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Leaps of Faith: Cuyamaca College's ESL “BOOST” Program

This article recounts some of the motivations, hurdles, and successes the Cuyamaca ESL Department in San Diego encountered while transforming its curriculum to an accelerated model. The college discovered that the new program, while challenging, increased the success and rate of passing among its language learners and improved the quality of their writing in ways even the implementers did not expect. The concerns, philosophy, and results behind Cuyamaca's move away from traditional ESL classes are examined.

AB705

Today, California English as a Second Language programs are in a rush to comply with the new law AB705. Everyone must somehow ensure that students take no more than six semesters to pass a transfer-level English class. For many programs that had six to eight levels of ESL, this is a sudden—and very tall—order. Fortunately for those of us at Cuyamaca College in San Diego, circumstances led us to make the necessary changes ahead of the new law, which provides us a chance to share the path we took and the adjustments we made that now position us to align with the new requirements.

Several years ago, those offering preparation courses at Cuyamaca College woke up to a disturbing recognition: We were part of a system that had developed to keep underrepresented students as long as possible from chances for success. It had never been planned and had not been our intended goal, of course. It evolved from the best intentions of dedicated educators wanting to serve students. When these students did not seem proficient enough in basic skills or language to do well in a course, another course was added as a prerequisite to “prepare” them. When even these courses did not produce as much progress as seemed appropriate, yet another course was added as preparation before that. And so on. And so on. What is more, the students required to take these classes by and large turned out to be from

poorer families, from immigrant families, from black families. And so on.

As it turned out, for every course students were forced to take below those real target classes they wanted, chances to succeed were eliminated each step of the way. We lost students with every added level, both inside those levels and between those levels. This is a statistical certainty according to the Multiple Measures Assessment Project, a research organization that has studied student success in California community colleges for several years now. So our “underprepared students” were not in fact, being helped. They were being weeded out. That was how our community college worked. That was how almost every community college worked.

The California Acceleration Project suggested a method to counter this institutionalized inequity, and we adopted it for the English as a Second Language sequence. We redesigned everything—the sequence, methodology, curriculum—and we called our Cuyamaca ESL model the “BOOST Program.”

What we had before looked like this (see Figure 1):

ESL 070 & 071	ESL 080 & 081	ESL 096	ESL 100	ESL 103	ESL 106	ESL 119	ENGL 120
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Figure 1. Traditional pathway (Grade C or higher to progress).

The core classes listed in Figure 1 were combination writing/grammar courses. This was a lock-step system that required successful completion of bottom levels before progressing to the next levels. The courses 070 and 080 were the bottom two levels, and they were bridged with the required companion courses 071 and 081 respectively—six-unit, lower-level listening/speaking classes just like the reading/writing classes they were linked to. Starting from the bottom, a student could take four years or more to complete his or her English acquisition program and complete a transfer-level English course. The transfer English course would come after successful completion of ESL 119.

The new program we proposed appears in Figure 2. The structure was basically three levels that could take a student from two years to three years to complete a transfer-level English class. Once we began to build this new curriculum, we met quite often with resistance that basically asked the same questions of us:

1. Doesn't language learning take time and don't you need to give the students all the time they need?
2. Don't you have to lower your standards to get students through more quickly?
3. Won't an accelerated sequence be too difficult for students to do or understand?

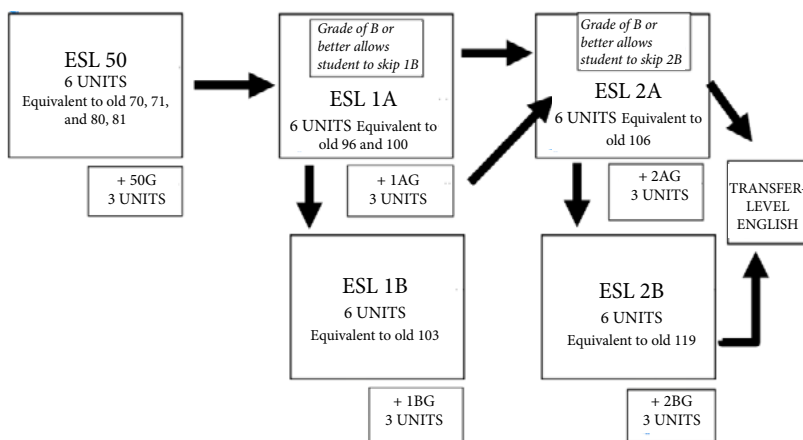


Figure 2. Cuyamaca BOOST ESL Program (three levels, five core classes, plus optional companion classes 1AG, 1BG, 2AG, 2BG grammar).

