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ABSTRACT

As a result of the increased demand for English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) instruction and the concomitant growth of ESL programs, interest has increased in the issue of credit for courses designed to promote English language proficiency sufficient to engage in postsecondary education. Recent national and regional studies have found that a significant number of two- and four-year colleges offer ESL for credit, with figures ranging from 44% to 79%, and that there are various ways of awarding credit. Those who support awarding academic credit for ESL argue that the acquisition of a new language requires as much or more effort than is required of typical college-level courses. They point to the abstract-level reasoning skills needed to learn the vocabulary and semantics of a foreign language. Other administrators and faculty do not feel that ESL courses should carry credit, contending that these courses do not contain college-level course material, that the nonpunitive grading often used in such courses does not warrant credit to a degree, that granting credit for ESL courses would require the hiring of new faculty and the establishment of new departments, and that ESL courses are not equivalent to foreign language courses. States and individual colleges have implemented a variety of policies that represent compromises on the credit issue. The California community colleges, for example, do not offer credit for "survival skills" or "prevocational" ESL courses, and award general education, elective, or major requirement credit for ESL courses based on students' majors. The issue of credit is related to the way in which colleges view their foreign student populations--as academic problems or as underprepared students with distinct academic promise. A 26-item bibliography is included. (MAB)

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Background

A review of the literature reveals that over the past few decades community colleges and four-year institutions, particularly those in metropolitan/suburban areas, have begun to realize a new postsecondary need. That need is to provide higher educational opportunities to nonnative, nonEnglish-speaking students. But whether the English-as-as-second-language courses provided these students should be awarded college-level credit remains an issue deserving investigation.

Many English-as-a-second-language (ESL) students have been placed in developmental/remedial programs (Blakely, 1989; Bolton, 1987; Greis, 1983). As a result, most metropolitan colleges are experiencing a need to offer more of these courses. However, as college administrators, faculty, and other students gain experience working with the ESL population, they are questioning whether the ESL students and the native English-speaking underprepared students should be offered courses equivalent in content as well as credit. As a result of this new conciousness, ESL faculty and courses are emerging as separate and distinct departments within many colleges. This trend has enlivened interest in the issue of credit for courses designed to promote English language proficiency sufficient to engage in postsecondary education.

This paper reveals the results of recently published surveys and other studies relevant to granting credit for ESL courses, and it discusses the pros and cons of granting credit for such courses. In addition, examples of resolutions colleges have reached regarding the issue of credit for ESL courses on their campuses are given.

Growth of ESL Classes

According to Farland and Cepeda (1988), the teaching of English to speakers of other languages initially began as a means to help nonnative people achieve citizenship or to refresh their prior knowledge of English. High schools, private institutions, and community colleges sought to fulfill this need by offering English and reading courses to nonEnglish-speaking people. In 1945, ESL programs began to emerge; however, they appeared "sporadically and independent of one another" (Farland & Cepeda, 1988, p. 5), and not until the late 1960s did ESL professionals enter the classroom and begin to transform the ESL curriculum.

The main reason why colleges have increased ESL offerings that the demand has steadily increased (Belcher, 1988; Blakey, 1989; Evangelauf, 1989; Farland & Cepeda, 1988; Greis, 1983; McCargar, 1982; Payne, 1977; Petersen & Cepeda, 1985). Bauer (1984) reports that English language programs for international students have grown dramatically since 1964. In 1964, only 57 locations of all levels offered ESL programs. But by 1982, 510 colleges and universities offered ESL programs.

Survey Results

Several surveys have been conducted to reflect the trend to give or not to give credit for ESL courses. One of the most revealing studies was conducted by the Board of Governors of California Community Colleges whose 1985 survey yielded responses from 98 colleges. Nine of these colleges do not offer ESL courses. "Of the remaining 89 colleges, 57 offer only credit ESL, seven offer only noncredit ESL, and 25 offer both credit and noncredit ESL" (Petersen & Cepeda, 1985, p. 19).

