

Challenges Facing California ESL Students and Teachers

The missions of each segment in the California educational system—elementary school, high school, adult education, community college, CSU, and UC—are distinct. Elementary and high schools provide open access. That is, they must serve all children. Adult education is likewise committed to providing education for all interested individuals over the age of 18. Community colleges serve high school graduates and anyone over 18 who can demonstrate an ability to benefit from its services. Only at the CSU and UC are admissions requirements an issue, with the CSU accepting the top one third of high school graduates and the UC accepting the top 12% (Commission for the Review of the Master Plan, 1987).

As educators responsible for the crucial language instruction of second language students at all levels, ESL professionals are grappling with the multidimensional nature of the task: The population needing English is extremely large and heterogeneous; learning a second language is a process unlike any other; and there are different educational realities in each segment. The complexity of the task, however, is seldom well understood by those who are only indirectly involved in serving this population, and many times, those individuals are charged with making pivotal decisions affecting second language learners. ESL teachers have a clear picture of the second language issues and the circumstances of their students. However, they may not have an easy means by which to share that understanding with others who need the information to serve L2 students appropriately. For instance, those in contact with second language students need to know that these students cannot be viewed as a single group, that ESL classes are unlike courses designed to improve the English skills of native speakers, and that it takes ten years or more of high quality ESL instruction for second language learners to acquire a level of academic English that will enable them

to compete with native English speakers (Collier, 1989). Enabling ESL professionals to represent and address these issues effectively is the purpose of this article.

Challenges Facing L2 Students

California's second language population is far larger than that of any other state, with 42% of the nation's second language students in its schools. Over a third of California's population speak a language other than English at home. In 1992, 76% of the second language population was Spanish-speaking, and about 16% spoke an Asian language. These two groups also account for three quarters of the state's population growth, and between the years 2005 and 2010, it is predicted that Latinos and Asians will outnumber Anglos in California for the first time (Walters, 1986).

To those observing the situation from a distance, the fact that second language students have cultures and languages different from traditional Americans makes them appear to fit into a single category. However, ESL teachers can testify that it is simplistic to refer to the second language population as a single group. It is not much more informative to divide that group into Spanish-speaking students and those who speak an Asian language. The diversity of the population is its only constant. California's students speak over 26 different languages at home (Department of Commerce, Economics, and Statistics Administration, Bureau of the Census, 1990). Even within language groups, there are varieties of cultures and ethnicities. Students also come from the widest possible range of educational levels, from preliterate to postdoctoral, and they have a large assortment of educational goals. These learners also arrive in the U.S. through several means. Some emigrate through legal channels, some illegal. Some come as refugees. Others come for a short stay, just to study. And many have grown up here or were even born in this country. These diverse cultures, experiences, languages, and attitudes are manifested in a wide array of responses to the United States, and the diversity of their needs complicates their acquisition of English (see Murray, this volume).

Second language students bring with them distinct cultures and customs. For instance, following the tradition of a close extended family, these students often have greater family responsibilities than native English speakers do. At the other extreme, students on their own in the U.S. may be affected by the absence of the strong family support system to which they are accustomed. For some, responsibilities for spouses, parents, or younger siblings may take time away from studies. In some cultures, a strong work ethic combined with the custom of all contributing to the family income may discourage children from attending school in favor of starting work at

a young age. Yet also among the second language population are those students from cultures that make education a top priority.

In many instances, financial demands force immigrant students to work more than native students do. These demands also encourage students to rush to complete their education and to maximize their educational dollar by enrolling in a large, sometimes overwhelming, number of courses. These students also often skip ESL courses in their hurry to complete their education, a practice that often backfires by costing them success in future courses or more time to back up and take the language courses they needed initially. Second language students often also sacrifice involvement in extracurricular activities and thus forfeit opportunities to interact with native speakers of English.

Because most second language learners have emigrated from their homeland, they have often had traumatic experiences associated with coming to this country. Some are political refugees or have come to the U.S. from war-torn nations. They may have endured horrors and lost everything including their families. Regardless of their background, they must make their way in a society that may be very different from what they are used to. Once here, some groups must cope in a postindustrial, information-age Western country for the first time. Additionally, they are often confronted with racism, anti-immigrant sentiment, and discrimination against anyone who does not have natively English. All of these issues potentially impede the willingness of newly arrived second language learners to seek language instruction.

In an attempt to feel comfortable in an otherwise unwelcoming new society, second language learners often seek companionship in an ethnic community with others from their home country. These communities provide comfort with their familiar sights, food, and values and offer genuine opportunities for cognitive development through cultural interaction and intellectual growth in the first language (L1). However, life in such communities offers few opportunities to interact with English speakers, making school the place where most such interaction occurs. In school districts where single first language populations predominate, chances to interact in English or to acculturate are restricted to the classroom (see Scarcella, this volume).

Second language students, especially the younger ones, often wish to adopt American ways, particularly the ways of American youth. This acculturation process may create conflict between the traditional values and customs of parents and the new values and customs immigrant youth emulate. The conflict is further complicated by parents' desire for their children to succeed in the new culture. Successful acquisition of the second language

culture and the English language takes time and is seldom achieved without a struggle. The desire to fit in with their native English-speaking (NS) peers may ironically slow their English development by dissuading students from enrolling in ESL courses. Although these students are very different from each other their identity as "foreigners" and need for English language skills provide common ground.

Learning English as a Second Language

As ESL professionals, we know that the ability to acquire language is inherent in human beings. In fact, every normal person acquires a highly complex linguistic system in his or her native language by the age of five. The remaining more subtle structures are acquired from ages six to 12 (Collier, 1995). The vocabulary needed to function in most survival situations is learned very early in life along with the function words and word forms that make the language understandable (Crystal, 1987). The basic sound system of the language, including most stress and intonation patterns, is also complete by an early age except for the sounds that are the most difficult to articulate (e.g., the *th* in English) (Dale, 1988). Features found almost exclusively in the written form of the language are typically learned at school.

When learners acquire a second language, they bring the same linguistic ability to the task, and the process is similar. They take in language they understand and use it to communicate. In this communication process, second language learners begin to decipher the structure of the language they are trying to learn. As more communication takes place, they refine their concept of the structure and generate rules that are applied in new communication situations. Because each learner's grasp of the structures in the second language is incomplete, gaps often are filled in by hypotheses based on the learner's native language. The result of this process is a representation of the target language that contains what may be perceived as errors, but which ESL professionals view as a developing linguistic system (called an *interlanguage*) that rests somewhere on a continuum between the speaker's first language and the target language (Selinker, 1972).

