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Reading and Writing Excellence Program:
A Safer and Braver Space to Address Inequities

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Abstract

Increased cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic diversity in the student population in higher education has made it imperative to address inequities in learning conditions faced by multilingual learners for whom English is an additional third, fourth or even fifth language. These students have often been viewed through deficit-based lenses rooted in Western colonial values and perceived to be in need of remediation in academic reading and writing. Using an empowerment approach through a learner-driven, instructor-facilitated model, the Reading and Writing Excellence (RWE) program, a non-credit, co-curricular initiative offered through the Centre for Teaching and Learning, attempts to address these inequities by engaging students in ways that socialize them to academic integrity practices and develop their competence with academic English, enabling them to develop confident learner identities for communicating in English about their course topics. This article critically reviews the RWE support

program, covering its rationale, mission, and pedagogical approaches. It highlights the program's effectiveness in creating a safer, more inclusive, and empowering learning environment, which is achieved through personalized feedback, serving individual needs, and promoting authentic, learner-centered interactions. The impact of the program is evidenced by students' increased willingness to write, their improved reading and writing skills, and their overall empowerment in this equitable and supportive space. The program outcomes demonstrate RWE's potential as a scalable, transferrable model for institutions seeking to create more equitable conditions for students whose academic reading and writing needs should be more adequately supported.

Introduction

Multilingual learners for whom English may be a fourth or fifth language arrive at Western university campuses with rich linguistic repertoires, diverse cultural perspectives, and varied educational experiences. Yet they are too often perceived through deficit-based lenses rooted in Western colonial views and are considered in need of remediation in academic reading and writing. This deficit positioning exposes multilingual learners to particular risks, including disproportionate reporting for plagiarism regardless of the developmental stage of their academic English (Beasley, 2016; Bretag, 2016; Eaton, 2022). By sidelining their strengths and lived experiences, institutions "perpetuate systems of privilege for some and oppression for others" (Eaton, 2022) and thus have the "de facto effect of blaming students for failing to comply with what may actually be less-than-transparent expectations" (Murphy, 2022, p. 84). As such, in this article, we identify and address the learning inequities faced by multilingual students, including the need to: (a) acquire and use written academic language, (b) gain familiarity with Western academic writing norms and expectations, (c) understand academic integrity expectations and practices, and (d) develop a sense of belonging in the learning community. Without providing this essential support through co-curricular programming, pedagogy, or policy, "it borders on unethical to keep taking their tuition dollars and de facto promising that they can succeed" (Murphy, 2022, p. 85). With this ethical responsibility in mind, this article examines how the Reading and Writing Excellence (RWE) co-curricular program complements Writing Centre support by proactively helping students overcome inequities through sustained practice within a relational pedagogy that values students' unique experiences and perspectives (Ladson-Billings, 2021).

Context: Acknowledging Inequities

As postsecondary institutions welcome increasingly diverse student populations, they must ensure equitable support for multilingual learners. These students bring rich linguistic

repertoires, though they may encounter challenges with the usage of Academic English and the conventions of academic discourse. Taking into consideration the range of inequities students who come differently prepared face in their new environments, such as racism and linguicism, we would like to emphasize a needed shift in the way these students are perceived and treated—instead of seeing them through the lens of deficit, we should appreciate them through the lens of strengths and assets. The term *multilingual learners* is being used to replace deficit-laden labels such as "non-native speakers of English" and "ESL students" that are stigmatizing. Casting students who are less fluent in academic English as being deficient perpetuates a power dynamic that disadvantages the students in various aspects of higher education. These negative labels rooted, in Eurocentric and colonial perspectives, have been dominant within traditional teaching methodology where there is "inbuilt ideological positioning of the learners as outsider and failure – however proficient they become" (MacKenzie, 2014, p. 8). Deficit mindsets on multilingual learners have a wide range of negative impacts. This paper argues for a shift towards an inclusive approach that acknowledges the diverse educational backgrounds and richly lived experiences of these multilingual learners. By using "multilingual learners," we acknowledge these students' varied linguistic skills and cultural contributions, viewing them as valuable contributors to the academic community. This asset-based perspective fosters a more equitable learning environment by focusing on students' capabilities and potential contributions rather than their perceived limitations.

Institutions need to acknowledge that many multilingual learners may have come differently prepared (i.e., based on their previous cultures, languages, lived experiences, and previous educational systems). Since they have had their previous educational experiences in one of their dominant languages and have excelled well enough in that education system to gain admission to a top Western university, such as the University of Toronto, they would naturally hope to continue their trajectory of educational development. However, due to inequities of learning conditions and being treated as deficient, their progress may be truncated. The

courage and resilience they show in bravely facing demands of a high level of competence in academic English should be given due recognition and supported adequately, considering the magnitude of cognitive processing and their anxiety levels about their identity in the new environment they face every day.

Although multilingual learners can access knowledge and experiences through their dominant languages and are capable of complex cognitive processing, their lack of academic English skills, cultural knowledge, as well as their unfamiliarity with academic norms and expectations disadvantage them in many ways. In recent years, scholars have drawn attention to the need to address the challenges multilingual learners face in courses as "faculty may not have connected the ways that students struggle to their problems with language... multilingual students have been less likely to receive necessary support at key points in their academic careers" (Murphy, 2022, p. 81). Disciplinary faculty are experts in their disciplinary research areas but mostly have not had language-teaching training to teach multilingual learners how to write academic essays for their courses. As such, in order not to continue disadvantaging multilingual learners, a centralized department located within the Centre for Teaching and Learning is a practical way to provide a means of customizable writing support (e.g., RWE), which helps students cope directly with their language development for their course needs. Ideally, this proactive support should be made accessible to students early in the semester before they are required to write their assignments that they bring to the Writing Centre for support.

