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Making ESL Programs More Relevant
A Practical Campus-wide Solution

There are a number of demographic trends which can sometimes seem to be chopping up the student population into totally separate groups of needs and interests. One of the big problems for intensive ESL programs is making their courses relevant to what English language learners will be encountering when they start studying in a regular academic program, such as engineering or business.

A continual source of frustration for ESL teachers (and students) is curriculum that focuses on language forms to be mastered in a step-wise process, as alluded to in Ashley Green's article this month. Several years ago, I participated in a pilot project at an intensive English program at a major university in the midwest: three teachers taught the traditional skills of writing, reading, and speaking/listening, but in the context of what was needed by the students in order to understand and participate fully in a regular university course, intro to human development.

The primary impetus for lessons came from materials being used by the instructor in the human development course. In teaching speaking and listening skills, I utilized video lectures and online components of the human development course, and eventually incorporated debate activities on issues arising in the targeted course. Other teachers gave writing or reading assignments that were usually connected to the content of the target course as well.

Nearly every one of those students scored well enough on the English proficiency test battery to enroll full-time or almost full-time in regular university coursework after that semester. It was a great reminder of the power of content-based instruction to motivate students and guide their progress in developing English language skills. It is sometimes like a vision from above or an awe-inspiring insight when teachers realize that grammatical points aren't necessarily learned in a grammar syllabus, but rather as integrated with purpose-driven content activities.

Yet another frustration often occurs as well, at the other extreme, in fully content-based programs. Students are motivated and everybody is involved in purposeful communication, from one level to the next, but when the student moves into regular coursework, his or her professors complain to the intensive English administrators about composition and speech that are riddled with errors which distract from what the international student is attempting to express. This kind of feedback often pushes programs to replace content-based with more grammar-based and phonologically focused curricula.

Yet another complicating factor in ESL program administration, as noted by Joy Reid and others in research over the past decade, is the appearance of generation 1.5 students, who are the children of first-generation immigrants, and often have English literacy difficulties distinct from those of students arriving directly to American colleges from overseas. Some of these Gen 1.5 students have gone through the U.S. public school system, and found ways to "survive" academically without developing reading and writing skills.

At community colleges with adult education services, there is yet another group of students, who are immigrants of various ages who did not have access to regular education for a variety of reasons, usually related to the need to work at manual labor jobs for long hours from a young age. I have seen parents who never finished high school, but now have children going through the school system, and who go back to school themselves at adult education programs to learn literacy and numeracy skills in order to complete a GRE and set a positive example for their family. These are some of the most highly motivated language learners and content learners you can imagine, even though many times the teacher must remember not to load them down with homework assignments because of all the job and family obligations they already are meeting.

I have developed ESL curriculum, been a proof reader for instructional materials, restructured literacy and career development curricula, and supervised and trained instructors in all of these areas. One of the main restrictions on programs which cater to any of the student groups listed above is that the curriculum does not address the interest of nearly every student in doing additional activities outside of class assignments to build their skills. Students look to clubs, extra jobs, TOEFL-prep study

books, and even spend long hours writing down translations of words and phrases to commit to memory, because they have nothing better to do that is recommended by the program.

I forgot one more group of students that can be encountered by an intensive English program: the student who has never seen English before. It is hard to find or imagine, with English such a dominant influence all over the globe, but there are places where students learn in their own language, are not required to study English, and whose local or regional cultures are not infused with English language. Some ESL programs are not equipped to handle the unique needs of a student who has no experience with the Roman alphabet and no experience with Germanic or Latin based languages like English.

That student definitely does not need a grammar class right off the bat, but writing, reading, and listening/speaking can be worked on from day one, if the teachers are sensitive and able to innovate in their lesson planning. The normal assessment battery will not be valid for this student, and it may be six months before he or she has enough of a knowledge and skill base for his or her English proficiency to be determined by such a test.

We did find in one program that time devoted to the most basic levels of Rosetta Stone, the popular computer software, did help a student like this to start piecing together competencies in vocabulary to begin to understand and participate in skills classes at the beginning levels of the intensive ESL program.

But in the case of such students, the system of the established intensive English program is more inclined to counsel him out of the program and discourage him from further pursuit of a college degree. I have seen this happen to a small number of students in my lifetime, and it is really hard for a teacher to take. In one case, the student that the program gave up on returned to campus for a visit six months later, speaking and understanding English very nicely and naturally. Another program had been able to accommodate this student.

So, there are all these different kinds of students, and actually a few more, including native English speakers who for one reason or another were not given complete access or attention to their needs in the school

system when they were growing up.

I am glad that I got a chance to see the WIN Workforce Skills Internet-based computer software in action at Lamar Community College, in Lamar, Colorado, during my time there. We brought it to campus for our career development classes, but also found applications that benefited our adult ESL and GED-prep students. One of the amazing features was that since Lamar Community College held the license, the use of the WIN program was open and free to any student enrolled at LCC.

When I was asked my opinion about how to set up an intensive ESL program for international students at Lamar, I immediately suggested incorporating the WIN Workforce Web-based units on reading skills, writing skills, and listening skills. The WIN software was developed by the ACT company, and these three core units are part of a larger array of skills needed for most jobs in America.

Students have their own login, and are able to access the software from home or anywhere there is an Internet connection. There are skills tests at each of about six or seven levels of proficiency, and working through the interactive lessons and exercises at each level takes at least 10 and ideally 15-20 hours.

I envision a community college or small college in which all students have access to the WIN software via the Internet, and where much of the introductory curriculum in every subject area incorporates a WIN skills building component. At the very lowest levels, there are beginning literacy materials that can be printed out for use. As students advance to the highest levels, they receive WIN certificates that administrators can print from the software directly, adding the school's logo and other customizations.

Upon reaching the top levels in the WIN program, students can make appointments at their local Workforce offices to be tested officially and receive bronze, silver, and gold certificates that represent actual skill levels valued by employers.

I believe that this software program could be used to create synergies and a fully networked total school system, including each department, from intensive ESL and remedial skills to vocational certificates and two- or four-year degree programs. Students would graduate with something

much deeper and more practical than the general public's notion of what a college degree is.

From the perspective of an ESL program administrator, the beauty of students having access to WIN Workforce software via the Internet is that the intensive English program can use powerful content-based and project-based instructional curricula developed by teachers to meet the interests of students and engage them in discovery of their individual educational paths in an American cultural setting, while curriculum coordinators find touch points between what teachers are doing and the reading, writing, and listening components of the WIN software, for students to pursue on a self-access basis, and encouraging them to spend as many hours as they wish on this kind of activity, because it will complement the teaching and learning they are doing in their classes.

The folks putting together that intensive ESL program at Lamar had something else in mind, and I did not pursue the matter because my job and responsibilities were within the narrow purview of adult education and career preparation. But I have always thought that WIN Workforce would be the linchpin for a very powerful, effective, and practical collaboration between an intensive ESL program and all other components of a small college.

One day you or I may have the chance to put these plans into effect.

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