Van Meter and Venkatesh (1988) conducted another regional survey of all community and some four-year colleges near the metropolitan Washington, DC area. Seventeen colleges out of twenty-nine responded. Twelve of the respondents offer ESL courses, and seven of these colleges award credit for the ESL courses. Burgamy and Hafernik (1986) conducted a national survey revealing that 57 four-year institutions grant ESL course credit and that only 17% of the responding colleges grant fewer than six credits for ESL. In accord with these studies, Fox and Byrd's (1988) survey of postsecondary institutions indicated that 79% of responding colleges grant either full or part credit for ESL courses. They also found that colleges most commonly grant 6-12 ESL credits toward a degree.

A nationwide survey of four-year colleges was conducted by Naguib Greis at Portland State University (1983). 128 institutions from 33 states responding. Fifty-six of the responses (44%) indicated that their institutions did award credit. Greis asked for recommended changes, responses to this item revealing interesting sentiments regarding credit. Thirty-six respondents stated that ESL courses should not be allowed credit; however, 67 respondents recommended credit for ESL courses. Interestingly, 43 respondents compared to 34 believed credit should be given at all levels of ESL, not just at the advanced level.

Of further interest is the way credit is awarded at the various schools. In the Petersen and Cepeda study (1985), credit was awarded under five different categories. Out of 89 colleges: (a) 22% awarded general education credit, (b) 57% awarded

elective credit, (c) 4% awarded major credit, (d) 9% awarded freshman English credit, and (e) 8% awarded other credit.

Other surveys reveal similar diversity in the way credit is awarded. Some examples include Payne (1977), who states that at Northwestern A&M some international students take a "ten hour block of compensatory classes" (p. 65) which all count toward an associate arts degree. Other examples include Towson University (Van Meter & Venkatesh, 1988) and Fort Lewis College (Greis, 1983), which reported that students in their ESL courses earn credits that may be used as elective credits toward graduation. Still a further example is Georgetown University, which reported that students receive credit for some ESL English courses, and this credit can be used to meet the modern foreign language requirements. Interestingly, Georgetown University does not use the term ESL; instead EFL, English as a foreign language, is used (W. Norris, personal communication, November, 1989).

Pros of Granting Credit

Many educators agree that ESL coursework should be given credit, this inclination chiefly inspired by the notion of academic rigor. They believe that the acquisition of a new language requires as much or more effort than is required of typical college-level courses. Accordingly, Petersen and Cepeda (1985) state that various studies show the "acquisition of a foreign or second language, in a setting other than in the natural process . . . requires academic vigor and an educational process which is anything but remedial or compensatory in nature" (p. 9).

Upon examination of the skills required of international students to learn English, it is noted that ESL courses are not remedial; ESL course skills are truly indicative of the skills needed at the abstract level as are most college courses. Inasmuch as culture is embedded in English as well as other languages, culture controls not only the vocabulary of language but also the way the brain retrieves and processes information. Therefore international students learning English sufficiently to succeed in U.S. institutions must not only memorize words and their definitions, but the students must also understand the semantics inherent in the language (Robinson, 1985; Spack, 1988; Taschow, 1976).

Other researchers reveal still further intricacies required in learning a foreign language. Cattey (1980) found that some other languages are not comprised of abstract symbols for words as in the English language, but rather some other languages use sound symbols which evoke mental pictures and emotions. In addition, Fenton (1977), Wauters, Merrill, and Black (1984), and Cattey (1980) reveal that languages in the Eastern Hemisphere are more attuned to the right brain; whereas, the English language is more responsive to the left brain. Students who have learned Eastern Hemisphere languages and are now learning English must develop totally new learning styles for learning the English language. Finally, after extensive investigation, deliberation, and debate, TESOL (1986) made a resolution to grant credit for ESL courses. This resolution was based on a study of ESL courses which revealed that the skills needed in ESL courses are as demanding as skills needed to learn any foreign language. The studies also reveal that these skills are not the same as those needed to remediate first language skills.

