

Research Findings on Best Practices for Teaching ESL

Between December 2016 and March 2017, the AANAPISI ESL Learning/Teaching Team at Bunker Hill Community College reviewed existing research on best practices for teaching ESL with a particular focus on asset-based and accelerated approaches vs. deficit-based and remedial approaches. We have synthesized our findings and present here four key findings associated with four different aspects of ESL: Institutional Support, Student Perceptions, Teacher Attitudes and Approaches to Learning, and Curriculum.

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FOUR KEY FINDINGS:

1. **Institutional Support:** ELL students succeed when they are supported by all faculty and staff and there exists close collaboration between content faculty and ESL faculty.
2. **Student Perceptions:** ELL students succeed when they see their ESL teachers and the ESL Department as advocates, supporters and a resource.
3. **Teacher Attitudes and Approaches to Learning:** ELL students succeed when instruction is based on students communicating and negotiating meaning rather than on their demonstrating knowledge of the standard language.
4. **Curriculum:** ELL students succeed when the curriculum is driven by challenging academic content through linked content classes and other classes that support students in 1) making personal connections between academic content and their lived experiences and 2) entering into the academic life of the college.

MAKING CONNECTIONS TO SPECIFIC APPROACHES:

In the following tables we link the four key findings to research describing the characteristics of asset-based/ accelerated vs. deficit-based/ remedial approaches to teaching ESL.

Note: The terms ELL (English language learner) and ESL (English as a second language) are used in these findings because they are the standard terms used in higher education institutes in the US as well as BHCC.

Table 1: Institutional Support

Key Finding: ELL students succeed when they are supported by all faculty and staff and there exists close collaboration between content faculty and ESL faculty.

Asset-based / Accelerated	Deficit-based / Remedial	Sources
An asset/accelerated model defines the institutional identity for the ESL program.	A deficit/remediation instructional model defines the institutional identity for the ESL program.	6, 7, 9 10, 20, 21
The needs of the students are prioritized. ESL sequence is adjusted according to students' needs and goals.	The needs of the institution are prioritized.	7, 10, 20, 21, 24
Non-ESL faculty and staff have an understanding of L2 learning and see the ESL program as partners.	Non-ESL faculty lack understanding of L2 learning and blame the ESL program for not adequately preparing ESL students.	2, 7, 10, 20, 22
Non-ESL teachers assume responsibility for adjusting their classes to meet the needs of ELL students.	ESL classes shelter Non-ESL teachers from having to accommodate a more linguistically and culturally diverse student population.	2, 7, 10, 22
Mastery of academic content and of English is not separated - all teachers need to be able to support both. There is teacher-teacher collaboration across disciplines.	Students stay in ESL classes to focus on learning English in a "dry run" practice course before being allowed into content classes. ESL and content teachers do not collaborate.	2, 3, 10, 11, 16, 18, 20, 22
Professional Development is continuously offered to all ESL and non-ESL faculty and time is built into the schedule for teachers to collaborate outside of PD sessions.	PD is not seen as needed and the need for collaboration across departments is not supported.	2, 17
Decisions about allowing ELL students to move onto content classes consider individual experiences of students, including issues of racial and class inequalities in trying to promote diverse learning groups.	There is a "one-size fits all" treatment of ELL students. Decisions - based on test scores - about allowing students to move onto content classes often divide students along ethnic and class lines.	9, 10
ESL classes are credit-bearing.	ESL classes do not count for credit.	7
Classes are integrated between proficiency levels allowing ELL's to learn from more skilled peers and they take courses with native speakers as soon as they enter.	ELL students are segregated away from native speaking students and need to complete prerequisite ELL courses before joining them.	1, 2, 9, 10, 14
Students are defined as emerging bilinguals.	Students are defined as ESL, ELL or "limited English proficient".	4, 7, 9, 10

Table 2: Student Perceptions

Key finding: ELL students succeed when they see their ESL teachers and the ESL Department as advocates, supporters and a resource.