Multilingual learners face many inequities, not least due to negative stereotypes that portray them as passive, dependent, uncritically minded rote learners and plagiarizers often assessed through deficit models (Heng, 2018). Furthermore, the lexical sophistication of university-level academic texts poses an additional learning burden (Nation, 2020) on students whose dominant languages have very different grammar systems and non-Romanized written scripts (e.g., Arabic, Mandarin, Japanese, Korean, Thai, and Tamil). Unlike Spanish, French, and

German, these languages do not have as cognates with English. Thus, having to read course texts in academic English and write essays in English for academic purposes adds to multilingual learners' learning challenges. A further area of inequity involves the impacts of many international multilingual learners' exam-oriented training on their preparation for the type of essay writing, including source-based research, expected in many Western universities. While students from privileged educational backgrounds where they have been primed for university know that there is a strong connection between their use of academic language and their emergent learner identity at university, multilingual learners from different educational systems that emphasize different aspects of education may be inequitably unaware of the "hidden curriculum: besides content, students face a second curriculum: needing to learn how to manipulate language to their professors' liking" (Behrens, 2018, pp. 15–16), resulting in the challenges to their identities when they discover what they had written are not aligned with Eurocentric academic demands.

Scholars have pointed out the inequitable positions in which these students find themselves, confirmed by the research that English language learners have been found to be five times more likely to be reported for academic misconduct (Beasley, 2016) and overrepresented in contract cheating (Bretag et al., 2019). This is not to suggest that these students are prone to academic misconduct. Instead, pervasive deficit thinking (Valencia, 2010) about these students and discriminating attitudes towards their academic English level may have led to higher rates of their being reported compared to more fluent native speakers of English. One factor that may account for this is that these students' low confidence about their writing skills could lead some of them to resort to using cheating service providers (Mathrani et al., 2021) or using Internet-based paraphrasing tools (Perkins et al., 2018; Rogerson, 2017). Given that inter-national students pay much higher tuition than that of domestic students, Eaton (2022) calls for educators to develop intentional strategies to address equity, diversity, inclusion, and decolonization, as well as provide opportunities for students to "cultivate their awareness, knowledge

and skills so that they can actively make choices to avoid plagiarism" (Eaton & Burns, 2018, p. 353). Instead of viewing multilingual learners as deficient and thus leaving the student to shoulder the burden of gaining proficiency (e.g., through paying tuition fees for language courses), taking a nondeficit inclusive approach to supporting students can help tackle the issues of inequity of learning opportunities.

Dealing with such inequities requires recognition that it takes time and effort on the part of students to develop critical thinking, academic writing, and reading skills valued in Western universities. It also requires genuine institutional support and resources for proactive developmental programming. Writing Centre appointments to support students with their assignments have been lifelines for many multilingual learners. However, the critical question is: Can one-hour Writing Centre consultations on assignments sufficiently fix the range of inequities that students face? Multilingual learners need to have the opportunity to use academic English frequently with mentorship in order to become confident, successful users of English for academic purposes.

Therefore, we highlight the need for institutional responsibility to proactively provide resources for a more sustained program (e.g., RWE) for multilingual learners to have the opportunities to overcome the initial inequities they encounter and then begin their trajectory towards changing the negative stereotype and asserting their presence in the academic environment. The University of Toronto Scarborough (UTSC) campus leadership responded to this responsibility by funding the scaling up of a successful RWE pilot, and in the subsequent years the relational pedagogy used was further evolved. The program's success in supporting the development of confidence among multilingual learners in their use of English for academic purposes lies in shifting away from the pervasive deficit thinking stance on multilingual learners as learners in need of remediation. In contrast, RWE instructors work with students as collaborators whose perspectives are valuable contributions to the exchange of knowledge. This positioning embraces students in their diversity. As well, the positive relational program

constitutes a safer and braver space to counter the negative stereotypes and reduce the disadvantages that these equity- deserving students face.

Program Overview

The Reading and Writing Excellence (RWE) program is a month-long, learner-driven, instructor-facilitated co-curricular program that addresses systemic inequities in academic language learning for multilingual learners. Unlike conventional assignment-focused appointments, RWE fills in the gap in supporting multilingual students by offering a proactive, risk-free and supportive intervention that enables these learners to work on developing their academic writing skills from their individual unique starting points. This individualized relationship-based engagement is achieved by having each student paired with an instructor for four weeks, working within a dedicated private discussion thread on the institution's learning management system. The supportive feedback and guidance from their RWE instructor help them gain familiarity with Western academic writing norms and expectations. Since students can clarify their academic integrity questions with their RWE instructor with whom a relationship of mutual trust can be developed, students develop a sense of belonging to their new academic community.

Building on the successful one-on-one model of the Writing Centre where a student gets help with their assignment within a 50-minute or a 1-hour slot, the RWE program matches a student with an instructor with whom they work one-on-one over a four week period. When a student enrols in the program, the student gains access to a private discussion thread with their assigned writing instructor on Canvas, the UTSC learning management system. The program seeks to establish a caring relationship between the instructor and the student via student-submitted journal entries based on prompts and readings, mostly of the students' choice. The program asks students to complete a daily 40-minute period of reading with a subsequent

20-minute writing exercise. Instructors respond to these each student's written submissions 2-3 times per week. Students meet their instructors once every two weeks (See Fig. 1).

Figure 1: *Learner-driven, instructor-facilitated structure of the RWE program*
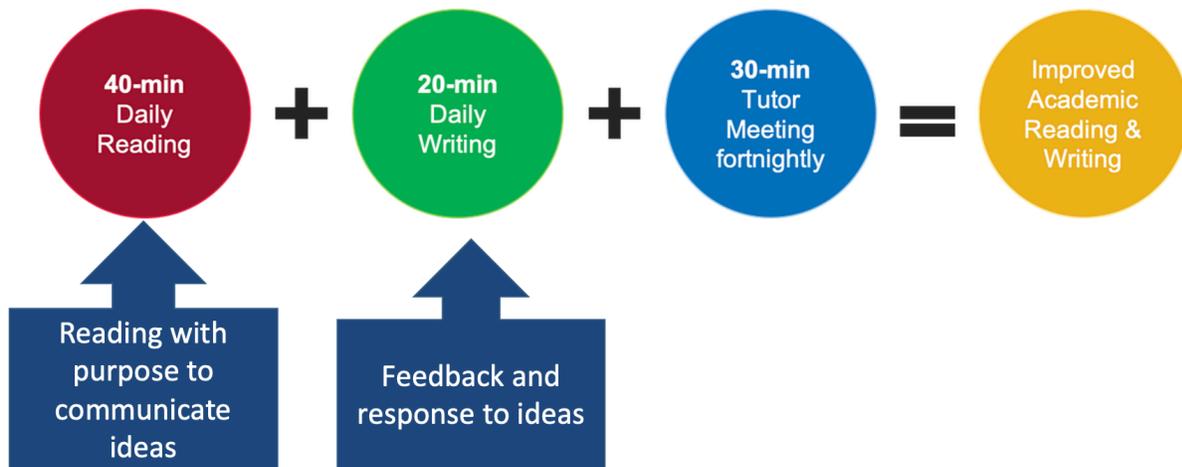
When a student enrols in the program, the student receives a private discussion thread with their assigned writing instructor, creating a space where the student may feel comfortable expressing their thoughts. This structure enables frequent interaction with students' writing, encouraging students to articulate their thoughts with a focus on clarity and communication of ideas. Since this is a non-credit, co-curricular program, this instructor-student interaction is like a supportive, written academic conversation that consequently develops the student's critical thinking and deep learning about their reading.

