

ESL Curriculum Revision: Shifting Paradigms for Success

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ABSTRACT: The early success of the revised ESL literacy development curriculum for international undergraduates at a large Midwestern university suggests that a curriculum which integrates reading and writing activity around meaning-making tasks with texts and focuses on fluency before accuracy is preferable to a skill-based curriculum. Support for this approach is found both in first and second language literacy development research, yet it has not been widely adopted in ESL developmental writing programs. Although only in the second year of implementation, test scores, grades, and student and teacher interviews indicate the revised curriculum is well-serving the developmental academic literacy needs of these matriculated ESL international students. Students are demonstrating reading and writing with greater ease and speed. They understand and produce texts with greater rhetorical awareness and have developed strategies for talking about and working with a variety of academic text-types. The development of these literacy practices has been well-received by teachers and students, and has prepared the latter to participate successfully in the required first year composition course.

KEYWORDS: ESL; literacy; adult; fluency; reading; writing; curriculum; university

Introduction

Investigations of second language writing and writers over the last several decades have revealed an increasingly complex landscape for university-level writing programs to negotiate. The international students with whom we work come with considerable variation in their literacy competencies in both their first languages and in English. Many international students have had six to ten years of classroom instruction in English and even experiences in US high schools and community colleges before they enter US universities. Despite this backdrop of apparent proficiency, a high percentage of students who enter research universities still struggle to adequately comprehend and produce academic texts, not simply because they

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may lack control over lexico-grammatical features, but because they have limited experience with English academic texts and limited knowledge of literacy expectations in US universities.

The field of L2 writing is making strides in acknowledging and addressing this relatively new emphasis on academic literacy over mere language competence. For several decades, evidence has been growing of the efficacy of integrating reading and writing that emphasizes meaning-oriented engagement with texts through content-learning (Brinton, Snow and Wesche; Carson, "Reading for writing"; Fitzgerald and Shanahan; Grabe; Hudson; Kern) Thus, it is surprising how many ESL courses for matriculated second-language learners still focus on discrete and sometimes decontextualized reading and writing skills rather than on skill-integration and fluency development, which form the basis of literacy (Kern). In this paper, I explore how one large research university has attempted to address this problem as it created a curriculum to propel newly matriculated ESL-level students through an academic literacy experience that provides them with the tools they need to begin to read and write alongside American undergraduates. Our implementation of a curriculum that focuses on fluency development through meaning-oriented reading and writing activity around thematic texts has promoted the development of academically literate behaviors ahead of the lengthier process of linguistic accuracy development in a second language. Participating in the practices of a literate community provides not only the foundation for attending to language development but also the relevance and purpose for that development.

Within this dynamic context of second language writers and writing, I began work at Indiana University in 2007 as the Director of English Language Instruction. One component of my responsibilities has been the oversight of the program of support courses for international English-as-a-second language (ESL) undergraduate students. Since the home department (Second Language Studies) had recently undergone significant academic and structural reorganization, and the ESL curriculum had not undergone review for some time, when I arrived, my departmental assignment included a rigorous examination of the curriculum. Familiarization with the nature of the curriculum, the profile of the students for whom the courses were created, the test that placed them in the courses, and the subsequent courses for which our curriculum was meant to prepare them soon revealed that a revision of the curriculum was in order. This determination was significantly shaped by my own perspective on the nature of adult second language literacy development as I had come to understand it from my previous teaching, research, and

program direction. However, it was also shaped by the concerns of teachers in the program, other faculty, administrators, and advisors.

After a year of investigation, planning, and review, a substantial revision of the literacy component of the ESL curriculum was implemented. This new curriculum made significant shifts in several aspects: first, it moved from discrete-skills to integrated-skills; second, the emphasis was shifted away from a focus on grammatical and lexical accuracy toward a focus on fluency and rhetorical facility; and third, the original group of five disconnected courses was replaced by three sequential courses. A complete revamping of a long-standing program was obviously not without obstacles, but the combination of several elements—principles that were clearly grounded in current theory, a willing and able local community of practitioners, and enthusiastic administrative support—made implementation possible. This paper presents the story of why and how a new curriculum came into being and the impact it is having on a range of stakeholders. It begins with a description of the initial context, the key players, and the processes involved in the development of the revised curriculum. This is followed by a description of the new curriculum with evidence from qualitative and quantitative inquiry regarding its impact. The paper concludes with a discussion of these results and a reflection on the process of development and implementation.

The Initial Context

The origin and development of the ESL developmental program in place when the curriculum review began is shrouded in the mist of institutional history. Suffice it to say, what was previously called the “Semi-Intensive English Program” grew up alongside the Intensive English Program that was instituted at Indiana University in the 1970s. The Semi-Intensive Program had a rather tenuous status within the university. In fact, all entering international students not from English-speaking countries were required to take a test during their orientation and, if the results of that test showed evidence of very weak English skills, advisors in the University Division (the home department of entering undergraduate students before entering their major departments) were notified, and they took it upon themselves to advise the student to sign up for the number of courses that were suggested by the test. However, there was little oversight, and what existed was left mainly to the advisors, who had large numbers of students to tend. There were some administrative checks in the way that students were coded by the registrar, but on the whole, tracking was minimal.

During the aforementioned departmental restructuring, as the current program for ESL developmental courses was being conceived to replace the “Semi-Intensive Program,” many issues warranted review. None was more important than the gate-keeping English proficiency test that placed students in first-year composition or developmental ESL courses. However, it soon became apparent that the test itself could not be reconceived until we understood the nature of the classes into which the students were to be placed. As the new curriculum would be literacy- rather than skill-based, the assessment tool and the criteria for assessment would need radical reassessment. Clearly then, the development of curriculum and the placement test had to be developed in tandem.

