

# Chapter 1

## Facing the Challenges of Higher Education in a Second Language: The Case of Chinese Students in a Canadian University

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This chapter reports on a needs analysis on a joint science program in which students spend two years each in China and Canada. Students take ESL courses in China to help them transition to the English curriculum in Canada. Since many of these students plan to work in Canada upon graduation, the authors aimed to determine how the program prepared them not only for university, but also for out-of-class interactions. They interviewed students currently in the Canadian stage of the program, a science teacher, and two ESL teachers. Students were well prepared for academics, but struggle with informal talk. The science teacher found the students to perform well, though were reluctant to speak up. In contrast, the ESL teachers commented on their lack of motivation. All parties noted that a specialized English for academic purposes (EAP) course might address these issues. The authors discuss implications for cross-cultural curriculum design and the need for communication between domain and language experts.*

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Statistics Canada (2017) reports that university enrollment rates for international students are increasing faster than that for Canadian students, with Chinese students making up a substantial share of the population. Sixty percent of these students plan on applying for permanent residence after graduation, according to the Canada Bureau for International Education (2018). These statistics are reflected in the growth of joint programs between Canadian and international universities. However, to our knowledge, no systematic analysis has been done on how well such programs prepare students for university-level study in one of Canada's official languages, English and French, as well as other aspects of their stay in Canada.

This chapter reports on a language needs analysis on a group of Chinese students in a joint science program, in which students do the first two years of their program in China and the last two years in Canada. The program includes a series of English as a Second Language (ESL) courses designed to help students transition from studying in China with a Mandarin-taught curriculum to take English-language courses in Canada. Since the program's inception, there has been no systematic needs analysis or course evaluation of the ESL component.

The goal of this needs analysis is twofold. First, in line with the theme of learning in and out of the classroom, we evaluate the extent to which the current program enables international students to succeed not only at the linguistic level, but also in terms of study practices, resource use, and out-of-class interaction, which may present additional challenges beyond the classroom. Second, in line with the theme of advancing equity practices for immigrant populations, we offer suggestions for enhancing the program's role in improving international students' experience and ensuring their success not just as students, but also as future professionals.

## **RATIONALE FOR NEEDS ANALYSIS**

A needs analysis (NA) is a systematic evaluation of the needs of learners, including what they need to know and what they want to know (Nation & Macalister, 2010). NAs play an important role in curriculum planning, providing information on learners' preferences, learning goals, and development which can lead to necessary changes in the curriculum (Grant, 2002). Read and Roe (2011) add that NAs should be integrated into curriculum design because understanding learners' needs allows a course to make optimal use of learners' existing knowledge. This was supported in a study by Oahn (2007), who compared EAP programs in Vietnam and New Zealand. He found that although both programs took their students' needs into account in the curriculum design process, the New Zealand program incorporated the analysis into its curriculum more effectively. Their methods included a pre-course placement test, course questionnaires, and ongoing interviews and in-class dialogues between teachers and students regarding how effective the students felt the learning process was. The Vietnamese curriculum, in contrast, relied mostly on teachers' and course designers' assumptions, much like the target ESL program. Oahn observed that when only teachers and curriculum designers have input and students do not, a curriculum can fail to address the differences between learners' and teachers' perceptions (Hawkey, 2006; Kirkgöz, 2009). For example, Hawkey's analysis of the Progetto Lingue 2000 (PL2000) in Italy revealed that differences in perception between what the teachers believed the students were learning and what the students believed they should be learning can hinder language development.

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