RWE writing instructors work collaboratively with the students assigned to them in an attempt to empower students based on their individual needs, challenges, and aspirations. Students participating in the program can withdraw at any time with no penalty. The program is low-risk, learner-driven, and instructor-facilitated so as to encourage learners to develop the freedom and confidence to express their diverse perspectives and lived experiences in relation to what they read in their course texts, with the expectation of a positive intellectual

engagement with their ideas, by their RWE instructors who are skilled writing instructors and educated interlocutors for higher education topics.

Program mission

The mission of RWE is to provide an equitable, non-remedial pathway open to all students, as well as specially to multilingual learners, to develop academic English fluency, integrity literacy, and an emergent junior scholar identity through sustained, personalized support. As such, multilingual learners realize that they can participate fully and confidently in their new academic environment by positioning them as capable contributors rather than remedial learners. They can draw on their own strengths and lived experiences as resources. In contrast to the deficit perception of multilingual learners , RWE students have the daily opportunity to grow towards their emergent junior scholar identities through sharing their thoughts of their course topics with their RWE instructors in their journal entries. Table 1 summarizes the cognitive, affective, and sociocultural dimensions of development through RWE. Unlike their course assignments which are graded, these non-graded daily journal entries are responded to by RWE instructors in a supportive tone which enables students to have a sandbox to play with their new ideas about their course topics and hone their critical thinking skills through their journal entries. For students with extremely limited language proficiency or writing skills, any of their written output in the RWE program is a step forward towards learning how to assert their voices and develop a sense of belonging.

Table 1. *Summary of cognitive, affective, and sociocultural dimensions of RWE mission*

	Cognitive	Affective	Sociocultural
Vocabulary	Expand course-related vocabulary through daily reading and writing of course materials.	Overcome fear and anxiety; increase willingness to express ideas in writing in English.	Develop a functional learner identity through larger vocabulary for communication; learn to take their place in the new learning community.
Familiarity with academic texts	Learn active and critical reading strategies to deal with high volume of academic texts.	Develop self-efficacy through manageable volume of daily reading and writing in English.	Learn about university expectations of academic integrity.
Academic writing norms	Learn academic writing norms and critical thinking skills.	Develop confidence to share perspectives on various course topics; become better prepared for assignments or exams.	Develop competence in expressing thoughts, as well as interacting with instructors and peers in class.

While Writing Centre appointments are invaluable for immediate, assignment-based guidance, they are not set up to address the structural inequities that multilingual learners face. The RWE program addresses this gap by providing sustained developmental opportunities that target: (a) acquisition and practice of academic English; (b) awareness of Western academic writing traditions; (c) engagement with academic integrity as a set of practices and values; and (d) integration into the intellectual and social life of the university. Through this design, RWE functions as an equity-focused complement to existing support services.

Program structure

The RWE program is offered in two cycles each semester—Cycle 1 at the start of the semester and Cycle 2 at midterm. This enables students to be supported in developing their disciplinary knowledge and writing skills before major assignments are due. Students who are enrolled in the program are matched to an RWE instructor. On the first day of the program, students attend a 30-minute orientation webinar conducted by the first author, followed by a

Question and Answer session. This webinar helps students to understand the program's principles, safe and brave space ethos, and daily usage practice expectations. It also reinforces for students that they are the drivers of their own learning. After the orientation, students view a 2-minute welcome video recorded by their instructor posted in the learning management system (LMS) and write their self-introduction journal entry to share their specific needs, challenges, and goals. The second journal entry is a response to an academic integrity socialization prompt that enables students to understand academic integrity expectations of good practice (for more details, please refer to Khoo & Kang, 2022). Except for Journals #12, #18, and #25 where students are required to reflect on their own progress and what they had learned from the instructor's feedback, from Journal #3 onwards to the end of the program, students' daily journal entries focus on summarizing their course readings and providing the analysis or perspectives of the reading materials. Instructors respond to every Journal #1 and Journal #2, followed by responses to selected subsequent journal entries.

In this learner-driven, instructor-facilitated framework, learners have the freedom to choose their own course material for their daily 40-minute reading time. After their reading, students can choose what to focus on in their subsequent 20-minute writing, which needs to be at least 250 words. In order to develop the essential summarizing and analytical skills expected of them in their academic writing, students are encouraged to first summarize the text that they had just read in order to give their RWE instructors an idea of what they had read. (Note. The instructors do not read the original text.) The more important paragraph is where students engage in critical thinking, as they share their thoughts on their reading. The RWE instructors' responses are not corrective feedback but rather an engagement with the students' ideas about their course topics. The one-on-one meetings that happen every fortnight enable real-time discussion and the opportunity to reinforce the relationship of trust built through the many interactions on the dedicated private thread in the LMS between each student and their RWE instructor.

Giving students the agency to decide is an important feature of the program as it enables students to work on what matters most to them (i.e., dealing with their academic reading, critical thinking, and academic writing skills). Unlike the conventional, one-size-fits all approach, this agency vests students with the power to customize the support according to their individual learning needs for their specific courses.

Student enrolment

In an intentional and strategic decision to avoid perpetuating deficit models and being mindful of the widespread stigmatized perception of the ESL label (Marshall, 2009), the RWE program is open to all students. Due to the non-remedial nature of the program, and the learner-driven, instructor-facilitated approach, the program has attracted a full spectrum of students including those who do well academically but wish to improve their writing skills to pursue graduate studies. As such, RWE is presented as a program that supports any student aspiring to improve their academic writing and reading skills. The program's intention to avoid deficit models is limited to the extent that it does rely on a diagnostic screening test to determine student eligibility given program capacity constraints.

