

Aligning ESL Pedagogy with Best Practices in Connecticut Community Colleges

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Executive Summary

The numbers of English language learners (ELL) in higher education are rising, and state education budgets are being cut, which means a growing number of students in higher education are not getting access to the pedagogical resources they need. English as a Second Language (ESL) programs at Connecticut community colleges (CCC) are being eliminated or combined with developmental programs, having their course sequences shortened and their testing procedures eliminated. This brief focuses on the pedagogy of ESL programs at CCC and specifically argues for policy reform that acknowledges the unique needs of ELL.

To align ESL programs in CCC with best practices, this brief focuses on three areas most in need of reform. The first focus of this brief is the differing pedagogy between ESL and developmental courses. In Connecticut, following national trends, there is a tendency to see ESL courses as developmental, but native and non-native speakers have very different academic needs. The second focus of this brief is the length of ESL course sequences. Two years of classes are not enough time for a non-native speaker to acquire a new language. This brief argues for extending this time to five years. Finally, the testing procedures at CCC must use multiple measures to ensure proper placement of ELL. Single measures, like GPA, will result in many students enrolled in the wrong level, which will waste time and resources to correct. Although incremental improvement in any one of these areas would increase the success rates of ELL students, synoptic changes in all are necessary to give ELL the greatest chance of success, which will benefit all the citizens of Connecticut.

The arguments for this policy include statistics that show the growth in higher education ELL numbers, the shrinking services offered to these students, and the benefits of synoptic change in the current CCC ESL pedagogy. The process of implementation includes political activism, education, and research. This brief concludes with multi-modal indicators of success that can be empirically measured by both internal and external monitors to evaluate the benefits to both ELL and the citizens of Connecticut. The main policy actors in this brief include the governor, the Connecticut State Assembly, the Board of Regents (BOR), the president of the Connecticut State Colleges and Universities (CSCU), the provost, the ESL Council, the Office of Research & System Effectiveness (ORSE), the Faculty Advisory Council (FAC), the faculty and staff of CCC, the CCC students as well as the citizens of Connecticut.

Planning: Background: Terminology Used in This Brief

The term “ESL” is used to describe ELL courses at all CCC, but it is not entirely accurate. Many students are learning English as a third or fourth (or more) language, and some learned English as a first language, but moved to a predominantly non-English speaking country at a very young age, and, upon returning to the USA, had to re-learn it. Another problem with the term “ESL” is that it connotes replacement of the first language. The term “English as an additional language” (EAL) is the preferred term to describe language courses for ELL to avoid the inaccuracies of “ESL.” For this brief, “ELL” will be used to refer to all students learning EAL, and the term “ESL” will be used exclusively to refer to the courses offered by CCC because that is the course designation used in the CCC course catalogs.

ELL is not a monolithic category. While there are many important and nuanced distinctions amongst the types of ELL, for the purpose of this brief these distinctions will be collapsed into two categories that both fall under the heading of ELL. These terms will be used differently in this brief than in their original formulation, so they will be defined here. The first category is “international students” and the second is “English as an additional language learners” (EALL). ELL will refer collectively to these two main categories of students that make up ELL in CCC higher education.

The term “international student” is typically used to mean any student taking classes in the USA who is on a visa and is not a permanent resident, citizen, or green card holder. Many come from English speaking countries like

Australia, Canada and Jamaica, but for the purpose of this brief, the term “international student” will refer only to students from countries that do not use English as a primary language who come to the USA for a limited time to learn English. This term includes students from countries like India, Nepal and Malaysia, which are former British colonies and consider English to be a native language, but who wish to improve their language skills in a country like the USA where English is the primary language spoken.

The second category, EALL, is more nebulous, but, for this brief, will include all the students who live permanently in the USA, with or without legal documentation, and without native-like English abilities. This includes first generation immigrants, generation 1.5 (students who came to the USA at a young age), and second-generation students who were born in the USA but have a language other than English as a home language. These students have varying levels of exposure to English in their lives and are navigating cultural identity as well as linguistic issues (Peirce, 1994, 1995).