Cons of Credit

Other college administrators and faculty members do not believe ESL courses should be given credit. The main objection to offering credit for ESL courses is that ESL courses do not contain "college-level material" and, therefore, should not receive college credit. Many states, like Maryland, have not, to date, differentiated between ESL courses and remedial courses. In Maryland, academic credit that counts toward a degree cannot include remedial basic skills; therefore, if ESL courses teach basic skills, they are considered remedial and do not receive college credit (J. Hunter, personal communication, November, 1989).

Other educators assert that since many ESL courses are not awarded letter grades they should not be granted college credit. Perhaps because a nonpunitive, credit/no credit grade does not affect a student's grade point average, it is felt that it should not enjoy college-level equivalency (Brown,Casey, McClellan, & Stark, 1982).

Greis's survey (1983) reveals other objections. Some educators believe that if students receive credit for ESL courses they would not have to take as many courses in their major. The students would be able to receive a college degree by virtue of their having enough college credits to graduate; however, they would not have completed the required number of courses to have completed a major. Greis indicates another objection: that granting credit for ESL courses would require administrative changes. On many campuses, ESL courses are taught by adjunct faculty, and the courses are considered part of developmental education, which is not considered a legitimate college-level department. If ESL courses were to be granted credit, full-time faculty would have to be hired, and ESL would have to be incorporated with another established college-level department or become a legitimate department within itself. Finally, there are also arguments against granting foreign language credit for ESL courses. According to respondents in Greis's study (1983), ESL courses are designed to teach students necessary skills to succeed in school; foreign language courses are not. Fifty-six respondents believe there is no parallel between ESL and foreign languages; however, 52 respondents believe there is a parallel, this nearly equal division of opinions indicating a decided lack of concurrence.

Some colleges have sought to reach an accord among their faculties in establishing or not establishing credit for ESL courses. Following are some examples of existing programs that attempt to effect resolution or at least accommodation for ESL courses, which do not fit conveniently into established academic structures.

The Board of Governors of California Community Colleges has arrived at a compromise on the issue of credit. Observing that ESL students are diverse in their own native language skills and are in various stages of skill and acculturation, they feel that ESL courses should be offered on an instructional continuum to meet those varying needs. The Board recommends that courses at the lower level of the continuum which teach survival skills or prevocational skills should not receive credit. However, for the higher level courses, the Board recommends that there be agreement among the colleges concerning articulation and course equivalencies: "Whether an ESL course is granted general education credit, elective credit or major requirement credit should be determined on whether the student is enrolled in an academic, vocational or undeclared field"

(Petersen & Cepeda, 1985, p. 14).

An example of a four-year institution's attempt to reconcile the credit issue is Georgetown University in Washington, DC. New student orientations involve mandatory testing for nonnative English students whose SAT verbal scores are below 500 and/or whose Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) scores are below 645 (W. Norris, personal communication, November, 1989). The University then offers several levels of EFL (English as a foreign language) courses. Five courses at the lower level do not receive credit. An undergraduate requirement is that all students take a foreign language. Therefore, EFL students may use the advanced EFL courses as credit to meet their foreign language requirement. The even higher level EFL course credits may be used to fulfill the requirements in English.

In 1981, Utah State University, another four-year institution, after having granted credit for some ESL courses, decided to designate all 20 ESL courses (referred to as "Intensive English Language Institute" courses) as elective/credit-bearing courses. The courses are numbered at the 100 and 200 level so as to indicate that these courses are not designated remedial. At present, ESL students are allowed 25 elective credits that may be applied toward the degree (Carkin, 1987).

In 1985, the University of Evansville decided to replace two noncredit ESL courses with seven credit ESL courses. The students are placed in these courses according to their performance on the Michigan Test of English Language Proficiency. A student may apply up to nine hours of these courses toward graduation (Longmire, 1986).