In line with the mission to support students in ways that are positive and empowering, and to communicate to students that they are the ones to decide whether they will need support, students take a 20-minute online Academic English Health Check (AEHC). This is the friendly term we use for the Diagnostic English Language Needs Assessment (DELNA) Screening test from University of Auckland. By 'friendly', we mean the plain-language, non-deficit framing that signals that the check is for students' own use to decide which supports to use. Thus, our use of the DELNA differs from its original purpose in New Zealand, to screen for students considered as Band 1 and thus "linguistically at risk" who would be required to undergo further testing and then assigned for remediation (Elder & von Randow, 2008). Band 2 scores indicate that the students' academic English skills are satisfactory, but they need to work on improvement. Band 3

scores indicate that the student's academic English skills are likely appropriate to begin university study.

The AEHC result is sent to each student along with the recommendation of free support services available to them through the Centre for Teaching and Learning. The AEHC results are confidential and are sent to email addresses students provide. The results are not available to their professors, the registrar's office, or anyone else. As such, it is clear to students that they are not being diagnosed as being deficient and assigned for remedial help. Rather, students can decide which of the recommendations they will follow. When the number of students applying for the RWE program exceeds that of the spots available, we prioritize admission for Band 1 students as they need support most.

To provide an idea of student demographics during winter 2022, we had a cohort of 182 students from 34 disciplinary programs, with 97 students in Year 1, 34 in Year 2, 31 in Year 3, 18 in Year 4, and 2 in Year 5 respectively. Sixty-six students self-identified as international students while 116 were domestic students. Seventy-four students self-reported to speak English as their first language while 108 students reported that English was not their first language. As the reports of this program have been analyzed based on the secondary use of data kept for program administration, no gender or age information of the students is available. Notably, student participants in the program can withdraw at any time.

Instructors and Their Roles

RWE instructors are expected to respond at least 2-3 times per week to each learner in the group assigned to them. Such regular personalized support is important for learners to feel that they benefit from their instructors' feedback, and thus learners are motivated to keep up with writing expectations for the month.

All RWE writing instructors have graduate degrees, mostly PhDs. Many of them teach university courses and grade assignments. Some of them are also writing instructors working

one-on-one with students in the Writing Centre which is part of the Centre for Teaching and Learning. During the interview for the RWE instructor's position, candidates are required to show how well they can provide a response to a sample student journal entry in this program within 15 minutes. Candidates need to demonstrate their abilities to engage productively with learners' ideas in the sample journal entries in a supportive tone that can motivate learners to continue writing in the program. The RWE instructors are hired on a contract basis. New instructors are provided with training on the standard program pedagogy, and the whole team of new and old instructors undergo full-day professional development each term to share successful practices and keep abreast of new developments (e.g., anti-racist pedagogy and GenAI). When the RWE program was re-envisioned as a fully online, one-month program during the COVID-19 pandemic, seven out of nine instructors were already experienced in using the standard RWE program pedagogy. During the pandemic, two new instructors were hired into the program and provided with the training in the standard program pedagogy. Among the instructors, the second author of this article was a bilingual English language learning specialist who had taught several thousand students' academic writing in diverse postsecondary contexts for over two decades. The instructor has a BA in English from China, an MA in Language Learning and Education from England, and a PhD in Language, Teaching, and Culture earned from York University in Canada) before being hired into this program. As this instructor (who later was promoted to assistant professor) had the necessary background (e.g., considerable expertise in language education, writing pedagogy, as well as intercultural and cross-cultural teaching and learning, applied linguistics) and training to cope with very low proficiency students (Band 1), she was assigned exclusively Band 1 students while other instructors had various combinations of Band 1, Band 2, and Band 3 students. To help these Band 1 students to engage successfully in the program, this new instructor layered culturally responsive pedagogy on top of the standard program pedagogy. The other RWE instructors of the team continued supporting students with the standard relational pedagogy.

During the pandemic, there was great urgency to support students to be able to develop and gain competence in academic English while living in their home environments. Thus, the RWE program was shortened from eight weeks before the pandemic to a four-week online delivery model in order to support more students with the existing level of resources. Students who needed further support were able to sign up for subsequent one-month cycles. The challenge in the one-month support was to provide opportunities for students in different global locations to engage in a high volume of English usage so that they would be able to gain some familiarity and competence in academic reading and writing. Since the pandemic necessitated that students live in their own social groups or families, many multilingual learners had little or no chance to use English in their daily interactions. Thus, it was necessary to establish a manageable daily goal of writing a minimum of 250 words per journal entry, so that over the course of four weeks, students were expected to write at least 6,250 words, which is an objective measure of their usage practice in expressing themselves in English. The more students were willing to communicate in writing about their course topics with their RWE instructors in English, the more comfortable and prepared they were likely to be when writing their course assignments. The personalized support in enabling students to develop their cognitive, affective, and sociocultural skills needed to cope with university level academic reading and writing had a high level of uptake by students as reflected by the high volume of voluntary written output (over 5,000 words within a month) by over 70% of the students in the study (Khoo & Kang, 2022) as well as international students with low English proficiency (Huo & Khoo, 2022; Khoo & Huo, 2022b). Most students wrote much longer than the minimum of 250 words required per journal entry.

Pedagogical Framework

Pedagogically, the program is intended to fill a gap in the support of multilingual learners in addressing inequities of their learning contexts. To counter deficit models where students' lack

of success is attributed to students' "endogenous deficits (e.g., poor motivation; inadequate cultures)" (Valencia, 2010, p. 136) , the RWE program takes an innovative empowerment-focused approach and strives to offer a safer and braver space for multilingual learners to practise usage of the written academic language, meet the expectations of Western source-based writing, as well as experience academic integrity socialization and feel a sense of belonging to the academic community.

