

Ripping off the Band-Aid: Efforts to Implement an Integrated Model of ESL Writing Support at a Liberal Arts College

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Abstract

A partnership between the Davidson College Writing Center Director and an ESL writing specialist resulted in the implementation of a pilot program replacing segregated ESL classes with a writing center-based model of support. This article outlines the evolution of the new model, results and outcomes of its pilot implementation, and related issues.

Full text

Davidson College, a small residential college located in North Carolina, is consistently ranked among the top ten liberal arts colleges nationwide. The college provides a writing-intensive curriculum and small class sizes that help students develop the communication and critical thinking skills that the institution values. To support the development of writing and speaking skills, the college established a Writing Center in 1995 and a Speaking Center in 2004. While most students are native-English-speaking American citizens, Davidson consistently has a population of roughly 3.5% international visa students [1]. Although this number is small compared to higher numbers of visa students and larger populations of resident non-native-English-speaking (NNES) students at state-funded institutions, NNES international students at Davidson need to perform at the same high levels of competence as their peers in a rigorous and linguistically demanding academic environment.

Over the last four years, we have been working to heighten awareness of ESL student needs, improve how the institution identifies ESL students from among the general population, and enhance academic support for ESL students, with a focus on writing skills. This article outlines measures taken to accomplish these objectives and recommendations for the design of a support structure for ESL writers that integrates rather than isolates them from the general student population.

BACKGROUND

The college has not ignored the needs of ESL writers. For over 20 years, it has hired a series of adjunct instructors to teach first-year writing courses offered exclusively to international students. The courses were always separate sections containing only international ESL students, and the adjunct faculty members, for the most part, had no other role at the college than to teach these classes. In the past, these courses had fulfilled the college's first-year writing requirement, but after a WAC-based program was implemented in 1999, they were considered pre-requisite only. Students required to take the ESL writing course were identified through a writing assessment conducted by the adjunct during International Student Orientation. As a result, a select group of international visa students were required to take an additional writing course as a prerequisite to the first-year writing course required of all students.

Beyond these courses and the tutorial assistance available to all students through the Writing Center, however, there has been no targeted support for second language writing development. This band-aid solution, which essentially segregated ESL writers and the faculty teaching them from the larger academic population, exemplifies what Matsuda (2006) has called a policy of “linguistic containment” of ESL writers. The isolated courses have had the unrealistic objective of filling any gaps in composition instruction and language development, after which international students were expected to progress without any further second language support.

In 2004, her first year of teaching the fall semester course, Denise discovered that it lacked both a clear purpose and student buy-in: students felt wrongly singled out as “remedial” writers in a high-stakes academic environment that was intolerant of remediation. These factors, coupled with the wide range of student issues in relation to varying levels of English language proficiency, different educational backgrounds, and ranges of motivation toward language learning, made the course challenging to teach.

Between 2004 and 2006, Denise worked to increase student buy-in and improve overall course relevance to the broader academic context. She refined the assessment and course placement process, improved communications to faculty and students about course objectives, and adjusted assignments. Working with the Composition Committee, which oversees the college’s first-year writing requirement, she implemented a provisional credit system in which these students could be exempted from also having to take the regular first-year writing course required of all students.

Despite these adjustments, the course design remained inherently problematic. The class format did not offer the individualized instruction that students with such varying needs required, and because it separated students from the academic context for which it was intended to prepare them, it did little to introduce ESL writers to the expectations of mainstream faculty and allow them to measure themselves against their NES peers. So in early 2007, Denise submitted recommendations to the Composition Committee hinged on the premise that international ESL students would benefit from greater integration into Davidson’s academic environment, while being provided with an appropriate level of support from an ESL-trained professional.

A REVISED PROGRAM DESIGN WITH POSITIVE RESULTS

One of the Composition Committee members, who was also the Writing Center Director, Shireen was eager to collaborate on a new support model based on Denise’s suggestions. In Fall 2007, we implemented a pilot program that replaced the single course with a writing center-based model in which an ESL specialist worked with faculty teaching first-year writing courses to provide individualized support for ESL students that supplemented classroom instruction. The new model had two key elements: one-on-one tutoring in the Writing Center provided by an ESL specialist, and collaboration between the specialist and writing course faculty. To cast the net of ESL writing support even further, Denise cross-trained and regularly consulted with student tutors in the Writing Center.

The new program design better integrated ESL writers into the mainstream curriculum, and Denise was able to support a larger number of ESL students than she would have taught in the class model. Fall usage statistics reveal that ESL students used the Writing Center, whether working with Denise or another tutor, in far greater numbers than ever before in conjunction with the new program. With ESL support, over 90% of international students enrolled in writing courses successfully completed the requirement in their first semester, a large increase over the less than 50% who had received provisional credit from the separate course in previous years.