Growing Numbers of ELL

The number of ELL is growing in the USA. From fall 2000 to fall 2016, the number of EALL in K-12 grew by 1.1 million students, and, in the fall of 2016, 6.8 percent of all students in Connecticut K-12 public schools were EALL, only slightly lower than the national average of 9.6 percent (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). In addition, the number of students taking ESL courses at CCC are increasing. For example, at Norwalk Community College (NCC), the number of ELL taking ESL courses grew 15 percent from 2000 to 2016 (Moeckel-Rieke, 2017).

In addition to EALL living in the USA, international students are coming to the USA to study in greater numbers, with the number of students attending institutions of higher education on student visas doubling between 1990 and 2014 and the total increasing from 671,616 in the 2008/2009 school year to 1,095,299 in 2018/2019 (Institute of International Education, 2020). These increasing numbers of ELL will require an increasing amount of pedagogically sound ESL courses.

Consolidation and Elimination of Resources

Between 2016 and 2018, 38 public colleges have consolidated at least one of their campuses (Busta, 2018), and since the 1999-2000 school year, 113 public, postsecondary Title IV institutions have closed or consolidated

(“Digest of Education Statistics, 2017,” 2018). At the national level, Betsy DeVos is planning on eliminating the Office of English Language Acquisition at the US Department of Education (Mitchell, 2018). Georgia and other states are consolidating ESL into mainstream courses (Hooker et al., 2014). This trend is leading to a shortage in pedagogically sound ESL programs for ELL.

On April 3, 2017, the President of CSCU announced that, due to financial shortfalls, all 12 of Connecticut’s community colleges would merge into one school, calling the initiative “Students First” (Connecticut Board of Regents for Higher Education, 2017). This consolidation would eliminate all but the highest two levels of ESL in all community colleges in the CSCU system (Connecticut State Colleges and Universities, 2017, 2019). Fewer ESL courses, combined with more ELL means there is a growing population of under served higher-education students.

Less Money for CCC

The state budget for CCC has been cut by the Connecticut General Assembly in the past, and will continue to be reduced in the future. In 2020, CSCU will receive \$12.5 million less than in 2019 and for CCC the situation is even more dire; in 2019, the CCC budget was \$7.9 million short of its needs, and in 2020 that shortfall is projected to grow to \$19.6 million (Megan, 2019, June 14). This has led to drastic policies being implemented, like Students First, a plan that includes not only cuts to ESL course sequences, but the elimination of courses that can not be offered at all the CCC.

Testing and Placement

Currently, each CCC has its own testing department and system for placing ESL students in the correct academic course for their level. The testing system is varied across the 12 CCC because each CCC has its own unique population of ELL and, therefore, organizes its ESL course levels differently and with different pedagogical focuses. For example, NCC has five levels of credit ESL courses and separates the course sequences into Reading/Writing, Grammar, and Oral Communications. However, Housatonic Community College has six levels of ESL courses, and only two course sequences, Grammar and Combined Skills. Placing ELL accurately in these different programs requires different testing procedures.

With the consolidation, Provost Gates is reforming and standardizing ESL placements at all CCC. At NCC, a multi-dimensional testing system is in place, which includes a standardized grammar test, a written essay and an oral interview. In a notice to all department heads, Provost Gates decided that, for the 2020 summer and fall semesters, “all placement for math and English at the community colleges be accomplished through self-reported student GPA” and if the GPA and testing placements are in conflict that “in all cases, the criterion that places the student in the highest-level course should be used” (J. Gates, personal communication, May 20, 2020), which would lead to less accurate placements for ELL.