Learners acquire English at different rates depending upon linguistic, cognitive, and academic factors such as first language background, motivation, age, and quality of schooling. Students' linguistic systems develop unevenly. The development depends on the quality of exposure to the second language the learner receives in addition to the same factors that affect the general rate of acquisition (Collier, 1995). Therefore, students who have lived in the U.S. for a long time may have sophisticated listening and speaking skills, but their reading and writing skills may be much less devel-

oped. Students who have studied written English in other countries but may not have had the opportunity to hear the language spoken by native speakers may have the opposite pattern of skill development. Additionally, a student may demonstrate different proficiency levels in a given skill depending upon the task required. For example, a student may demonstrate advanced proficiency on a narrative writing assignment but only intermediate proficiency on an analytical one.

How close to a complete and accurate representation of the target language learners ultimately come is dependent on a host of factors. It typically requires five to seven years to reach parity with high school native English speakers if factors align to work in the learner's favor (Collier, 1989). If learners start the language acquisition process early in secondary school or sooner, if the language program provides feedback that expedites understanding of the target language structure, if there is sufficient opportunity for genuine interaction in the target language within a context that promotes language learning, the five-to-seven year acquisition period applies (Collier, 1989). The more education learners have in their first language, the closer they will be to achieving this goal within five years. Students with no schooling in their first language take an average of seven to ten years and sometimes longer to reach average native speaker norms (Collier, 1989). Other factors such as the learner's personality, learning style, first language, motivation, and attitude towards the new language and culture also either positively or negatively affect the length of time it takes to learn the second language.

For second language learners aspiring to a higher education, their goal is to attain a level of proficiency in English that will enable them to compete academically with native speakers. Acquiring this level and type of language is far more demanding than learning the language for conversational purposes and takes far longer (Cummins, 1983). The task is also more complicated because the learner is engaged in learning the academic subject matter and the language simultaneously. Because learners must start with language they can understand, they are at a further disadvantage in mastering the target language if the English they hear and read is at an incomprehensible level.

The most daunting task for schools serving this population is accommodating the length of time it takes students to acquire a second language. Very few educators and even fewer noneducators have a realistic appreciation for this time factor. Constant pressure from administrators, parents, and even the students themselves to mainstream learners quickly often undermines teacher efforts to create effective second language programs. Some productive teaching techniques have been developed to facilitate the

second language acquisition process and at the same time help students keep pace academically with their native speaker counterparts—for example, specially designed academic instruction in English (SDAIE) (see Fields & Fields, this volume). But even these efforts are often dismissed as restricting access to college prep courses or as lower level and thus unequal tracks for second language students.

ESL programs are sometimes criticized by individuals who themselves learned English as a second language very successfully in the California school system. However, these individuals fail to realize that their language environment was not what it is today: They made up a tiny minority of second language students at the time and were thus afforded constant opportunity for interaction and feedback in English.¹ In addition, other educational and motivational advantages they may have had are seldom taken into account by these critics.

Challenges Facing California Educators

Within the K–12 system, access to core curriculum is a concern for second language students. Students arrive in the U.S. at all ages and stages of English language acquisition. They may enter a U.S. high school in the 10th grade, for instance, and have only three years to learn whatever English they can before graduation time. The program may be designed to last for seven years, but students are often not around for the first four years of it. As a result students do not benefit from the program as it was designed. And yet the measure of success of a high school is its graduation rate for all students, not just those who have had the benefit of its full program. The expectation is that all students will graduate. The additional expectation is that all students will be able to take regular, college-preparatory coursework. For high schools in areas where the number of immigrant students is high, the challenge to provide access to the core curriculum for all students is formidable.

In many districts, students who arrive too late to graduate from regular high school are sent to adult education programs, most often administered within the same high school district. The goal of these programs is to help these students acquire enough English and basic skills to be able to receive a high school diploma and to get jobs. Students are offered vocational training and an opportunity to transition to higher education. Adult education ESL programs also serve the enormous population of newly arrived adult immigrants. Often these students are not literate in their first language, so their language acquisition process is combined with the acquisition of basic reading and writing skills. To these students adult education also provides life skills education.

Adult education programs are typically taxed with large class sizes, open-entry/open-exit policies, less than ideal facilities, and a disproportionate number of part-time teachers. Although some of these features, like the open-entry/open-exit policy, are in place to improve student access to programs, they also create problems. For instance, the open-entry/open-exit practice limits continuity and progression within the curriculum. Similarly, offering classes at sites in the community is convenient for students but does not encourage them to interact with students and faculty in regular college programs or to feel comfortable on a college campus (see Lieu; Manson; and Seymour, Scholnick, & Gibson, this volume). The main limitation for adult education programs, however, is the number of seats they can provide. Adult education ESL programs are extremely impacted, and funding for increased offerings is subject to the political climate surrounding this student population.

The primary mission of community colleges is to provide the first two years of general education for students to transfer to four-year institutions. Additionally this segment offers vocational programs and ESL and basic skills education to prepare students for college-level work. Although the mission and main service population for community colleges and adult education programs are different, the demand for ESL classes in both segments is enormous and growing. This demand has left the community colleges in many areas throughout the state unable to offer a sufficient number of ESL sections to prepare entering L2 students for other college and vocational courses.

The California State University and the University of California systems offer baccalaureate and graduate degrees. Given the length of time it takes to acquire academic English, second language students transferring from community colleges are typically still in need of ESL instruction in order to succeed in their courses and to complete their degrees. Although ESL instruction is offered at many of these institutions, not all campuses offer appropriate ESL instruction to students who transfer from community college.

Each segment has to contend with a set of unrealistic expectations. K–12 is expected to teach L2 students sufficient English to be ready for college, regardless of the circumstances students bring or the time they spend in the segment. Adult education programs are expected to provide completely open access to all adult students yet still offer high quality learning opportunities. Community colleges are likewise expected to accept all students, even those with no English language skills, on the one hand, and to prepare students to meet upper division writing demands on the other—all without creating a long ladder of courses. In spite of the sharp increase in L2 learners in the state population and the dilemmas facing feeder insti-

tutions, CSUs and UCs expect their students to have college-level writing proficiency when they arrive, and as a result of this expectation resist offering students the support they require (see Celce-Murcia & Schwabe and Murray, this volume).