Compared to having to express themselves in course assignments, tutorials, or oral presentations where their output or performance is graded, students' writing and interaction with the RWE instructor is positive, constructive, and supportive. The safer space, from multilingual learners' perspective, can be defined as an "environment in which students are willing and able to participate and honestly struggle with challenging issues" (Holley & Steiner, 2005, p. 49) where they can "openly express their individuality" (p. 50). The braver space that we have created is for students to boldly attempt to summarize their course materials and express their opinions on their various course topics to an instructor, an authority figure in many cultures but with whom students now develop a confidence to freely share their thoughts about their course topics without worrying about grades. Given that each student interacts with only the RWE instructor through the LMS's dedicated discussion board function, our brave space differs from Arao and Clemens' (2013) effort to move from safe to brave space in the context of a peer group learning environment. For the RWE program, the safe space is the private discussion thread dedicated for the student's and the RWE instructor's exchanges. Given the trust that is built up between student and instructor, it is truly a safe space for the student to articulate their thoughts without any fear of being judged or graded poorly for their writing. It is also a brave space for the student to explore the development of their ideas and thoughts on course topics in ways that they would likely not dare to express as freely in their course or tutorial space of their discipline. In this space, multilingual learners work with their instructors who encourage

them to articulate their authentic voices and share their thoughts in the learning process in an anxiety-free supportive relationship.

Recognizing multilingual learners' inequitable learning conditions due to language, culture, and socioeconomic challenges, it is important to note that each student's learning needs and aspirations are unique. The RWE program builds on the successful one-on-one model of the Writing Centre consultation, and takes the model further in positioning the student and RWE instructor to collaboratively address inequities related to (a) mastering and applying academic English in writing, (b) learning the conventions of Western academic discourse, (c) cultivating awareness of academic integrity norms and practices, and (d) building a sense of belonging within the university learning community. In this way, RWE fills a crucial gap in institutional support structures by addressing systemic barriers rather than leaving students to navigate them alone. As soon as students are accepted into the program, they are encouraged to attend a 30-minute Orientation webinar conducted by the first author where they get to understand the empowering, anti-racist, decolonizing safe and brave space where they can develop their voice with personalized support for one month. This webinar explains the collective strategy and mission of the program to facilitate their accelerated development of cognitive, affective and sociocultural capital for reducing current inequities and reaching a more advantaged position to deal with their major assignments in the later part of the semester. It is emphasized to students that in the RWE program, they are in the driver's seat, and they decide what aspect of their course readings they would choose to focus on for their 40-minute daily reading and then they choose what aspect of their readings they would reflect on during their 20-minute daily writing. In order to strengthen essential skills that students need to deal with future writing assignments in their courses, students are advised for their 20-minute writing to focus on writing 2-paragraph journal entries—the first paragraph to summarize what they had read (since the RWE instructors do not read the original text they had read), and then in the second paragraph to provide their perspectives, analysis, or personal opinions about their reading. The instructors

would engage with their ideas in ways that help each individual bridge the gap between what they have been used to in writing tasks in previous educational experiences versus the unwritten expectations of critical thinking in Western academic writing that instructors and teaching assistants expect to see in assignments. Since the RWE instructors' role is to facilitate students' individual trajectory of progress towards becoming a junior scholar in the academic community, the orientation session makes it amply clear to students that in this learner-driven, instructor-facilitated model of one-on-one support, students have the opportunity to customize the support offered to them through their daily choice of course reading and daily journal-writing.

The relationship between the instructor and the student begins from the point the student watches a two-minute welcome video pre-recorded by the instructor and posted in the learning management system. The student writes a self-introduction journal entry (in response to the given prompt for Journal Entry #1) to share their specific needs, challenges, and goals. Some excerpts of the Journal #1 prompt are shown in Appendix 1. The RWE instructor's personalized response to each student's introductory journal entry communicates care, empathy, and readiness to support the student's expressed needs and aspirations. This first introductory journal gives the instructor the chance at the beginning of the program to learn about the student and thus to respond effectively so that the student develops trust in the relationship, which encourages engagement.

The second journal entry requires students to respond to an academic integrity socialization prompt that enables students to understand academic integrity expectations and encourages students to share what they found to be new to them from the materials provided in the links (For more details, see Khoo & Kang, 2022). By getting students to gain familiarity with academic integrity expectations within this safe and brave space in RWE, students can freely ask questions, and some students have shared about trauma they or their peers had experienced related to plagiarism. RWE instructors respond to each Journal #2 posted by every student, so that students have a positive interaction regarding academic integrity and can clarify any points

that seem ambiguous. RWE instructors can also share advice or guidance with their students. Subsequent to this journal entry, many students choose to incorporate in-text citations in subsequent journal entries, so that they become familiar with how to do so, and RWE instructors help them develop a better understanding of the citation system they are using.

From Journal #3 onwards to the end of the program, students' daily journal entries summarize their course readings and analyze their perspectives of the reading materials. After ChatGPT was launched in November 2022, a new pedagogical goal in RWE was to engage students in actively reflecting on their progress and what they had learned through the RWE process. Hence, reflection on progress prompts for Journal entries #12, #18, and #25 were introduced so that students realize the value of developing their critical thinking and writing skills through RWE instead of relying on GenAI to generate output for their assignments.

Unlike Writing Centre appointments dealing with a piece of writing that each student brings, the RWE program requires students to engage in a daily 40-minute reading and 20-minute writing practice to hone students' critical thinking skills of their course materials and share their thoughts about them for one hour every day. This structural scaffolding results in students' engaging in spaced learning (Brown et al., 2014) of disciplinary content which is essential for them to progressively acquire the language for communicating about their disciplines effectively. As the power dynamic between the student and the instructor is not traditionally hierarchical, given the non-credit voluntary nature of the program, there is an opportunity for the creation of a safe and non-threatening space, where students can write in their own authentic voice, discover their own thinking process through writing, and develop this processes through personalized feedback.

