

ESL STUDENTS IN CALIFORNIA PUBLIC HIGHER EDUCATION

ICAS ESL Task Force Report

Executive Summary

April 2, 2006

Introduction

The increasing numbers of immigrant students in the United States and the special needs of English as a second language (ESL) learners have been prominent topics in national conversations about education at all levels. Nowhere in the United States have educational issues concerned with ESL learners been more critical than in California, where language minority students comprise nearly 40% of all K-12 students and an ever growing population of postsecondary students. Many ESL learners have ESL problems that lead to special challenges when they need to use academic English in college and university classes. Therefore, there is a critical need for California colleges and universities to find effective ways of educating the rapidly growing population of learners who speak a language other than English at home in order to help them achieve a wide range of educational, professional, and career goals.

Although California's postsecondary ESL learners are extremely diverse in their ethnic, cultural and linguistic backgrounds, they tend to belong to one of several very broadly defined populations. One group consists of long-term immigrants or American born children of immigrants who reside in non-English linguistic communities. These learners, sometimes called generation 1.5 students, have done most, if not all, of their schooling in the U.S., yet are still struggling to reach competency in college-level oral and written academic work. A second population includes more recently arrived immigrant students, who may or may not have developed first language literacy and who may have completed several years of schooling in the USA; these students are generally more easily identifiable as second language learners than the longer term immigrants. A third population, the size of which varies significantly from campus to campus, consists of international students, who exhibit a wide range of different native languages and cultures and have typically developed first language literacy skills. There are many students in each of these groups who are still struggling to use English effectively in their academic work, and, therefore, create challenges for institutions, programs and individual teachers.

This report responds to some of the key questions raised by educators and legislators about ESL practices, programs and support services across the three California post-secondary systems: the California Community Colleges (CCC), the California State University (CSU), and the University of California (UC).

- Are campuses effectively identifying those nonnative English speakers who need specialized instruction to achieve academic success from those who do not need it?
- Are the assessment and placement procedures we currently have for English learners adequate?
- What kinds of programs, courses and support services are currently offered for English learners? How could they be more effective?

While this report was produced to address the particular concerns of the California Community College Board of Governors, the concerns of the Board are shared by a great many others, both within the CCC system and beyond it. The problems facing ESL learners affect not only their ability to be successful within or transfer between public institutions of higher education, but also their ability to fully participate in and contribute to the social and economic well-being of the State of California. It is with this broader perspective in mind that the task force recommends that this report, its findings, and its recommendations, be shared with faculty, staff, and administration in all three segments of public higher education in California, intersegmental groups, California professional organizations concerned with the specific needs of ESL learners, legislators and other governmental entities, and our colleagues in K-12 education, where many ESL learners begin their education in the United States of America.

This report is based on an on-line survey, statistical data from education web pages and the collective knowledge of the task force members. The online survey used to gather information for this report was designed in extensive consultation with the Director of the University of California, Santa Barbara, Social Science Survey Center. For each college and university campus, the ESL Task Force identified and contacted respondents whom they believed would be qualified to answer the survey questions.

Faculty and administrators who responded included professors, instructors, lecturers and program directors or coordinators. Over 82% of the respondents reported that teaching was at least a part of their position. Of the 109 community colleges, representatives from 61 (56%) completed the survey. Of the 23 California State Universities, 12 responded. Of the ten University of California campuses, the eight that have ESL classes or programs (San Francisco and Merced do not) were asked to complete the survey, all of whom did so.

Survey Findings

Identification, Assessment and Placement of ESL Learners

The findings of this survey support the belief of many educators involved in ESL and English programs that the identification, assessment and placement of ESL learners is a critical issue on our campuses.

Identification of ESL learners is complicated and inconsistent, and this hinders any effort to collect information about their status and progress. In the majority of community colleges, self-identification is the primary tool for identifying ESL learners. However, some students are reluctant to self-identify as ESL learners because of the perceived stigma. In addition, there are generation 1.5 students, who do not fit neatly in either the traditional ESL or native-speaker categories. Culturally, these students are not ESL learners. However, results on placement tests and students' work in classes show that they have ESL-marked features in academic writing and reading. At CSU, freshmen, when taking the English Placement Test (EPT), can self-identify as being second language users of English. This self-identification shows students' language background but not whether they have ESL problems. For the UC, entering freshmen may be

identified as having writing errors characteristic of the writing of nonnative speakers of English ESL learners when they take the UC Systemwide Analytical Writing Placement Exam (AWPE).

While some students may be initially identified as ESL learners, on-going identification is lacking, and this hinders collection of longitudinal data to track their progress beyond ESL coursework. Of the campuses responding to the survey, 75% of CSUs and 88% of UCs designate incoming freshmen as ESL learners, for students who transfer in, only 27% of CSUs and 14% of UCs make an ESL designation.