4. Won't crucial skills that students need for success be "skipped" in a faster sequence?
5. Have you forgotten the fact that not all ESL students seek transfer-level English?

We were aware of these "red flags" well ahead of making the leap that our faith in our students led us to. Even then, the "leap" was more actually a series of several smaller jumps in three years' time. We started with the two upper levels (which became 2A and 2B) in the first year and then tackled the middle three levels (now 1A and 1B vs. 96, 100, and 103) in the second year, and finally we converted the bottom two levels (70 grammar/writing, 71 listening/speaking and 80 grammar/writing, 81 listening/speaking—they all became ESL 50) this last year. These three years and the experience they provided us now help us to better answer these "red flags" more thoroughly. We now, more than ever, believe our leap was well worth it.

New Curriculum: Pacing Options

We asked: "Does every student need the same amount of time?" We referred, of course, to more than just which level a student is placed in. We questioned whether two students placed into the same level would need the same time to complete the sequence and go into transfer English. We wondered if there could be a program that allowed a choice of fast pace or slow pace to reach required proficiency.

The "Accordion Model" of Laney College in Oakland became our way to test this. In the model, each of our intermediate and advanced levels has

an A section and a B section. For Cuyamaca, our intermediate and advanced levels are ESL 1A, ESL 1B, ESL 2A, and ESL 2B. Those students who complete the A section with a passing grade can go on to the B section next term. Since every term uses different themes, texts, and has different writing assignments, no student who takes A, and then B, ever really repeats any lesson. The skills are just reinforced. However, a student who receives a grade above average in A is allowed to skip B and proceed directly to the next A level. In other words, a student enrolled in 1A who receives a superior grade can go into 2A next term.

This model allows for a longer sequence or shorter sequence depending on the effort and production of the student. Figures 3a and 3b show three years of data for our intermediate and advanced levels. In the traditional program, a two-levels-below course was ESL 106. In the accelerated program, these students would place in ESL 2A. Similarly, four-levels-below transfer placement in the traditional program would put students in ESL 100, but in the new program these students (and students who would have placed a level below that at five-below transfer) would take the ESL 1A class. All numbers are in percentage of the cohorts measured.

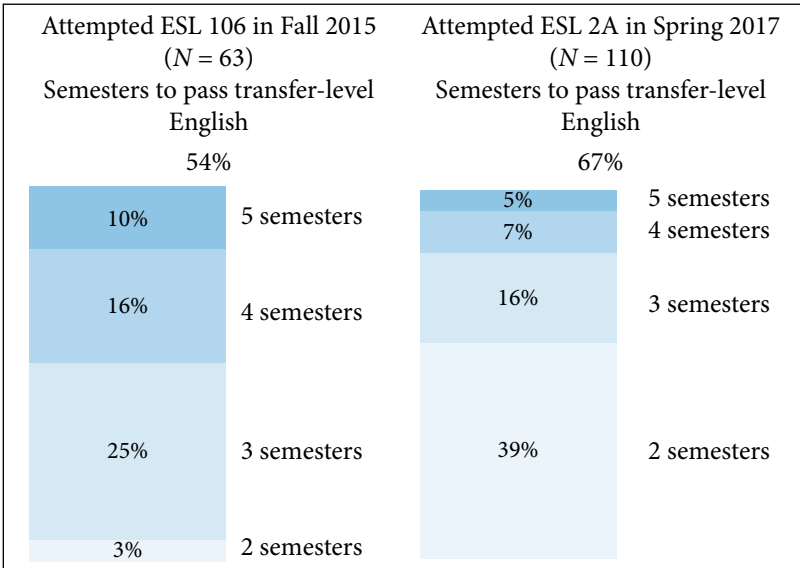


Figure 3a. Of the 63 students placed two levels below transfer English in the traditional model, only 34 managed to complete transfer English in five semesters. Three semesters later, 110 students who would have been placed two levels below in the traditional program were instead placed in the accelerated class one level below transfer English. Of these, 74 completed the transfer-level English course in five semesters. The success rate jumped 13%.