Arguments for Policy: *Pedagogical Differences Between ESL and Developmental Courses*

ELL in higher education have different educational needs than native-English speaking, higher educational students who are identified as developmental. According to a U.S. Department of Education study by Schak et al. (2017), developmental students are “students who were perceived as underprepared for the academic rigor of college-level coursework” and developmental education is “strategies to help under prepared students acquire the skills and knowledge needed to move into college-level courses” (p. 2). This can include enhanced advising, skills classes such as study skills and time management, and other college preparatory courses. But a large number of ELL do not need developmental courses and should not be classified as developmental students.

The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (2017) found that, in 2012, 29.1% of the immigrants who were 25 years of age or older had a Bachelors degree or higher (p. 308) before they arrived in the USA. These numbers vary by school. In the spring of 2016, 11% of the students taking ESL courses at Norwalk Community College had a high-school degree from a US high-school, 78% had a high-school degree from another country and 45% had completed a college degree in another country before attending NCC (Moeckel-Rieke, 2016). But still, in the USA, ESL students keep getting put in developmental courses, and ESL departments are being eliminated or folded into developmental departments.

Argument for Longer ESL Course Sequences

As anyone who has tried to learn a new language knows, they cannot be learned in one or two years. Using their own research data from two school

districts in California, as well as data from other research in Canada, Hakuta et al. (2000) found that “The clear conclusion emerging from these data sets is that even in two California districts that are considered the most successful in teaching English to LEP students, oral proficiency takes 3 to 5 years to develop, and academic English proficiency can take 4 to 7 years” (p. 13). Currently, financial aid to ELL students at CCC only covers 30 credits, or approximately two years, of ESL courses. Therefore, longer course sequences for ELL should be implemented at CCC to serve the academic needs of ELL better.

Argument for Better Testing

Placing students in the right level can be the difference between success and failure. Students who are placed in too high a level will get frustrated and students who are placed in too low a level will not be challenged and will not learn. It is essential that testing and placement procedures are valid and reliable. There is also the issue of bias in testing. EALL and international students have different cultural norms, and tests designed for EALL can give inaccurate results when given to international students (Chen & Henning, 1985; Djwandono, 2006). Multiple measures, using reading, writing, listening and speaking tests, take more time and cost more in both material and human resources, but putting ELL in the correct level will save money in the long run because instructor time and financial aid will not be wasted with wrongly placed students.

Benefits of Improvements in ELL Education

Immigrants are an asset to the economy, and educated ELL contribute more to the economy than those with less education. A National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (2017) analysis of immigrant costs and benefits to the state and national economy from 2011 to 2013 found that, while first-generation immigrants cost the economy \$57.4 billion, “second and third-plus generation adults create a benefit of \$30.5 billion and \$223.8 billion, respectively. By the second generation, descendants of immigrants are a net positive for the states as a whole” (p.12). Grenier, (1984) found that knowing English can “explain up to one third of the relative wage difference between non-Hispanic white and Hispanic male workers” (p. 50). Zhen (2013) found a direct correlation between higher-level language abilities for immigrants in the USA and increased earnings level, that female immigrants with lower English skills earn even less than their male counterparts at the same English level, and determined that “the

reward for English proficiency is greater for immigrants at the upper earnings distribution” (p. 37). This means that providing pedagogically sound ESL courses to ELL can increase their earning potential, and the governor of Connecticut and the members of the Connecticut General Assembly who are responsible to the citizens of Connecticut for the improvement of the economy of Connecticut should be responsive to these facts.

Content of Brief: Formulation

There are three main policy streams that need to be implemented to ensure that ELL receive the education they need. The first is to remove ESL courses from developmental departments and make sure they are administered as their own department or program. The second is to increase the length of ESL course sequences to a minimum of five years. The third policy focuses on testing and placement procedures. Although there are different policy actors as well as implementation, legitimization, and evaluation plans for each, these three streams are linked in that all three are focused on improving the pedagogy of ESL courses at CCC.

Separating ESL and Developmental

Separating ESL and developmental programs needs to start at the Connecticut Board of Regents. They must formulate and pass a resolution for the CSCU president to implement. This would require the CEO (formerly College President) of each CCC to re-organize any departments in their college that have merged ESL and developmental courses. Depending on the number of ELL in the college, ESL should be either a department, with a chair as the head, or a program led by a full time program director.