Survey responses identified significant issues in the areas of assessment and placement. While writing theory and research support the use of writing samples for assessment and placement into writing courses, fewer than 40% of community colleges employ a writing sample citing the expenditure of money and time needed to evaluate the samples. Validation of tests is also an issue due to the lack of support for research functions. While ESL courses often serve as the prerequisites for enrollment in English, the community colleges do not impose a time frame within which ESL coursework must be completed. In addition, of the three quarters of CCC respondents who indicated the existence of prerequisites, a large majority (83%) indicated that students could challenge the prerequisite for a course.

Within the CSU system, entering freshmen take the English Placement Test (EPT) as an assessment of their language ability. This test is taken by all students and makes no accommodation for non-native English learners. Only 27% of respondents indicated that an additional placement test specifically for second language learners of English is employed in the assessment process. With the implementation of regulations governing remediation, students who achieve low scores on the EPT have one year to remediate before being redirected to a community college to complete remediation in English before being readmitted to a CSU. For students transferring from a community college, the assumption at most CSUs is that fulfillment of GE Breadth or an Intersegmental General Education Transfer Curriculum (IGETC) pattern indicates that a student has achieved the academic writing proficiency needed for upper division work. However, results on campus-specific junior-level writing proficiency exams may indicate that a student continues to manifest significant second-language writing problems.

At UCs, each individual campus has a placement process for students who have received "E" designations on the AWPE. The "E" designation is given to non-passing essays when nonnative English features have contributed to the non-passing score. On five of the eight campuses, ESL or writing program faculty re-read the "E"-designated examinations to make placement decisions into either ESL or mainstream courses. Respondents indicate that many "E"-designations are now for generation 1.5 students, who have received most or all of their education in the United States. UC campuses typically afford students one or two years to successfully complete the Entry Level Writing Requirement (ELWR). Those identified on writing tests as needing ESL instruction are usually given additional time to allow enrollment in ESL courses to develop their writing proficiency. Community college transfers to UC are assumed to have the academic writing proficiency needed for upper division work.

ESL Courses and Programs

A second major area for which the survey collected extensive data across the three systems concerned the range and types of courses and programs designed for ESL learners as well as respondents' perceived needs for courses or programs not being currently offered. CCC respondents report offering ESL courses through diverse departments and programs; most frequently through ESL departments (47) followed by English departments (14). On CSU campuses, English departments are the most common academic home for ESL courses. At UC campuses, writing programs are the departments or programs most frequently offering the ESL courses. The survey also sought to determine where courses and programs for ESL learners were housed and the extent to which courses were credit bearing.

Of those campuses who responded, almost all CCC campuses (98%) report having ESL classes. Most of the CSU campuses responding (83%) report having such courses. However, since only half of the CSU campuses responded to the survey, it should not be assumed that the majority of CSU campuses have ESL courses. In fact, many of the CSU campuses do not offer ESL courses. All of the UC campuses report offering classes designated for ESL students. On two of the UC campuses, however, there are no required ESL courses; on these campuses, there are courses designated for ESL students in Writing Programs which students may take electively. UC ESL courses are generally targeted to freshmen, whereas the CSUs have ESL courses that serve both freshmen and upper-division students. It should also be noted that for at least some CSUs, the students served by the ESL classes are mainly international students and not immigrant ESL learners.

While all three segments offer a broad range of levels of writing courses, only CCCs offer a wide range of levels in the other skill areas, including reading, listening, speaking, grammar, and multi-skills. CCCs report offering from one to six or more levels of ESL writing instruction, CSUs report offering from two to four levels of ESL writing instruction including upper division ESL writing, and UCs report offering from one to five levels of ESL writing instruction but with more than half of UCs reporting offering only one level of ESL writing.

Among CSU respondents, half report that all ESL courses are credit bearing, 40% report that some are credit bearing and 10% report that none are credit bearing. Among UC respondents, 71% state that all ESL courses are credit bearing and 29% report that none are credit bearing. 84 of the 109 community colleges report offering ESL courses for credit, but credit may or may not be applicable towards the associate degree. Community colleges also offer noncredit ESL courses.

The majority of CCC and CSU respondents and some UC respondents report that additional ESL courses are needed on their campuses to meet ESL learners' needs. Many community colleges report needing additional sections of classes already offered. The need for additional sections of existing classes is less pronounced at CSU and UC campuses.

The survey also asked respondents to comment on program evaluation methods. CCC, CSU, and UC campuses report a variety of ways to engage in program evaluation. At UC campuses, it is

fairly common to have an outside evaluator participate in the evaluation, while at CSU and CCC it is much more common for a program to undergo a program self-evaluation.

Support Services for ESL Learners

A third broad area for which this report collected information was that of support services designated especially for ESL learners. These services included orientation and advising, counseling, tutoring, outreach, assistance to disabled ESL learners, job placement and career services. While for programs and courses information, the survey did not distinguish between international and resident ESL learners, this distinction proved important when surveying support service for these two populations.

Orientation and initial advising is viewed as one of the most important services to support ESL learners. In the CCC, where the number of international students varies greatly, orientation and initial advisement is offered about as frequently for international learners as other ESL learners. However, in the CSU and UC, specially tailored orientation and initial advisement is offered more frequently for international students than for other ESL learners. This is most pronounced in the CSU, where most of the campuses offer these types of services to international students but less than a third to other ESL learners. The overall rating for these orientation services for ESL learners (both resident/immigrant and international) is generally positive in the UCs and CCCs with 60% of the respondents rating them good or excellent and less positive for the CSU, with only 22% rating them as good or excellent.