At Indiana University, all international students for whom English is not the first language must take an English proficiency test before registering for classes. Until the fall of 2008, this proficiency test included multiple-choice components for assessing grammatical accuracy, and reading and listening comprehension, as well as a timed essay. The essays were evaluated with a modified trait-based rubric that weighted accuracy of language and structure over content and development. The combined test results determined whether students would be required to take anywhere from zero to eight ESL support courses, each of which ran for eight weeks. For literacy development, courses included Reading Skills, Expository Reading, Grammar Review, Sentence Writing, and Paragraph Writing. Students scoring the most poorly on the reading test were placed into Reading Skills followed by Expository Reading, and students scoring below a certain level on the grammar section of the test were required to take Grammar Review, while those scoring most poorly on the written essay were also required to take Grammar Review along with Sentence Writing and Paragraph Writing. Thus depending on the scores in the separate sections of the proficiency exam, a student could be required to take some or all of the reading or writing courses with little or no regard for sequencing, often with a more elementary course, such as Sentence Writing, being taken simultaneously with a more advanced course, such as Paragraph Writing.

Students were expected to complete these required courses in the first year, but if students did not pass or finish the courses, they received a grade of Incomplete and were allowed to retake them and sometimes long after their actual need for the course. Other undergraduate courses could be taken concurrently with these ESL courses, the only limitation on course enrollment being that if any of the reading or writing courses were required, a student would not be allowed to enroll in the university’s required first year

English composition course (usually W131ML, a variation of the course for multi-lingual writers) until the following semester. However, there was (and is) no gate-keeping mechanism to assure that students have taken or passed the required classes or that they can demonstrate sufficient competence to continue unassisted in their coursework.

Coincidentally, for several decades, the number of sections of the developmental ESL courses had been fixed. This meant that whatever the overall results of the English proficiency exam were for the entire cohort, only a set number of students (beginning with those who scored the lowest) were given a recommendation to take the ESL courses. As long as the number of international students did not substantially change from year to year, this approach to providing support courses was not without its merits. Having a guaranteed number of sections of these courses was administratively and financially expeditious, as the department could guarantee classes for the university and in return be guaranteed a certain number of assistantships for the graduate student-instructors who made up the bulk of the instructors, which greatly facilitated course scheduling. Furthermore, since the international students being placed into these classes had already been accepted into Indiana University, the focus on the students with the weakest English skills in a particular incoming class was an acceptable approach to dealing with the goal of helping the students to get by. As long as there were few complaints or protests from faculty or departments about students failing to live up to expectations, the system seemed to be working.

Two things made this halcyon state of affairs impossible to maintain. First, during the reorganization of the Second Language Studies department, new policies and standards were implemented to increase integration of the ESL program within the College of Arts and Sciences. This integration included making transparent to the administrators in the College the methods of testing, placement, instructor selection, curricular development, and other aspects which had never been of great interest to them in the past. Second, with the advent of a new president, there was a heightened emphasis on international recruiting, especially in areas such as China, that promised rich new fields of student prospects. At the same time, this heightened recruitment led to an influx of students whose English language and academic literacy backgrounds were ever more varied.

The literacy curriculum in place when I arrived could only be inferred from the titles, a handful of syllabi, and textbooks of the five courses related to reading and writing. There were no documents available to indicate the rationale or guidelines for course design or program integration of courses.

The course titles suggested a traditional instructional approach which favored intensive practice in specific sub-components of reading and writing, as well as practice in discrete grammatical topics. The grammar course was what it was—a brief review course in the major aspects of English grammar. For the other courses, there were no stated objectives or curricula to describe the overall goals or objectives. Each instructor was basically left to her own devices to construct a course that she felt fit the needs of the students. Of course, a stream of “institutional history” gave the courses some consistency, but whenever a strong new teacher persisted over several semesters, the course essentially became what she made it. There was virtually no guidance at that point from the top, primarily because the person charged with directing the program was completely on his own in running it, with little support from the department or the university, and was simply trying to keep his head above water as he managed all the testing, placement, instructor assignments, etc. by himself (no one was surprised when he had a heart attack not long before he retired). To explain the problems I encountered when I arrived in the department is in no way to take away from his long, dedicated direction of the program, but it was universally agreed that the program had to be completely recast to the new demands being made on it.

The syllabi extant from previous instructors reveal courses focused on multiple components of language learning, some well-grounded in current approaches for the development of English for Academic Purposes, but, again, unrelated to each other and evincing considerable variation in the scope and rigor of sections of the same course. One cause of variation was the high turnover rate in instructors since these 2-credit, 8-week courses were taught by Associate Instructor graduate students. Another cause of variation was that these courses could be taken simultaneously and ideally completed within the student’s first semester of study at Indiana University, thus eliminating the possibility of sequencing the courses as prerequisites for one another or closely linking their goals and objectives.

The syllabi for the courses Sentence Writing and Paragraph Writing *did* include drafting and revising of longer texts with some attention to the rhetorical modes, such as process, comparison, or argument. However, through semi-structured interviews with the small cohort of instructors who were teaching these courses when I arrived, it was evident that, as a group, they had struggled to manage the many demands of the courses. Each teacher first developed the ideas of what they thought needed to be taught, found or created materials consonant with their vision, and finally tried to have the students engage in multi-draft writing with sufficient peer and instructor

feedback. Some spoke of being “overwhelmed” with the task and others spoke of just following the syllabi of previous teachers even though they did not always represent the teachers’ own ideas of literacy development. Based on the prospect of an integrated curriculum, clearer course goals, and program cohesion, the teachers were open to revision.

Although I was responsible for the review of the curriculum, it goes without saying that it is a wasted effort if it occurs in isolation from those who will be affected by it. As I began to make inquiries into the nature of the curriculum in use, the test that placed students into it, and the literacy-focused course students would take after our courses, I was fortunate to meet three individuals who would join me as part of the unofficial team for the project. One member of the small cohort of ESL literacy instructors was responsible for the essay rater training for the English proficiency exam and for some time had coordinated the writing curriculum of the Intensive English Program for pre-matriculated students at Indiana University. With his interest and knowledge about second language writing and his concern for the coherence of the courses, he willingly became an active discussant in my year-long process of reviewing the literature and the local context, and in envisioning possible revisions of the curriculum.