Increasing Length of ESL Course Sequences

Because federal financial aid only covers two years of ESL courses, the Governor and Connecticut General Assembly will have to pass legislation to increase state funding for ESL course sequences for a minimum of an additional three years. This does not mean that all ELL will need the full five years of courses, and many will means-test out of qualification for financial aid, so only a portion of the ELL will use these funds. The ESL Council, working with individual CCC ESL departments will have to formulate a pedagogically sound sequence of courses to ensure all adult

ELL get the higher education they need to participate fully in Connecticut's social and economic processes.

Improving Testing and Placement Procedures

Every CCC has a testing department that handles intake for all CCC students, not just ELL. These fall under the auspice of the Provost who will have to work with the testing departments to ensure that every CCC uses multi-measure tests that differentiate between EALL and international students to place incoming students in the course that best suits their needs. Legitimization - Evaluating the Proposed Policy

The purpose of these policy proposals to change ESL pedagogy at CCC is not only to improve the lives of the ELL in Connecticut, but, by doing so, improve the social and economic lives of all the citizens of Connecticut. This means that to evaluate the success or failure of these policies, the policy evaluation process would need to include data about the social and economic lives of not only the ELL, but all the citizens of Connecticut. Both internal and external evaluators would need to be involved to gather this wide-ranging data.

To evaluate the ELL programs and testing, the ESL Council should conduct research. To establish the impact that educated ELL have on the Connecticut economy, institutions with policy departments, like Southern Connecticut's Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies could conduct meta-evaluations of data collected by governmental groups like the Connecticut Department of Education (portal.ed.gov/SDE) and the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES.ed.gov).

Implementation - Getting Proposed Policy Enacted

To implement these three policy goals, the Connecticut BOR, working with the CSCU president, needs to issue guidelines separating ESL from developmental courses. To lengthen the ESL course sequences, the Connecticut General Assembly will have to pass legislation to fund more classes for ELL and more time for ESL instructors. Mandating multi-measure testing procedures will require the provost to work with the ESL Council to develop testing policies that benefit Connecticut's adult ELL in higher education, and to consult with the testing departments of each CCC.

Each ESL department needs to conduct a needs assessment of their ELL and ESL program to determine the best method for testing.

The first step in this process is for the ESL Council to mobilize the citizens of Connecticut to put pressure on the governor and the Connecticut General Assembly. The economic benefits of educated ELL have been discussed earlier in this brief, so a political campaign, including writing, phoning and emailing the members of the Connecticut General Assembly and the BOR would need to be implemented. This could be lead locally by individual ESL departments lobbying their college senates, and include ELL, their families and CCC students.

The second step is for CCC faculty, staff and students to educate their communities on the benefits of immigrants and a bilingual population, and to hold voter registration drives. Currently, there is an anti-immigrant sentiment in the USA, and the value of multiculturalism is not being recognized. These educational seminars and voter drives should be a grass-roots effort, led by faculty and students, through student activity groups, and coordinated through the local CCC self-governance body. The ESL departments at each of the 12 CCC can create educational materials and hold local educational symposiums at their college.

Finally, the FAC has a voice at BOR meetings. The individual members of the FAC can be lobbied by the ESL Council members at their college to bring these policy suggestions to the BOR. This can be done though the 12 individual college senates (or other shared governance structure) and model resolutions can be created and distributed by the ESL Council for these college senates to use and modify to fit their specific needs.

Consequences - Evaluation of Brief

The success of these policies in changing both the ESL system at CCC as well as the quality of life for Connecticut citizens should be determined by a combination of evaluations done by varying actors examining data from many different areas. To show these varying evaluations, Table 1 gives a summary of the type of evaluation necessary, the actors doing the evaluations and the data to be gathered.

