their diversity” (Flick, 1998, p. 5). My research intention is to understand ESL students’ experiences in their transition to their university academic studies. In order to access the experiences, beliefs and perceptions of research participants, I chose qualitative research as the research methodology for this study. First of all, qualitative research is often conducted in natural settings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). According to Berry (1998), human experiences are shaped in contexts and best understood as they are found, in other words in their natural settings. It is in natural settings where human behaviors can be truly reflected and the meanings of these behaviors can be well interpreted. (p.3)

Secondly, qualitative research makes it possible to obtain information from participants (in this case, ESL students, their instructors, and university instructors) that they may not “consciously” know themselves. Issues, which directly affect the ways in which language learning of ESL students and their adjustment to a new culture and a new academic subculture, are “wrapped in the stories [ESL students] hold” and experiences they have gone through (Bell, 2002, p.211). By analyzing experiences of research participants, “deeply hidden assumptions” that their experiences embody could surface (Bell, 2002, p.209).

Ernest (1994) argues that the qualitative research paradigm is “primarily concerned with human understanding, interpretation, intersubjectivity, [and]lived truth”
(p.24). As a researcher conducting qualitative research, I, therefore, constantly engaged in a process of understanding, interpretation and reconstruction of reality. Through understanding experiences of ESL students and of ESL instructors and university discipline instructors working with ESL students “at a holistic level, [I] interpret the complexities embedded in these experiences to seek meanings and illuminate their significance” (Berry, 1998, p.3).

3.2 Research Design

3.2.1 Research Setting

This study was conducted using a qualitative research approach, and qualitative data were gathered from document review and in-depth interviews. The study was conducted in a mid-sized university in western Canada. The university has an enrolment of approximately 13,000 students, including about 1200 international students. Among the facilities on campus is the ESL Centre, which provides courses for students whose first language is not English. Programs offered at the ESL Centre include short and long term English language courses, and a university academic preparation course. Instruction is provided from basic to advanced levels (010-Basic, 020-High Basic, 030-Low intermediate, 040-High Intermediate and 050-Advanced). ESL students are grouped according to their language proficiency.
3.2.2 Sample Selection and Data Gathering Procedures

The procedures for selecting participants for this study could be described as *purposeful sampling* (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Maxwell (1996) refers to purposeful sampling as selecting research participants “deliberately in order to provide important information that [cannot] be gotten as well from other choices” (p. 70). In this study, it was expected that ESL student and instructor participants could be selected in order to provide significant insights about the phenomenon of research interest (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

3.2.2.1 Research Participants

A. ESL students participating in this study were first and second year undergraduate students at the university. They were selected for the study based on the following criteria.

1. They had completed the ESL program offered by the ESL Centre and were enrolled in the university program of their choice.
2. They had graduated from their ESL program no more than two years earlier, so that their ESL learning experience was still fresh in their minds and their present university educational experience was still fairly new.
3. They were both male and female with different cultural backgrounds and in different faculties at the university.
Of the five ESL students who participated in the interviews, three were female and two were male. At the time of the study, three were first year students, while the other two were second year students. These five ESL students came from different cultural backgrounds: one Mexican, one Korean, one Japanese, and two Chinese. They were registered in different faculties: two in the Faculty of Engineering, one in Business Administration, and two in the Faculty of Arts.

B. The three ESL instructors in the study were two females and one male who teach ESL classes at the university ESL Centre. They were chosen because they had been teaching at the intermediate and higher levels, where most of the ESL students go on to enter the university program. These three instructors have a wide range of experience. The total number of years of teaching range from 10 to 14 years while the total number of years teaching at this ESL centre range from 7 to 14 years. One ESL instructor’s experience was exclusively at the advanced level, while the other two ESL instructors had experience at both the intermediate and advanced levels.

C. First e-mail contact with potential university instructor participants was achieved through references from friends and other professors I know. Some of the university instructors informed me, however, that they could not participate in my research because of their busy schedules. In the end, only two university instructors volunteered to participate in this study. They were professors teaching in the Faculties of Engineering and Computer Science. Both university instructors were Canadian-born and
had experience with ESL students in their class. They were also informed from the very beginning that the research focus was on how students performed.

One of the main ethical concerns posed by qualitative research is the researcher’s responsibility towards the participants. In the current study, the fundamental responsibility of the researcher was to prevent any harm coming to ESL students, ESL instructors and university instructors through the processes by which they were studied. To reduce the risk of harm, the principles of confidentiality and anonymity were followed (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The identities of the ESL students and instructors participating in this study were not revealed. Research participants were informed about who would have access to the interview tapes once recorded. I also told research participants that no names would be used in written transcripts. Citations would be labelled ESL participant; ESL instructor or university instructor, as appropriate.

3.2.2.2 Data Collection Procedures

Data collection occurred over a period of 14 months. Multiple research methods (document reviewing and in-depth interviewing) were employed for data collection, because “no single method can grasp the subtle variations in ongoing human experience” (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p.12).

Document Review

“Documents are mainly written texts which relate to some aspect of the social world” (Hitchcock & Hughes, 1995, p. 212). They are valuable sources of “unwitting
testimony" (Scott, 1990, in Hitchcock & Hughes, 1995, p. 212), revealing information about values and beliefs not always directly intended in the written texts. Documents collected for the present research include those relating to ESL syllabus, curriculum materials, and assessment and policy issues produced within the ESL Centre. For example, guidelines, information packages and handbooks, were collected throughout the study to provide written evidence of how ESL instructors perceive the English proficiency of ESL graduates.

Interview

Interviews were chosen for data collection because interpretative research can be viewed as “a social production symbolically negotiated between researcher and participant” (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984, in Leki & Carson, 1997, p. 44). In-depth interviews were selected as a way of data collection because they “represent the world view of the participants being investigated” (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984, in Leki & Carson, 1997, p. 44), and are considered as the “most common and powerful ways in which we try to understand our fellow human beings” (Andrea & Frey, 2003, p.62). In qualitative research, the interview questions are open-ended. Furthermore, there may be no set order of questions because the research interview evolves according to the participant’s responses to the questions (Leki & Carson, 1997).

In this study, interview questions were designed to get a sense of ESL students’, ESL instructors’ and university instructors’ understanding, interpretation and perceptions of their learning and teaching experience. All the participants were asked semi-structured interview questions (see Appendix D). Interviews were conducted individually in either
the researcher's office, or wherever research participants preferred. The Chinese interviewees were given the choice of responding in either Mandarin or English since I am a Mandarin native speaker. As it turned out, however, all interviews were in English. Each interview lasted approximately one hour, was recorded with a cassette recorder and transcribed later.

3.3. Data Analysis: Constant Comparison Method and Inductive Analysis

This study focuses on the analysis of ESL students', ESL instructors' and university instructors' reflections and perspectives with regard to the effectiveness of ESL programs to assist in the transition of ESL students to their university academic studies. This study used the constant comparison (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; see below) method. Data were analyzed inductively (Patton, 1990). Inductive analysis (Patton, 1990) means that the patterns, themes, and categories of analysis "emerge out of the data rather than being imposed on them prior to data collection and analysis" (p. 390). The data analysis was further completed through a triangulation of relevant data from other sources, in particular, documents related to the ESL program. Figure 3 illustrates the interaction among the data.
Glaser and Strauss (1967, in Lincoln & Guba, 1985) described the constant comparison method as following four distinct stages:

1. comparing incidents applicable to each category,
2. integrating categories and their properties,
3. delimiting the theory, and
4. writing the theory. (p. 339)

In this research, data analysis followed the guidelines of the constant comparison method closely. The transcripts of each interview were sorted out in the sequence of the interview questions. The transcripts of the interviews and the review of the documents were read and examined to search for relevant and recurring themes related to the research questions. The relevant and recurring themes that emerged from the data with regard to participants' perceptions of language education were constantly compared to determine their representativeness. In analyzing the data I moved "back and forth between the logical construction and the actual data in a search for meaningful patterns"
to reveal how the research participants (ESL students, their instructors, and university instructors) perceived the impact of ESL program completion on ESL students’ transition to university studies (Patton, 1990, p.411).

3.4 Research Trustworthiness

This study examines the impact of the ESL program on the transition of ESL students to university academic studies. It applies a set of criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985) to judge its trustworthiness. These criteria are credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. *Credibility* addresses the question of whether the reconstructions (i.e., the research findings and interpretations) arrived at via the study are acceptable to the research participants. *Transferability* addresses such questions as whether the researcher has provided a clear description of the research context to make it possible for others to replicate the study or make judgments about contextual similarity. *Dependability* asks the question whether both factors of instability and factors of phenomenal or design induced change are taken into consideration. *Confirmability* deals with the issue of whether the characteristics of the data, rather than those of the researcher, are confirmable (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

To meet the four trustworthiness criteria, I took the following actions. First, I built and maintained trust with research participants since the ultimate credibility of the findings depended upon the extent to which trust had been established. Second, I did not deliberately influence or manipulate the conditions of this study. Third, I did not impose
prior categories on the results of the interviews, but let respondent categories dominate the findings to make interpretations of data credible to those who had provided them.

To summarize, this study aims to explore ESL students' and teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of the ESL program for ESL students' university academic studies, and the comparison between preparation and expectations. Qualitative research methods were employed to in an effort to understand how research participants perceive the effectiveness of the ESL program and how their perceptions are related.
Chapter Four: Interview Research Findings

The interviews conducted in the present study include interviews with ESL students, ESL instructors and university instructors from two different faculties. From inductive analysis and constant comparison of research participants’ responses to interview questions, four general concerns relevant to the impact of ESL completion to these ESL students’ adjustment to their academic studies in Canadian university emerged. These concerns are addressed by the following four themes:

1. Opportunities for language practice in ESL programs and university discipline-specific studies.
2. Challenges these ESL students encountered in both ESL programs and university discipline-specific studies.
3. Impact of ESL completion on the transition of these ESL students to their university discipline-specific studies.
4. Suggestions by participants for a more appropriate ESL program to facilitate the adjustment of ESL students to Canadian universities.

Each theme is explored using a number of related interview questions. As interviews were conducted with three groups of participants, data related to the same theme are reported under the same heading. In the case of the first two themes, many kinds of dynamics and issues are identified. Thus, for the purpose of clarity, data gathered from the different groups of participants are reported separately. Presenting
interview data in this format makes it possible to compare data and illustrate certain instances of mismatch among the participants’ perceptions. Transcriptions were not corrected for English. The spoken English of ESL students is not always grammatically correct.

4.1 Theme One: Opportunities for Language Practice in ESL Programs and University Discipline-Specific Studies

Data collected throughout this study regarding opportunities for language practice in ESL and university discipline-specific studies are presented in categories of the four micro-skills within language: reading, writing, listening and speaking. Other issues emerged from interviews with participants and are reported under different headings in an attempt to provide a more complete picture of the dynamics within the two contexts. Relevant interview questions are:

ESL Students: a) What differences, if any, did you perceive in the kinds of texts you read in ESL programs and university discipline studies?

b) What difference, if any, did you perceive in the reading and writing assignments in both contexts?

c) What differences, if any, did you perceive in other language practice other than reading and writing in both contexts?

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ESL Instructors: What reading and writing assignments did you assign to the students?

University Instructors: What reading and writing assignments did you assign to the students?