The other two team members were, like me, new faculty at Indiana University. One is a member of my own department whose area of expertise is high-stakes language testing. He had been given the task of checking the validity and reliability of the English Proficiency Exam and initiating changes if necessary. The other is a faculty member in the English Department, whose area of expertise is Composition and Rhetoric, and who also had experience with second language writers. She had been tasked with coordinating the curriculum for all the sections of the first-year composition course designed for international students. The three of us began our work at Indiana University without any awareness of what the others were engaged in, but, as I began to investigate the ESL curriculum, the necessity for collaboration with these individuals became quickly apparent. This grouping was perhaps fortuitous in that at least one of us had a fairly long history with the program and was familiar with its workings and how it had developed, while the other three were, as mentioned, new to IU, and so they came with totally fresh ideas. Indeed, the faculty member from the English department shared with me two important features: first, she also had recently finished her dissertation and received her Ph.D. and was full of fresh stimulation from her own research, and, second, she was also charged with reconfiguring a program that dealt with non-native English speaking

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students, in her case the previously mentioned Multi-lingual W131 classes. Thus, we were in similarly challenging and demanding positions, and found the sharing of our ideas to be immensely fertilizing.

Although other faculty, administrators, and university advisors were occasionally consulted through the review and design process, it was these individuals I sought out most regularly to discuss ideas and swap drafts of curricular documents that shaped the initial formulation of the revised literacy curriculum. This was a period of high energy and enthusiasm with little consideration of complications that implementation would later reveal. The only constraints we labored under were the necessity to design a curriculum with no more than the number of ESL courses previously offered and to make it possible for students to complete these courses in no more than one academic year.

Insights from Second Language and Literacy Acquisition

Perhaps the greatest amount of time during the first few months of curricular investigation was a review of the literature on second language literacy development in order to provide guiding principles for both the review and potential reshaping of the curriculum. This process was greatly aided by the opportunity in my first semester to teach a course and pursue research on second language adult literacy development. Both activities considerably facilitated establishing the guiding principles for the revision of the curriculum.

Central to the revision of the curriculum was our team's recognition of the reciprocal processes of reading and writing. Several models of the inter-relatedness of reading and writing have been proposed in both first language and second language reading and writing research, as well as the relationship between first and second language literacy. Competing models of these inter-related processes emphasize different features and directionalities of influence between them (for a review of these models see Hudson). Generally, however, the models portray both first and second language readers and writers as active participants, using similar complex cognitive processes to construct meaning by drawing on similar knowledge bases (Fitzgerald and Shanahan). Second language learners, like first language learners, select, organize, and connect information with prior knowledge in a specific context using specific strategies to accomplish the goal of meaning-making in both reading and writing tasks. Although there is much about second language literacy yet to be investigated, researchers and teachers alike have indicated

that it is more productive to concentrate on the similarities between second language reading and writing than on the differences (Eisterhold; Grabe; Zamel) and thus at least avoid “the inefficiencies and arbitrary distinctions that persist when instruction in the two is separated” (Hudson 286).

This insight from the literature suggests a refocusing of attention on literacy development as a unified whole rather than on reading and writing as two separate components. Richard Kern’s definition of academic literacy captures this integration. He defines it as contextualized engagement with academic and discipline-based texts through interpretation and production that necessitates and motivates both learning and thinking (16). This definition does not preclude attention to the linguistic dimensions of literacy but rather gives greater attention to the sociocultural and cognitive/metacognitive dimensions. In other words, the interpretive, collaborative, culturally-sensitive, problem-solving nature of working with texts for both readers and writers is of at least as much, if not more, importance than language features and conventions. This is an especially relevant insight regarding second language readers and writers since communicating in another language “often involves shaping one’s expression differently, thinking differently, indeed sometimes seeing the world differently” (303). Although theory and research provide substantial justification for integrating reading and writing instruction for second language literacy development, this approach is not as well-established among ESL programs for international undergraduates as it is for domestic basic writers, an increasing number of whom are multilingual. Such may be a consequence of the long history in both ESL and EFL instruction of focusing on discrete language skills rather than literacy, and it may also reflect the history of investigations into second language writing, which tend to follow in time the investigations into first language writing. While it has become common practice in first year composition courses to take a literacy-based or genre-based approach to reading and writing texts, it is still not common in the courses for students who do not yet meet the language expectations of first year composition courses. It is commonly assumed that if students do not have sufficient vocabulary, comprehension, or writing skills, they need to find remedial support in courses focused on these individual weaknesses. This assumption does not consider the varied experiences academically-ready learners have had with a great variety of texts over a long period of time.

A second principle that emerged from a review of the literature is that fluency precedes accuracy in second language development. The concept of fluency is part of the construct of language proficiency accounting for the

ability to read and write with ease and with a high level of comprehension in reading (Stanovich) and comprehensibility in writing (McGowan-Gilhooly, “Fluency Before”). The development of reading and writing fluency in the first language is a long, incremental process that begins with oracy and continues over many years of schooling with countless implicit and explicit activities around texts. In the case of second language literacy development, the focus instead is often on explicit tasks that emphasize accuracy in comprehension and production of short decontextualized texts, which leads to disfluent reading and writing behaviors. Reading becomes the context for learning individual vocabulary words and writing becomes the context for producing correct grammatical sentences, neither promoting academic literacy.

Support for giving attention to fluency before accuracy in literacy development can be found in several areas. In first language contexts, studies of reading fluency practices such as reading repetition, reading under time pressure, and extensive reading suggest benefits for increasing reading comprehension (National Reading Panel). Less research has been done in second language literacy contexts, but there is also evidence of the positive effects of fluency-building activity on the reading comprehension of second language learners through practices such as extensive reading (Day and Bamford; Grabe). In terms of writing development, expressivist and process orientations, which include such practices as free-writing, journaling, pre-writing, and drafting, support building fluency before attending to accuracy. As Mayher, Lester, and Pradl point out in *Learning to Write/Writing to Learn*, developing writers can gain a “sense of comfort, confidence and control” when they are given opportunities to express their ideas quickly and continuously without fear of having their incomplete language systems critiqued for inaccuracies (4).