As there is no concern about formal assessment, students do not have to attempt a level of lexical sophistication that they do not yet possess by incorporating vocabulary that seem impressive to them. They can learn from the customized feedback to argue, evaluate, question, and critique. In fact, from the perspective of a decolonizing approach, this is "distributed practice

for generating meanings and outcomes" (Canagarajah, 2024, p. 4). The instructor has a chance to learn from the self-introduction of the first journal about the student's background, and thus the instructor is well-positioned to develop empathy for students stated struggles and provide effective personalized responses that engage with the student's ideas. The instructor can also share essential tips and guidance to facilitate students in developing their diverse voices (Khoo & Huo, 2023), while meeting the academic writing norms and academic integrity expectations at their host university. As a result, the instructor and the student are co-creators in this safer and braver space and their academic interaction has become a reciprocal and meaning-making process. The RWE support provides the developmental space for students' daily articulation of their opinions on various course topics and offers students the opportunity of (a) using academic language that they encounter in their reading when writing about their course topics; (b) exploring the connections between their previous educational and cultural experiences with the expectations of academic integrity at their university; (c) embracing their junior scholar identities that are expected of students when they engage in academic writing tasks; and (d) developing the mindset for exercising agency in their reading and writing to address the inequity gap. Some examples of different students' reflections of their RWE experience excerpted from students' Journal #25 and included in an internal report (Khoo, 2024) are shown below:

> In RWE, a valuable strength I learned was critical thinking at a deeper level. This is clearly demonstrated from my first few journals to my later journals. I think this relates to personalized learning as I was able to learn at my own pace and read whatever I wanted to, while still relating it to my chosen course.

> My tutor [Tutorname] gave me a lot of constructive advice during the RWE process, such as encouraging me to question some of the theories, to consider who is talking behind the experiments, to think about the identity traits of the person, race, class, gender, etc., and also encouraging me to think critically about the Journal in the context of my identity traits, and to be expose myself in my articles. These useful suggestions help me shape

my ability to think more holistically. I am very grateful to [Tutorname] for being there for me and guiding me through the RWE process.

Standard RWE relational pedagogy

Since the RWE program was designed to address as much of the inequity spectrum as possible for multilingual learners to help them integrate with and contribute to their new academic community, the ungraded communication opportunity has enabled students to have positive reciprocal connections with their supportive RWE instructors in empathetic relationships which are salient in their development (Walker-Gleaves, 2019). In her assertion that learning is a subjective experience, Walker-Gleaves (2019) emphasizes the relational component, where "the continual and renewed emotional growth of both the student and teacher is intrinsic to the student's intellectual development" (p. 104). For every student assigned to the RWE writing instuctor, the instuctor gets a chance to respond in ways aimed at promoting student engagement with the program in the discusison board. Additionally, through the many asynchronous interactions per week and the two 30-minute meetings that the student has with the instructor per cycle, the students and the instructor are building their relationship with each other. The instructors learn about the students' disciplinary topics and perspectives that are the result of their sociocultural and educational experiences while students learn about academic expectations and norms that they navigate through meaning-making during communication with their empathetic and supportive RWE instructors. Since the student knows more about the topic than the instructor, the interaction allows students to be in the unusual position of being the more knowledgeable partner sharing disciplinary content with the instructor who serves as an educated reader and learns more about the topic. This opportunity helps students to feel braver to talk about the topic, which is lower risk for the student than when they are writing to their course instructor or teaching assistant who would judge them on their level of knowledge about course topics. As instructors get to know each student better, their comments become

more tuned to the individual student's needs, and support the student's identity development for communicating their ideas in English.

Here are some examples of guidelines provided to RWE writing instructors for responding to students' self-introduction in Journal entry #1 below (Khoo & Huo, 2022a):

1) Have I warmly welcomed learners to this risk-free, positive, supportive online learning space, and assured them of my mission to help them develop?

2) Have I ensured that I have taught something useful and necessary to the learner at this stage?

3) Have I motivated the learner to want to fully engage with this program and keep building this relationship with me?

4) Have I communicated in vocabulary accessible to the learner (i.e., not speaking above their heads)?

Learner-driven and instructor-facilitated model

Participation in RWE is voluntary, and students have the agency to make their daily decisions on which course reading material matters most to them to read and write. Instructor facilitation of learning happens in a relationship of sensitivity and trust in Vygotsky's (1978) zone of proximal development (ZPD), which is between where a student is able to operate independently and the point at which the learner could achieve a more complex task through interactions with the RWE instructor. The instructor's encouraging tone in engaging with the student's ideas in the journal entries guides students to higher levels of critical thinking than those initially shown by students in their earlier journal entries. As noted by Walker (2010), operating in ZPD is inherently motivating for learners as it transfers the control of the learning process to learners; thus, learners develop greater efficacy and mastery in communicating their knowledge, ideas, and perspectives on their course topics. The positive and healthy dynamics with the instructor provide students with the opportunity and a safe space to express their voices and feel that they belong to the learning community where others are interested in them as an individual

and in their ideas. Furthermore, students can feel that their voices matter. For international multilingual learners who have lamented that their attempt at conversation with domestic peers dry up in a couple of minutes, their month-long written conversations on course topics with their RWE instructor show these students that they have lots of ideas they can share.

Nature of writing instructor responses

This interaction is basically the co-construction of the learning journey, with mutual respectful engagement that promotes two-way learning. A student who writes daily can expect to receive 2-3 responses from the instructor per week. The instructor takes approximately 15-20 minutes per response with variation dependent on a student's journal entry. Some journal entries may require more than 15 minutes to respond to, and thus the student may receive only two responses per week from the instructor. In this two-way communication, students learn from their instructor's personalized feedback, and students try to integrate the feedback in their subsequent journal entries. The instructor learns from how each student responds to the instructor's comments as to the tone, style, approach, and quality of feedback. In the case where the instructor is very effective in engaging the student, the student is likely to sustain active writing till the end of the cycle. On the contrary, where the instructor goes through the performative motion of giving feedback but essentially copies generic canned feedback to be pasted as a response to each student's introductory journal, the student may not feel a genuine care in the response. In this case, the student tends to become demotivated and likely to stop writing after noticing that their investment of time and effort did not really result in useful or actionable feedback to improve their further journal entries as expected. As a result, the student may stop writing or withdraw from the program.

Usage-based fluency and competence development through social interaction

To address the significant disadvantages faced by multilingual learners unfamiliar with dominant Western educational norms, it is important to create conditions conducive to developing their practical fluency and competence in academic English. Without such a sustained

academic conversation with the RWE writing instructor, students would not have the opportunity to practice being an English language user every day or understand how to communicate their ideas better to their instructor who is like a proxy for their course professor. Without the RWE opportunity, it may be challenging for newly arriving multilingual learners unfamiliar with North American academic writing norms and standards to know how to meet the academic writing expectations at their host university.