4.1.1 Reading Texts and Assignments in Two Contexts

4.1.1.1 Texts Used for Reading in Two Contexts

Reading texts in ESL programs:

Responses from ESL students identified the materials used for reading in their ESL programs, as mostly textbooks, handouts from newspapers (such as: Globe and Mail and local newspapers), magazines, novels, and short, simple, easy texts. The topics of the reading texts included: different cultural issues, love and marriage, and the environment. As one student said:

Sometimes, we read from the textbook, the topic would be very much about the culture sometimes... Sometimes is about very normal things happened everyday. I remember there was a reading about a car accident... ... the reading materials is a little bit more simple. (ESL student participant interview, April 4, 2006)

Another student gave a similar response:

Topic is kind of everything, like culture thing, Chinese medical stuff or Korean some scenery or singing, also there is politics about Canada. (ESL student participant interview, March 16, 2006)
Students' recall of the reading texts used in ESL programs corresponded to the ESL instructors' responses. The reading materials available to the students were from textbooks and authentic materials, such as, newspapers, and novels which “[had] been edited for ESL students” (ESL instructor participant interview, February 18, 2005). The topics in the lower level classes were categorized as more popular and general. As one instructor said, “It is very, very much topical, current events. What’s happening in Canada and the world. What’s happening in Canadian culture” (ESL instructor participant interview, February 18, 2005). In the upper level ESL class, content in the reading materials was perceived as more scientific and academic. As one ESL instructor put it:

This type of textbooks has themes, like ecology, climate, punishment, but usually they also have things like family relationships, this kind of thing. The more advanced levels have more social scientific kinds of thing, that they would encounter in the university. There is a series of environment issues, chapters of love and marriage - these kinds of things at this level [the beginning level]. Let’s say more popular topics, but with an academic focus. (ESL instructor participant interview, March 5, 2006)

Responses from ESL instructors also revealed that in a student-centered ESL classroom, ESL students were encouraged to choose reading texts they were interested in, and there was also more “choice in what to read” (ESL instructor participant interview, March 7, 2006).
Reading texts in university academic studies:

In contrast to the reading texts used in the ESL program, both ESL students and university instructors identified the reading texts used in university studies as mainly textbooks and course notes. One university instructor stated that, "[students] got to read the textbooks. That's probably about it" (University instructor participant interview, March 17, 2005).

4.1.1.2 Reading Assignments in Two Contexts

Reading assignments in ESL programs:

In response to the question about the reading assignments in the ESL program, ESL students perceived the common reading work they had to do was to read in order to "understand" the reading material, "answer questions", "make questions" for other students, "make vocabulary lists" and "summarize" the content of the reading material (ESL students' statements). One student noted, "Normally, we will have some questions right after that. Sometimes those questions are multiple choices" (ESL student participant interview, April 4, 2006).

Another student stated, "I reading that stuff [newspaper], maybe in 10 to 15 [minutes], and then I have to answer some questions" (ESL student participant interview, March 16, 2006).

In addition, ESL students said that they were often assigned a lot of reading every day, which reflected that reading in the ESL program was more controlled by ESL instructors. One student said:
When I was in 040, I can say my teacher is kind of strict about reading. So teacher gave just one day. In ESL classes, it’s from Monday to Friday. So every day, teacher gave reading stuff, answering or catching something in the class time. So it was really tough time, so I have to study until 2 o’clock. (ESL student participant interview, March 16, 2006)

When asked what they asked students to do with the reading texts, ESL instructors said, “there is a type of assignment that is a newspaper assignment where they have to read the newspaper, make a vocabulary sheet, ask each other questions in their group and then summarize the news they read” (ESL instructor participant interview, March 7, 2006). Responses from ESL students and ESL instructors also suggested that the underlying focus of the reading tasks in the ESL program was on vocabulary, grammar and reading comprehension.

Reading assignments in university academic studies:

Compared with the reading assignments in the ESL program, ESL students perceived reading in the university to be freer, and more dependent on the student’s initiative to find reading materials related to discipline content. One of the students stated:

Reading is free. It depends on me. They [university professors] won’t ask you to read. Just textbook is reading stuff. The teacher didn’t give any other stuff. I have to find [reading stuff] by myself. … if I cannot understand some kind of economy stuff, I have to find in website, and I have to search what is meaning… (ESL student participant interview, March 16, 2006)
Another student said:

Another thing we need to read or spend time on is the research. The research, is that one you need to take on the information for your study. (ESL student participant interview, April 4, 2006)

Responses from university instructors confirmed the ESL students’ perceptions. That is, in the university content study, there seemed to be no specific reading tasks assigned to the students. In order to gain better understanding of the content, ESL students had to search for and read texts related to the content of their discipline. Different reading purposes were also perceived from the responses of ESL students and university instructors. At the university level, understanding the content was perceived as prevailing over other linguistic demands. ESL students commented that in university, they read to prepare for lectures and to understand main ideas as they interact with written texts.

In summary, the reading texts used in ESL programs identified by research participants were more general, and in most cases were provided by the instructors. In university courses, textbooks seemed to be the predominant reading materials available to the students. These texts were perceived as being more academic or specific, and students were required to take more responsibility for their reading choices.
Writing assignments in ESL programs:

In ESL lower level classes, students were asked to do more basic, descriptive and expressive writing on some “easy” topic, such as “what do you like most?” and “explain your Korean culture” (ESL student participant interview, March 16, 2006). When moving to the upper level, ESL writing instruction was considered as preparation for university writing, and ESL students were asked to write “essays” or “research essays”, which were more “formal” in terms of format (ESL student participant interview, March 19, 2005). The topic was still very general, however, as one student recalled:

Teacher gave a lot of writing assignments, but that was basic one. What is your favorite stuff? or What do you like most? Something like explain your Korean culture. I remember something like that. (ESL student participant interview, March 16, 2006)

Another ESL student said:

One thing we did in [our class] was about the contrast and comparison which means ...you are going to tell the difference and the similarities. In [the class of next level], we get into the essays. Essay is something more formal and more English... (ESL student participant interview, March 19, 2005)
With the writing assignments in ESL programs, students stressed they had to pay attention to language and format, and even the focus of composing a research essay seemed to be the mastering of format. One student stated:

"Before you may write down something by following your own style. But [when] we are writing an essay, you have to take many things into your consideration, because they have format." (ESL student participant interview, March 26, 2005)

Another ESL student said:

"Teacher gave us some information how to write topic, or something body or conclusion .... academic writing, we learn how to write essay, so essay stuff, like topic sentence, not just paragraph, thesis statement, how can develop thinking, and how to quote, put footnote." (ESL student participant interview, March 16, 2006)

Responses from ESL students revealed that in ESL programs, students were given more choices of topic. One student commented:

"Sometimes we are given a certain topic, sometimes is about technology, sometimes is about phenomena... Sometimes teachers ask us to choose our own topic which you are interested in and you can share with group." (ESL student participant interview, March 26, 2005)

Furthermore, responses from ESL students revealed that in the writing class at higher levels, students were encouraged to express their own ideas in response to the texts. One student said, "the other thing is about how do you express your understanding..."
about certain thing, that is about yourself” (ESL student participant interview, April 4, 2006).

ESL instructors spoke of a similar focus in written coursework. One ESL instructor stated:

When they [ESL students] finish [intermediate level], they can write a journal, they can write a letter, they can do this kind of thing, but they need more if they want to go on to an academic program. (ESL instructor participant interview, March 7, 2006)

Another ESL instructor from a higher level explained:

In writing, we teach five-paragraph essay format and thesis statement, so students should be able to write using a basic template. Students have to move beyond that, but should be there. (ESL instructor participant interview, February 18, 2005)

Writing assignments in university academic studies:

In university discipline-specific studies, ESL students commented that they had to produce more formal, academic, informative and research-oriented writing, such as business letters, lab reports, projects, research essays and literature reviews (ESL student participant interviews, March 19 & 26, 2005; March 16, 2006; April 4, 2006). ESL students also noted the intellectual demands required for the university content writing, where they had to express their opinions. Another difference that ESL students noted was the length of the writing assignments in the two contexts. One student said:
In history class, I got [to do] 2000 word essay, in more than 10 pages. In ESL just do 4 pages, that was maximum. (ESL student participant interview, March 16, 2006)

When asked what writing assignments students had to do in their discipline courses, university instructors mainly referred to “lab reports” and “report writing” (University instructor participant interviews, March 17, 2005; April 18, 2006).

In summary, participants’ responses revealed differences in the way they did the written assignments in the ESL and university contexts. In ESL programs, ESL students more often had to write essays based on personal experience or cultural background, whereas, in university, students were asked to produce papers that were more research-oriented and informative. The underlying purposes of writing assignments were perceived differently in the two contexts. ESL writing assignments emphasized the accuracy of language use and practice of format, whereas, in the university more attention was given to the accuracy of the understanding of the content.

4.1.3 Practice of Speaking Skills in Two Contexts

_Speaking practice in ESL programs:_

Opportunities for practising speaking skills in ESL programs as reflected in the data collected from ESL students’ responses included: discussions, prepared speeches and presentations in lower level ESL classes, and spontaneous speaking, video presentations, and group debates in higher level ESL classes. In addition, the responses of
ESL students revealed two main features of speaking practice in ESL. One was that the topic used for discussion, presentation and debate was more personal or related to general social issues. The other feature was that there was more time for ESL students to prepare for presentations. One ESL student said:

> When I was in 030, maybe at that time, there is a speaking test, I write something and I memorizing and I just telling people, that's not speaking, just speech... (ESL student participant interview, March 16, 2006)

ESL instructors’ responses on the opportunities for ESL students to practise their speaking skills correspond to those of the ESL students. One ESL instructor stated:

> Also they are expected to give speeches, presentations and talks...quite a few, not just descriptive but moving from description to more abstract ideas, concepts so they should be able to move beyond the levels for examples, giving directions or giving instructions. And they should be able to discuss their opinions. So we do ask them to do presentations, so we have this huge activity which is debated and is broken down into parts, so students do debates within the classroom and then all the students in the 050 level choose representatives to present in the class and then they debate one class to another. (ESL instructor participant interview, February 18, 2005)

*Speaking practice in university academic studies:*

Responses from ESL students and university instructors concerning the academic practice requiring speaking skills in the university were identified mainly as participating in class discussion, asking questions related to the content, and doing presentations.
Compared with the speaking practice ESL students had in ESL programs, these activities were more spontaneous in nature, and there was less time for preparation.

4.1.4 Practice of Listening Skills in Two Contexts

In the ESL program, listening is a skill to focus on. ESL students get listening practice by watching TV programs and listening to CDs. They are evaluated through quizzes. Focus on listening skills enforces language knowledge (e.g., vocabulary) and comprehension of content. One ESL instructor commented:

Some of the things they need to do, for instance, are to listen to a 20-minute lecture and take notes and have a comprehension of the main points of the lecture. And then we give them exercises, opportunity to practice. Listen to news broadcast and comprehend. Students choose radio programs from documentary clips and listen to them. (ESL instructor participant interview, March 26, 2005)

Another ESL instructor stated:

For their listening skills, they have to watch a TV program, for example, make a vocabulary list, and present the vocabulary and TV program, list their questions about it. So they are learning how to focus on main ideas when they are taking notes. (ESL instructor participant interview, March 5, 2006)
Responses from ESL students and university instructors identified the most common academic practices involving listening skills as: attending lectures and interacting with the instructor and peers.

4.1.5 Other Emerging Issues

Research participants identified various opportunities for language practice in ESL programs and university academic studies. Emerging from participants’ responses are other issues involving academic practice in the two contexts. These emerging issues are presented below under a separate category.