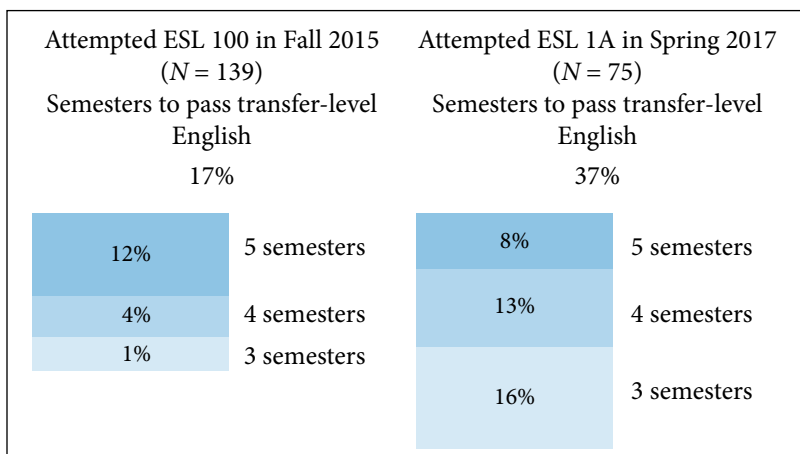


Figure 3b. Of the 139 students tracked in the old sequence beginning at four levels below transfer, 24 managed to complete transfer level in five semesters. Three semesters later in the new program, 75 students who would have been placed similarly to the first cohort in the old system were placed directly into the new two-level-below transfer level. This time, 27 of these students made it through transfer-level English in five semesters. The results showed that the accelerated model, despite having less than half the cohort of the students in the traditional model, produced more success than the traditional program. The success rate more than doubled.

New Curriculum: Higher Standards

As the throughput of successful students increased, we had to address the second objection. How much did we have to lower the standards in order to accelerate students?

In the rewriting of the curriculum outlines, each new accelerated level began with the entry skills required by the lowest level we were replacing, but the exit skills were those of the highest level in the sequence we were replacing. So, for example, our new 1A class had the entrance skills of the old ESL 96 (five levels below transfer) and the exit skills of ESL 103 (three levels below transfer.) The expected skill increase, therefore, jumped. In theory, this made all the new classes harder, not easier.

The prevailing instructional design and pedagogy before implementing our BOOST Program was quite traditional. We followed the basic outlines provided in textbooks of ESL. Teachers could adapt quite a bit and augment, but every class had to get through the same number of chapters and tests based on separate reading, writing, and grammar textbooks. Our lessons basically followed the sequence of textbook chapters. Sometimes we would make our own tests, and sometimes we would use publisher-provided tests or test generators.

All of this went out the window with the new program. The new curriculum focused on challenging, book-length texts (not textbooks) that classes deconstructed in shared exercises that practiced grammar, listening, speaking, and prewriting skills, and then they wrote about their impressions in individual papers. A few case-study comparisons from our intermediate levels two years ago serve as an example of how this new pedagogy introduced more rigor rather than less. At that time, because we were introducing the new acceleration into these levels, we actually had the old and the new programs running side by side. As a result, we were able at the end of the semester to compare two students who assessed with similar scores but were placed either in the old program (ESL 96) or the new accelerated course (ESL 1A.)

A student in the traditional course worked with an academic writing textbook and a grammar textbook deemed appropriate for the level. He completed exercises in each book and in the end was able to produce a final paragraph in the class judged superior to most of his fellow students. Here was his final paragraph for the beginning-intermediate ESL course:

Childhood Memories

When I was a child, I really liked to play soccer, swimming and playing chess. First of all, I liked to play soccer because it was fun and played with my friends and challenged them. Second, at swimming it was fun to play with water. I also enjoyed jumping in the pool. It is so awesome. Finally, I liked playing chess because it's a game that is very useful for memory, focus and develop in diligence. I liked to play and benefit from it. I really enjoyed those games because they are fun, interesting and good for health.