Compounding the unreasonable demands placed on each segment, no vehicle for communication among the segments has been created. The dilemma of L2 students transitioning between segments, therefore, has yet to be meaningfully addressed. Because programs have been designed independently on each campus with little consideration of how the segments feed into one another, students face the same scenario at each segment: Their language abilities are assessed anew, and they are typically placed wherever they fit in that program without reference to their previous language-learning history. Difficulty achieving articulation for ESL offerings means students' previous coursework is seldom evaluated or considered from segment to segment. It is thus not surprising that students feel they are forced to start over with their ESL classes at each educational juncture (see Ediger, and Lane, Brinton, & Erickson, this volume).

Identification of L2 Learners and Assessing Language Needs

Identification and placement of L2 learners in language courses varies from segment to segment and from campus to campus. The inconsistency of practices causes part of the difficulty in providing appropriate language instruction across segments to those who need it.

California elementary and secondary schools identify students as potentially in need of second language instruction through a home language survey completed by parents. The survey asks four questions designed to determine if each student is a second language learner. Students so identified are later given a language assessment in both their native language and in English (see Sasser, Fields & Dunlap, this volume).

Students entering a school district for the first time have their listening and speaking skills evaluated using one of four state-approved instruments designed to elicit a brief language sample. Reading and writing are evaluated by a local instrument if students are old enough to be expected to have those skills. On the basis of their listening and speaking skills, students are judged as fully English proficient (FEP), or limited English proficient (LEP). This determination has enormous implications for students' future opportunities for language instruction. Those judged as FEP are not eligible for bilingual instruction, ESL instruction, or other language acquisition support for the length of time they remain students in that district. If, for example, on the basis of understanding and responding to a few spoken lines of English, a student is evaluated as FEP in kindergarten and later has

second language problems in writing, the only avenue of assistance available is remedial instruction designed for native English speakers.

Community colleges must assess students' language skills upon entry using a combination of state-approved instruments and other types of measures. Students may be advised or placed in ESL courses according to the assessment results. Unlike the K-12 system of identifying potential L2 students for later language assessment and the practice by some CSU and UC campuses of basing placement on second language features found in a writing sample, the community college system allows students to choose to participate in either the assessment process designed for native speakers or the one designed for second language learners. Since assessment instruments designed and normed on native English speakers do not address issues of language structure (the prevailing instructional issue for L2 learners of academic English), the instruments fail to place students accurately. Often second language students who have elected to participate in the native speaker assessment process find themselves in developmental (formerly called *remedial*) English courses, where none of their second language features are addressed. After wasting a semester or more, they may be advised to take ESL.

At CSUs and UCs where ESL programs exist, efforts to identify and place L2 students differ widely. Although all CSUs evaluate entering freshmen on the English Placement Test (EPT), a test designed to measure native English skills, specific evaluation of L2 students is not required systemwide. Moreover, L2 students transferring from community colleges are usually exempt from any assessment process. These transfer students very often have difficulty passing the Graduate Writing Assessment Requirement (GWAR), a graduation requirement at all CSUs.² They may also have trouble with their other courses and may fail to graduate from the CSU campuses.

At the UC, practices differ from campus to campus as to whether and how students are identified as ESL. Along with other entering freshmen, freshmen ESL students take the UC systemwide Subject A Examination. When students are identified by this exam as potentially in need of ESL instruction, the individual campuses to which they have been accepted make decisions about their placement. On most campuses, they are screened further and placed in ESL courses if deemed necessary. On other campuses, students are immediately mainstreamed whether or not they have been identified by the UC systemwide exam as being potentially in need of ESL instruction. Transfer students entering the UC have already satisfied their freshman composition requirement. With the exception of one campus (UCLA), campuses do not identify transfer students as ESL or hold them to a requirement.

Identification and assessment of second language students in all segments is uneven and inconsistent (see Ching, Ford, & McKee; Fields & Dunlap; Sasser, this volume). In K-12, the home language survey works well to identify students who are likely to benefit from L2 instruction. However, basing eligibility for L2 support on only listening and speaking assessment at the early ages combined with locally devised evaluation of reading and writing later on has left some students without the second language programs they need to successfully acquire academic English. In community colleges, the recent requirement that all tests used must be approved as a valid match for the program's curriculum and students is a step forward. Nevertheless, permitting students to follow an assessment process designed for native speakers has done a grave disservice to L2 students who believe they can succeed in college without gaining the level of second language skill required for college-level coursework. Finally, the four-year universities have, in most cases, not recognized the need to identify and assess L2 transfer students and have failed to provide the consistent ESL support these students need to succeed on the GVAR, in the case of CSU, or in their other college courses.

Curricular Issues

ESL curriculum development in high schools, as with all high school subjects, is tied to a state framework that defines what will be taught. Yet, there is no framework for high school ESL separate from the one designed for native English students. However, for adult education a set of standards which assure consistency in content and level for adult ESL programs has been developed (California Department of Education, 1992).

Community colleges are free to set their curricula independently. Each college's faculty is charged with approving courses offered in accordance with a state curriculum model. In addition, courses are separately articulated for transfer purposes with each CSU and UC campus, and sets of transfer courses have been agreed upon by the four-year institutions. The state curriculum model and transfer agreements provide some common standards or general education courses across the community college system (see Garlow, this volume).

Typically, intersegmental articulation agreements do not govern ESL course work. Thus, students often do not receive credit for ESL courses when they transfer to another campus within a given segment or when they move from segment to segment. As a result, they may be retested for their English language skills when they enter the new institution.

Although over half of the community colleges have at least one ESL course designed to transfer to four-year universities, the overriding consid-

eration in the development of community college ESL curricula is not articulation with universities but their fit with the needs of the college's local population. Designing ESL programs to fit local populations has resulted in a range of offerings—from the most beginning types of language instruction including preliteracy training to ESL courses comparable to freshman composition courses. Offerings also vary in terms of their focus on listening and speaking skills versus reading and writing and regarding how closely they are tied to vocational programs. The result is a wide range of levels and emphases, with little or no articulation of ESL courses between colleges, even those within a single district.