An international perspective on the ESL credit issue can be observed at Salem-Teikyo University in West Virginia. Jointly owned by Japanese and American institutions, Salem-Teikyo has decided, according to Dr. Anita Ward (personal communication, July 3, 1990), to design an entirely new curriculum for the incoming Japanese students. These students are still required to complete 128 credits to graduate; however, the first 60 hours are considered ESL courses. These credit-bearing ESL courses are designed around content areas such as history or literature instead of skills. Thus, the issue of awarding credit for skills courses is avoided, although Dr. Ward is seriously considering recommending that first-semester courses be skill oriented.

In contrast, the University of Washington, a four-year institution, has decided not to award credit for ESL courses; instead, a "modified transitional model" has been adopted (Hargett & Olswang, 1984). Students who score between 500 and 579 on the TOEFL are admitted to the school; however, they are further diagnosed and mandatorily placed in ESL classes. The ESL courses are considered remedial and are given no "credit toward graduation; they do, however, count toward fulltime enrollment and thus satisfy F-1 visa requirements" (Hargett & Olswang, 1984, p. 15).

Many institutions, like George Washington University, do not consider the ESL courses as credit bearing except for the highest level course which is equivalent to freshman English composition. According to Clare Iacovelli at Georgetown University (personal communication, June, 1990), if an equivalent credit course could be found, the ESL courses could receive credit.

The Credit-Awarding Trend

As this research review rather clearly reveals, the credit/no credit issue persists on postsecondary campuses. But as we read about the pronouncements of ESL practitioners as well as the instances of innovative ways institutions have adapted ESL programs into the mainstream of the accepted collegiate curriculum, there appears to be a trend that is prompted by both practical and ethical considerations—to view international students as promises rather than problems.

First of all, as the traditional college-age population in the U.S. declines, colleges and universities look more toward international students to maintain quotas (Blakely, 1987; McCarger, 1982). Therefore, the imposing size of the ESL population invites attention and inevitably brings the credit/no credit issue into focus. For instance, on a growing number of campuses enrollment in ESL courses is second only to that enjoyed by seats occupied in credit-bearing English composition classes (Petersen & Cepeda, 1985). Especially because the ESL population is to a considerable degree represented by international students who (a) are already skilled learners in their native languages, (b) have practiced higher order thinking and analytical reasoning skills demanded by postsecondary courses, and (c) are culturally motivated to engage in the collegiate experience (Rose, 1989), these students comprise an underprepared group that has distinct academic promise.

Next, as we champion the enriching pluralism of intercultural diversity in professional fields, we are starting to recognize that we must legitimize those courses that afford access to degrees and training opportunities that avail professional competence. As Blakely (1989) affirms, there is growing sentiment that we need to recognize international students as "the special students they are, a valuable resource whose diverse educational and cultural backgrounds can make an inestimable contribution to the intellectual life of any campus" (p. B2).

Finally, we are now, and in a more thoughtful way than in the 60s and 70s, testing our definitions of what constitutes college-level course work. Especially, we are questioning the criteria we can use to measure the degree of rigor or the amount of effort a course would involve before it enjoys academic integrity. As Hargett and Olswang (1984) point out, "There is no objective criterion that can be pointed to as the body of language knowledge or skills that is truly indicative of the ability to use English at the college level" (p. 8). Given that there is sparse evidence to support our standards for academic respectability, we need to arrive at a workable definition that appropriately applies to our changing student population.

Notably, it is in the individual and apparently isolated instances of institutional accommodation rather than the learned journal rhetoric that we can see a slowly growing but nonetheless decided trend toward awarding credit—albeit at appointed levels and sometimes for parochial and political reasons. And this trend is consistent with our recent willingness to question unavailing Eurocentric models of education and in keeping with world-class instructional approaches and practices.

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