The same semester, a student assessed with a similar score took the new accelerated course, in which the required books were the novel *The Circuit* by Francisco Jiménez and the nonfiction sampler *Voices From the Field* by S. Beth Atkin. Discussions about the books took students into areas of vocabulary, grammar, and writing styles while they grappled with the issues faced by itinerant migrant families in the 1960s traveling the circuit of farms that paid undocumented workers to harvest their crops. After discussing the book and the student ideas about the issues, they wrote individual papers to express their beliefs. Here was this student's final paper:

Violated Childhood

“In the United State, more than 70% of the illegal working migrants children are farm workers, and the laws that protect them are minor laws”(Nation farm workers Web). In America, the agriculture is the only industry that legally employs children under age without giving

them their rights. When the children of undocumented farm workers help their parents in the fields, they face many huge problems because they are denied from their rights. We can see many of these children from farm workers in the *Voices from the Fields* by S.Beth Atkin. She talks about a lot of plights of illegal children farm workers, and all these children are the voices from the field to show the reader a real picture about them. The book is very important because it has many interviews and photographs about these children's suffering. Their rights are violated, and they struggle from many difficult issues such as, different language, constantly moving, missing their family, lack of care, and many other issues. Andrea Martinz is eighteen years old from Mexico and speaks only Zapotec, and she faces many barriers about these problems when she arrives undocumented to California with his mother. Also, Manuel Araiza who has ten years old, and he misses his home in Mexico when he comes with his whole big family to Castroville California illegally over the hills. As well as, Julisa Velared is twelve years old, and she always misses her mother because she leaves Julisa with her younger sister alone for a long time to work at the field. English language, always moving, and missing their family and relatives are the huge problems that the children of illegal farm workers struggle from.

First of all, different languages is a huge problem for the undocumented farm workers children because it is an obstacle for getting education, face discrimination, and feel lonely. To begin with, the language is the reason why illegal younger field workers cannot complete their education. Andrea Martinez is a young Indian girl, and she moves to California with her mother says, "But learning English was harder. I [Andrea] in the same level for two years" (40). Clearly, because Andrea cannot speak and understand English, she is not able to pass and go to the next level. Also, many children farm workers struggle from discrimination. Because Andrea Martinez is from Indian tribe in Mexico, she speaks only Zapoteca and cannot speak and understand nor English either Spanish at her class in the school. She tells, "They [Andrea's classmate] pulled my [Andrea's] hair and they called me a fool. They insulted me....they were born her and speak mostly English" (41). That is extremely segregation, for she is only from different country and cannot speak their language, so they bother her even time they see her. Next, most of immigrants' farm workers children feel lonely because their parents leave them to work for a long time. Andrea Martinez stays with her stepfather many days when her mother goes to work, and she tells, "She [Andrea] was not only isolated from her family and Zapotec language but also ostracized by schoolmates because she did not speak Spanish" (37). When Andrea's mom goes to work, she leaves Andrea with her stepfather who speaks only Spanish, so she cannot communi-

cate with her which makes her isolated from the world around her, and Andrea cannot contact with her classmates who speak only Spanish. [There was more, but this much of the work proves the point, I think.]

The two samples were typical for the two courses. Not for the first time would sample work from our new program show us that students rise to a challenge in large numbers. We definitely were not lowering standards. The bar had actually raised and it was the students themselves who set the new marks.

New Curriculum: Successful Acceleration

When we adopted the A/B-level system allowing students to repeat the same skill levels from, for example, 1A with a different set of books the following semester in 1B, we expected a great number to “repeat” in this fashion—after all, we were taking multiple semesters and shortening them to single terms. Surely the number of students able to accelerate their pace would be limited.

An unexpected result surprised us. The advanced-level BOOST worked very well, and most students ended up producing final work equivalent to two semesters’ worth of work in the traditional program in just one semester, while some students still took two semesters. The breakdown of how many students “jumped” into transfer-level English and how many had to take the additional semester at ESL 2B was 71% versus 25%, with 4% not returning. The intermediate BOOST-level students, however, actually produced final work of higher quality than in the three-semester sequence it replaced, and the vast majority of students produced the required skills in one or two semesters instead of three. The breakdown at the intermediate level of students able to pass 1A in one semester as opposed to two were 79% to 19%, with 2% not returning.

And when we brought BOOST to the beginning level in Fall 2018, the most remarkable result of all surprised us. We did not expect the lowest level of language learners to be able to complete the new ESL 50 in a single semester. After all, these are the students who “need the most time” to acquire language. Yet the methodology practiced in the advanced and intermediate classes yielded even more accelerated results at the bottom, as the chart in Figure 4 indicates.