In several of the state's largest districts, the community college district performs the function of adult education described above. These college districts have entered into agreements with their K-12 districts to provide adult education for their communities. Where such programs exist in the community colleges, they usually do not bear college credit, but are offered alongside a college credit ESL program (see Seymour et al, this volume).

Four-year institutions have language programs designed to help students succeed in upper division courses. Since these courses typically require students to write proficiently, university ESL programs focus largely on writing skills. The purpose of university ESL courses is typically far narrower than those offered in any other segment because their purpose is so tightly defined. However, partly because feeder high school and community college ESL programs serve a number of purposes, only one of which is developing students' college-level writing skills, university faculty are frustrated by the lack of grammatical sophistication L2 students bring to their segment.

Because ESL programs are designed to match the needs of the local student population and the framework of each segment, they do not fit together from segment to segment. Nevertheless, ESL students must meet the same requirements for graduation, entry, or transfer as all other students in the state of California. Combined, these two factors mean that to progress from one segment to the next, ESL students require a longer time since they must acquire academic English and must complete ESL courses in addition to other courses specified.

Qualified ESL Faculty

ESL professionals recognize that in order to best serve the needs of L2 learners, they must be appropriately educated in the discipline of teaching ESL (TESL). Minimum qualifications for hiring ESL faculty have recently been established in most segments, ensuring that ESL teachers are knowl-

edgeable in the areas of linguistics, second language acquisition, TESL methodologies, and cross-cultural issues. Implementation of minimum qualifications, however, remains somewhat problematic at all levels.

At the high school level, in addition to having a secondary teaching credential, ESL teachers must have a language development specialist certificate (LDS), a bilingual/bicultural certificate of competence (BCC), a cross-cultural, language, and academic development certificate (CLAD), a bilingual CLAD (BCLAD), or an ESL supplemental certificate. However, teachers may sometimes sign a teacher-in-training document while completing a certificate, or they may obtain an emergency waiver if they have a baccalaureate degree and have passed the California Basic Education Skills Test (CBEST), permitting them to teach while they are enrolled in a teacher credentialing program.

In the high school segment, there remains a scarcity of teachers who hold the appropriate credentials to teach ESL or sheltered (SDAIE) classes. As a result, many teachers are currently employed through the emergency credential process. These teachers, some of whom hold only BA degrees, are allowed to teach through the waiver process and typically have two years to complete the requirements for the secondary credential. Others sign a teacher-in-training document, agreeing to obtain the appropriate certificate (e.g., LDS) within a determined time period, typically two to three years.

Qualifications vary somewhat in the higher education segments, though an MA in TESL generally serves as a minimum qualification. In 1987, the California community college credential was replaced by the requirement that all instructors hold a master's degree in their teaching discipline. ESL instructors at the community college must hold an MA in TESL, or an MA in a related field and a TESL certificate. This requirement may also be met through a locally determined equivalency process.

There are no uniform requirements for teaching ESL at the CSU or UC. Generally, CSUs require a PhD degree in linguistics, TESL, or a closely related field to teach full time. Such full-time faculty typically teach in linguistics or TESL master's programs but may also teach some ESL classes. Part-time faculty usually have a master's degree in TESL, or a MA in English or a closely related field with a certificate in TESL. Both full-time and part-time faculty with no special qualifications may be assigned to ESL classes. Qualifications are established at the department level. Full-time and part-time UC faculty teaching matriculated students may be professors or lecturers. Professors (tenure-track, visiting, and temporary) must hold PhD degrees. Lecturers have either master's or doctoral degrees in TESL, applied linguistics, or a related field. These faculty may also teach in MATESL or PhD programs.

Overuse of Part-Time Instructors

In addition to teaching qualifications, another hiring issue affecting the quality of ESL instruction in higher education is the tendency of colleges and universities to rely heavily on part-time instructors and teaching assistants. In areas of rapid growth like ESL, part-time faculty are typically hired to fill the immediate need. They are less expensive than full-time faculty, and they do not acquire tenure. However, in times of budget cuts, the lack of institutional commitment to part-time faculty makes these ESL part-time faculty the first to be eliminated. The result is that programs of recent growth and those in the highest demand (i.e., usually those intended for ESL students) tend to be reduced before older, more established programs, despite the often greater demand for more ESL offerings.

Because full-time instructors are typically fully integrated staff members and do not suffer the marginalization part-time faculty often encounter, they are essential in assuring that institutions meet the L2 learners' needs. A strong core of full-time faculty plays a central role in developing programs that match the needs of second language learners and acts as advocates for them on the campus and in the community. ESL faculty also serve as sources of information about L2 learners and ESL course offerings to administration, staff, faculty from other disciplines, and the rest of the student population. They ensure that ESL courses prepare students for transition to mainstream English courses, provide academic support for other coursework, and foster the learning strategies ESL students will need to be successful. ESL faculty communicate the L2 learners' unique needs to the counseling staff and are themselves active advisors of L2 learners. ESL faculty also offer teachers in other disciplines help in adapting their instruction to the needs of L2 learners without watering down their standards or course content.

Faculty Development and Collaboration

K-12 teachers who teach subjects other than ESL, like their ESL counterparts, must complete a course on multiculturalism in order to qualify for a credential. In addition, any teachers assigned to a content course that is designated bilingual must have a BCC or a BCLAD credential; teachers assigned to a class designated as sheltered/SDAIE must have an LDS, BCC, CLAD, or BCLAD.

At other education levels, there are no special requirements for non-ESL faculty who have L2 learners in their classes. However, these faculty have been encouraged to learn how to better meet L2 learners' needs and more effectively communicate course content. In part, this effort has come

about at the community colleges through the requirement that the success of under-represented students be evaluated. This need for faculty awareness of L2 students' learning needs and characteristics is equally important at the CSU and UC.

As important as ESL faculty are in serving ESL students, they cannot begin to do the job by themselves. In most programs, ESL students spend only a small part of their school day with ESL teachers, if they spend any time at all. Most of their time is spent with teachers in other disciplines. Therefore, developing academic language skills for ESL students must be viewed as the task of teachers in all disciplines and at all levels, since L2 learners remain engaged in the process of language development throughout their academic lives.