Non-remedial, respectful, and inclusive engagement of diverse lived experiences

Understanding the intertwined connection between language and identity, as noted by Bucholtz and Hall (2005), it is essential to frame our support for multilingual learners in a way that bridges the inequity gap without framing them as a remedial and stigmatized student population. This approach is crucial to help avoid perpetuating the negative bias or stereotype of these multilingual learners. Students do not perceive being in the RWE program to be remedial since their task in RWE is to be reading their own course text which all students should be doing in order to keep abreast of the lectures. Since writing about what they had read helped students feel that they understood the material better, students felt being in RWE helped them develop good study habits that would help them perform better in their courses. As such the students do not feel stigmatized. In fact, many felt they were being better students because of being in RWE. The RWE program is inclusive and supportive, recognizing and respecting the unique strengths and the starting points of each learner. Considering the varied cultural, linguistic, educational, and socioeconomic backgrounds of our students, we provide an encouraging environment to help express students' ideas without fear or anxiety. This environment enables students to connect the new learning with their personal experiences. In such a setting where they are met with supportive responses from RWE instructors, students are more likely to engage actively and practice communicating their thoughts continuously.

Willingness to articulate thoughts on course readings

In a statistical analysis of engagement data from the Canvas LMS of a cohort of 182 students in nine groups, Khoo and Kang (2022) found a trend of high volume of voluntary written output during students' one-month in the RWE program. The summary of the word count of students' journal entries showed an average of 6,064 words while the highest total word count in one month was 17,038 words. Most of the students wrote more than 5,000 words each during the RWE program with their instructors' personalized support. Word count is a uniquely objective means of quantifying multilingual learners' academic language usage and practice in explaining their ideas about their course topics to their RWE instructors. Thus, it is a good indicator of students' readiness to articulate their ideas in their own words when writing their assignments to reduce their dependency on the incorporation of long chunks from their source texts (which is generally considered as textual plagiarism).

Transformative learning experience

Qualitative analysis of students' experience in the one-month synchronous and asynchronous interactions with their RWE instructors showed that students discovered the breadth and depth of their ideas about their course readings. Their success in sustaining the discussion with their RWE instructors enabled them to gain cognitive, affective, and sociocultural resources that they can draw upon to combat linguicism (i.e., linguistic racism) and inequities they face (Huo, 2020; Khoo & Huo, 2022a). In addition, low proficiency students' high uptake of the opportunity to express themselves is noticeable. In Khoo and Kang's (2022) study, 86 low proficiency ELLs wrote on average 5,844 words within one month, which was a comparable volume to their more proficient peers in the cohort. Most importantly, the high word count contributes to students' increasing fluency in articulating their ideas on their course topics.

Culturally responsive pedagogy as enhancement

Culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) is the "teaching to and through personal cultural strengths, intellectual capabilities, and their prior accomplishments" (Gay, 2010, p. 26). It refutes deficit models (Ladson-Billings, 2006) which devalue multilingual learners' language proficiency and strengths (Ladson-Billings, 2014). Five key principles of culturally responsive pedagogy have been implemented in RWE: cultural bridging (Kilburn et al., 2019), personalized feedback, empowerment and learner autonomy, teachers as collaborators, and humanistic teaching (Gay, 2018). Cultural bridging connects students' previous learning experience and strategies with the new academic environment (Kilburn et al., 2019) with the provision of individualized support, to empower students as active, autonomous learners and enhance their confidence and transform learning (Gay, 2018) by acknowledging their personal strengths (Yasin, 2021). During this learning process, instructors do not position themselves as authorities, but power-sharing partners and collaborators, negotiating choices with students. Additionally, instructors show empathy and concern for students, caring about their students' struggles, progress, and achievements (Jabbar & Hardaker, 2013). Montelongo and Eaton (2019) call the humanistic teaching as "becoming~teacher~becoming~human" (p. 53). Since care is "relational ethic" (Beck & Cassidy, 2009), "culturally responsive care" (Rider, 2019, p. 193) and "ethics of care" in teaching are conductive to democratic education (Rider, 2019, p. 197). By instilling these five CRP principles, the CRP instructor has fostered "an equitable classroom climate" (Krasnof, 2016, p. 16) where students can find "meaning" and "purpose" in their academic conversations with their instructor (Massar, 2022, p. 481).

Enhancing the standard RWE pedagogy with culturally responsive pedagogy was found to be particularly effective for supporting international students with low language proficiency (Huo & Khoo, 2022) and those linguistically at-risk international students (Khoo & Huo, 2022). In an analysis of 14 Chinese international students with extremely low academic English proficiency, Huo and Khoo (2022) reported the use of culturally responsive pedagogy as an enhanced

layer of support in addition to the standard RWE program pedagogy. Eight students wrote at least 25 journal entries during the 28 days when they were participating in the RWE program, producing on average 11,454 words in their journal entries within one month. This extremely high volume of written output exceeded the average volume of words (6,064 words) that was produced by the total number of 182 students in the Khoo and Kang's (2022) study. The CRP instructor adopted the cultural bridging approach by drawing on students' cultures as assets and turning students' initial challenges into strengths. In addition, the CRP instructor showed constant care about her students and established rapport with her students. As a result, students' reflections included comments about feeling like talking to a friend in the discussion of their ideas with the CRP instructor. This observation can reinforce the efficacy of the culturally responsive pedagogy in bridging the inequity gap of low-proficiency international students.

Encouragement of effortful investment

RWE offers participating students an opportunity to be recommended for 2% bonus marks for the course they engaged with in the program (provided that the course is on the CTL Collaborating Courses). This bonus mark incentive has been approved by the office of the Dean's office since students who are fully engaged and meet the criteria for recommendation become deeply engaged with their own knowledge making processes. This attracts students to the RWE program. Students who complete all the requirements for the program can apply to the Coordinator (first author) to have a Centre for Teaching and Learning recommendation of 2% bonus mark to be sent to the professor of the course. Course instructors are free to register their courses CTL Collaborating Courses. Many instructors are extremely supportive of the program because students are keeping up with their course readings every day and they are engaging in deep learning about their course through writing, and most importantly they are improving their writing skills. In Fall 2023 and Winter 2024, there were 71 and 79 collaborating courses respectively, reflecting the wide support among faculty for the RWE program. Basically, though the

program is voluntary, it is effective in having students effortfully working on their course materials.