From research on the acquisition of form in a second language, we find evidence for the benefits of developing fluency through meaningful communicative activity before attending explicitly to the accuracy of specific linguistic features (Ellis; Doughty and Williams). In general, early or regular attention to errors has not been shown to change the route or rate of development and often reduces motivation to communicate in the target language. The point is not that language concerns should not be addressed at all in the early stages of second language literacy development, but rather that fluency development should be emphasized. Considering the accuracy-oriented English courses most of our students experienced before arriving in the US and at our university, it seemed particularly important to maximize

confidence and production by focusing on fluency first in order to motivate literate engagement with texts.

A third research-based insight important to our team is based on investigations of the nature of academic literacy tasks and research on how second language learners negotiate their education in the academy. Second language learners at the university level come with prior experiences, values and knowledge of literacy activity which may contrast significantly with those of US universities. Although it is impossible to define academic literacy as a unified or static phenomenon, a literacy curriculum for second language learners needs to consider academic conceptualizations, purposes, and expected achievements of interacting with texts. Linda Blanton's list of "literate behaviors" and Joan Carson's analysis of tasks typical of three disparate undergraduate majors have both been instructive in coming to understand the discourse community these ESL writers are attempting to join. According to Blanton ("Discourse, Artifacts"), literate behaviors that promote text interactions across the disciplines include interpreting texts in light of personal experience and vice versa, linking texts with each other, synthesizing texts to build new assertions, extrapolating from texts, and creating unique texts through these other behaviors (226). However, the tasks most common to undergraduate education are those that focus on learning—reading to learn, writing to learn, reading and writing to prepare for listening to learn. The demonstrations of learning are most often not in formal research papers or essay tests, but in multiple-choice and short or long answer tests (Carson, "A task analysis"). Arguments for attending to identifiable features of specific disciplinary genre exist, but the disparate goals, experiences, and language abilities of the international students in these courses suggest a more general approach that assists these learners in coming to understand, comment on, reformulate, and generally use reading and writing for learning

We realized that in order to effectively draw from these first and second language and literacy development theories, we needed a compatible teaching methodology. We found this in the long-established approach to English for Academic Purposes of content-based instruction. By engaging learners in sustained language activity around thematically-related texts for the purpose of content learning, this approach to English language development supports the integration of reading and writing, fluency and accuracy development, but in the context of learning a particular content, which is the norm for university courses. Developmental writing classes for native speakers often provide readings from a variety of disciplines and from

a variety of genre, but, in fact, the content of the courses is still writing. In contrast, content-based instruction for language learners embeds the writing and language instruction into thematic content. Fredricka Stoller contends that by reading in one thematic domain, concepts and language are recycled in such a way that learners build up conceptual and linguistic knowledge with which to read and write more fluently and to think more critically in particular subject areas, which goes beyond the known value of content as a means to keep learners motivated to learn.

Other already implemented curricular models proved to be highly instructive and motivating as well. Two models in particular took on this role during the revision process. The first, the Integrated Reading/Writing program at San Francisco State University, has demonstrated for almost ten years that, by combining reading and writing development as linked processes in literacy development, basic writers not only pass the revised course sequence at higher rates than those in a traditional remediation sequences but also have higher retention rates in and beyond those courses. In designing their curriculum, Sugie Goen-Salter and Helen Gillotte-Tropp made explicit the value of writing as a means to understand texts and the value of reading as a means to understand the choices writers make. Goen-Salter more recently reiterated the purpose of the integrated curriculum as an effort to “break down the barrier between text reception and text production, by inviting students to look at a text they read for clues to its production, and a text they produce for clues to how it might be perceived” (86).

Finally, although fluency has not been a common focus in university ESL or basic writing programs, particularly in regard to reading, the demonstrated success of the Fluency First curriculum at City College New York is a compelling example of how a focus on fluency can benefit pre-academic basic writers, many of whom are not native speakers of English. Adele MacGowan-Gilhooly (“Fluency First”) and her colleagues, in response to persistently low pass rates of ESL and basic writing students on the university’s required skills assessment tests in writing and reading, developed a new curriculum by “reversing the traditional grammar-focused approach to ESL and creating a sequence of three courses around the concepts of fluency, clarity, and correctness” (39), an ordering of instructional emphases first posed by Mayher, Lester, and Pradl. What started as an attempt to engage reluctant learners to read, write, and talk about several longer narrative and descriptive texts to build fluency in the lowest level of their basic writing three-course sequence soon extended to a revision of the other two courses around the goals of clarity and accuracy, respectively. Students read extensively, often around

themes, in each course, but across the sequence the reading focus changed from popular fiction to academic texts and the writing focus moved from personal response to academic argument (“Fluency Before”). The “overwhelming success” in raising the pass rates on the skills assessment test for these students is largely attributed to the “massive amounts of spontaneous language used in the classroom” around reading and writing texts and tasks (45). The focus on fluency first and the sequencing of the three developmental courses in the City College New York program were particularly instructive in redesigning our own curriculum.

Although the bulk of the students in the programs at San Francisco State and City College New York are not international students, the multilingual and diverse literacy experiences they bring are not entirely dissimilar to those of the second language international undergraduates entering Indiana University. One significant difference, however, is that many international students have had very limited oracy experiences in English, thus complicating the development of academic discursive practices. The success of these programs was demonstrated in the pre- and post-test correlations of the students in the different program types. Unfortunately, this method of analysis was not possible at Indiana University since, not only was there no required exit test at the end of the literacy development courses, there was little data on previous students’ placement exam results which could be correlated with retention or achievement. Based on the model of these two programs, though, an internal exit exam was designed in the curriculum, so that some measurement of impact could be assessed.