Table 1.
Evaluations Necessary for ESL Policy Change

Item being evaluated	Type of Evaluation	Evaluated By	Variables Measured
Implementation of Policy	Process Evaluation	-ORSE -BOR	-Number of resolutions passed by BOR
Separation of ESL and Developmental	Policy Evaluation	-ESL Council -CCC ESL Departments	-Increase or decrease in number of ESL courses taken by ELL
Length of ESL Course Sequences	Impact Evaluation	-ORSE - ESL Council	Increase or decrease in length of CCC ESL course sequences
Implementation of Multiple-Measure Testing	Impact Evaluation	-ORSE -ESL Council -Provost	-Number of ELL moving to next level in course sequence -Number of ELL moving into ENG101

In addition to the above evaluations, other measures that should be monitored by the ORSE are the number of ELL students entering ESL programs, the number of ELL completing an ESL course sequence, the number of ELL going into gatekeeping courses, usually ENG 101, and the number of ELL completing degrees. But degrees are not the only measure of success. Many ESL students are not taking classes for degrees, but for personal development or “self actualization” (Maslow, 1943). The Connecticut General Assembly, working with the governor, and the Department of Education, should implement a “quality of life” study to evaluate the effect that these policies have on ELL in their daily lives. How do their job earnings and satisfaction improve? Are they more involved in the politics and cultural activities of their communities?

The long-range benefits for Connecticut’s economy also need to be evaluated. Bettertrained workers and lower unemployment should lead to an improved economy and lower rates of welfare payouts. There will be more innovation because, as Blau and Mackie (2017) report, “recent immigrants have higher patenting rates than natives” (p. 280). A bigger tax

base with a higher GDP for the state should improve the lives of all of Connecticut's citizens.

The final aspect that should be monitored is the numbers of international students coming to Connecticut. With better testing, more programs and better pedagogy, CCC should see an increase in the numbers of students coming from overseas to take advantage of the ESL programs that Connecticut offers. The Connecticut Department of Education monitors the population of visa students in CCC and publishes reports, so the numbers are publically available. With this increase in international students, who pay out-of-state tuition, the individual colleges should also have more money in their operating budgets, which can be seen in the yearly budget reports by the BOR.

Conclusion

In the United States, despite depictions in news and popular culture, crime goes down when immigrants move in (Flagg, 2018) and, economically, “by the second generation, descendants of immigrants are a net positive for the states as a whole” (Blau & Mackie, 2017, p. 12). These are only some of the benefits of an educated EALL populace. There are also benefits to the native English-speaking community. The Connecticut Community Colleges’ Mission Statement declares that one of the purposes of the schools is to “nurture student learning and success to transform students and equip them to contribute to the economic, intellectual, civic, cultural and social well-being of their communities” (Connecticut Board of Regents, 2013), and one part of the mission of Norwalk Community College (NCC) is to “prepare our students to be active and responsible contributors to the global society” (Norwalk Community College, 2010). To accomplish these lofty goals, native English-speakers must interact with and learn from a diverse and well-served ELL community.

Leaders in education policy at all levels must ensure that ELL receive pedagogically sound courses over an appropriate length of time and be accurately placed in those courses in order to succeed. One major problem is that there is need for more research on ELL at the higher education level, a deficit that needs to be corrected. According to Oropeza et al. (2010), the focus of research on ELL institutional support is on the K-12 level, and “linguistic minority students have been both under-researched and underserved in the context of research on minority students’ access to and retention in higher education” (p. 1). Educational leaders at all levels have

a responsibility to push for educational reforms, which means that it is the responsibility of anyone who claims to be a leader in education to step up and make policy reform part of their praxis. At each of the levels discussed in this brief (state, college, department), leaders are beholden to the students, the citizens of their state, and the academic community to be actively involved in research and the development of policy that serves their constituents. In the future, more research must be conducted with adult ELL so that education policy makers can learn more about how ELL contribute to CCC, Connecticut, and the global community.

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