In order to serve L2 learners, content-area faculty need information about who second language students are, including the amount and kind of education they received in their home countries, their length of residence in the U.S., their educational experiences in the U.S., and the results of assessment. They also need background in second language acquisition and multicultural communication. Most importantly, they need help in designing instruction that will be accessible to the L2 learners in their classes and that will contribute to these students' language development and add to their repertoire of learning strategies. Teachers need to learn interactive teaching techniques that will make the second language students in their classes active users of English. Finally, they need to find ways to assess fairly the learning of second language students in their classes. This understanding of L2 learners is currently being addressed at the high school level by the qualification requirements for content teachers. For content teachers in the higher education segments, these objectives can best be accomplished through both formal faculty development and an ongoing informal dialogue among ESL faculty and faculty in other disciplines.

ESL Faculty's Key Roles

ESL faculty can be instrumental in educating content-area faculty to serve L2 learners in their classes. For example, one promising model offers adjunct classes to accompany content courses, thus giving L2 learners an opportunity to develop the study strategies they need to be successful in a content area course. In such a program, ESL faculty work closely with faculty teaching courses ranging from computer science to psychology to ensure that the ESL courses support the content courses. In the process, the content faculty learn new and more effective ways of reaching the L2 learners in their classes. The key to the success of these programs is the close cooperation between ESL core faculty and the faculty teaching the

content courses. When language development becomes a team effort rather than the sole responsibility of the ESL faculty, students and faculty both benefit.

Increasing Internal Articulation

To ensure that students make reasonable progress in their language learning process, programs must offer an internally articulated sequence. The skills taught in the first level must be adequately mastered before the student progresses to the second level. Curricula need to reflect this progression; hence, the exit skills of level one must match the entrance skills of level two, and so forth. Additionally, expectations of the extent to which these skills must be mastered to ensure success in the next level need to be clearly spelled out to the students, ideally before they enter the course. This internal articulation is vital to program integrity. Course standards developed around internal level definitions form the basis for later intersegmental communication about student skill level and articulation of courses. One way to carry the message about L2 students to those outside the ESL field is to identify some key areas that every educator should know. Appendix A articulates some of the most important points concisely.

Addressing The L2 Challenge: Agreeing Upon Standards

ESL faculty readily agree on the long-standing need to describe the continuum of ESL proficiency levels, that is, to develop a common vocabulary that characterizes the stages of English second language acquisition. In 1985, the California Community Colleges Board of Governors ESL Task Force recommended defining ESL levels state wide. More recently, Amnesty legislation, California Community College Matriculation regulations, the Immigrant Education and Workforce Preparation Act, and the Intersegmental Committee of the Academic Senates (ICAS) discussions have all highlighted the specific need for such second language descriptors. One response came from community college ESL professionals who produced *Matriculating the ESL Student* (ESL Assessment Group, 1992) and the *Community College ESL Proficiency Level Descriptors* (ESL Assessment Group, 1993).³ The community college descriptors served as models for a set of intersegmental descriptors contained in *California Pathways: The Second Language Student in Public High Schools, Colleges, and Universities* (ESL Intersegmental Project, 1996). *California Pathways* was written to describe the richly diverse and often difficult routes second language students must travel to reach their educational goals within California's K-12, community college, and four-year university systems.

The intersegmental descriptors (ESL Intersegmental Project, 1996)

give ESL specialists and others who are in contact with this population a way to connect the language education paths of a significant portion of California's students. Although the descriptors have yet to be anchored to language samples or compared to existing assessment instruments, they serve as a starting point—the first step in a process to develop meaningful intersegmental communication, appropriate measures of language proficiency, and effective curricula to improve articulation between courses, campuses, and segments.

These descriptors characterize the second language continuum in the four skill areas: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. They have application both within and across the segments of California education from high schools through the California Community College, California State University, and University of California systems. The descriptors give those who work with second language (L2) learners a common language to approach the following:

- discussing the continuum of L2 proficiency levels
- developing or revising ESL curricula
- evaluating tests
- interpreting courses within and across segments.

The descriptors were developed by looking at a variety of existing scales, ultimately including features that seemed, in the opinion of project members, to describe the academic English language proficiency of students within all four segments. They function in these ways:

- describing learners' observable language performance
- representing at a given level in a particular skill area a composite view of a student's proficiency, with the caveat that every trait listed may not match a student's proficiency
- identifying the beginning point for a level with the assumption that the skills below it have been acquired.

The following issues are outside the scope of the descriptors. They do not:

- assume literacy in a student's first language (L1). Literacy in the L1 is an important factor affecting acquisition of reading and writing skills in English, but the degree of L1 literacy does not need to be measured to apply these descriptors
- correspond to program levels—a single course may have to serve students at several levels in some programs
- attempt to define whether a course merits credit or not

- replace institutional grading scales or rubrics.

Some underlying assumptions about L2 learners should inform those who use the descriptors:

1. Students in a particular program may reflect only a portion of the range.
2. The time it takes a student to move from level to level may vary. Acquisition of academic English can be an especially lengthy process. Although students may be able to carry on everyday, informal communication much earlier, they may require ten years or longer to be able to function in an academic setting. Progress tends to be much faster at the lower levels.
3. Students acquire English at different rates. Acquisition rate is influenced by various factors including first language background, motivation, age, and quality of schooling.
4. A student may have uneven language skills. For example, a student may demonstrate advanced speaking skills but only intermediate writing skills.
5. A student may demonstrate different proficiency levels in a given skill depending upon the task required. For example, a student may demonstrate advanced proficiency on a narrative writing assignment but only intermediate proficiency on an analytical writing assignment.
6. Even at the advanced and superior levels, L2 users of English may retain some "accent" both in speaking and writing that distinguishes them from educated native speakers.

Conclusion

Just as the cognitive demands on students increase as they move from high school to community college to university, so too do the linguistic demands. For example, L2 skills that are adequate to meet high school needs may be less than adequate to meet community college needs. Similarly, students possessing adequate linguistic skills to cope at the community college may experience difficulty in upper division university courses. It is therefore no surprise that the L2 level required to mainstream students in English courses designated for native English speakers increases as students move through the segments (Collier, 1995).

The existing articulation agreements between the high schools and the CSU or UC systems require that ESL students complete four years of high school English instruction before qualifying to apply for college or university admission. Since many ESL courses do not fulfill CSU or UC entrance requirements, high school ESL students who wish to pursue higher education are frequently mainstreamed into regular English classes before they are ready as part of an attempt to qualify them for college admission. Many

students who follow this path later find themselves underprepared for coping with the language demands of the community college or university. As a result, they are often required to take ESL courses after they have entered a college or university, despite having completed ESL at the secondary level. The use of the Second Language Proficiency Descriptors to closely articulate ESL courses and skill levels among high schools, community colleges, and universities will address this issue.