Insights from the Local Context

Simultaneous to the review of the literature, I gathered information to develop a profile of the current students, the placement exam they took, and the nature of the subsequent first-year composition course our courses were meant to minimally prepare them for. The student profile had begun to change in the middle of the last decade as a result of the university’s efforts to recruit a higher number of international students. Without a TOEFL score requirement for undergraduate admission, and the SAT being waived for students in countries where the test was unavailable or the test scores were not trusted, students with a much wider range of English proficiencies from some regions of the world applied and were accepted in considerably greater numbers than in the past. The increasing majority of students who are required to take English language support courses at IU comes from East

Asia. As a group, these students have in the past been characterized as highly motivated learners, with deep L1 content knowledge and literacy, and well developed L2 metalinguistic knowledge, but as less proficient in L2 oral skills and unfamiliar with target culture academic expectations. While these characteristics are better construed as tendencies on continua rather than as givens (Matsuda), the degree of variability along these continua is rapidly increasing when the range of second language experiences of recent international students is taken into consideration. Many more have been studying English since the beginning of their elementary education. Others have been adding test preparation and supplemental courses to their mandatory English language curriculum. Still others have been attending English-medium high schools and colleges in their home countries or in the US and Canada before arriving on university campuses. It is no wonder that this population displays more widely varying oral and literate proficiencies than in the past.

Directly or indirectly, when the old system of courses was still in place, I began to hear faculty and administrators around campus complain about the less than acceptable literacy and oracy abilities of incoming international students in their classes and programs. I was invited to discuss the placement exam and our courses with specific schools or interest groups (i.e. Campus Curriculum Committee, Office of the Vice Provost for Academic Affairs, University Division Advisors) during 2007 and 2008 and the voiced concern was similar: more students seem to need more help with their language skills than in the past. Ongoing conversations with the coordinator of the first year composition curriculum for multilingual writers confirmed these same concerns, and in-class surveys of all the sections of the first-year composition courses for multilingual writers in 2007 and 2008 revealed considerable diversity in learner types by location of prior education, types of proficiency measures taken, and academic literacy experiences. The general proficiency of the learners was also very diverse since the cohort included those who just barely passed the placement exam and those who passed with ease.

As I reviewed the Indiana English Proficiency Exam, it became evident that validity and reliability had to be strengthened necessitating substantial changes in the nature of the exam. Only two components of the exam could be described as performance-based, listening and writing, and yet, even in these two areas, a clear correlation between them and placement in developmental courses was not evident. The writing of a timed 45-minute essay on an argument prompt alone did not provide much information on literacy proficiency for academic purposes, and the listening score did not lead to a course on listening development. The necessary revision of the test fortunately took

place in tandem with the curricular changes that were starting to take shape. For the rest of the academic year, the high-stakes language tester and I met regularly to discuss the relationship between not only the components of the test and the curriculum but also the assessment criteria for new performance-based components in the test. Much of the discussion and drafting was focused on how to weight criteria and design a scoring mechanism that would combine the results of the multiple-choice reading comprehension component and the holistically-assessed writing component.

The Revised Curriculum

By Spring 2008, a curriculum was emerging to guide the curricular revision. After numerous drafts with feedback from the review team members and workshops with instructors on the principles and potential practices of the new curriculum, the curriculum was put into the hands of a relatively new cohort of graduate and adjunct instructors in Fall 2008 for implementation. Only one teacher remained who had taught in the previous curriculum although all of the teachers had had experience teaching in developmental writing programs for matriculated students. However, the teachers new to our program had worked previously in programs that took a discrete skills approach to writing development with heavy emphasis on grammatical accuracy. In some sense, this was a new approach for all of them.

Each of the three courses in the sequence emphasizes several aspects of literacy development. First, each level has one underlying literacy goal of fluency, clarity, or accuracy through integrated reading and writing tasks with a variety of texts. Second, the students engage in a range of writing tasks that reflect an increasing degree of cognitive difficulty, beginning with personal responses, followed by paraphrase and summary, and finally with argument and evaluation in persuasive, researched writing. Discussion and writing are used to both comprehend and respond to the texts. Finally, students are engaged in a multi-draft writing process at every level, with peer and teacher feedback. Each of these courses meets for 100 minutes, twice a week for an eight-week period of time.

In the first level course, Academic Literacy Development I, it is not uncommon to find ESL learners who have never read a complete English text of more than a few paragraphs and who have never written a single text of more than a few paragraphs in English. Since the primary goal of this course is to increase the students' fluency in reading and writing, they are encouraged to make connections between their own experiences and those expressed in

narrative and descriptive texts and to attempt to get a sense of the authors' voice and intentions. A daily ten-page reading requirement, along with free-writing to guided prompts in the first ten minutes of the twice-weekly class, presses the students to build reading and writing speed while maintaining a high level of comprehension and comprehensibility although not necessarily lexico-grammatical accuracy. The means by which these goals are addressed include reading and discussing two primarily narrative full-length English texts, which currently are *Tuesdays with Morrie* (Albom) and *A Walk Across America* (Jenkins). The universal themes of identity, relationships, and transitions motivate student participation in class. In addition to three in-class essays and shorter writing practice activities, they produce two longer papers, one narrative and the other descriptive, through a multi-draft process with peer and instructor feedback.

Since the majority of students needing ESL literacy courses initially test into the second level, Academic Literacy Development 2, the goals of helping students to gain confidence in their second language literacy and to increase awareness of American university literacy expectations remain the same as in Academic Literacy Development 1. However, now the learners focus more on clarity through careful paraphrasing and summarizing of both fiction and non-fiction texts, paying more attention to capturing the intentions and arguments of the authors rather than responding personally. Faithfully reporting the ideas of others is foundational to many types of academic writing, in particular research writing. In Academic Literacy Development 2, students read one novel and several genres of literary and expository texts, such as speeches, poetry, news reports, and journal articles, as well as multimedia resources such as podcasts and videos that follow-up on many of the themes and topics of the novel. The novel currently in use, *A Lesson Before Dying* (Gaines), provides links among the various genre of reading and writing in the course while building knowledge and understanding of American history and culture. Since for many students, this is the first course they are required to take in the literacy sequence, free-writing on assigned topics related to the readings, several in-class essays, and a multi-draft approach to writing projects are again the means by which to build up fluency and to generate ideas for writing.