4.1.5.1 Teaching Methodology

ESL instructors said that ESL classrooms are student-centered, language instruction is theme-based and task-based, and various skills, such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing are integrated and practised to fulfill communicative purposes. In contrast, many teaching and learning methods adopted by ESL programs are not often identified in the university, such as, “in engineering type of work, we don’t have as much group discussion as we do in philosophical and educational types of courses” (University instructor participant interview, March 17, 2005). On the other hand, one ESL instructor stated:
How we teach is different because we do it in an integrated approach. So in the ESL class, we are doing a unit. We read books on something, and we have discussion on it. Based on my knowledge, the theoretical knowledge is hidden from the students. It’s behind the themes. I use theoretical knowledge to prepare class. I don’t say to the students “This is my theoretical knowledge”. I give them prepared classes, like education, what happens at school. But if I’m teaching English 100, if a professor is teaching academic content, what they’ve learned in the university goes directly to the students. (ESL instructor participant interview, March 7, 2006)

The fundamental difference of the teaching focus was articulated. As one ESL instructor put it:

Here, really it’s language acquisition. They are trying to acquire the facility with the language, whereas in the university, it’s almost the opposite. It’s content that’s important. Language is expected of you to have. You have to have the fluency and facility with the language. (ESL instructor participant interview, March 7, 2006)

4.1.5.2 Student-Instructor Relationship

Responses from ESL instructors revealed “the relationship between the instructor and students is very different”. In the ESL program, ESL instructors seemed to have a “dual” face of “being an instructor of a language” and also a “mentor” or “coach” to provide “emotional support”, to be with students “all the way throughout the [learning] process, [to] coach and help” (ESL instructor participant interviews). In university, the relationship between students and university instructors was perceived more like an
adult-to-adult relationship. Here students were supposed to take more responsibility for their own learning. One ESL instructor commented:

In ESL, the teacher is more like a coach, because they have their assignments. We are coaching them and helping them prepare for it, giving them ideas, suggestions. We also have to mark it at the end. But we are with them all the way throughout the process, coaching and helping and so on. In the university, they don’t have that support. They are expected to be like the other students, and they have to stand by themselves. (ESL instructor participant interview, February 18, 2005)

An ESL student stated:

For students, we are the same, just learn different things. In ESL, teachers are responsible. They are responsible for your study. I mean professors in university are really responsible, but I mean in ESL students are pushed. They are pushed by teachers. Oh you have to finish this assignment. If you don’t do this assignment, you lost your marks. In university, professors are responsible too, they always there, they answer your questions, and you can get help from your professor. If you don’t get good marks, that’s bad. That’s your business. Professors are not responsible for your marks. They were taught [teaching] you, they were educated you. But how much you can get, that depends on the students. (ESL student participant interview, March 26, 2005)

4.1.5.3 Sociocultural Issues

Sociocultural concerns emerged from participants’ responses. One ESL instructor stated:
And it’s cultural challenges too. Because especially in many Asian cultures, students think the teachers will give them the topic. They don’t need to think of the topic. This is a big challenge for many cultural groups. Whereas other cultural groups already have it, like the western group. They are very much like us. It’s very similar. They have knowledge and strategies that are needed to process that. The difference between ESL and university is mostly the awareness about the students. (ESL instructor participant interview, March 5, 2006)

In summary, responses from the research participants revealed various opportunities for language practice in the ESL program and the university. Different focuses with regard to language practice as well as different language demands underlying that language practice emerged from the interview data. Data gathered from interviews identified other differences in teaching methodologies, student-instructor relationships, and awareness of sociocultural issues in the two contexts.

4.2 Theme Two: Challenges ESL Students Encountered in ESL Programs and University Discipline-Specific Studies

Interviews of research participants highlighted the different challenges ESL students experienced in their studies in both contexts. The following interview questions were designed to gather relevant information:

ESL Students: What particular difficulties, if any, did you experience during completion of reading and writing assignments in both contexts?
ESL Instructors: What particular difficulties, if any, did you perceive in ESL students’ experience during completion of reading and writing assignments?

University Instructors: What particular difficulties, if any, did you perceive in ESL students’ experience during completion of reading and writing assignments?

In this section, challenges ESL students had in their study in both contexts are presented in relation to the four skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking) within a language. Other challenges perceived by the participants are grouped in a separate category.

4.2.1 Problems with Reading in Two Contexts

Difficulties experienced during reading assignments in ESL programs:

When asked what particular difficulties they had in completing their ESL reading assignments, ESL students reflected on their learning experience in the ESL program, and noted that relatively inadequate vocabulary and lack of related background knowledge impeded their comprehension of the reading texts in their ESL programs. One of the students said:

I think it [the difficulty] was the vocabulary. Sometimes words there you don’t know the meaning....sometimes you get to understand the meaning in different way. (ESL student participant interview, March 19, 2005)
Another student stated:

Vocabulary is kind of difficult to me. So I had to find some vocabulary, so quite difficult at that time. (ESL student participant interview, April 4, 2006)

**Difficulties experienced during reading assignments in university academic studies:**

The problems with comprehension that ESL students experienced in university academic studies were mainly those related to terminology (i.e., specific vocabulary), discipline-related background knowledge, and a heavy reading load. One ESL student stated:

[I don’t know] the professional words to describe the thing. But in the university, they use different structures, they have longer paragraph. Sometimes, they use quotes from different materials, but I didn’t know or I just can’t get the full meaning. Sometimes they use graph, sometimes when they are explaining the graph, you will need to understand all those specific words. (ESL student participant interview, April 4, 2006)

Compared to reading in ESL programs, lack of sufficient background knowledge was perceived as a much greater impediment in university studies. Another big difference that ESL students perceived in the reading assignments between ESL and university classes was related to the volume of reading required. They were simply overwhelmed by the heavy reading load they had in their university courses. One student said:
University is really intensive, like reading stuff. Time-consuming. It takes a long time. I need more time. (ESL student participant interview, March 16, 2006)

University instructors perceived the reading performance of students differently. As one university instructor put it, “I find that students don’t seem to have as much trouble with reading — understanding reading — as they do in conversation”. And this instructor went on to explain the reason might be “perhaps they [ESL students] can go at their own rate. When they are reading they can read slower” (University instructor participant interview, April 18, 2006).

In summary, the general reading problems ESL students identified were difficulties understanding the vocabulary in ESL programs and terminology in university academic studies. Insufficient background knowledge in both contexts revealed the importance of the role of background knowledge in facilitating comprehension. Background knowledge was more relevant in university studies since reading texts in ESL were more personal in nature. In university studies, context and background knowledge depend on course content. For example, ESL students with an education background in related fields had fewer vocabulary difficulties. When they lacked prior related experience, ESL students generally perceived difficulties in understanding the terminology. Besides, interview data also reveals the difference in volume of reading required in the two contexts.

4.2.2 Problems with Writing in Two Contexts

Difficulties experienced during writing assignments in ESL programs:
In response to the interview question regarding difficulties ESL students experienced in their completion of their writing assignments in the ESL program, three of the five ESL students said there was not much difficulty. ESL students' responses were consistent with previous interview answers. This was probably due to the fact the writing assignments were mainly based on their personal experience and, therefore, seemed easy in ESL and fairly simple for ESL students (see the writing assignments reported in the first section of this chapter). The two ESL students, who did mention difficulties, related these to language use and writing format. As one student put it:

The basic vocabulary I know, but, not detail thing, a little bit different between the same meaning, but there is a little bit different... teacher mentioned that my grammar is not quite enough. (ESL student participant interview, March 26, 2005)

Regarding difficulties with format, one Chinese student stated:

I show you an example, the format for example. When people write in Chinese, somehow it is different when you should write in English. For example, we will have a topic sentence for each paragraph, the English one, you have a topic sentence, showing the reader what’s the main ideas about. But for Chinese writing, maybe you can put it at the end of the paragraph, to conclude it. I think it’s the English way which prefer to have it at the beginning. Sometimes you just forget it. (ESL student participant interview, April 4, 2006)

As reported in the previous section of this chapter, ESL writing instruction is focused on the practice of writing format. ESL students acknowledged the writing format provided by ESL instructors was useful. Nevertheless, their responses as cited above
revealed it wasn’t easy for some ESL students to get used to and master the writing format, at least initially. Furthermore, all of the student participants reported they had difficulties with time limits in producing the written assignments. One ESL student stated:

The other problem I used to have is the time limit. Sometimes you have to write down everything in class. Which means you can’t go over time. You can’t take it home. For English learners, sometimes you just found out that there was nothing in your head. Sometimes it’s little bit embarrassing… you were asked to write a longer essay, you were asked to write more formally. That becomes a big problem. (ESL student participant interview, March 16, 2006)

Difficulties experienced during writing assignments in university academic studies:

When asked if they experienced any particular difficulties in completing written assignments in university academic studies, all the ESL students reported having difficulties. In contrast to the ESL assignments, ESL students indicated writing tasks assigned by university instructors were what they considered more academic and research-oriented. Accordingly, there was more critical thinking involved, and students were asked to generate, develop and organize their opinions. From ESL students’ responses, perceived difficulties encountered in the completion of written assignments in university included:

1) Inadequate language knowledge and skills;
2) Misunderstanding the content and lack of familiarity with the writing format;
3) Improper language organization;
4) Developing and expressing personal ideas;
5) Adjusting to the appropriate western writing style.

1) Inadequate language knowledge and skills

Throughout the interviews, ESL student participants expressed their concerns about their insufficient knowledge of terminology. As one student put it:

I have problems with vocabulary, and expressions, people usually use, I had problems with structures with the punctuation. When I was supposed to write a research essay, I can say that I encounter the same thing. (ESL student participant interview, March 16, 2006)

Similarly, another ESL student reported her lack of discipline-specific vocabulary:

So far, I take English 100, so I write a few papers, but not too much. The most hard part for me, I find my vocabulary is not large enough, sometimes hard to find exact words. (ESL student participant interview, April 4, 2006)

2) Misunderstanding the content and lack of familiarity with writing format

Responses from the ESL students revealed their concerns with properly understanding the content of the written texts they had to respond to. One ESL student stated:

That's accounting class, so for all the calculation, I didn’t have a problem. But the first part, lots of explain things and understanding things, so I lost a lot of marks. (ESL student participant interview, March 26, 2005)
Another ESL student expressed the same feeling, and said, “the other thing is the understanding of certain event. You just don’t understand it very well” (ESL student participant interview, April 4, 2006).

All the ESL students articulated their frustration with their lack of familiarity with the writing format. One student said:

When I was doing Engineering 103, sometimes we have to write formal essay to submit your final project or to be a description about your design.... You would certainly like to talk about the thing, but you just don’t know how to talk in English. You just don’t know the proper way to speak it out. (ESL student participant interview, April 4, 2006)

3) Improper language organization

All the ESL students had developed a general knowledge of how to organize their writing in their ESL programs, such as skills of organizing an academic paper into introduction, body, and conclusion sections. Instruction is reinforced in higher-level ESL courses when ESL students write a five-paragraph essay. Despite advanced writing practice in ESL such as essay writing, ESL students still revealed they had difficulties in organizing certain writing tasks. One ESL student stated:

I can say, comparison, I can compare very well, I can do that kind of writing very well. But like abstract, like just describing this picture, maybe my sentence structures not quite good to describe that kind of stuff. I thought that maybe there was a lot of vocabulary that I can use, but I cannot choose proper vocabulary form, I cannot make my sentence more clearly. So maybe that was my problem. (ESL student participant interview, March 16, 2006)
4) Developing and expressing personal ideas

Another major obstacle these ESL students had to cope with in their university writing was to develop self-expression, or what one participant referred to as “how do you express your understanding about certain thing, that is about yourself. You can tell from yourself” (ESL student participant interview, March 26, 2005).