Strengthening communication among the segments will lead to clearer articulation of ESL courses at each juncture. To provide a concrete basis for that communication, the Second Language Proficiency Descriptors should be promptly tied to language samples and assessment instruments in each segment. The development of critically needed ESL assessment instruments, especially those designed to be used intersegmentally, must also begin as soon as possible.

In addition, to further aid the process of intersegmental articulation, a segment by segment database on second language learners is needed. Although some student information is systematically collected by the K-12 and community college segments, it is typically extracted by ethnicity rather than by first language. Information on course enrollment is similarly difficult to interpret. However, in order to understand the dimensions and needs of this population within and across segments, carefully designed data collection by all segments is required. ■

Endnotes

1. With 90% to 100% of some of today's high school student populations consisting of second language students, the situation has changed. Students in such situations no longer interact with native speakers on school grounds, in their communities, or often even at work.
2. Some university campuses report a 70% to 80% failure rate on the GVAR and similar tests for L2 transfer students compared to a 25% to 40% failure rate for native English transfers. (*Report on the Test to Fulfill the Upper Division English Composition Requirement*, UC Davis, 1992).
3. Descriptors are available from CATESOL, 1146 N. Central Avenue, #195, Glendale, CA 91202.

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Appendix A

What Every California Educator Should Know About L2 Learners

Because the second language student population in California schools is increasing, every educator who comes in contact with these students must have a basic understanding of their needs in order to assure they are appropriately educated.

Not all L2 learners have the same educational needs.

Because second language students share the need to learn English, they are often seen as forming a homogeneous educational group. They are, however, not at all homogeneous. In fact, the interplay of variables characterizing L2 learners makes meeting the population's educational needs exceptionally challenging. It is therefore important that all segments of education give particular attention to an individual L2 learner's situation when evaluating his or her need for services.

Educationally useful distinctions among language learners can be made.

There are three groups of language learners that can make understanding students' needs easier. The term *native speakers of English* refers to students whose first language, the language acquired at home, was English. The term *L2 learners* (second language learners) refers to all students whose home language during early childhood was other than English. A subgroup of L2 learners, *ESL students*, are those who have need for ESL programs or classes designed to help them acquire the English language. It is important to understand the dynamics of these three groups because their language education needs are not the same. Such definitions should be integral to any assessment and advising process affecting L2 learners because they will help to distinguish, for example, the L2 learner from most basic skills students whose first language is English.

Learning a second language is a unique process.

Learners acquire English by developing their understanding of the linguistic system through communication. They gradually refine their concept of the system, and during that process fill gaps in their concept with hypotheses based on their native language. The result of this process is a representation of the target language that contains what others may perceive as error, but in reality it is a developing linguistic system called an interlanguage that rests somewhere on a continuum between the speaker's first language and the target language. Educationally sound feedback leads learners to revise these hypotheses; over a long period of time these revisions help them approach mastery of the language. Unfortunately, if L2 learners function for long in a language without getting adequate feedback, they may not fully develop their control of the language. In fact, their language development may stop before they have acquired all the features of language.

Learning language is unlike learning most subjects where a body of information can be imparted and its comprehension easily measured.

Instead, students' success in acquiring English is measured by asking them to use the language in an infinite number of situations. Children enter school already able to do this in their first language, so there is no need to measure it in this way. The closest subject to ESL is foreign language education, but the level of application needed for ESL students to live and work using English, and to compete academically, far exceeds the need for foreign language skill in this country.

Measuring skill level in a second language is not the same as measuring native language skill.

Once L2 students are correctly identified, accurate assessment and subsequent placement into appropriate language courses are essential for L2 learners to succeed, to be retained, and to progress through the educational system in California. It is ineffective to use objectively scored instruments designed to assess the English of native speakers for assessing the English level of second language learners. Four-year institutions often blend the identification and assessment processes by distinguishing students in need of ESL courses when evaluating their writing.

The linguistic demands of courses increase as the student moves up through the segments.

Just as the cognitive demands on students increase as they move from high school to community college to university, so do the linguistic demands. For example, L2 skills that are adequate to meet high school needs may be less than adequate to meet community college needs. Similarly, students possessing adequate linguistic skills to cope at the community college may experience difficulty in upper division university courses. It is therefore no surprise that the L2 level required to mainstream students into English courses designated for native English speakers increases as students move through the segments.

It can easily take ten years to learn a second language well enough to succeed academically.

Perhaps the most crucial issue in designing effective ESL programs is understanding the length of time it takes to acquire proficiency in a second language and how proficiency is defined. Recent research shows that on average it takes five to seven years for young students to reach the norm on nationally standardized achievement tests. Education in the first language reduces the amount of time required and improves ultimate second language proficiency. So much time is required for fully acquiring a second language, in fact, that university level L2 learners who have been studying English in the United States for ten years sometimes still need ESL instruction. Understanding the length of time required to attain proficiency in a second language is important for all educational professionals because of a tendency within the educational system itself to rush L2 learners through a school's language continuum.

Acquiring academic English requires a great deal more time and study than learning to speak English, and is a far more challenging task. L2 learners are often at a disadvantage because they are faced with the task of acquiring and using academic English at the same time they are trying to learn other course subjects. Also because it takes so long to learn academic English, conversational fluency in English often masks a lack of competency in reading and writing English. L2 learners typically acquire listening and speaking skills prior to learning to read and write. Their fluency in English and sometimes their familiarity with U.S. customs and culture often cause the listener to assume a higher level of language skill than the student possesses.

To best assist L2 learners to reach their educational goals as quickly as possible, it is important to identify them right away.

The accurate and early identification of L2 learners is of utmost importance because their identification determines which set of services, which set of assessment measures, and which types of courses, ESL or native-English, will best meet such learners' needs. Consistently considering a student's first language experience will prevent misidentification of L2 learners on the basis of factors unrelated to their language skills. For example, a student's previous enrollment in courses or programs intended for native English speakers is not a dependable indication of a student's familiarity with or abilities in English. Similarly, because some students do not understand the term "ESL" or are reluctant to self-identify as L2 learners, advisors and others consistently need to consider first language experience as a primary indication of whether or not such individuals may be correctly identified as students best aided by second language services and assessment.