The indication from these data (although it was only one semester) provides, at least, the pattern that answers the third objection. The curriculum we developed, based on the instructional cycle suggested by the California Acceleration Project (2019), produced more than double the success we had seen before. Not only that—in the traditional sequence a typical final product produced would be the ability to correct several sentences on a test for grammar. No composition. At the end of the BOOST beginning level, the

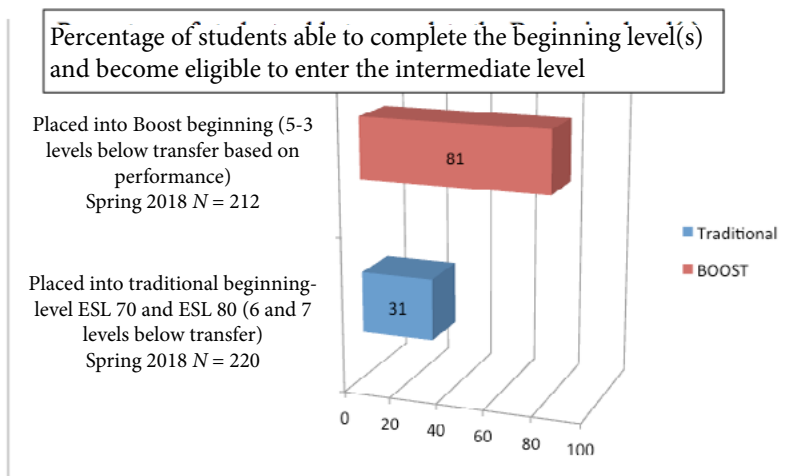


Figure 4. Data showing that BOOST methodology accelerated results in the lower levels.

students produced full paragraphs with topic sentence, ideas, quotes, and citations about social issues they studied in the class!

This is all, we believe, a result of that instructional cycle (see Figure 5) and pedagogy taught at the workshops conducted by the California Acceleration Project. We follow the cycle three times in our intermediate and advanced classes, and two times in the beginning level. It is easy to understand and adapt into anyone's curriculum. One just has to try as we did.

Anybody looking at the curriculum at the beginning would have said it was too hard. In fact, our students proved that not only was the instructional cycle not too difficult to follow, it made English easier for them to understand. (For more information, see [The California Acceleration Project's Instructional Cycle for Integrated Reading and Writing Classes.](#))

New Curriculum: Crucial Skills

Although they might pass transfer-level English, what is likely to happen to students in these "accelerated" courses after those all-important English credits? The fear is that what is not being taught will catch up to these students eventually, so it is better to drill them on the basics: grammar, spelling, vocabulary.

First, this is a classic deficit philosophy that assumes something we as language teachers should already know. "If you don't teach it, they won't learn it" is not true in the slightest, not with language acquisition. It was Noam Chomsky who suggested that all human beings are prewired for language. Everyone will acquire it in some form and pace. He spoke, of course, about L1 acquisition, and although the intervention of the teacher is still key