A Korean student expressed confusion about the similar marks for every one of the writing assignments. After checking with the instructor, this ESL student referred to the instructor’s comment, saying, “…but the idea which you wrote down is your personal thing or depends on your brain idea, so I cannot tell about it” (ESL student participant interview, March 16, 2006). She continued,

It’s quite difficult you know, critical thinking was really, I thought I didn’t do anything about it like before. I have to really think about it and I have to discuss with my friends, what you think about it, and give information… (ESL student participant interview, March 16, 2006)

Another ESL student reflected on his experience and said:

In university, they ask you to give point of view, nothing from the book, nothing from nowhere. They ask you to explain why this happen. To give point of view, against, favor. You don’t know how to start. (ESL student participant interview, March 19, 2005)

5) Adjusting to the appropriate western writing style

Compared to other problems that the ESL students experienced in their writing at university, difficulties in adjusting to the western writing style were the greatest. One
Korean student seemed very sensitive to issues of writing style and expressed frustration about marks on assignments:

I got to check my vocabulary, my essay in the academic writing centre … I thought my essay was good, and I can get good mark when I hand in, but the teacher gave me back and write some opinion. Teacher check it, that I cannot understand this sentence, it’s very abstract. I cannot understand what do you want to talk to me, … I thought I can understand, maybe in Korean thinking I can understand perfectly, but Canadian said “No, I cannot understand what do you want to talk in this sentence. This sentence is strange…”. Maybe my sentence is not correct. … My thinking style is not quite English. Maybe Canadian thinking style…. I want to put into English one, but it was not work well, it was Korean one…Until now, I don’t know how to solve this kind of problem. (ESL student participant interview, March 16, 2006)

An ESL student from Mexico spoke about the challenges in trying to avoid grammatical errors in writing assignments:

... the grammar because this is supposed to be for Canadian university, so for international students they ask you to do native speaker in writing and everything. So big challenge. I have to write report papers, ten-page papers, spelling mistakes, or commas, they take out one point. So it’s really hard for me. It’s pretty challenging….My mainly mistake I have done so far, the sentence structure is almost the same as Spanish, but the difference is all the preposition going to different way. So when I was typing, I put wrong preposition. Because I wasn’t practicing enough before I enter the faculty. (ESL student participant interview, March 19, 2005)

ESL students’ frustrations and struggles in adjusting to the western style of thinking and writing revealed concerns beyond language and academic content. The
influence society, culture and values have on the construction of knowledge, way of thinking, and approach to writing was stressed particularly by a Chinese student:

I think in ESL, people are writing in international way. But what I can think of from university is that we need to write more Canadian. Sometimes, people can’t understand you. Sometimes, they thought the language you use is a little bit strange. We don’t have that time. We are not like Canadians, they grow in this country, they develop by this culture, so I’m just like a guest to the nation. You just can’t master everything. We are often asked to express our own ideas. That’s the thing about vocabulary the word chosen, you need to choose the appropriate one, that’s the most difficulties. Sometimes the word I use is not good to supply to certain situation. (ESL student participant interview, April 4, 2006)

In addition to problems with language, content, writing style, organization and the development of personal ideas, students also stressed the challenges of writing longer academic papers, and the reading involved in completing writing assignments. One student stated:

In history class, I got 2000 word essay. In more than 10 pages, in ESL just do 4 pages, that was maximum. In here, to put my opinion, it was 10 pages, I can say, I’m desperate. I cannot do, and also I have to read at least 3 books. So it’s a lot of reading, to prepare that essay before one month. (ESL student participant interview, March 16, 2006)

In summary, writing difficulties of ESL students had in both contexts identified from participants’ responses included lack of sufficient linguistic knowledge of English language, lack of familiarity with the writing format and western writing style. Moreover, ESL students had difficulties in developing and organizing personal ideas. Data regarding
ESL students’ writing difficulties in both contexts revealed concerns beyond language. Cultural influences on ESL students’ approach to writing were evident.

4.2.3 Problems with Speaking in Two Contexts

In contrast to difficulties ESL students experienced in completing their reading and writing tasks in both contexts, ESL students perceived relatively fewer problems in their oral speech. The analysis of interview data reveals that similar obstacles were identified in both contexts. For that reason, the data in addressing challenges impeding the speaking performance of ESL students in both contexts are presented together.

Responses from ESL students generally related to the problems they experienced in speaking, specifically with pronunciation and appropriate word choice. One student stated:

First, I was a little bit concerned my pronunciation, about the English, I know the words, but you just can’t speak it aloud in a proper way, so that’s the problem. The other thing is that I’m not really sure if I can catch on the right meaning. So I prefer to talk with my professor after class. (ESL student participant interview, March 26, 2005)

Uncertainty about pronunciation and meaning of words was perceived to hinder ESL students’ participation in discussions and interfere with interaction with instructors and peers. One student said:

They are talking to each other, but you just can’t get in. But sometimes, they talk to you, but you are not very sure about how to respond. If you
have one group project... (ESL student participant interview, April 4, 2006)

Another student stated, “… sometimes the professor cannot understand what question I’m asking” (ESL student participant interview, March 26, 2005). Similar to challenges in ESL students’ adjustment to the western writing style, problems were encountered by ESL students due to the culture and sub-culture of different communities. One student said:

My thinking style is not quite English. Maybe Canadian thinking style. Someone said before you think English, you don’t need to think, just speak, like inborn natural ability. To me is not, my English is learning as a second language. So I have to think then I speak, also when I listen someone speak, I have to think and then put into mind, but teacher speak so fast, so I don’t have time to do that. So at that time, I cannot understand particular point, so I have to search website to find that one. So I need extra time to think. Because I cannot make sentences clearly, I cannot say, I just thought in Korean, I just speak in English, that was not match. So maybe in front of my classmates, I just say some words, vocabulary, some sentences, maybe I cannot make some organize things, it’s not good. (ESL student participant interview, March 16, 2006)

Responses from ESL students also revealed preferred language by various communities. A Korean student said:

Speaking, in ESL we talk in English of course, but it’s a little bit different with Canadian way. We can put our way in English. We make English in our ESL way, because teacher say maybe this is just ESL language. We can understand, but that’s not English way. We put English in our way, Japanese, Chinese, Korean. If I talk with my Korean friends in English, maybe we put English in Korean way, so in ESL we do. Teacher say ESL
English and Canadian university English is little different, they say it as a joke, but I cannot take it as a joke, because it really happen in ESL. (ESL student participant interview, March 16, 2006)

Responses from instructors indicated similar concerns. The university instructors noticed that ESL students were more likely to ask questions after class. In the university instructors’ view, this attitude of ESL students indicated their lack of confidence in speaking out in class. One university instructor commented:

I find international students maybe are hesitant to ask questions in class. They more likely come to ask after the class...certainly there are some hesitations on their part to ask questions to discuss things because they feel a little inadequate, I think, in their English. (University instructor participant interview, March 17, 2005)

4.2.4 Problems with Listening in Two Contexts

Students’ responses highlighted the problems they experienced in their listening abilities. Similar to issues around speaking abilities, the information obtained from interviews of ESL students concerning the challenges hindering their listening performance in both contexts was grouped together. Challenges with listening were identified as problems in understanding the meaning of words, various accents, following the rate of speech, lack of familiarity with slang and jokes in the conversation, and with the content-specific knowledge to assist understanding. As one student stated:
In the university, we probably realize that people around you will talk in a local way, sometimes they bring some sayings you don't know. Even they have some jokes, but it's not funny for you. Sometimes there is a way to say. Sometimes it's hard to understand, you have to ask, "What do you mean?" Sometimes they mention a singer, but we just don't know. (ESL student participant interview, April 4, 2006)

Another ESL student stated:

After I graduate my ESL class, I take university class....I remember first time, it's kind of shock, because I cannot understand what teacher say... I cannot write down, take a note, I have to listen, take a note, I have to think, and I have to find vocabulary, which vocabulary the teacher using, it's kind of confusing, missing everything. So I thought, I really need study hard at that time.... I cannot figure out things like Chinese medicine, academic stuff, maybe because of vocabulary, and then because they speak so fast, their pronunciation is so different, so maybe I cannot catch that....other Canadians they speak, there is a different way to talk, lot of slang, a lot of idioms which I don't know, so it's really hard to figure out, so I have to ask them, "What's this mean? What's this mean?". (ESL student participant interview, March 16, 2006)

Students believed having sufficient background knowledge played an important role in their comprehension of conversation and lectures.

First, understand lecture is kind of difficult. If I take a history class, I have to know history or something, like vocabulary about history class. If I take psychology class, also I have to know about those vocabulary. So first I have to read a book to understand the teacher, what the teacher talk. Textbook. Otherwise I cannot understand class. (ESL student participant interview, March 16, 2006)
One student said:

Your classmates, they have their knowledge from their high school, they more likely have the opportunities to put it into practice, so they will be more know better than I did. (ESL student participant interview, March 26, 2005)

Responses from university instructors revealed ESL students’ lack of familiarity with the way of speaking of native English speakers. As one university instructor put it:

In terms of speaking, most language training programs are not about speaking the vernacular language. I know there will be people teaching idioms. But most of us speak that way regularly. OK, “you are in the ball park”. It means what you are doing is appropriate. So with ESL students, ... they are thinking something to do with baseball.... Lots of my colleagues speak that way all the time. (University instructor participant interview, April 18, 2006)

In summary, responses from research participants identified the ESL students’ problems with listening and speaking in both contexts. These problems were: catching meaning of English words and idioms, choosing appropriate words in oral speech, following native speakers’ regular rate of speech and getting used to different accents. Cultural differences in ways of structuring sentences were perceived as challenging to these ESL students.
4.3 Theme Three: Impact of ESL Completion on ESL Students’ Transition to Their Chosen University Academic Studies

Data collected from interviews indicate there are concerns regarding the effectiveness of ESL programs. The purpose of this study was to identify the role of ESL programs in facilitating ESL students’ university academic studies. The questions in the interviews were formulated in order to probe for this concern and they are as follows:

ESL students: In your opinion, what has been the impact of the completion of ESL programs in facilitating your university academic studies?

ESL Instructors: In your opinion, what has been the impact of the completion of ESL programs in facilitating ESL students’ university academic studies?

University Instructors: What should, in your perception, ESL students’ language abilities be in order to facilitate their university academic studies?

ESL students’ perspectives on the effectiveness of ESL programs:

With regard to perceptions of the impact of ESL completion on their academic language abilities to undertaking university classes, all ESL students spoke highly of their ESL instructors and of the academic language preparation they had from ESL programs. In their opinion, completing ESL programs was helpful for their university studies. One
ESL student commented, “Personally, I think the ESL program is greatly doing a good job to educate international students” (ESL student participant interview, April 4, 2006).