Source: ESL Intersegmental Project. (1996). California Pathways: The second language student in public high schools, colleges, and universities. Sacramento: Intersegmental Council of Academic Senates in conjunction with the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office.

Appendix B

SECOND LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY DESCRIPTORS

LISTENING

NOVICE-LOW

- has little or no ability to understand spoken English
- sometimes recognizes isolated words and learned phrases

NOVICE-MID

- understands some words and common social phrases
- understands some short, previously learned words or phrases, particularly when the situation strongly supports understanding
- understands short phrases or sentences about topics that refer to basic personal information or the immediate physical setting
- can rarely keep pace with the ongoing message
- usually requires repetition or careful speech

NOVICE-HIGH

- understands words and phrases in familiar situations
- understands personal interactions when the situation is familiar and strongly supportive
- usually misunderstands the central message in extended speech
- can sometimes keep pace with the ongoing message
- often requires repetition or careful speech

INTERMEDIATE-LOW

- understands familiar information in interactions that fulfill immediate personal needs
- sometimes understands new information when the situation is strongly supportive
- often misunderstands when information is unfamiliar or when cultural knowledge is required
- can sometimes identify subjects and details when listening to extended speech, but often misunderstands the central message
- has uneven understanding of natural speech and often requires repetition or rephrasing

INTERMEDIATE-MID

- often understands new information in brief personal interactions
- has understanding that is uneven and generally affected by length, topic familiarity, and cultural knowledge
- can often identify subjects and details when listening to extended speech, but sometimes misunderstands the central message
- usually understands natural speech when the situation is familiar or fulfills immediate needs

INTERMEDIATE-HIGH

- often understands new information in sustained personal interactions
- sometimes understands speech on abstract or academic topics, especially if there is support
- has understanding that is often affected by length, topic familiarity, and cultural knowledge
- can usually identify subjects and details when listening to extended speech and rarely misunderstands the central message
- sometimes understands implications beyond the surface meaning

ADVANCED

- often understands the central idea of speech related to professional or academic topics
- often cannot sustain understanding of conceptually or linguistically complex speech
- has understanding that is sometimes affected by length, topic familiarity, and cultural knowledge
- often understands implications beyond the surface meaning

ADVANCED-HIGH

- usually understands the central idea and most details of speech related to professional and academic topics
- usually sustains understanding of conceptually or linguistically complex speech
- has understanding that is rarely affected by length, topic familiarity, and cultural knowledge
- usually understands implications beyond the surface meaning

SUPERIOR

- understands technical or professional presentations and discussions in a field of specialization
- sustains understanding of conceptually and linguistically complex speech
- usually understands rapid, accented, dialectal, or regional speech
- understands implications beyond the surface meaning
- recognizes but may not always understand idioms, colloquialisms, and language nuances

DISTINGUISHED

- understands highly technical or professional presentations and discussions in a field of specialization
- understands rapid, accented, dialectal, or regional speech
- understands idioms, colloquialisms, and language nuances
- has listening skills essentially indistinguishable from those of an educated native speaker of English

SECOND LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY DESCRIPTORS

SPEAKING

NOVICE-LOW

- can sometimes produce isolated words and a few frequently occurring phrases but may not use them accurately
- demonstrates little or no functional communicative ability
- is usually misunderstood even by attentive listeners

NOVICE-MID

- uses vocabulary and short learned phrases sufficient for meeting simple needs and for expressing basic courtesies
- frequently pauses and may repeat the listener's words
- speaks with some accuracy when relying on learned phrases
- speaks with limited accuracy when new vocabulary and structures are required
- is often misunderstood even by attentive listeners

NOVICE-HIGH

- uses concrete vocabulary that relates to familiar topics
- can ask and answer simple questions and initiate and respond to simple statements
- can participate in a brief face-to-face conversation on a familiar topic
- sometimes recombines learned material in original ways with limited grammatical accuracy

- often uses language that is not situationally or culturally appropriate
- is sometimes misunderstood even by attentive listeners

INTERMEDIATE-LOW

- uses basic concrete and abstract vocabulary
- uses a limited range of grammatical structures correctly
- can maintain a face-to-face conversation on a familiar topic
- occasionally expresses original ideas with limited grammatical accuracy
- sometimes uses language that is not situationally or culturally appropriate
- is occasionally misunderstood even by attentive listeners

INTERMEDIATE-MID

- can perform basic communication tasks in many social situations
- often demonstrates awareness of target culture by choosing language appropriate to context
- begins and participates in simple conversations on topics of interest
- can provide added detail or rephrase message to facilitate conversation
- over relies on familiar grammatical structures and vocabulary to communicate message
- has a basic functional vocabulary; attempts to use more academic vocabulary may result in inappropriate word choice and awkward phrasing
- can usually be understood by most attentive listeners

INTERMEDIATE-HIGH

- uses a variety of concrete and abstract vocabulary, sometimes inappropriately
- has control over many basic and complex grammatical structures
- can communicate in most social situations, though not always accurately
- can provide added detail or rephrase message to facilitate conversation
- usually uses language that is situationally and culturally appropriate
- can usually be understood by attentive listeners

ADVANCED

- uses a wide variety of concrete and abstract vocabulary
- often uses precise word choice to communicate shades of meaning
- has control over most basic and complex grammatical structures
- can communicate in many social, professional, and academic situations
- uses language that is situationally and culturally appropriate
- is usually easily understood

ADVANCED-HIGH

- uses a sophisticated range of vocabulary
- has control over almost all grammatical structures
- usually uses precise word choice to communicate shades of meaning
- can communicate in most social, professional, and academic situations
- communicates effectively in most social, professional, and academic situations
- is easily understood

SUPERIOR

- has control over virtually all grammatical structures
- can communicate in virtually all social, professional, and academic situations
- uses precise and sophisticated word choice to communicate shades of meaning
- is usually able to tailor language to a specific audience

DISTINGUISHED

- may be nearly or completely indistinguishable from an educated native speaker
- effectively tailors language to match the needs of a specific audience
- possesses nativelike linguistic and cultural knowledge

SECOND LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY DESCRIPTORS

READING

NOVICE-LOW

- is sometimes able to read isolated words and common phrases, especially when they are strongly supported by visual context