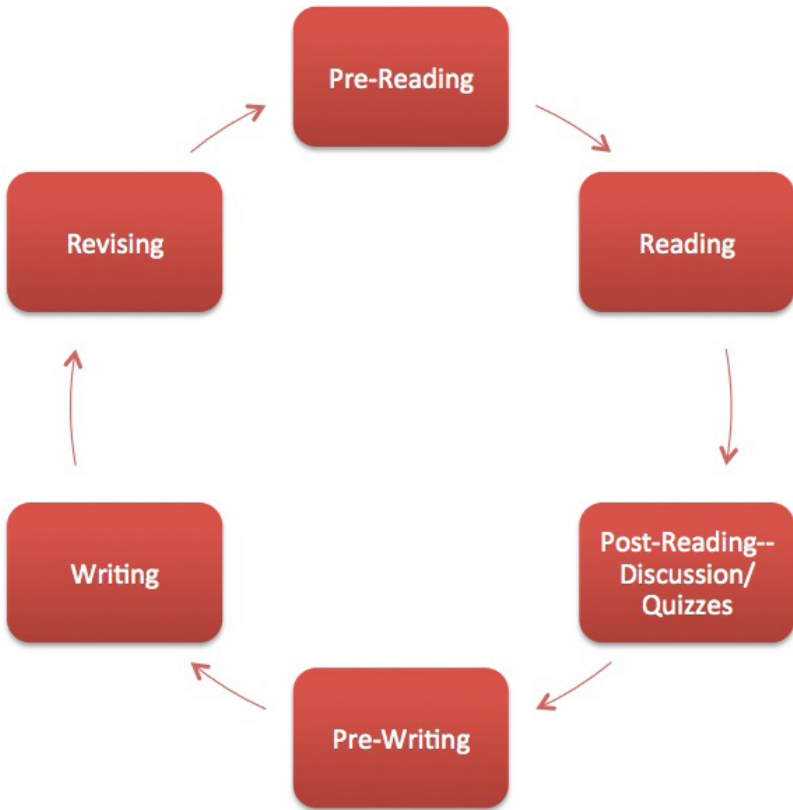


Figure 5. The California Acceleration Project’s instructional cycle we use at Cuyamaca. This chart depicts the instructional cycle of the reading and writing processes we use in our accelerated classes. It is based on the assumption that the reading and writing processes are integrated, and that students use both reading and writing to make and create meaning from written language. **Note.** Both the reading and writing processes are recursive, and the arrows do not always represent the process in which students engage. It can be much messier than the image implies, with students circling back to any stage during the process of completing a writing assignment.

for L2 once L1 is acquired, the implication of what Chomsky suggested is still at play here. There is more than just a teacher in the classroom at work here. Not everything a language learner acquires is on the blackboard. And what is more to the point, L2 acquisition continues well past the time the blackboard recedes into memory.

Second, designing a curriculum based on content and tasks, not basic

skills such as grammar and vocabulary, has been shown to garner positive results. Traditional writing classes in ESL and developmental English often contain decontextualized lessons on “the basics” or writing assignments designed to elicit certain grammar and vocabulary items. In other words, the microskills drive the content. However, research and classroom findings show that implementing task-based curricula can lead to higher student engagement and vocabulary/grammar development (Fearn & Farnan, 2005; Halici Page & Mede, 2018; Haussamen et al., 2003; Weaver, 1996). What seems to work best in writing classes is systematic minilessons that examine the form, meaning, and use of the grammar and vocabulary needed to achieve one’s writing goals for a specific, authentic task. In other words, research and instructors alike suggest that we should let the content of the task drive the grammar and vocabulary instruction.

The statistics coming out for us are proving that students are not, in fact, losing out on critical learning. They succeed better than ever, even beyond that initial transfer-level English class. Jose Cortes and Melissa Reeve (2019) from Solano College recently shared a study in which they followed a group of ESL graduates beyond their language acquisition courses to see how their skills held up in all-English classrooms at the college level. Not only did students succeed, but Cortes and Reeve demonstrated through student samples from their college courses that students’ language acquisition continued, even without further ESL classes. It is good to remember that language learning does not stop once they are out of ESL—students continue to improve their proficiency in English as they go on to academic classes. What our students need is a good boost into English. They will surprise many with just how much they can acquire, and with how they can succeed.

Even with younger students, the concept of “slow and steady wins the race” proves an underestimation of language learners. Our beginning-level curriculum was adapted and used in a dual-enrollment program with a local high school. At first, the high school teacher recruited to give our program a try was quite dubious.

To be honest, I was very skeptical at first when I was handed the curriculum for ESL50 and ESL50G. I thought to myself, I’m asking my students to jump into an Olympic size pool, when here we were in the kiddie-area trying to learn how to swim. Nonetheless, we put our floaters on, we held hands, and we all jumped in. I want to say that this jump has helped my students tremendously. They have responded to the program very well. Their confidence, their English skills, their motivation, their enthusiasm, their social interactions with other core subjects have risen to the challenge. All this is backed up not by what I see in them, and the outcome of the program, but by other teachers who my students have. Said teachers are noticing the shift in attitude of the non-English

students; such as not being shy, or seeming too far behind. Overall, this program does ask a lot from the students, but it's structured in a way that helps the teacher provide the necessary scaffolds to empower the students. (Rafael Miravete, ELD coordinator)

New Curriculum: Transfer English Is for Everybody

It is for everybody in the sense that it should be available to all of our students, no matter where they come from. If they get to the point where they could go on with a college career, and they decide not to—that is another matter. To let anybody, even the student, decide that a transfer path is not for him or her right out of the gate for any reason should not be a teacher's or administrator's job. The job is to provide a way to get the skill, to provide opportunity.

When the process is done right, teachers and students are empowered. For teachers, the sense of purpose and energy multiplies. Students experience a boost in confidence that is due to a curriculum that respects their intellect. They can see themselves as capable, and they can feel that at least one instructor sees them as capable. This is a game changer. At Cuyamaca, we have finally lost count during the past two years of how many students “not interested in transfer English” changed their minds when they discovered what they were capable of actually doing. Why should we make a path of less accomplishment when the transfer path, even if not followed all the way to transfer, still imparts the best opportunity for proficiency—whatever level of proficiency desired?