Students who test into the highest level of the sequence, Academic Literacy Development 3, have generally demonstrated fluency and clarity in their reading and writing skills. However, the presentation of their ideas is limited in sophistication, particularly due to limited evidence and support and to the lack of accuracy in language and expected writing conventions.

In other words, if the linguistic errors were overlooked or mentally corrected while reading a student's writing, the reader would find a relatively coherent text with an articulated purpose and some organization but insufficient development and formal accuracy. In terms of reading, these learners can determine the general meaning and components of an argument but have less facility with implicit meanings and complex argumentation. Attending to accuracy includes using appropriate rhetorical moves, relevant and supportive evidence from multiple academic sources while avoiding plagiarism, more varied vocabulary, a wider range of grammatical structures, and following a particular style sheet.

The means by which these goals are addressed include daily reading assignments from a full-length non-fiction text on a theme, numerous non-fiction articles on related topics, and the student-selected articles needed for the researched paper related to the theme. A popular topic that has generated much public debate is particularly useful for helping students to develop skills in evaluating the credibility and usefulness of multiple sources since it is relatively easy to access reliable material at a range of reading levels through university databases and the internet. The current topic in use is climate change with the text *Our Choice* (Gore). By investigating the rhetorical moves the author uses to present a position and persuade the reader, the students prepare to use multiple sources to argue a position on a related topic. The use of these sources provides the context in which to address concerns of plagiarism and the use of appropriate citation. As in the other levels, fluency activities and in-class essays are included, but more attention is spent on achieving formal accuracy in the multi-draft writing process.

Evaluation of the New Curriculum

As noted, Indiana University does not require an exit exam for students taking these required ESL developmental courses. Thus, it has not been possible to make comparisons of student outcomes between the previous and current curricula. Nonetheless, four semesters of placement and end of session in-class essay data, the first year composition grades of students who have completed at least one literacy development course, end-of-session student interviews, and teacher interviews, provide evidence to suggest some real and perceived benefits of the new curriculum.

The student data included in this analysis was drawn from students who had an English proficiency writing test score from the beginning of a particular semester and a final in-class essay for that same semester. Ideally,

we would have been able to administer both the reading and the writing components of the placement exam and combine their scores as we had in the placement exam at the beginning of the semester, but this was precluded by time, expense, and the need to avoid over-exposure of the small number of reading test forms. The in-class essays were administered as part of the final exam for the course by the course instructor and then rated by trained and recalibrated raters from the same pool used for the placement exam. Every essay was read by two raters, and, if they did not agree on a score of one to five, a third (or fourth) rater also read the essay to assure that at least two raters gave the essay the same score.

Without comparative data from the old curriculum (before the Fall of 2008), strong claims for the efficacy of the new curriculum cannot be made. However, the data suggest that the curriculum does promote writing development. The aggregate results for each semester of the 2008-09 and the 2009-10 academic years are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Aggregate Comparison of Placement and In-class Holistic Writing Score for 2008-2010

| | August ^a IEPE | December In-Class Essay | January IEPE | May In-Class Essay |
|-----------|-----------------------------|----------------------------|-----------------|-----------------------|
| 2008-2009 | 2.35 ^b (N=94) | 3.71 (N=94) | 2.55 (N=29) | 3.14 (N=29) |
| 2009-2010 | 2.61 (N=164) | 3.48 (N=164) | 3.00 (N=15) | 4.33 (N=15) |

^aNote: Most international students enroll in the Fall semester.

^bNote: All results are statistically significant (Paired T-test: $t < 0.000$).

The grade distribution in the first year composition course between those who went immediately to this course and those who took one to three ESL literacy development courses was less similar in the first year of implementation than in the second, but in both cases, the students who were exempt from the ESL received more As and withdrew less frequently (see Table 2). However, the fact that the students who had to take ESL courses achieved a grade of B or better to the same degree as the exempt students is encouraging. Although the GPA mean for the first year composition course is higher for the ESL-exempt students (3.05 and 3.7) than the ESL-required students (2.65 and 3.15), the ESL-required students are holding their own.

Table 2. Grade Distribution of ESL-Exempt and ESL-Required Students in First Year Composition for Multilingual Writers

| | 2008-2009 | | 2009-2010 | |
|---|-----------------------|------------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------|
| | ESL-Exempt (N=107) | ESL-Required (N=79) | ESL-Exempt (N=132) | ESL-Required (N=138) |
| A | 46.73% | 18.99% | 44.70% | 34.06% |
| B | 33.64% | 51.90% | 43.18% | 42.75% |
| C | 7.48% | 16.46% | 9.09% | 11.59% |
| D | 1.87% | 1.27% | 2.27% | 2.17% |
| F | 2.80% | 1.27% | 0.76% | 1.45% |
| W | 7.48% | 10.13% | 5.30% | 7.97% |

The results of oral interviews with students and teachers over the same semesters also suggest the curriculum is promoting literacy development. Eighty-seven students enrolled in literacy courses in Fall 2009 volunteered to be interviewed regarding their experience. To a person, they all reported high levels of satisfaction with the course in which they were currently enrolled. They generally reported improvements in their writing both in speed and quality and a higher reading speed with comparable or better comprehension than before the courses began.

In each level, when asked which task was most beneficial for them, the students mentioned the free-writing activity:

Student #2 (Japanese) Academic Literacy Development 1

I think free writing is good cause we can think by ourselves, no stress. I never thought how to improve writing skill before, but now I respond freely to reading in writing.