NOVICE-MID

- comprehends familiar words and/or phrases which may appear in lists, labels, signs, forms, and directions
- understands simple sentences which contain familiar words and phrases
- sometimes understands clearly related sentences when context, background knowledge, or visual information support meaning

NOVICE-HIGH

- usually reads slowly, word by word
- understands many common words and/or phrases
- sometimes understands new words and/or phrases when the context supports meaning
- sometimes understands common sentence connectors and transitional devices
- can sometimes locate facts in short, simple texts

- often understands clearly related sentences when context, background knowledge, or visual information support meaning

INTERMEDIATE-LOW

- reads word by word or in short phrases
- understands most common words and/or phrases
- can often locate facts in short, simple texts
- sometimes understands new information from texts with familiar language
- occasionally uses textual cues such as sentence connectors and transitional devices to comprehend the meaning and structure of a text
- occasionally understands the central meaning and/or details of a text when content and language are familiar
- occasionally understands common cultural references

INTERMEDIATE-MID

- can often read simple texts on familiar topics with some fluency and speed
- sometimes understands the meaning of new words from context
- sometimes distinguishes between main and supporting ideas which are accessible because of familiar content and/or language
- often understands new information from texts with familiar language
- sometimes uses textual cues such as sentence connectors and transitional devices to comprehend the meaning and structure of a text
- sometimes understands texts that are grammatically complex or on unfamiliar topics
- sometimes understands common cultural references

INTERMEDIATE-HIGH

- reads simple texts on familiar topics with some fluency and speed
- often understands the meaning of new words from context
- usually distinguishes between main and supporting ideas in texts which are accessible because of familiar content and/or language
- usually understands new information from texts with familiar language
- uses a variety of textual cues such as sentence connectors and pronoun reference to comprehend the meaning and structure of a text
- often understands texts that are grammatically complex or on unfamiliar topics
- often understands common cultural references

ADVANCED

- can usually adjust reading rate according to the text
- understands most new words given a clear context
- is able to use a wide range of complex textual cues to comprehend the meaning and structure of a text
- usually makes appropriate inferences
- usually understands the author's purpose, point of view, and tone
- sometimes understands figurative language
- can read a range of personal, professional, and academic texts
- usually understands texts that are either conceptually or linguistically complex
- usually understands common cultural references

ADVANCED-HIGH

- reads most texts fluently and rapidly, adjusting reading rate according to the text
- usually understands texts that are conceptually and/or linguistically complex
- makes appropriate inferences
- understands the author's purpose, point of view, and tone
- often understands figurative language
- understands most complex hypotheses, argumentation, and supported opinions
- can read a wide range of personal, professional, and academic texts
- understands common cultural references

SUPERIOR

- reads most texts fluently and rapidly, adjusting reading rate according to the text
- understands figurative language
- understands complex hypotheses, argumentation, and supported opinions
- understands most common and unusual cultural references

DISTINGUISHED

- reads virtually all texts fluently and rapidly, adjusting reading rate according to the text
- understands common and unusual cultural references
- reads at a level essentially indistinguishable from that of an educated native speaker

SECOND LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY DESCRIPTORS

WRITING

NOVICE-LOW

- has little or no practical writing skills in English
- is sometimes able to write isolated words and/or common phrases

NOVICE-MID

- has minimal practical writing skill in English
- demonstrates limited awareness of sound/letter correspondence and mechanics
- can write some familiar numbers, letters, and words
- can fill in a simple form with basic biographical information

NOVICE-HIGH

- has some practical writing skill in English
- has limited independent expression
- demonstrates some awareness of sound/letter correspondence and mechanics
- can produce sentences and short phrases which have been previously learned
- uses simple vocabulary and sentence structure, often characterized by errors

INTERMEDIATE-LOW

- can write on some concrete and familiar topics
- can write original short texts using familiar vocabulary and structures
- often exhibits a lack of control over grammar, vocabulary, punctuation, and spelling
- demonstrates some evidence of organizational ability

INTERMEDIATE-MID

- can write on a variety of concrete and familiar topics
- is able to organize and provide some support
- demonstrates limited control of sentence structure and punctuation to indicate sentence boundaries
- often uses inappropriate vocabulary or word forms

INTERMEDIATE-HIGH

- can write about topics relating to personal interests and special fields of competence
- shows some ability to write organized and developed text
- uses some cohesive devices appropriately
- displays some control of sentence structure and punctuation to indicate sentence boundaries, but often makes errors
- sometimes uses inappropriate vocabulary and word forms

ADVANCED

- can write effectively about a variety of topics, both concrete and abstract
- displays clear organization and development
- displays an awareness of audience and purpose
- uses cohesive devices effectively

- demonstrates an ability to integrate source material
- controls most kinds of sentence structure
- makes some errors in grammar, vocabulary, and punctuation, but they rarely interfere with communication

ADVANCED-HIGH

- can write about a variety of topics, both concrete and abstract, with precision and detail
- displays rhetorically effective organization and development
- demonstrates an ability to tailor writing to purpose and audience
- uses a range of cohesive devices effectively
- demonstrates some ability to integrate source material
- uses a variety of sentence structures for stylistic purposes
- makes some errors in grammar, vocabulary, and punctuation, but they do not interfere with effective communication

SUPERIOR

- writes effectively for formal and informal occasions, including writing on practical, social, academic, and professional topics
- displays strong organization and presents hypotheses, arguments, and points of view effectively
- consistently tailors writing to purpose and audience
- displays control of the conventions of a variety of writing types
- employs a variety of stylistic devices
- can incorporate a variety of source material effectively, using appropriate academic and linguistic conventions
- makes only minor or occasional errors, but they do not interfere with communication

DISTINGUISHED

- writes effectively on virtually any topic
- employs stylistic variation, sophisticated vocabulary, and a wide variety of sentence structure
- can tailor writing to match specific purpose and audience
- fully commands the nuances of the language
- has writing skills essentially indistinguishable from those of a sophisticated, educated native speaker

Source: ESL Intersegmental Project. (1996). *California Pathways: The second language student in public high schools, colleges, and universities*. Sacramento: Intersegmental Council of Academic Senates in conjunction with the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office. (Available from CATESOL, 1146 N. Central Avenue #195, Glendale, CA 91202).