



Ingredients of an Effective ESL Curriculum at an Urban Community College

by Maria Ammar

An effective ESL curriculum at an urban community college involves focusing on the ESL students and their needs. At most urban community colleges, the ESL students are also students who have commitments to work and family. They are often students who are trying not only to improve their English language skills but also to develop work skills or pursue further education. An effective ESL curriculum at an urban community college should integrate study skills into the courses, have theme-based modules that focus on areas related to students' current or future work and future study, and have classes that are linked with other courses that will help students cross the bridge from ESL classes into classes required for degree and certificate programs.

Often, teachers find that ESL students who first enter an ESL program at an urban community college do not possess the necessary study skills they need to successfully progress in their classes. Teachers may discover that some students lack organization, time management, and goal setting skills. I believe that teaching study skills directly through ESL curriculum is most effective in helping students to be better prepared to face the challenges and demands of college coursework. One recent study found teaching study skills having benefits for students, as the researchers indicate that teaching these skills "...appears to have done more than improve study skills, it also appears to have changed academic self-efficacy" (Wernersbach, Crowley, Bates, & Rosenthal 2014). Teachers can give their students instruction on study skills as part or most of a lesson and still work on English language skills. For example, I have taught my students the importance of keeping an organized academic notebook. At the beginning of the semester, I show them an example of an academic notebook. I then give them information on what they should include in their notebook: a personal calendar with important class dates, a syllabus, class assignments, etc. I then have students do a peer review of important sections of each other's notebooks throughout the semester to make sure that students are maintaining their notebook. Activities like this one help give the students the skills to be independent learners in all their classes.

Another idea for effective ESL curriculum is including theme areas about work and study in the lessons for the students. Such themes can include subject areas (business, psychology, etc.) that students will probably study depending on their major or certificate area. Many current ESL textbooks develop such themes in each unit while working on the language skills of reading, writing, speaking, and listening. I believe that programs can improve their relevance by developing curricula that include themes related to what their students will study in the future. For example, if there are many ESL students who plan to study the health sciences once they are in their degree or certificate program, they may benefit from themes that focus on, for instance, disease, diagnosis, or healthcare employment trends. Having theme areas in an ESL curriculum can help students connect what they are learning to their work and study and give them the motivation to continue their studies. For this reason, instructors should stay updated on what majors are most popular with international students. Business/Management, Engineering,

Math/Computer Science, and Social Sciences were found to be some the majors that most international students chose in 2013-2014, according to the Institute of International Education's Open Doors Report (Institute of International Education 2015).

Developing an ESL curriculum that is linked to non-ESL courses can help students to make the transition beyond the ESL program and into their degree and certificate programs. This will most likely involve the advanced level ESL courses, which can have direct or indirect connections to non-ESL courses such as math, science, computer skills, or business classes which are also offered to native speakers of English. I have seen ESL and native speakers of English students benefit from working with each other in such linked courses, especially when it is a first experience to work with the other group. ESL instructors who teach these linked courses can collaborate with the instructors in the content-based courses by working together or giving each other updates on how their students are doing in their classes. Having these linked ESL and non-ESL courses assists in providing a comfortable bridge for ESL students to their degree and certificate programs. It also helps students to see what lies ahead for them after the ESL program. An example of how effective learning communities are for a class of non-native speakers and natives speakers of English can be seen in an online learning community between Chuncheon National University of Education and University of Tennessee students: "both CNU and UT students reported enjoying the opportunity to communicate and share ideas about teaching, language, food, sports, and culture with each other in the informal ejournals and in Skype conversations" (Lloyd & Barreneche 2014).

In summary, an urban community college can do many things to have an effective ESL curriculum for its students. Developing curriculum with integrated study skills can better prepare students for college success and make them independent learners with strategies that will also help them in their future careers. Having theme-based curriculum that focuses on students' work and studies can help students see the relevance of having ESL classes and prepare them for classes they will encounter in the future. Including linked ESL and non-ESL courses for advanced level ESL students will introduce students to working with non-ESL teachers and speakers with the guidance of collaborating instructors of the linked courses. An ESL curriculum that integrates study skills, is relevantly theme-based, and has linked ESL and non-ESL courses can help give students the tools they need to have academic success in the college and professional success beyond college.

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