Since reading and writing every day about a particular course is indeed a tall demand, students who do not meet the criteria of a minimum of 25 journal entries in the month can still qualify for 1% bonus mark recommendation if they had written 13 -24 journal entries. For students who have written 12 journal entries for fewer, it is still a win for them because they have written some journal entries and received some supportive responses personalized to their needs from their RWE instructor. What is important is that since there are 5 mandatory journal entries, even if students stop the program early, they would have done at least Journal #1 (where they self-assess where they stand) and Journal #2 (where they examine the expectations of academic integrity links provides and they reflect on what is new to them). Students high level of engagement in the program show that this positive, non-remedial and non-deficit way of supporting multilingual learners in overcoming the inequities of their learning condition resonate with them.

When students are given a chance to engage with their self-selected course readings and write summaries and reflections every day, the cumulative impact is substantial in a month as shown in Figure 2. During the month, the student has spent around 9.6 hours writing about their course topics and has acquired disciplinary knowledge by reading for 19 hours. It is our position that, instead of being inequitably evaluated based on the grading criteria they are not prepared for in their courses, RWE helps address the inequity gaps related to gaining familiarity with academic writing norms and expectations by giving multilingual learners space to progressively become more comfortable to express themselves on course topics to their RWE instructors who do not grade their journals. This opportunity to labour through writing and developing writing skills outside of traditional hegemonic assessment ecologies (Inoue, 2015, 2019) provides an alternative to the pervasive deficit thinking historically used on students considered Other.

Figure 2. *Daily tasks add up to substantial academic reading and writing within one month*
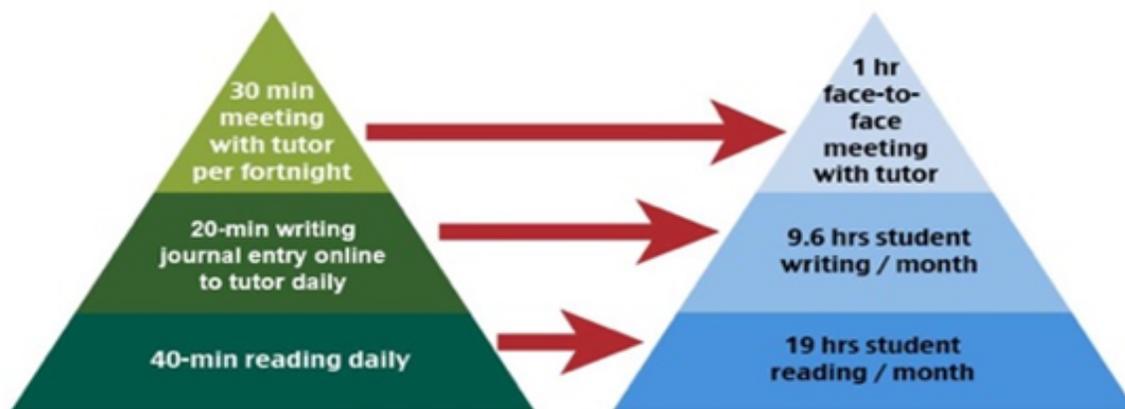
Conclusion

The common portrayal of struggles among multilingual learners highlights a lack of general awareness of the equity gap. It is vital to provide multilingual learners with opportunities to express their knowledge and perspectives in a manner that they feel comfortable with. The implementation of such a safer and braver space should emphasize the relationship of care and trust where instructors facilitate students' acquisition of new knowledge in the dominant language. Additionally, instructors play a crucial role in helping students feel that they belong to this equitable space and their new academic community. Without such opportunities or support, the equity gaps would continue to exist, and multilingual learners would function at "half capacity" (Xing & Bolden, 2021, p. 41), feeling a lack of belonging to their new learning environments. Low language proficiency is not equated to low cognitive ability. Thus, to re-dress inequity faced by multilingual learners, culturally responsive pedagogy layered on top of the standard RWE program pedagogy is found to have resulted in low English-proficiency in-ternational students being able to produce a higher volume of writing compared to their peers in the program (Khoo & Huo, 2022b).

Students' active participation and increased writing output in the RWE program demonstrate the importance of a supportive, safe, and brave space for expressing their individuality and building competence in their academic skills. This is particularly essential for students from diverse cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds to overcome academic inequities. The RWE program's anti-deficit approach empowers students by encouraging them to develop their voices, agency, and identities through the active engagement with their personally relevant course materials. Instead of focusing on their perceived weaknesses viewed from the deficit models, this empowerment approach facilitates students to leverage their unique perspectives in their writing, as well as enhancing their comfort and involvement in their learning.

Appendix

For Journal Entry #1, students are asked to read the booklet ((Khoo, 2015) [Beating the Odds: Success Stories of Students Overcoming English Language Challenges](#))

Note. The term "tutor" is often used in the RWE program when communicating about the RWE writing instructor as the term "tutor" comes across with the meaning of being a coach rather than the term "writing instructor" that students might automatically connect with judging or grading their work.

For the student new to RWE:

Reflect on the experiences of the profiled students, and the ways these represent your own experiences, by asking yourself such questions as:

- Which student do you think is most like you? Why?
- What strategies in this booklet that might help you?
- Referring to the downward and upward spirals on pages 14 and 15, which are you on now, and which would you like to be on?
- After looking over the action plan on page 16, tell your tutor what your specific goals are, and think of some strategies that might work for you. Try to articulate statements more detailed than something simple like, 'Improve my writing". Identifying specific goals and strategies can help you better identify and reach your goals. For example, you might consider writing something like, "I want to improve my writing of lab reports and summarizing key findings by reading relevant and discipline-specific journal articles, in order to analyze and better understand the discussion offered by the authors."
- Even if you don't identify with any of the students in Beating the Odds, you can still explain how your experiences and needs differ from those students, suggesting some

ways that you could improve upon the work they've done and develop strategies that might work more specifically for you.

Note: **you do not need to answer all of these questions**. They are simply meant as prompts to help you start thinking about how to respond to this first journal prompt.

For the returning RWE student:

If you have done RWE before, please share with your tutor when you did RWE . Also, address the following points:

1. What changes or lack of changes happened in your previous RWE experience? This will help your tutor understand your previous experience and your tutor will be in a better position to support you this cycle.
2. What do you hope to achieve in this cycle of RWE? What are the challenges that you are working to overcome?

What has motivated you to join RWE this time?

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