Ongoing counseling is regarded as another important support area to promote retention and assist "at risk" learners, among other purposes. The findings of the survey indicate that international students, to a much greater extent than immigrant students, have counseling services available to meet their special needs. Sixty percent of CCCs offer ESL counseling to international students, but fewer than half report such a service for immigrant/resident students, many of whom could use it. Whereas over half the reporting CSUs provide counseling for international students, very few have ESL counseling for immigrants/residents. Counseling directed specifically to ESL students is offered to international students on only two UC campuses, one of which also provides counseling to immigrant/resident ESL students.

Fewer than 50% of the respondents in all three segments indicated that specific services for "at-risk" ESL learners are provided. The frequency of services seems to be greater in the CSUs (46%) than either the CCCs (33%) or the UCs (25%).

Tutoring has long been considered one of the most important support services on college and university campuses for second language learners, as evidenced by the considerable research and pedagogy devoted to this area in the field of Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) and Applied Linguistics. All three systems provide tutoring targeted specifically for ESL learners, both immigrant/resident and international. Tutoring services are provided more frequently for international students at the CSU than at other levels. However, 86% of the UC campuses provide tutoring services for immigrant/resident ESL learners, exceeding the other two systems by more than 15%. All three systems provide a range of tutoring services with some specialized tutors. The overall perceived effectiveness of such learning centers is mixed.

Comments point out significant problems with tutoring services, among them the inadequacy of tutor training; insufficient pedagogical grammar knowledge on the part of tutors, which is essential for ESL writing tutoring; and a high turn-over rate once tutors are trained. Scheduling of tutors is sometimes not effective because there are insufficient numbers of tutors later in the semester when they are most needed. Finally, there is insufficient funding for the tutoring/learning centers as a whole.

While the need for outreach to secondary schools from the postsecondary systems has been widely discussed and programs implemented by many campuses, respondents to this survey from all segments report that, for the most part, they are not aware of outreach services to ESL high school learners. In the case of both outreach efforts and transfer services, it is clear that more transfer counseling specifically directed toward ESL students and more sharing and/or collaboration among programs regarding outreach are needed to improve the flow of students between segments.

Responses to survey questions about other support services for ESL learners, such as disabled student services, financial aid, and job placement/career services, indicate such specialized services meeting ESL students' needs are offered only by a small number of institutions.

Conclusion and Recommendations

ESL learners are present on every campus of the three segments of public higher education in California. This is true whether or not an institution officially recognizes the presence of ESL learners on campus through programs and services designed for their special language needs. Indeed, on some campuses, especially in the CCC system, ESL learners represent a growing majority of students. These students have varied ethnic, linguistic and cultural backgrounds; partly for this reason, they are not always readily identifiable. They range from international students and recently-arrived immigrants to long-term immigrants and those who are born in the United States into non-English linguistic communities. Many in the latter two categories comprise the group identified throughout this report as generation 1.5.

The language development needs of ESL learners must be addressed because their educational progress and success, or the lack thereof, affect not only themselves but also their classmates, their instructors, their institutions, and ultimately the society at large. Those in positions to make decisions about institutional priorities need to recognize this situation and the fact that, based on current demographic data, the number of ESL learners in higher education in California will only continue to grow in the coming years. Ongoing communication among ESL educators is essential to an effective response to the needs of ESL learners in higher education.

The Task Force concludes with the following recommendations.

1. Our public higher education systems should work with legislators toward the goal of developing a statewide system for identifying ESL learners and tracking their progress through the higher educational segments

2. Campuses should review current assessment and placement instruments, and, where needed, develop more accurate instruments and appropriate placement procedures for ESL students.
3. Campuses should provide ESL instruction and related support services to entering and transfer students, including generation 1.5 students.
4. Campuses should review the adequacy of current ESL instruction. Issues examined might include the following: skill areas and number of levels, appropriate class size, the number of course sections, degree applicability of courses, course repeatability, and program evaluation
5. Campuses should encourage ESL learners to address their academic language needs in an appropriate and timely manner.
6. Campuses should coordinate and improve support services specifically designed to meet ESL learners' needs, keeping in mind the different populations (international students, immigrants both long-term and recently arrived, generation 1.5).
7. ESL professionals should be called on as resources in all areas of student support for working with ESL students.
8. Campuses should improve the identification of ESL students with learning disabilities and develop ways to meet their special needs.
9. Through intersegmental collaboration, a higher education website should be developed for ESL professionals from all three segments of public higher education in California. This could include such features as a directory of California public college and university ESL professionals, a searchable annotated bibliography of studies, program profiles, and reports that specifically focus on current ESL practices and issues in higher education, and links to these reports.
10. Each system should institute a formal organization of ESL coordinators to develop ways to serve ESL students more effectively.