We drew a chart to contrast the traditional versus the “accelerated” practice. We wanted to see if any gaps were visible in the teaching when looked at with a side-by-side comparison of techniques. Figure 6 shows what it looked like.

It looked to us as if no one program tied loose ends more completely than another. We just used different knots. We would even go further and say that what we have fastened holds up much better than the alternative. In the end, we found that the answer to a better learning environment was to give the students control of it as much as possible. This is what the new curriculum forced us to do. We became truly student centered. We even re-structured our placement and student learning outcomes (SLO) assessments to be predominantly student centered. In our placement, student select their own levels based on sample writings from the various courses. For our SLOs, students answer a brief survey that asks them to rank their own learning outcomes. We found that students can judge themselves pretty well in these areas. And we believe them.

<i>Traditional</i>	<i>BOOST Pathway</i>
Front loading and lecture	Backward design/Lessons target what is needed for next course
Teacher leads (does most of the talking)	Students collaborate (they do most of the talking)
Drills and exercises for emphasis	Group activities
Grammar interrupts writing or reading	Grammar taught just in time, as needed during writing or reading
Textbooks mimic realia/Graded for level (ex. for advanced level: <i>Academic Writing</i> textbook and <i>Focus on Grammar</i> textbook)	Texts real—no simulation/complex and rich—challenging (ex. for advanced level: <i>Mindset</i> by Carol Dweck and <i>Forbes Greatest Business Stories of All Time</i> by Daniel Gross)
Lock-step system—Language limited to that judged to be level-appropriate	System not locked—Language given without limit, level repeated as needed

Figure 6. The traditional model contrasted with the accelerated practice.

Faith

We noticed, as each pressure point was applied by resisters, that a constant theme repeated. Traditional practitioners just did not trust students. Our program turned the entire sequence into a student-centered affair, and this made some people uncomfortable. The ultimate objection of resistance, not listed before, was to accuse our new successful students of mass, organized cheating. It happened at high levels, and it happened to the embarrassment of our whole school. We spent a year of tracking success to prove that students kept succeeding in subsequent classes, just as Solano College had shown.

Some colleagues still did not believe. It has taken not a single, but multiple, leaps of faith to get where we are. We not only believe in our students, we believe in everybody's students.

In 2018, the full-time English as a Second Language instructors at Cuyamaca College published a statement on the California Acceleration Project Facebook page. The last part of it follows:

Declaration of Faith for Students of English as a Second Language
By Cuyamaca College ESL

... insisting on long sequences and traditional methods for language instruction is a form of prejudice. Sorry. There it is. If believing “linguistic equity” means—a student cannot possibly succeed unless they sound and write like us—then we have fallen into the ethno-centered

trap. One might ask, how can I be prejudiced if I care so much for my students? The answer is by underestimating them and assuming they could not possibly succeed with that accent, that lack of grammar ... that lack of knowledge regarding semantics. Consider the story told by Malcom X about one of his best high school teachers. The teacher asked what Malcolm wanted to do with his life. The answer was “I want to become a lawyer.” The response was an insistence that the boy reconsider to something more realistic, because the odds of a black man being a successful lawyer were very slim. I put it to all of you that Malcolm’s teacher was not insensitive or unsympathetic, and he truly cared that his student make a wise choice. Yet, removed from that time and place, we can all see what that response really symbolized. In the future, our actions today will also be removed from this time and this place for a better look at us and our students.

Our students may not sound like us or write like us, but they have great intelligence and capacity. They can do so much more with the proper training in a much shorter time if only we will give them the opportunity.

Dr. Virginia Lyn Neylon-Craft
Manuel Mancillas-Gomez
Guillermo R. Colls
Cuyamaca College, 2018

One of my colleagues at another college told me after reading our statement, “I think you’ve gone too far.” I can only shake my head. In California, certainly, the journey has only begun. We have much further to go. The crucial message we are learning from our experience is this: We are not the gatekeepers of opportunity. We are the gatecrashers.

Author

Guillermo R. Colls received his master’s in Linguistics from San Diego State University (1997) and a Reading Teaching Certificate from UCSD Extension (2006.) He is chair of the ESL Department at Cuyamaca College in San Diego, where he and his team used the principles of the California Acceleration Project to transform the curriculum.

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