Student #45 (Korean) Academic Literacy Development 2

It kind of really helped me a lot cause in a free-writing I wrote like 110 in 10 minutes, but later I could write like 310 in 10 minutes... Writing enough amount of English will help me in my courses, to write a lot of essays...Quality is definitely better...I have all my writings with me and I've read it and now it's totally different. I guess the reason for that is I read, we read in class, cause usually in high school I didn't read any English books, but in Level 2 there was

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book to read that we have to read, so after reading the novel, cause to read a lot you have more to say... I couldn't believe that I could write this well compared to the time when I came here.

Student #25 (Chinese) Academic Literacy Development 3

I really like the part of Level 3 is free-writing. That's a really good part. I think like, sometimes you don't know what to right down like even though when you start a paper, you know, like, I have no focus point, whatever, I don't have it organized so far, and even free-writing for a couple of minutes you can find out some really good points. That's a really good thing, and free-writing you can do it all the time, like every day. It's not a great deal and you are training your writing skill. You will like improve it is better for your thinking your thought. That's a great deal of fun. I like that one... I also use free-writing in my other classes now.

Writing faster was stated as the most notable indication of improvement, but when pushed to elaborate on why writing faster was of value, students indicated writing faster would help them considerably in other university tasks such as written exams and papers in other classes. However, additional benefits were mentioned, such as "thinking free" (Student #2), "better quality" (Student #45), and "find out some really good points" (Student #25).

Students in Academic Literacy Development 1 noted additional benefits in being able to read more quickly, to focus on the main point, to describe a person's emotions, and to think "by ourselves." The comments by Student #15 are representative of these benefits:

Student #15 (Chinese)

Before I learned Level 1 my teachers focus on grammar and after Level 1 the most of things I many by myself because I read a book and then write a journal, write what about what did I thought, what did I think and then I am in the book and I can feel how the author feel, yeah, and I think it is very useful because I am not only read the wonderful story but I learn the grammar and some vocabulary...I think I read the story carefully and slow because I want to feel what the author's feel and I think read more quickly now compared to before.

In Academic Literacy Development 2, most of the students mentioned the value of free-writing for writing and thinking faster, as in the following example:

Student #19 (Hindi)

If you consistently do your free-writes, you develop your confidence in writing your thoughts down and that will help you in all your writing...Register, content, format...actually the very basic writing techniques have improved papers in my other classes.

However, at this level, one-third of the students made specific reference to improvements in reading comprehension, as represented in the next example:

Student #29 (Mon, Burmese)

When we are reading, when I get a novel, I want to know everything. I can't be patient, so I don't want to eat or do anything, I just want to read the book, but in this class, well, what we do, after each 8 or 10 pages, we have to stop and then write a journal, one page of journal, so it's really difficult for me at first time because I don't want to stop. I want to know what happens ahead, but I had to do that. I had to push myself to stop and think about it really think about the details, and so it has really improved me from other courses because that's what other instructors want. I mean they want you to think about it after you read it. I think it changed me that.

Additionally, ten of the twenty-one respondents noted improvement in the organization of their writing, from “arrangement of the parts of the paper” (Student #9), to “make it more clear” (Student #29), to providing “more detailed content” (Student #5). Eight of the twenty-one respondents made specific reference to how the reading and writing skills and strategies developing in the academic literacy course were helping them in other courses they were taking.

In Academic Literacy Development 3, fifty-six of the sixty respondents noted improvement in how to write a research paper. These comments ranged from being “more logical” (Student #58) and having “better coherence of points” (Student #18), to “how to use example to support main idea” (Student #35), and “how to quote, cite, APA form” (Student #32). The following two examples illustrate some of these features:

Student #18 (Cantonese)

In ESL class [before] we write essay but not research. We write on own topic and our own idea....This class really help me to write more...I was trying to write long papers but even when page limit was two pages I feel difficult, now every time I write five pages. This class is really teaching me how to write a paper after reading something...and how to use that so somehow if you use someone else's work and use their idea to prove your idea it's a better paper. It's all about evidence and strong points.

Student #56 (Chinese)

Purpose is to go over the important writing process, revising, how to avoid plagiarism, research and college level academic writing... I never studied how to use APA style...also in-class essay guide was very helpful before that I didn't know how to write in-class essay. I made progress especially in writing, I was writing really slow before that but when I take this class I had to do free-writing and it helped improve by writing speed and build up the habit to revise my papers.

The mention of the writing process and revising in the previous example is not found in the comments of students in the first two levels of the literacy sequence, but about one-third of the respondents at this level make some reference to the fact that "revising can help the paper" (Student #30).

It is possible that only those students who were happy with their courses elected to be interviewed although all students were offered one percent extra credit for participating in the interviews. Nonetheless, it is evident that many students value what they are learning, see improvements in their abilities, and feel more confident about their literacy activities in English.

A second source of evaluation comes from self-reports of teachers in the ESL courses. These instructors report noticing differences between those students who have completed more than one level in the sequence and those entering at a higher level. The continuing students demonstrate greater confidence, better writing ability, and a clearer understanding of university tasks and performance expectations:

If I could generalize, the students who start in Level One and are now in Level Three have lower general English proficiency but better academic skills, and the students who start in Level Three have

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higher English, but their academic skills are not as good...We joke [that] we teach following instructions. And in Level One and Two, they kind of get that academic expectation down, and by the time they get to Level Three, they read the assignment sheets. The people who come in...they have some fluency, but not the skills to apply it. (ESL Teacher Interview, March 2009)

Teachers have also noted that students who have taken at least one or more literacy development course have developed a vocabulary for talking about reading and writing that indicates their increasing participation in a “literacy community.” In regard to students who had completed the first course and were entering the second, one teacher commented:

It was a really smooth transition...I felt like the academic, or the literacy community is really important. I’ve just noticed...we have better discussions in class. I think their writing has tended to be more responsive....They were all very comfortable and I think they were more enthusiastic and better able to respond to the book. We were able to get started writing right away without whole lot of explanation and just sort of the sense of this is what we do, we read and write together....They seemed to have very good control over both of those and the connection between the two, and like it was they had no problem telling me what they needed. (ESL Teacher Interview, May 2009).