One unexpected benefit of the pilot program was that the new model enabled us to identify members of a previously untracked or “hidden” population of ESL students. Previously, only international visa students had been assessed for proficiency in English composition. But in the pilot program, faculty partners also referred NNES students living in the U.S. as Permanent Residents and U.S. Citizens to Denise for specialized support.

Overall, by placing the specialist in constant interaction with faculty and giving her exposure to writing assignments across the curriculum, this program better synchronized ESL support with mainstream academic expectations. In addition to raising awareness of ESL issues, the availability of a specialist alleviated some faculty discomfort about having ESL writers in their classes. Faculty feedback on the initiative was widely positive, and Denise also felt that the ESL specialist-faculty partnerships were fruitful collaborations.

ADDITIONAL RESEARCH, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND OUTCOMES

After the Fall semester ended, we compiled a report for key college stakeholders that considered our results and faculty feedback in relation to ESL practices at institutions recently identified by college administrators as Davidson’s peers for benchmarking purposes. For the peer survey, we gathered data from institutional websites and circulated an online survey to individuals at each about admissions practices and standards, language assessment, writing course placement and offerings for ESL students, staffing of ESL support, and faculty development.

We also considered Davidson’s institutional statistics, such as the retention rates and SAT Verbal scores of international students compared to the overall student population. While numbers of international students are small, the frequency of lower retention rates among international students suggests that variances may be leveled off by an increase in academic support for students who struggle with second language issues. Over the past four years, Denise had observed that some international students needing extensive ESL writing support have entered the college with disproportionately large gaps between their Verbal and Math scores. This suggests that SAT Verbal scores could be used, in conjunction with other data, to help identify students who may be in need of ESL support [2].

Based on pilot program results and our other research, the report included broad-based recommendations that call for enhanced communication and support across the trajectory of the ESL student experience. Essentially, we recommended that the college:

- Continue to use an integrated model of ESL writing support through the college Writing Center, employing an ESL specialist and cross-training peer tutors;
- Increase faculty development with regard to working with the ESL population;
- Identify and track the ESL population more fully, and
- Coordinate support among faculty and staff involved in preadmissions, admissions, orientation, advising, and curricular support.

As of this Spring, we can report that the new model of mainstreaming students with specialized tutorial support through the Writing Center each fall will continue. In addition, other offices on campus are willing to adjust their practices in light of our findings. The Admissions Office will improve information about standards and expectations provided for international applicants on the college website and tag admissions folders to help identify ESL students who may be in need of support. Individuals responsible for international student orientation will enhance their discussion of the multidisciplinary and writing-intensive nature of a liberal arts education. Faculty advisors who will be working with students identified as ESL will receive additional information on how to support them. Finally, our Institutional Research Office has agreed to track ESL-identified student performance relative to overall student performance, while respecting student confidentiality.

THE PERILS OF BROADENING ESL SUPPORT

Amid these many gains, our conversations on campus in the wake of this pilot program have (re)confirmed an essential source of tension—concerns about remediation and perception of reduced standards that may slow both efforts to identify and meet needs of ESL students and efforts to improve pedagogic practices to reflect a more inclusive linguistic environment. At this point, the campus does not have a permanent staff member with ESL credentials; such a presence, we feel, is a necessary step before we will be able to prepare faculty to work with a more linguistically diverse student population and convince faculty and administrators that different doesn't equal lowered standards.

While we believe ESL student support cannot be delegated to one individual or department but must be shared among stakeholders across the institution, the challenges we have faced suggest the complexities involved in identifying and serving the ESL population in this broader context. It is certainly “messier” to engage faculty in ESL support, and it could be seen as less efficient to integrate rather than segregate ESL students because it requires ongoing collaboration. Sharing ownership makes the tasks of budgeting, administering, and staffing more complicated. While there are historical reasons why ESL and Second Language Writing have evolved separately from other academic disciplines, a professional division that has been a factor in the separation of ESL students from the NES student population (Matsuda, 2006), recent scholarship documents the need for institution-wide approaches to ESL support, and for inter- and intra-departmental collaboration in providing this support (Dadak, 2006; Kubota & Abels, 2006; Phillips, Stewart & Stewart, 2006). Despite the challenges involved in such cross-institutional

approaches, we hope that building an improved network of support for ESL students will result in greater inclusivity, and ultimately, greater academic success, for these students.

NOTES

[1] Based on statistics provided by the Davidson College Office of Planning and Institutional Research.

[2] It has proven difficult to use institutional data on student demographics to identify ESL students. Students designated as “international” may not be NNEs. Conversely, there are NNEs students who are not international students. Attempting to identify ESL students by self-reported ethnicity codes is also problematic because ethnicity does not always imply language needs.

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