Another student stated:

they [ESL programs] have a pretty good system, like offer different kinds of classes. ...Most of the courses I think is good and I got really good teachers. They are really like experts, so they know very well how to organize the whole class ... It’s for oral English class. For writing class, my teacher told us how to write basic things like ... statements. It’s really helpful. For me, right now I’m taking English 100 [at the university], most of them I have learned in ESL, so it’s very very helpful....In my opinion, they want students to use the language and get to really use the language and communicate with each other, [ESL] offer all different kinds of language, or different kinds of classes, all those fields of classes, so you can take one you prefer, so it really depends on the person. If I think my listening is not good, I might take movie class to help my listening. (ESL student participant interview, March 26, 2005)

There were positive comments from research participants on the effectiveness of ESL programs. Some responses from ESL students, however, revealed possible expectations for more appropriate and efficient ESL programs. One student said:

For the listening, they [ESL program] prepared me very well. But for the writing, no... they give you a good concept how you should write, but they don’t make you practise enough. I thought they would teach you something hard, like all the assignments or the academic things [you have to do in the university], the class was kind of slow for the level you are suppose to be in. (ESL student participant interview, March 19, 2005)
Another student stated:

First, in ESL, I’m surrounded by Japanese, Chinese, Korean or some kind of Asian people, people from other countries. But in university, there is a lot of Canadian, which I can say, I never experience. Because in ESL, we don’t have experience or chance to speak to Canadian. So I’m really afraid of how can I [make] conversation with them, and how can I understand my teacher, because lecture is kind of long, maybe vocabulary will be difficult, there is a lot of reading stuff. So I’m afraid of it... (ESL student participant interview, March 16, 2006)

**ESL instructors’ perspective on the effectiveness of ESL programs:**

In response to interview questions, three ESL instructors formulated their answers indirectly by emphasizing personal factors that may interfere with ESL students’ performance in their university studies. ESL instructors stated some of the factors influencing the academic performance of ESL students are: motivation, personality, and autonomy. For instance, one ESL instructor stated:

So if they are good students, they seem to do very well when they get into their own subject areas. If they are not such good students academically, I think they have a lot of problems. (ESL instructor participant interview, February 18, 2005)

Another ESL instructor said:

There is such a broad range of preparedness among these students. From my experience, a lot of students are beautifully ready ...Some students have a wonderful work ethic, and by the time they leave the advanced level, we are so confident that they will do well, ... Other students, unfortunately, because they are not working hard [on their assigned academic work]... they really struggle simply with the language. So there...
are students who sort of squeak by in their classes and those students are not well prepared for university. (ESL instructor participant interview, March 7, 2006)

All the ESL instructors mentioned that, when compared with ESL students who pass a TOEFL test (Test of English as a Foreign Language) and go to university directly, ESL program graduates are more likely to do well in their chosen university studies.

[We] have two kinds of students. You have highly motivated students, they want more, they do everything more than you ask them to do. Then you have kind of a mean group, struggling a little bit, but they are also very motivated. And you have usually a small percentage at the bottom.... But for preparation when they leave our program, I think, it’s my opinion that they are much stronger than someone coming in with the TOEFL score. (ESL instructor participant interview, March 5, 2006)

University instructors’ perspectives on ESL students’ required language abilities:

ESL students entering university may take different routes to get there. Some take the TOEFL test and pass entrance requirements (550 in most of Canadian universities), and are accepted by the university directly after they come to Canada, while others go through ESL programs. Given the diversity of ESL students’ backgrounds, it is probably difficult for university instructors to make an accurate assessment of the effectiveness of ESL programs on the academic language development of ESL students. University instructors interviewed stated the difficulties ESL students in general have in their university studies reflects a gap between the level of proficiency ESL students have and
the expected language proficiency required for university academic studies. As one university instructor stated:

Most of the students that I have had are able to understand, are able to communicate,...I think they have different capabilities in terms of speaking and in terms of reading... their grammar isn't perfect and their writing sometimes leaves much to be desired. (University instructor participant interview, March 17, 2005)

Another university instructor said:

Some of them [ESL students] finish ESL. There is still a long way being able to write [academic papers]. They are able to handle mathematics and programming.... When [ESL students are asked to] sit down and write a paper, they are just not ready now. ... Students come in, they’ve gone through ESL. They’re out of ESL. But I don’t perceive they are ready to handle courses. They don’t seem to. I’m generalizing here, I mean, they are still struggling.... now you [students] have to analyze, and solve [problems], now you got to interpret the language... there are word problems,...they don’t have enough practice. (University instructor participant interview, April 18, 2006)

A summary of responses with regard to research participants’ perspectives on the impact of ESL programs on academic performance of ESL students in their chosen university studies revealed inconsistencies. Research participants identified various factors that might interfere with the performance of ESL students, such as motivation, personality and learning autonomy. Although all of the research participants confirmed the effectiveness of ESL programs in facilitating the transition of ESL students to their university studies, they also spoke about their expectations regarding a more efficient ESL program.
4.4 Theme Four: Research Participants’ Expectations Regarding ESL Programs

One of the main purposes of conducting this study was to provide ESL practitioners with first-hand information to enhance the development of a more appropriate and efficient ESL program. To achieve this end, a single interview question encouraged research participants to generate suggestions, provide input and make recommendations based on their personal experiences. All participants were asked the same question: In your opinion, what would be a more appropriate and efficient ESL program?

ESL students’ responses:

During the interviews, ESL students reflected on their learning experience in the ESL program and commented on their current studies at the university. One ESL student suggested more intensive training in ESL classes would be helpful.

040 and 050 is kind of huge jump. 050 and university is huge jump. So we have to reduce that jump, so we have to make a little similarity to the class, so I hope that class not just focus on common life. Activities in 050 should be in 030, 040 also. (ESL student participant interview, March 16, 2006)
Another student stated:

In [advanced class], they ask you to speak, but they don’t challenge you that much with writing... so I would expect we have more essays to do, more papers...you can practise your writing in ESL. Then when you get into the faculty, you have good level of writing. You are more comfortable doing papers. (ESL student participant interview, March 19, 2005)

ESL students discussed their expectations of having more contact with English native speakers. One ESL student said, “I hope there is also some experience to meet some Canadians in the ESL class” (ESL student participant interview, March 26, 2005).

Another student shared that opinion.

Students from other areas, their first language is not English, so it’s hard for them, they are still small community. ESL can get more contact, help ESL students get more contact with university students, I mean Canadian students, that would be perfect. I don’t have much contact with university students. Students can get more chances to talk to people from university, from the native speakers, that may be better. (ESL student participant interview, March 16, 2006)

ESL instructors’ responses:

ESL instructors expressed their concerns about difficulties ESL graduates had in their university studies, and discussed their expectations for the ESL program. ESL instructors suggested the need to develop advanced ESL programs that would be more academically-oriented and more discipline-tailored. One ESL instructor suggested:
It would be nicer if we could have a little more time in the language programs...I would love to have more specific courses, another level at the end of [the advanced level] for people who are going into university. An [academic discipline] ESL course of engineering, an ESL course of administration. A little more specific. (ESL instructor participant interview, February 18, 2005)

ESL instructors encouraged interaction between ESL students and native English-speaking university students, between ESL staff and university faculties. One ESL instructor commented:

Create a mentoring system, help students build bridges. [University native English-speaking] students in engineering would partner with an international student [and] help [ESL] students, maybe answer questions about homework, ...and then those students can get some expertise which [ESL instructors] don’t have. I think along with language acquisition, that would be helpful. (ESL instructor participant interview, March 7, 2006)

Another ESL instructor stated:

We are hoping to build bridges. We don’t have as much bridging as we should have. They don’t exist. We want to build stronger ties between faculties. (ESL instructor participant interview, March 5, 2006)

ESL instructors made specific suggestions on improving the ESL classes. One ESL instructor suggested:
The first thing will be a seminar, the seminar style, and would be a heavy emphasis on speaking presentation ... the themes could be connected with the needs... because in a seminar style you have people questioning you ... This is the course I would design as a bridging course. (ESL instructor participant interview, March 5, 2006)

University instructors' responses:

University instructors expected ESL students to have stronger communication skills and solid knowledge of English grammar. One instructor stated:

One thing that I believe that we need to do in our university education is to have an English class that concentrates more on communication, more emphasis on grammar, and less on literature appreciation. (University instructor participant interview, March 17, 2005)

University instructors emphasized that ESL students should have more cultural immersion. One university instructor stated:

I think one thing that would be beneficial to the ESL students is if they could be more immersed into something like a Canadian home. It would be useful to them to have more interaction with our society. (University instructor participant interview, April 18, 2006)

In summary, in addressing the research question on the need for a more appropriate and efficient ESL program, research participants spoke of the need for better preparation of the ESL students. Their suggestions for the ESL program included:

• more language training (such as, grammar, communication skills);
- counseling support;
- seminar-based lectures, as well as more specific, academic-oriented and discipline-specific courses;
- building a mentoring/bridging system;
- more interaction with Canadian society.

Responses from research participants provide data which could possibly assist ESL practitioners in developing a more appropriate and efficient ESL program.

4.5 Summary of Interview Findings

The participants' interview answers reveal differences in the opportunities for language practice in ESL programs and university discipline studies. In ESL, language learning and teaching seemed to be more aimed at developing students' communicative competence and building a solid language foundation for students to undertake university studies. This leads to the emphasis on language knowledge such as, vocabulary, grammar, writing format and comprehension in general. The authentic teaching materials involved in language practice in ESL were generally on the topics of cultural issues and everyday events. The ESL student participants in this study felt, however, that merely developing communicative competence does not effectively equip them to take on undergraduate studies. For these ESL students, English was no longer a university course they were taking. English had become a tool to unlock all knowledge available to them in any faculty they chose to study in at an English-speaking university. For these ESL
students, this tool would be used not only to gain knowledge but also to immerse themselves in the new culture and community. The ESL students experienced increasing intellectual and academic requirements, especially when dealing with ever-increasing complex oral and written language assignments. These were but a few of the obstacles these ESL students encountered in their university academic studies.

From the interviews conducted throughout this study, a clearer picture emerges of what it was like for these ESL students studying at a Canadian university and what some of the challenges were in their academic environments. Data gathered from interviews allow for a closer analysis of language practice in both ESL and university discipline studies, as well as suggest some challenges these ESL students encountered in the two contexts. Moreover, data give us at least a glimpse into the impact of ESL completion on the adjustment of ESL students to the academic community.
Chapter 5: Reflection on ESL Programs: Document Review

Document review is one of the research methods employed in this study. Various documents including Canadian Language Benchmarks, and documents developed and distributed among ESL instructors and ESL students at the ESL Centre (e.g., booklists and information packages) were collected and reviewed. The analysis of relevant documents is important for a better understanding of the learning experience of ESL students and of the beliefs of ESL instructors. Data from document review together with research participants' interview data are used in an attempt to answer the following research questions and to address concerns about the impact of completing the ESL program on the transition of ESL students to their university studies. The questions are: What are the particular instructional objectives that ESL programs aim to achieve? What language abilities are ESL graduates expected to acquire?