Finally, interviews with instructors of the first year composition course for multilingual writers also indicate that with each successive ESL literacy course, teachers find it easier to work with these students because they are already familiar with the language and practices of interacting with texts, a multi-draft writing process, the literacy expectations of the university, and both the confidence and vocabulary for addressing their ongoing literacy development needs. This puts them at an advantage in comparison with the international and sometimes domestic long-term English learners for whom this is the first contact with university writing. As one teacher noted:

Ever since the [literacy] courses have been revised, I’ve definitely noticed my students who have taken them have been much better prepared for W131. It’s a huge leap because I remember thinking that the students who had taken the old version of those classes

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were still noticeably behind the others, as opposed to now, when many of them are actually better prepared than their classmates (First Year Composition, W131ML instructor, Email communication, September 2009).

Another indicated that there is much greater variation among the students who enter W131 directly without [ESL-literacy] coursework in terms of proficiency and experience with university literacy tasks whereas the students coming from [the third course] “fluently navigate through my class” (W131ML instructor interview, June 2010). Since there had been no articulation of the developmental ESL courses with the first year composition courses in the past, and the teaching cohorts of both programs are constantly in flux with graduate students coming and going, it is impossible to get an in-depth comparative analysis of the old and new curricula from the faculty.

Discussion

The implementation and investigation of this curriculum is ongoing, but the initial data from student tests and grades as well as the perceptions of students and teachers has been gratifying. By engaging in the literate behaviors of comprehending and responding to specific texts, the students’ reading and writing activities remain integrated. By emphasizing fluency and clarity before accuracy, the students’ work with texts increases in purpose and focus. However, there are ongoing challenges in implementing this curriculum.

For many students, this is a novel approach to language development and one that does not seem to match with their previous expectations for reducing what they often believe to be their biggest limitation, lexicogrammatical accuracy. The request for more grammar instruction is often heard when students first begin one of the courses. Convincing them of the efficacy of our approach is a challenge, but the fact that students report such satisfaction with the fluency activities and with learning how to use sources is encouraging.

The grade distributions of international students in the first year writing course for multilingual writers show that all of the second language international students still have to work hard at comprehending complex academic texts and producing linguistically clear and accurate papers in English. However, from the teachers’ perspectives, the students who have

taken the ESL literacy courses have developed strategies for talking and working with academic texts such that working with these students goes more smoothly.

The student and teacher interviews suggest a number of ways in which the courses might be strengthened. Quite a few students indicated that they thought more discussion about the reading texts, particularly in the final literacy course, would have promoted not only their comprehension but also their ability to formulate their points of view for writing. A number of students also thought that more individual conferencing with the teachers about their writing would be beneficial.

Creating continuity through the sequence and equity among the many sections of each level is also a challenge. The cohort of teachers, advanced graduate students and adjuncts, is not static, and they each bring their own literacy beliefs and established practices, which significantly influence their teaching decisions. The regular workshops and semi-structured interviews with the teaching cohort have revealed that, in spite of regularly referring to the guiding principles, rationale, and suggested objectives and means, the teachers struggle to sufficiently promote fluency in reading and writing before attending to concerns of accuracy. It has also been difficult to assure equity across the many sections of a particular level in terms of the number and difficulty of supplemental texts, the quantity of reading and writing, and in the expectations of student outcomes in spite of the curricular documents which provide guidelines for each of these features. Another challenge for the teachers is to choose from among the many possible literacy engaging activities they have used in the past. Some of these choices become easier once a teacher has taught at least two of the three courses in the sequence and is able to see development over time. Even when the teachers understand this trajectory intellectually, it remains a challenge to not over-engage and respond to every literacy event. Some teachers find it extremely difficult when first teaching in Academic Literacy Development I, for example, not to correct sentence level errors and only respond to meaning of a comprehensible but very poorly written free-writing or journal response from a student.

In order to create continuity for the program, the teachers meet regularly each semester to discuss the courses, and make occasional adjustments in both the desired outcomes of each course and the means to accomplish them. For example, after the first semester, it became clear that too much writing and too great a variety of texts for reading were expected in the second and third courses in the sequence. Through collaboration, the teachers have reshaped the writing assignments in the second course into a series of

shorter tasks that each support research writing, such as separate paraphrasing, summarizing, and citing sources projects, and have dropped the full research paper assignment, which then became the primary assignment of the final course. In addition, the final course has reduced the scope of the research paper assignment in order to allow for more attention to accuracy in revising and editing.

Logistically, implementation of the curriculum has not been flawless, particularly on the administrative side. University advisors were accustomed to only recommending these courses to the new students, and while there was a relatively high degree of compliance, there were students who figured out how to avoid them, and advisors were not responsible to follow up on students' actual registrations. Now the courses are required, and if a student has to take all three literacy development courses, it is impossible to complete the sequence in one semester. The long-held assumption that all required ESL literacy development courses must be completed before enrolling in first year composition is now being enforced. This now causes students to take the initial composition requirement in their second year. Particularly for transfer students, pushing this requirement into their second year at the university conflicts with the time/course requirements for applying to some majors, such as business, which is the stated desired major of up to 90% of the new international students. There have been some very frustrated advisors and some very distraught students through this initial implementation period, but these issues have mostly been resolved. Better and regular communication between our department and university advisors has mitigated some of the frustration. The support of academic units for consistent tracking of student compliance and the modification of university computing systems to provide advisors with immediate information regarding student compliance have also reduced confusion and frustration.

The administrative kinks are getting worked out, but it is the curricular impact on student learning which is of far greater importance. Although the evidence thus far gives us some reason to be optimistic, it is impossible to know the full extent of how these courses or what elements in them benefit the learners most. Nonetheless, the instructors have expressed confidence and enthusiasm for the principles and practices of the curriculum, and most students have demonstrated development in academic literacy and expressed enhanced confidence to continue successfully in their university studies.

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