

Short Communication

Co-enrollment as a facilitator of English as a second language (ESL) students' transition to non-ESL college courses

Erkan Acar

Department of Human Development, Marywood University, PA, USA. E-mail: erkanacr@gmail.com or eacar@m.marywood.edu. Tel: 001 570 801 37 07.

Accepted 10 June, 2011

English as a second language (ESL) educators face with special challenges in their field since the ESL students experience dramatic cultural and social transitions beside the educational changeover. Newcomers with different traditions, moral values and ethical standards are faced with more difficulties in or out of the classrooms. Such potential difficulties naturally negatively affect overall language learning process of those students. Furthermore, for such students, the transition from ESL education to higher education (That is, post-secondary education) often proves impossible since the encountered problems of ESL students are more complicated and multi dimensional than ordinary students. This paper addresses major dimensions of ESL education, and discusses "Co-enrollment" strategy for ESL student's more effective transitions to postsecondary education.

Key words: English as a second Language (ESL) education, college transition, co-enrollment.

INTRODUCTION

Challenges in English as a second language (ESL) education: A silent transition

Successful orientation programs should provide learning experiences that help students understand, and make adaptations to change (Robinson et al., 1996). Most universities and colleges offer transition courses for their first-year students, since the adaptation from high school or the workforce to college is a complex and challenging process. These specifically-designed courses assist students in the academic, cultural, and social transition into their new institution. Such courses are mostly named as University 100. In those specific courses, students are able to learn several important components about their new educational environment including values, academic progress, internal culture and rules. In other words, students complete their transition into a new educational system throughout those specially designed courses. Furthermore, those courses mostly are mandatory for all newcomers except ESL students. Unfortunately, schools largely ignore the transition of ESL students, even though, it is well known that ESL education involves unique challenges and difficulties. Furthermore, the language barriers of some ESL students mean that the problems that these students encounter will go unvoiced. This silence must not be interpreted as the sign of a

successful education.

In the field of education, the most obvious challenge is faced by those who are responsible for facilitating the transition of English language learners. Since newcomers hail from different cultural backgrounds, each brings his own traditions, moral values and ethical standards to the classroom; thus, the transition period for English as a second language (ESL) student is often in many ways extremely difficult. Indeed, for such people, the transition from ESL to higher education (That is, post-secondary education) often proves impossible.

DIMENSIONS OF ESL EDUCATION

Of the challenges faced by immigrant and international students alike, language is perhaps the most obvious. But they both also face a well-known difficulty commonly known as "cultural shock". Cultural shock describes the impact of moving from a familiar culture to one which is unfamiliar. There are two key factors for cultural shock. The first is the shock of a new environment as the individual faces the different ways of his new country. The second is the shock of being separated from significant others in one's life, such as family members, friends and teachers. Other factors that can contribute to cultural shock include climate, food and language, as well

as, religious and educational systems that are unfamiliar to the individual. For students in ESL courses, these elements can create surprising and sometimes uncomfortable environments, which consequently may lower academic achievement. For example, different social behaviors may confuse newcomers. They may perceive people as cold and distant. Specifically, they may find the relationships between teachers and students more formal or less formal than relationships to which they are accustomed. Furthermore, for ESL students, the way the system decides what is important and how responsibilities are allocated may prove unsettling (UKCISA, 2010). By their very nature, ESL classes are also extremely diverse. This broad range of student social and educational backgrounds can have an adverse effect on the teaching process; oftentimes, teachers find that they have to deal with problems that are not at all related to their primary role of teaching English. Different student understandings of concepts like “social role” and “rule of behavior” may in turn confuse teachers and may hinder their performance. Moreover, Brown (1992: 246) identifies additional complications that are unique to ESL education. Because no teacher education certification requirement exists, anyone who happens to be a native English speaker can teach English, even though ESL may not necessarily be that person’s area of expertise. Accordingly, a lack of professional respect for ESL teachers often develops within institutions. Unfortunately this can drain enthusiasm from ESL teachers, leaving them less motivated for their classes and for lesson preparation. A further complication is that ESL education is administered in a variety of locations, including libraries, community centers and technology-based labs. These “mixed use” settings affect both learners’ achievement and a teacher’s ability to conduct classes effectively; as Berlin (2005: 51) states, ESL classes are often relegated to a sort of second-class status as a result.

CO-ENROLLMENT: A STRATEGY FOR ESL STUDENTS’ TRANSITION TO POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION

In 2007, the Council for Advancement of Adult Literacy (CAAL) published a report titled “Passing the torch: Strategies for innovations in community college ESL”. The report studied the ESL programs of five colleges (Bunker Hill Community College, Charlestown, Massachusetts; City College of San Francisco, San Francisco, California; College of Lake County, Grayslake, Illinois; Seminole Community College, Sanford, Florida; and Yakima Valley Community College; Yakima, Washington) and the strategies that they used to accelerate ESL students’ transition to post-secondary education. According to the report, one of the most important steps in hastening student transition from non-credit ESL classes was the elimination of gateways.

Traditional ESL transition models insisted that students obtain a certain level of language proficiency in non-credit ESL courses before they could move on to some combination of for-credit ESL and general education courses. The report reveals that “co-enrollment” is one of the most important strategies for eliminating these gateways. According to the report, many of the five colleges examined allow ESL students to “co-enroll” in regular college courses that are taught in English. The report indicated that this “co-enrollment” strategy not only allowed students to learn the subjects taught by those courses but also allowed students to practice their language skills in real college courses. Accordingly, the strategy is expected to increase the motivation of ESL students. Furthermore, co-enrolled students had a better understanding about the purpose of ESL courses. Co-enrollment assured students that their many hours spent in ESL courses were an investment leading not to basic language skills alone but to higher educational achievement. A longitudinal research study prepared at City College of San Francisco revealed that co-enrolled ESL students—especially those who had at some point enrolled in business courses—were far more likely to succeed in ESL programs than students who only enrolled in ESL. Co-enrolled ESL students were also far more likely to advance to higher levels of education in other credit programs.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The successful transition of ESL students is largely considered to be a primary goal of the ESL curriculum. But preparing students for a new level of college life, which will include both college-level courses and full immersion into the internal culture of a new learning institution, usually happens only incidentally within the context of regular ESL classes, since language barriers make a separate transition course proposal difficult. Thus new strategies should be applied to standard ESL programs. Co-enrollment is, by itself, a form of transition, and so may facilitate the transition of ESL students to higher education. The Council for Advancement of Adult Literacy’s report showed that the effect of this strategy for ESL students is significant.

REFERENCES

- Berlin LN (2005). *Contextualizing College ESL Classroom Praxis: A Participatory Approach to Effective Instruction*. Routledge, KC.
- Brown JD (1992). *Using Surveys in Language Programs*. Cambridge University Press.
- Council for Advancement of Adult Literacy, (2007). *Passing the torch strategies for innovation in community college ESL*. New York.
- Robinson DA, Burns CF, Gaw KF (1996). *Orientation Programs: The Foundation for Student Learning and Success*. *New Directions for Student Services*. 75: 55–68.
- UKCISA, (2010). *International students and cultural shock*. The Council for International Education. Retrieved January 10, 2010 from http://www.ukcosa.org.uk/student/info_sheets/culture_shock.php#shock.