Due to the significantly growing number of immigrants into Canada, the Canadian government has developed and distributed a national descriptive framework for adult ESL education, Canadian Language Benchmarks (CLB) (Canadian Language Benchmarks, 2000). CLB is "a descriptive scale of communicative competencies and performance tasks in which the learner demonstrates application of language knowledge (competence) and skill" (Canadian Language Benchmarks, 2000, p.viii). In addition, CLB is also marked as a national standard for planning second language curricula for a variety of contexts, such as school and workplaces (Canadian Language Benchmarks, 2000). CLB has found its way into many ESL training institutes and programs in Canada. The ESL centre in this study is one of them. During interviews, ESL instructors stated
that CLB was adopted in the ESL program as a way of assessing the language abilities of ESL graduates. In other words, ESL instruction in this ESL centre aims to comply with CLB standards for listening, speaking, reading and writing. Thus, ESL programs at different levels have their own syllabus in accordance with CLB. The table below illustrates the standard of CLB (level 8) and instructional objectives of the advanced level (050) in the ESL program, with regard to the four skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

Table 1: Standard of CLB (level 8) & Instructional Objectives of ESL Programs (050)
(Reference not given to preserve anonymity of participants)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>050 CORE CLASS BOOKLIST (Spring 2006)</th>
<th>Canadian Language Benchmarks (Level 8: Fluent intermediate proficiency)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Listening &amp; Note-taking Skills:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Listening:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Demonstrate critical understanding of (a) 20-30 minute lectures and presentations by one speaker, and (b) authentic videos of 15-30 minutes in length.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Develop and practice strategies for note taking.</td>
<td>• Learner can comprehend main points, details, speaker’s purpose, attitudes, levels of formality and styles in oral discourse in moderately demanding contexts of language use.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Can follow most formal and informal general conversations, and some technical, work-related discourse in own field at a normal rate of speech.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Can follow discourse about abstract and complex ideas on a familiar topic.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Can comprehend an expanded range of concrete, abstract and conceptual language.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Can determine mood, attitudes and feelings.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Can understand sufficient vocabulary, idioms and colloquial expressions to follow detailed stories of general popular interest.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Can follow clear and coherent extended instructional texts and directions.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Can follow clear and coherent phone messages on unfamiliar and non-routine matters.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Often has difficulty following rapid, colloquial/idiomatic or regionally accented speech between native speakers.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Speaking Skills:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Speaking:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Manage a conversation or discussion of 10-15 minutes in length on a researched topic.</td>
<td>• Learner can communicate effectively in most daily practical and social situations, and in familiar routine work situations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Give a 15-30 minute oral presentation on a research topic in own area of study.</td>
<td>• Can participate in conversations with confidence.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Participate in debates, conduct interviews,</td>
<td>• Can speak on familiar topics at both concrete and abstract levels (10 to 15 minutes).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Can provide descriptions, opinions and explanations; can synthesize abstract complex ideas; can hypothesize.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• In social interaction, demonstrates an increased ability to respond appropriately to the formality level of the situation.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Can use a variety of sentence structures, including</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reading &amp; Vocabulary-building Skills:</td>
<td>Reading:</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Read a passage from an authentic text 3-5 pages long, and write a summary or outline to demonstrate that you understand its contents.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Use a variety of strategies to understand and remember vocabulary.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Can locate and integrate several specific pieces of information in visually complex texts (e.g., tables, directories) or across paragraphs or sections of text.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• May read popular newspaper and magazine articles and popular easy fiction as well as academic and business materials.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Uses a unilingual dictionary when reading for precision vocabulary building.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Learner can follow main ideas, key words and important details in an authentic two- or three-page text on a familiar topic, but within an only partially predictable context.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Can extract relevant points, but often requires clarification of idioms and of various cultural references.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Can extract key information and relevant detail from a pagelong text, and write an outline or a one-paragraph summary.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Can link sentences and paragraphs (three or four) to form coherent texts to express ideas on familiar abstract topics, with some support for main ideas, and with an appropriate sense of audience.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Has occasional difficulty with complex structures (e.g., those reflecting bias and the purpose/function of text).</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Learner demonstrates fluent ability in performing moderately complex writing tasks.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Can write routine business letters (e.g., letters of inquiry, cover letters for applications) and personal and formal social messages.</td>
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<td>• Can write down a set of simple instructions, based on clear oral communication or simple written procedural text of greater length.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Can fill out complex formatted documents.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Can extract key information and relevant detail from a pagelong text, and write an outline or a one-paragraph summary.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Demonstrates good control over common sentence patterns, coordination and subordination, and spelling and mechanics.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Has occasional difficulty with complex structures (e.g., those reflecting cause and reason, purpose, comment), naturalness of phrases and expressions, organization, and style.</td>
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**Writing Skills:**

- Write summaries and summary reports of longer texts of up to 5 pages or 30 minutes of oral text.
- Write a personal response essay of up to 5 double-spaced typed pages to a text or other stimulus.
- Review and extend paraphrasing skills.
- Review and practise grammar skills.

**Writing:**

- Learner demonstrates fluent ability in performing moderately complex writing tasks.
- Can link sentences and paragraphs (three or four) to form coherent texts to express ideas on familiar abstract topics, with some support for main ideas, and with an appropriate sense of audience.
- Can write routine business letters (e.g., letters of inquiry, cover letters for applications) and personal and formal social messages.
- Can write down a set of simple instructions, based on clear oral communication or simple written procedural text of greater length.
- Can fill out complex formatted documents.
- Can extract key information and relevant detail from a pagelong text, and write an outline or a one-paragraph summary.
- Demonstrates good control over common sentence patterns, coordination and subordination, and spelling and mechanics.
- Has occasional difficulty with complex structures (e.g., those reflecting cause and reason, purpose, comment), naturalness of phrases and expressions, organization, and style.
As outlined in Table One, the training objectives of the 050 ESL program are close to those of CLB level 8 in the four basic skills of language: listening, speaking, reading and writing. The analysis of the documents follows the format of the table with the exception of listening and speaking. They are analyzed together because they are primary components of oral language proficiency.

**Listening & Speaking**

In general ESL classes, the objectives of ESL instruction are to equip ESL learners with sufficient language knowledge and skills to fulfill communicative purposes and conduct effective English language communication in daily life. Therefore, oral language proficiency involving listening and speaking skills is considered important for ESL students so that they can communicate purposefully and competently (Brown, 2000). Interview data show that listening activities in the ESL program were focused on: conversations between ESL instructors, peers and ESL students themselves, listening to the language CDs to answer the patterned questions in order to “demonstrate a good understanding” (050 Core Class Booklist, 2006, p.4). Similarly, speaking skills were developed through activities such as: prepared discussions, video presentations and debates. Even though the topic chosen to practise speaking skills is academically-related in the latest version of 050 Core Class Booklist (2006), ESL students are evaluated for “grammatically correct” structures, “appropriate vocabulary”, clear and accurate “pronunciation” and “in-depth summary” (050 Core Class Booklist, 2006, p.5). The emphasis on oral language practice in the ESL classroom is generally focused on the correct use of the language and the ability to use language for communicative purposes.
Data from interviews indicate that despite oral language practice and training in the ESL program, ESL students face problems in their academic studies at university. Information obtained from interviews with ESL students and university instructors indicated academic practice within certain university disciplines requires ESL students to have a good command of English in order to exchange ideas, to question and argue, to develop personal points of view and to construct new knowledge. In addition to linguistic knowledge of English, there are other cognitive and intellectual demands ESL students face. For example, as indicated in the 050 Core Class Booklist (2006), the purpose of listening practice is to “develop and practice strategies for note-taking [skills]” (p.4). In contrast, attending a lecture in a regular university class is not merely note taking. ESL students at the university level also have to actively and constantly process the spoken texts to pick-up relevant information for their further use. Here, the cognitive and intellectual demands involved in the listening process challenged these ESL students. The following comment is typical, “The professor spoke so fast .... I have to write and listen, and…” (ESL student participant interview, March 16, 2006).

A review of the teaching objectives of the 050 ESL program regarding listening and speaking skills shows that, “critical understanding of the spoken texts” is emphasized (050 Core Class Booklist, p.4). ESL students come from many different backgrounds. In many of these, critical analysis might not be valued, and therefore, ESL students may not be familiar with the concept and the specific abilities required in order to practise that skill.
**Reading**

Reading in ESL is aimed at "us[ing] a variety of strategies to understand and remember vocabulary" (050 Core Class Booklist, 2006, p.4). In order to develop English reading skills, ESL students are asked to read "authentic text 3-5 pages long" from the *Globe & Mail* and local newspapers to make vocabulary lists, answer questions, "write a summary to demonstrate [they] understand the content" (050 Core Class Booklist, p.4), and have to read aloud with "clear pronunciation, correct intonation, and reasonable fluency" (050 Core Class Booklist, p.27). Participating in reading activities listed earlier, ESL students are working at a more superficial level of the written texts, and therefore more attention is given to the wording of a text. Consequently, there may not be many intellectual demands on the students. Reading instructions are generally focused on text comprehension. ESL students rarely move beyond text comprehension to text analysis.

Interviews with the university instructors revealed that students at the university level need to read to search for content-related information, to synthesize, question, argue and form their own points of view on a given issue. In other words, they need to develop Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) – an issue discussed in Chapter Two. Reading in ESL programs emphasizes the comprehension of written texts, and reading is considered as a means of building vocabulary. In university academic studies, ESL students need to process reading texts to gain new knowledge that involves not merely getting information from the reading texts, but also reflecting on and consuming the information to achieve a deeper understanding. The mismatch of instructional emphasis and expectation about reading purposes inevitably led to these ESL students’ frustration.
with the reading load. These ESL students struggled to meet the expectations of having to
discuss assigned topics critically and comparatively.

Writing

Research participants indicated writing for an academic audience was the most
challenging task they encountered in their university academic studies. In ESL classes,
however, even at the highest level (050), writing assignments in the perception of ESL
students seem to be fairly undemanding. Most writing in ESL classes consists of “simple”
and “short” production of paragraphs on a very “general” topic. ESL students are
required to write “summary reports of” a given text “5 pages long”, and the writing
assignments are also used to “review and extend paraphrasing skills” and “review and
practice grammar skills” (050 Core Class Booklist, p.4). The focus is primarily on the
accuracy of syntax and spelling. ESL graduates stated in interviews that before they
handed in their writing assignments, they focused their attention on “vocabulary”, and
“grammar” (ESL student participant interview, March 16, 2006) and other language
errors. Interview participants did not mention any concerns in their ESL program about
content or structure in their essay writing. They mentioned they lost marks for
grammatical errors but not for weak subject matter.

In university studies, writing practice is more research-oriented. For instance, lab
reports, research essays and literature reviews require ESL students to demonstrate their
knowledge and skills in using language for analyzing, evaluating, synthesizing, and
presenting their own opinions critically. The difference in writing practices and demands
between the two contexts might impact negatively on academic achievement of ESL graduates.

Data gathered through interviews and review of related documents provide a deeper understanding of the dynamics within the ESL program and the university discipline-specific studies. Research findings point to differences between the two contexts. The focus of English language learning shifts from the development of communicative competencies to the critical and intellectual use of language as a means to analyze, synthesize, evaluate, question and create knowledge.
Chapter Six: Discussion and Recommendations for Further Research

During this research study, I interviewed research participants to gain insight into their perspectives on learning and teaching ESL. ESL students had left families and friends, their social support system and homeland, to come to Canada to pursue higher education. The transition of these ESL students to a western higher education system and their adjustment to Canadian culture and university discipline-specific subcultures were full of challenges, as my research findings indicate. In their academic studies, these ESL students encountered unexpectedly high demands for English language proficiency. Student participants also reported challenges related to a lack of efficient study skills, competent cognitive skills and familiarity with the university and discipline subculture. The main purpose of this study was to provide first-hand information to assist ESL practitioners in developing more effective ESL programs to better prepare ESL students for western-style university studies. It is important to identify the underlying issues regarding challenges ESL students face in their efforts to fit into English-speaking university classrooms. This chapter discusses the research findings. I begin by highlighting the influence of the diversity of cultural backgrounds and previous education experience of the ESL student participants on how they approached learning in a western university. Suggestions for ESL programs are then presented, and the necessity for further research is pointed out to conclude my research study.
6.1 Discussion of Research Findings: Acknowledging ESL Students' Diversity and Their Challenges in Integrating in an English-Speaking University

During the interviews, these ESL students constantly referred to their previous English learning experience in their home countries while they reflected on their current situation at the Canadian university. Analysis of the interview data shows that these ESL students were aware of differences between their way of thinking and understanding of both spoken and written texts, and that of the native English-speaking Canadian students. They spoke about the challenges they encountered in their university discipline studies, especially the problems they had in writing for university academic purposes. These ESL students' prior experience with English language acquisition together with the concerns emerging from the interview data emphasizes an intertwined relationship between language and culture. This relationship was emphasized in research literature and discussed in the second chapter of this thesis.