Asset-based / Accelerated	Deficit-based / Remedial	Sources
ELL students feel a sense of identity and belonging within the ESL department, institution, community, and academic discourse.	Students perceive being placed in the ESL program as branding them as poor learners and being exited from the ESL program as a confirmation of their intellectual abilities.	4, 10, 20, 24
ELL Students perceive the ESL program as their supporters and advocates.	ELL Students perceive the ESL program as discriminatory, punitive, stealing their money, and diverting time from their academic goals.	1, 2, 4, 10
An asset-based and accelerated modeled ESL program motivates students to persevere.	A deficit-based and remedial modeled ESL program discourages students and leads to student attrition.	5, 7, 20, 21
ELL students have a positive identity as multilingual speakers and feel that their multilingual skills are seen as an asset.	ELL students perceive ESL as a pejorative label defining them as inadequate, needing help and/or intellectually inferior.	4, 9, 14, 24
The ESL teacher is seen as student supporter and resource.	The ESL teacher is seen as authority and gatekeeper.	1, 4, 6, 7, 9, 10, 14

Table 3: Teacher Attitudes and Approaches to Learning

Key finding: ELL students succeed when instruction is based on students communicating and negotiating meaning rather than on their demonstrating knowledge of the standard language.

Asset-based / Accelerated	Deficit-based / Remedial	Sources
Learning English is connected to culture.	Learning English is divorced from culture.	3, 6, 7, 9, 14, 15, 18, 24
Students learn as part of a cohort.	Students learn in isolation.	1, 9, 16, 17, 20
Fluency is prioritized over accuracy.	Accuracy is prioritized over fluency.	2, 6, 7, 11, 14, 20, 24
There is the perception that students bring global experiences, varied perspectives and resilience.	There is the perception that students come underprepared academically or with interrupted schooling.	6, 7, 9, 10, 14
Teachers promote translanguaging where students are supported in building on all their multilingual language practices in communicating and negotiating meaning.	Teachers promote learning the standard language.	9,14, 24
Learning is seen as most effective in heterogeneous groups in terms of proficiency and background.	Learning is seen as most effective in same level placing according to standardized test scores, which fails to recognize varying levels, strengths and weaknesses.	2, 6, 9
Learning activities prioritize use of small groups and problem-based projects with students interacting and negotiating meaning primarily among themselves.	Learning activities prioritize use of whole class teacher-fronted tasks as students interact primarily with the teacher explaining the correct answer.	6, 9, 14, 18, 20

Table 4: Curriculum

Key finding: ELL students succeed when the curriculum is driven by challenging content through linked content classes and other classes that support students in 1) making personal connections between academic content and their lived experiences and 2) entering into the academic life of the college.

Asset-based / Accelerated	Deficit-based / Remedial	Sources
The learning of language and content is integrated through thematic classes and linked classes.	ESL classes are taught as stand-alone classes with unrelated content. Language must be mastered before students can move onto academic content.	3, 5, 6, 11, 16, 19, 20, 22
ESL coursework is integrated with holistic, iterative methodologies.	Skills and grammar are taught in isolation.	6, 9, 14, 20, 24
Curriculum supports students in navigating the academic curriculum and entering into academic contexts, discourses and communities.	Curriculum is testing-heavy with a focus on basic skills.	5, 7, 9, 16, 18, 19, 22, 24
ESL materials are authentic, content-rich, challenging and support critical thinking that supports students in engaging with big questions that matter beyond the classroom.	ESL materials are simplified and content serves as background to teach discrete skills as well as lexico-grammatical issues.	5, 6, 9, 12, 13, 16, 17, 20, 22
Scaffolding is used to support students in engaging with challenging academic content.	ELL students are seen as incapable of engaging with challenging academic content.	9, 11, 18
Students see themselves in the ESL curriculum and content, and they are supported in making connections between their personal experiences and the academic content.	Curriculum and content does not connect with students' lived experiences.	8, 12, 15, 17, 18, 20, 22, 24
Classes are collaboratively designed and taught.	Classes are taught and designed in isolation.	6, 11, 16, 20, 22
Assessment uses multiple measures of student academic performance.	Assessment involves heavy use of timed testing and single placement test scores.	2, 7
Curriculum is connected to students' community and students apply what they are learning in real-world settings.	Curriculum does not connect to students' communities and learning is confined to the classroom.	9, 12, 13, 16, 21, 23, 24

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