The profiles of these ESL students revealed a wide diversity in their language, educational, cultural experiences and backgrounds. In Chapter Two, Ballard and Clanchy's (1991, in Ballard, 1996) model of the influence of cultural attitudes to knowledge on teaching and learning strategies was discussed. Students from different cultures and having some previous education experience approach teaching and learning differently. The different approaches - reproductive, analytical and speculative - were reviewed and discussed in Chapter Two. The features of the reproductive approach are evident in descriptions by these ESL students of prior English learning in their home.
country during the interviews. The five ESL student participants, four from Asia and one from Mexico, all recalled that English teaching in their home countries, generally followed the grammar-translation method, which focuses on imitation and memorization of vocabulary and grammar rules - valuing the correct form of the English language. In this method, little attention is paid to listening and speaking skills (Brown, 2000; Freeman & Freeman 2004).

Having learned English through a grammar-translation approach, these ESL students were used to following teachers’ instructions and paying attention to the mechanics of the language, rather than paying attention to comprehension and communication. In their western university classrooms, the instructional focus shifted from language usage to comprehension of the content knowledge, according to research participants. Therefore, these ESL students felt overwhelmed and frustrated with the use of idioms and slang as well as with the academic and intellectual demands involved in spoken speech and written text, when they participated in an English-speaking content class. Academic studies at university require these ESL students to use English as a “tool” for exploring, analyzing and forming knowledge “to explore the city, explore [the] university” (ESL student participant interview, April 4, 2006). ESL students’ profiles and statements during the interviews represent their conserving attitudes to knowledge, and thus a reproductive approach to teaching and learning. Western undergraduate studies, however, value an “extending” attitude to knowledge, a more “critical style of learning”, and adopt an “analytical approach” to teaching and learning according to Ballard (1996, p.152) and Harwood and Hadley (2004). In an extending attitude, knowledge is no longer “fixed” but rather “open to question and criticism” (Ballard, 1996, p.152). These ESL
students' former education through a reproductive approach may have caused some of the frustration and the problems they had at the western university.

In the analytical approach, students are encouraged to develop their critical and analytical skills (Ballard, 1996). Research findings, however, indicate that due to a perceived lack of training in critical and creative skills, these ESL students encountered challenges in their academic studies. Interview data revealed these ESL students passively sat in university classrooms without asking questions. Their primary focus may have been to understand the language. After class, their questions were mostly for clarification purposes (University instructor participant interviews, March 17, 2005; April 18, 2006).

As discussed in the second chapter of this thesis, culture shapes the language used by members of that culture. “Language is part of culture” (Brown, 2000, p.177). People express their thoughts through words, but words “are not the only linguistic category affecting thought” (Brown, 2000, p.197). The way in which words are put together and sentences are structured affects the meaning that is conveyed (Brown, 2000). For this reason, language has embedded cultural influences, and although different languages are structured differently they may express similar meanings. The culture-rooted nature of language challenged these ESL students to adjust themselves to adapt to appropriate ways of structuring speech, to efficiently convey their thoughts, and to successfully communicate with the members of their new culture. As Brown (2000) argues:

Culture is really an integral part of the interaction between language and thought. Cultural patterns of cognition and customs are sometimes explicitly coded in language. Conversational discourse styles, for example, may be a factor of culture. (p.198)
Culture shapes language, and cultural differences affect people’s attitudes towards knowledge. It could be argued that people from different cultures hold different attitudes towards knowledge. Consequently, different people perceive teaching and learning differently. From the research evidence collected through interviews and documents, it would seem that the challenges of these ESL student participants in their transition to their university studies were not merely caused by insufficient language proficiency, but also as a consequence of lack of awareness of the influence culture has on the structure of language. To this could be added a lack of awareness of people’s attitudes towards knowledge, and a lack of familiarity with the university culture and discipline subculture. Exploring the cultural influence on students’ attitudes towards knowledge could be important for the contextual understanding of ESL students’ perceptions of their academic language learning experience as well as the challenges they encounter in their process of learning.

6.2 Suggestions for ESL Programs: Bridging the Gap

Recognizing the diversity of ESL students allows for contextual understanding of the challenges they encountered during their university academic studies. The comparison of research findings regarding differences in language practice, academic focus and demands uncovered an underlying but essential difference between the focus of the ESL program and the academic language proficiency requirement in university discipline studies. The existing gap hindered these ESL students’ adjustment to their academic studies. Research evidence collected in this study indicates an appropriate and
effective development of the ESL program could be a function of EAP practitioners’ realization of the cultural influence on ESL students’ attitudes and approach to learning, awareness of the expectations of the university, and adjustment of the teaching focus of language instruction in ESL programs.

Inspired by previous research (see Chapter Two) and the conversations with research participants, two main considerations related to ESL programs, curriculum design and bridging systems, are developed and are listed as follows:

1. **Curriculum design.** Designing a curriculum requires attention to the syllabus, teaching methodology and course materials.

   - **Syllabus** – Reviewing ESL documents, the purposes of ESL instruction at the participating ESL centre are to prepare ESL students with sufficient language knowledge and skills, as well as efficient study skills to undertake university studies. Interviews of ESL instructors and analysis of research related documents reveal that more attention and emphasis probably need to be given to the development of students’ analytical and critical awareness required in western university studies. It would probably be helpful to have specific academic focuses explicitly presented in the ESL syllabus. The emphasis on the development of communicative competencies and the forms or structures of language could still be the major concern in language classrooms. With an extended syllabus, however, the analytical and critical skills could be stressed first to illustrate the intellectual demands of university work, and then
practised in various language activities. With an extended syllabus, language instruction could focus on "the sharing of ideas and [...] the "how" and "why" of investigation rather than on the "what"" (Hall & Kenny, 1988, Flowerdew & Peacock, 2001, p.184).

- **Teaching Materials** – Data from interviews with participating ESL instructors during the interview reveal that texts and other materials used to practise language skills at the participating ESL centre are authentic in nature. Revisiting interview data regarding texts used in the ESL program, authentic materials such as textbooks, newspapers, magazines and novels have the purpose of "represent[ing] real-world language use" (Flowerdew & Peacock, 2001, p.182). Even though in the higher level ESL class, the material is more academically-oriented, the topics presented in the instructional materials are general and more related to everyday issues.

  The preference for authentic materials is probably linked to the need to develop students' communicative competence (Flowerdew & Peacock, 2001; Freeman & Freeman, 2004). To this end, discipline-specific content material may not be appropriate for the ESL class (Flowerdew & Peacock, 2001). Research literature indicates EAP instruction is different from general ESL instruction, and that EAP academic preparation programs are designed to prepare ESL students for further university studies (Flowerdew & Peacock, 2001). EAP students may benefit from opportunities to explore the specialized
style of language use preferred in their future university discipline communities.

The EAP classrooms at the ESL Centre are very student-centered, and students are encouraged to bring materials they are interested in to the language classroom (ESL instructor participant interview, March 7, 2006). This policy together with preference for authentic materials in the language classroom could provide opportunities for the adding of content-related academic materials. Ballard (1996) suggests that the closer EAP instruction could get to actual academic interests of the students, the more motivated they would be, and thus the more efficient the program could be.

- **Methodology** – Instructional methodology employed in the EAP program is identified as theme-based, task-based and integrated. ESL students are encouraged to practise their listening, speaking, reading and writing skills in theme-based material to complete certain tasks (e.g., presentations or debates). Task-based, integrated instructional methods offer opportunities for ESL students to engage in the tasks and activities which they might confront in their future specific disciplines. For this purpose, ESL instructors could take the initiative of contacting colleagues in university faculties to identify certain tasks (e.g., lab reports, literature reviews, project reports, etc.) in university programs. For example, in writing instruction in ESL, students could be given opportunities to practise some of the university writing tasks. This teaching methodology could be helpful in making language instruction and practice
more relevant to students’ future university studies and therefore more purposeful.

2. **Bridging systems**- During the interviews, all ESL students and ESL instructors expressed their hope for more contacts with university faculties and native English-speaking university students. Possible bridging systems are discussed in the next section.

*Phase 1: ESL staff bridging with university faculties*

Most ESL instructors are familiar with theories and practice of SLA, however, they might not be familiar with the academic demands of specific-disciplines (Flowerdew & Peacock, 2001). Considering the nature of the EAP program, ESL instructors could “be willing to adjust teaching activities and tailoring materials to the students’ needs, to familiarize themselves with the language of the students’ special subject and to take an interest in and to acquire a knowledge of the students’ world” (Flowerdew & Peacock, 2001, p.181). To meet these expectations, ESL instructors would need to connect and co-operate with the university subject instructors in order to “seek information from the department about the content of the courses, the tasks required of students, the expectations of the department and its related discourse community about the nature of communication in the subject” (Dudley-Evans, 2001, p.226).
During interviews, these ESL students mentioned they had little opportunity to communicate with native English-speaking university students. The desire of ESL students to increase contact with native English-speaking university students could provide opportunities for ESL staff to develop a bridging system to help ESL students meet and interact with native English-speaking university students. Communicating with Canadian students could provide ESL students with opportunities to increase their communicative competence and acquire information that native English-speaking university students provide. This information includes acquiring knowledge of different styles of studying at the Canadian university, expectations of instructors, effective use of library, computer and lab resources at the university, efficient management of workload and other necessary survival techniques familiar to native English-speaking university students.

"[T]he teaching and learning of EAP presents its own unique challenges, problems, opportunities, failings and success" (Flowerdew & Peacock, 2001, p.177). In order to meet these challenges, it may be appropriate to develop a new curriculum with an extended syllabus. That syllabus could stress critical thinking skills and task-based instruction. Content materials could reflect university discourse and ESL students’ academic interests. Finally, a bridging system between ESL programs and university disciplines could be put into place.
Following theories of second language acquisition, ESL practitioners believe ESL students unconsciously acquire English in processing comprehensible language input and practising purposeful communication (Brown, 2000; Krashen, 1981, 2003). In general, ESL instruction aims to help ESL students master sufficient linguistic knowledge, correctly interpret spoken and written texts, appropriately negotiate meaning following sociocultural rules, and use effective strategies to carry on communication competently (Savignon, 2004). The ultimate goal of ESL programs is to develop ESL students’ abilities to use language correctly and appropriately in order to achieve communicative competence. Consequently, typical ESL classrooms are often learner-centered, and use authentic texts and materials. The notion of communicative competence suggests, however, that acquiring a second language is not just mastering the linguistic code of the language; it is also cross-cultural learning and constantly adapting oneself to the values, norms and beliefs of the target culture.

The intertwined relationship between language and culture is linked to the concept of social constructivism that is considered to be a dominant philosophy in western education. Social-constructivists claim that knowledge is socially constructed and shaped by sociocultural practices. Therefore, knowledge is associated with a given society and culture and thus relative to different communities. Following the social constructivist view of knowledge, language is constructed by and serves its own culture. Language, thus, represents the attitudes, values, norms and beliefs of a particular culture. This belief has led ESL practitioners to integrate cultural issues into ESL classrooms in
order to increase students’ cross-cultural awareness and develop their intercultural communicative competence.

Every society and community has its own culture. Each university discipline has its distinct culture as well. Within the university and each discipline, shared values and beliefs indicate what is important in a given academic community. These beliefs guide the practice within the community. Shared norms represent the expectations of how community members should behave in different situations. When ESL students enter university, they enter a new community, another culture. It is thus necessary and important for ESL students to learn to adapt to the values, norms and the beliefs shared by community members in order to participate appropriately in the practice of that community. The notion of discourse community calls for the acculturation of ESL students. The intellectual demands of the discipline, the need to become familiar with, and adjust to a discourse community could challenge ESL students. Compared to ESL students in general, ESL students planning to attend western university programs probably have distinct needs for high levels of English language proficiency and cross-cultural preparation. To meet the needs of this group of ESL students, programs of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) have been developed throughout Canada.

EAP is a tailored program aiming to prepare ESL students with sufficient language knowledge and cross-cultural skills for them to be able to undertake studies in a western university. Because ESL graduates need to have the abilities to compete with native English-speaking peers at university, ESL instructors would probably want to know how their ESL graduates perform in their university studies. Much research on the performance of ESL students at university has already been conducted. Research findings

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from this study reveal the problems the ESL student participants encountered at the university level, and suggest that they felt the need for more preparation.

This qualitative study examined the effectiveness of an ESL program in assisting the transition of five ESL students to their Canadian university studies. Interviews were conducted with ESL students, ESL instructors and university instructors. Data gathered shed light on the dynamics within the ESL program and university contexts. In their attempt to adjust to the university community, these ESL students encountered problems with academic language proficiency, critical thinking skills, study skills, academic background knowledge in their specialization, familiarity with university culture and discipline subculture, and adjustment to the western approach to learning.

Analyzing interview data on the opportunities for language practice in both contexts together with a review of related documents revealed fundamental differences in the purposes of language use in the ESL classes and the university degree program courses. The goal of the ESL program is the development of ESL students’ communicative competence, and thus language instruction focused on the development of language ability. At the university level, language becomes a means to exchange ideas, obtain knowledge and conduct research. These ESL students acknowledged that in addition to language demands, expectations of familiarity with the western style of teaching and learning to be creative and critical were also placed on them. Lack of cultural awareness was identified as a source of frustration. Other identified concerns of these ESL students in their university studies were linked to the fact that their cultural background resulted in a different approach to learning in their prior education in their home countries.
Ballard (1996) states that in most non-western countries, knowledge is not open to challenge, and students approach learning in a reproductive way that emphasizes imitation and memorization of the knowledge transmitted by teachers. Coming to Canada with a mainly reproductive approach to knowledge and learning, these ESL students encountered difficulties due to differences in attitudes towards knowledge and methods of teaching and learning. Different cultural values, norms and attitudes challenged, influenced and interfered with the learning of these ESL students in a new education system.

Throughout the interviews, research participants spoke highly about the ESL preparation program, and appreciated the time and effort their ESL instructors devoted to ESL students and the programs. These students felt more confident in their language abilities to take on university courses than peers who had not gone through ESL preparation programs. When comparing themselves with native English-speaking peers, however, these ESL students acknowledged they were unable to compete even though they believed they had sufficient language knowledge. This was because they believed they lacked other aspects of language acquisition. These students believed they needed more preparation and familiarity with the western style of learning.

Recommendations were articulated during interviews by research participants, with the main focus on language training. ESL programs may want to focus on the importance of cultural values to ESL students, on the ways such values influence their process of learning. ESL programs may need to develop students’ awareness of cultural differences by focusing on a different cultural mode of learning, and attitudes towards
knowledge. Finally, ESL programs may want to encourage the development of creative and critical thinking skills.

Research indicates that an increasing number of ESL students enter western countries for educational purposes. This certainly seemed to be the case in the university where this research was conducted. As the number of ESL students significantly increases, university classrooms in Canada will become more and more linguistically and culturally diverse. ESL students bring new insights and appreciation of higher education and thus contribute to the Canadian education system. Meanwhile, the large number of ESL students attending Canadian postsecondary institutions leads to challenges of all kinds. How to meet the increasingly diverse needs of this group of students remains a hotly debated issue and calls for further research.

6.4 Implications and Suggestions for Further Research

This study was conducted over a one-year period, and explores the experiences of five ESL students, three ESL instructors and two university content instructors, studying and teaching at a Canadian university. This study deals with the opinions and recollections of a relatively small group, and so is not meant to be a representative portrayal of every ESL student. A study of other ESL learners at different educational institutions may yield different results. This study was conducted with the intent of paving the way for more in-depth research studies. This study indicates the need for further research into the experiences of ESL students of different cultural backgrounds involved in academic English language acquisition.
Further research could be conducted in the following areas. First, data collection in this study took place over a year; it is thus still a relatively short span of time. There is a need to conduct longitudinal studies into the process of ESL students’ EAP learning and their adjustment to university. Such studies, incorporating data on students’ developing skills in listening, speaking, writing and reading, would aid in developing EAP programs and course materials that would benefit EAP students.

Second, further research is needed on how ESL students cope with their academic challenges during university studies. Identifying the coping strategies ESL students adopt could provide EAP instructors with the tools necessary to help equip ESL students with effective learning strategies.

Further research is needed that will incorporate data on ESL students in various contexts. ESL students enter western universities through various venues. Some of them may take the TOEFL test or other English proficiency tests and enrol at Canadian universities directly. Others go through ESL programs and start their university program at the completion of ESL programs. This study concentrated on five ESL students, who had graduated from their ESL programs. Other ESL students entering university without an academic preparation program may have different concerns and encounter different challenges in their university studies. For this reason, further research needs to be conducted to compare ESL graduates with foreign students in general. Further research needs to analyze ESL students’ perceptions of their learning experiences at Canadian universities and identify the challenges they encounter in their university programs. Such studies could provide information for ESL practitioners and would help them evaluate the effectiveness of EAP programs and assist in ESL curriculum development.
There is also a need to research the correlation between cultural influences and ESL students’ adjustment to western universities. In this study, culture influenced the ESL students’ attitudes towards knowledge and approach to learning, therefore, culture could impede the transition of ESL students to a new educational system. In addition, culture differs from society to society. Do ESL students from Asia have different perceptions regarding language acquisition and learning than students from Latin-American countries? If so, to what degree do their cultural attitudes interfere with, or indeed enhance their learning? To answer these questions, further studies are required in order to determine the actual influence of culture and prior education on ESL students’ learning in a new educational system.

There is a need for quantitative research to complement the qualitative approach used in this study. Measurable data from sources such as test scores for English achievement in speaking, listening, reading and writing, conducted both in EAP and in universities in Canada, could serve to provide a more complete picture of the language learning experiences of ESL students. Such scores alone cannot provide an accurate picture of the challenges ESL students face, as quantitative data may ignore the perceived strengths and weaknesses of the students themselves. A combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods is required in order to identify and address the specific challenges ESL students face in going on to university studies in the west.

Finally, this study of issues and concerns around ESL students could serve as a springboard for further research. Such research could take in perspectives from outside the university. Social and political contexts could be taken into consideration in order to gain a more complete picture.
References


Appendix A

Ethics Committee Approval
Voluntary Participation: Participation in this research study is completely voluntary. You, the participant, have the right to decline participation or withdraw at any time without penalty.

Ethics Approval: This research study was approved by the Research Ethics Board, University of Regina. If the research subjects have any questions or concerns about their rights or treatment as subjects they may contact the Chair of the Research Ethics Board at 585-4775 or by e-mail: research.ethics@uregina.ca

Consent Statement

Having read the above, I, ____________________________, agree to participate in this study and consent to the conditions stated in this consent form. Finally, I certify that I have received a copy of this consent form.

(Signature of Participant) (Date)

(Signature of Researcher) (Date)

Your participation in this study is greatly appreciated.
Voluntary Participation: Participation in this research study is completely voluntary. You, the participant, have the right to decline participation or withdraw at any time without penalty.

Ethics Approval: This research study was approved by the Research Ethics Board, University of Regina. If the research subjects have any questions or concerns about their rights or treatment as subjects they may contact the Chair of the Research Ethics Board at 585-4775 or by e-mail: research.ethics@uregina.ca

Consent Statement

Having read the above, I, ____________________________, agree to participate in this study and consent to the conditions stated in this consent form. Finally, I certify that I have received a copy of this consent form.

(Signature of Participant)  (Date)

(Signature of Researcher)  (Date)

Your participation in this study is greatly appreciated.
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(Signature of Researcher) (Date)

Your participation in this study is greatly appreciated.
Appendix E
Interview Questionnaire

Potential Interview Questions to Student Participants:

- Self-introduction (When and why did you come here / choose to study overseas?, what’s your English education in your home country?, what do you plan to do after you finish your program (going back or staying here)?)

- How did you prepare for coming here? Did you do something special?

- What expectations did you have before you enrolled in the ESL program?

- What reading and writing assignments you have in both ESL and university?

- What other English instruction you have in ESL?

- What differences, if any, did you perceive in the kinds of texts you read in EAL and university discipline contexts?

- What difference, if any, did you perceive in the reading and writing assignments in both contexts?

- What particular difficulties, if any, did you experience during completing reading, writing assignments in ESL and university?

- What other particular difficulties, if any, did you experience in both contexts?

- How do you think the ESL preparation for your university study?

- What do you think the differences between ESL program and your university study?

- Did you perceive these difficulties you have at the university even though you graduate from ESL?

- What your perception of ESL student’ language abilities should be?

- What do you think would be helpful? / How do you think the ESL program can be more helpful to your academic study?
Potential Interview Questions to **University Instructor Participants**:

- Self-introduction (years of teaching, which year-course, specialize).
- How many ESL students in your class? What’s the percentage?
- What reading and writing assignments you assign to the students?
- What difficulties, if any, do you perceive the ESL students encounter during their study (understanding the lecture, communicating with professor & peers, asking and answering questions, doing presentations, reading / written assignments, class contributions, and etc.)?
- What’s your perception of ESL students’ English language proficiency for their taking the university disciplinary courses (including reading, writing, speaking, understanding, proficiency and the requirements of their courses)?
- How well do they seem to have been prepared? What language abilities and other knowledge and skills (study skills, social-cultural skills, etc) do you think ESL students should have before coming into the university courses?
- How do you think the ESL students could be supported in their academic program?
- What is the difference between teaching a mixed class (native-speakers & non-native speakers) from teaching other class?

Potential Interview Questions to **ESL Instructor Participants**:

- Self-introduction (years of teaching, particular at this EAP center; which level; 050 level experience)
- From your experience, how many of the students will go to the university? What’s the percentage?
- What reading and writing assignments you assign to the students, and what other activities they do in the EAP program?
- What particular difficulties, if any, did students experience during completing reading, writing assignments in EAP program?
- What other difficulties, if any, you perceive the ESL students have in their ESL study?
• How well prepared do you think the students are as far as English concerned? What’s your perception of their English language abilities when they graduate?

• What are some of the challenges that the students have, and the instructors, like you have?

• What are your perceptions of language needs and other knowledge and skills ESL students should have in order to succeed in university?

• What differences do you perceive between the ESL program and university academic study?

• What do you think will help ESL students succeed in their university study?