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UCLA Community College Review: Academic Literacy for English Language Learners

Mary Jane Curry

Immigration to the United States has sharply increased in the past 30 years; between 1970 and 2000, the percentage of foreign-born people doubled to 10% of the overall U.S. population (Szelenyi & Chang, 2002). Of this population, 43% are between 25 and 44 years old (Lollock, 2001), ages at which they are likely to seek post-secondary education. Second-generation immigrants, whose first language may not be English, make up another 10% of the population (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). Historically, the U.S. educational system has played an important role in helping immigrants acculturate to U.S. society. However, advances in transportation and communications allow many recent immigrants to maintain greater linguistic and cultural ties to their countries of origin, and thus they may not seek assimilation as it has historically been understood. Like their predecessors, however, contemporary immigrants often see education as a way to move past low-level jobs in service industries, health care, and agriculture. Furthermore, more adult immigrants are seeking higher education and training, as the changing global economy requires greater levels of education in general, and multiple literacies in particular (Hull, 1997). Immigrants often turn to community colleges because of their open-door policies, low cost, proximity, and range of programs.

For immigrants who are English Language Learners (ELLs), however, entering and succeeding in U.S. institutions of higher education involve more than simply studying a new language. Students must also learn the specialized practices of academic reading, writing, and speaking that characterize college-level communication. These academic literacy practices represent particular views of the world, uses of language, and ways of constructing knowledge within academic disciplines. Although

they are dynamic and evolving, these practices tend to manifest the dominant cultures of those inside academia, which many ELLs may not share (Lillis, 2001). Learning academic literacy involves engaging in a range of academic social practices; this effort entails much more than learning to speak or write in a new language. Rather, gaining academic literacy involves negotiating various academic discourses in multiple circumstances.

Academic literacy plays a pivotal role in the experiences and retention of ELLs in community colleges (Benesch, 2001). Without it, students may have difficulty passing gate-keeping examinations or courses that require large amounts of reading and writing, and thus they may be at greater risk of dropping out. For many students, academic literacy is a hidden barrier that stymies their educational efforts. Ultimately, students without sufficient academic literacy may lack the ability “to make their voices heard as they move through the academy and into a complex world” (Weiner, 1998, p. 102).

To examine the complex issues of language, writing, and identity involved in preparing ELL students for college-level academic work, this review will draw on research in community college education, the teaching of English to speakers of other languages (TESOL), basic writing, and the author’s qualitative research on students’ experiences with academic literacy in a basic writing course at a Midwestern community college. A qualitative study such as this provides a thick description and understanding of how students’ interactions with institutional structures and processes can affect the quality of their education. After providing background information about ELLs and an overview of issues related to teaching and learning academic literacy, this article argues that community colleges should both set high expectations for ELLs and support them as much as possible by linking ESOL and writing courses with disciplinary content. This argument advocates exposing nontraditional students such as ELLs to the holistic approaches to curriculum and instruction that have historically been offered only in elite institutions. In making this argument, this article first explores the large variations in students’ cultural, linguistic, and educational backgrounds as well as their future academic and occupational goals. The article then considers the institutional structures of the community college that affect ELLs, including testing, staffing, and the location of English and writing courses within

or apart from academic departments. Next the article describes the theoretical and pedagogical issues of teaching academic literacy, and it concludes with an overview of some strategies and programs, such as learning communities, that can support ELLs in attaining academic literacy.

English Language Learners: Backgrounds and Aspirations

It is difficult to characterize the typical English Language Learner because of the great variation in students' cultural, linguistic, and educational backgrounds and goals. ELLs can encompass foreign-born immigrants and refugees; generation 1.5 students (those who arrived at an early age and whose first-language literacy or formal education may be limited) (Harklau, Losey, & Siegal, 1999); the children of immigrants or refugees; and international students and their families. Some ELLs arrive in the United States with eighth grade educations, and others have already earned graduate degrees. Some, like traditional college-age-generation 1.5 students, may have attended U.S. high schools. Still others may have had their formal schooling interrupted for political reasons. Indeed, a bimodal pattern of immigrants exists, with those with lower educational attainment on one end and highly skilled professionals on the other (Portes & Rumbaut, 1996).

ELLs' occupational and educational aspirations vary as much as their linguistic and educational backgrounds. To illustrate this complexity, this researcher draws on her ethnographic study of ELLs in a basic writing course at a Midwestern community college (Curry, 2002). The 16 students in the class included a Dominican, a Laotian, and three Palestinians who had come to the United States as teenagers; a Sierra Leonean who came in his early 20s; eight adult immigrants from Russia, Turkey, Taiwan, and Hong Kong; and two middle-aged women from Korea and Japan whose husbands worked locally. Only three of these students had less than a high school education; five students had high school diplomas, three students had bachelor's degrees, and five students had graduate degrees. The high level of educational attainment achieved by this group of students stands in sharp contrast to typical U.S. born basic education students. Students' aspirations also ranged. Some simply wanted to practice their English, while others hoped to obtain vocational training in law enforcement or pursue undergraduate or graduate degrees.

This diversity of backgrounds and aspirations reflects the complexity of contemporary global migration and poses a key challenge in teaching adult ELLs. Although colleges typically classify ELLs according to English proficiency levels, other aspects of students' backgrounds affect their comfort and experiences in the college environment. Students with previous experience in higher education will likely have what Bourdieu (1998) calls academic *cultural capital*, that is, the knowledge and habits of the socially valued practices of higher education. These students may quickly feel comfortable navigating the academic environment, proficiently completing homework assignments, asking questions, participating in discussions, and producing academic texts (Brammer, 2002). Students without such cultural capital often have difficulty understanding and meeting course expectations. For instance, Saky, a Laotian student in my study, compared himself to international students at the local university: "I just wondered, some foreigners. . . probably don't speak English that well. How come they are able to pass those [university] degrees?" Saky's question demonstrates that having academic cultural capital can be more integral to student success than being proficient in English.

English Language Learners in the Community College

English language learners have a variety of reasons for attending community colleges. Recently arrived immigrants or refugees may take survival English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) to learn the linguistic and cultural skills needed to function in the domains of housing, health care, and schooling for their children. Others may take more specialized classes in citizenship or workplace English through programs funded by local employers or government agencies (Hull, 1997). Students with sufficient English proficiency may take academic preparation courses—usually called basic, developmental, or remedial classes—before entering credit-bearing vocational or academic programs. Depending on a community college's organizational structure, ESOL courses may be offered in adult or continuing education divisions, in vocational programs, or in academic departments. Where these classes and programs are located within a community college can have differing effects on ELL students' learning. Courses offered in adult learning divisions may or may not charge tuition, usually carry no academic credit, and may be less challenging than other divisional courses. Academic or vocational programs, on the other hand, typically charge tuition and bear credit;

their courses tend to be more specifically oriented to particular scholastic goals. The institutional location of these courses can influence ELLs' experiences and ability to succeed in community colleges, as noncredit courses do not usually count for financial aid eligibility and may not sufficiently challenge ELLs.

Remedial Courses

Despite recent moves by some legislatures and administrations to restrict basic education, much research has affirmed its value for ELLs and other students (Greenberg, 1997; Weiner, 1998). However, remedial education often carries a stigma because of its association with underprepared students. The skills and drills approach used in some remedial courses contributes to this negative perception, and students themselves may feel inadequately prepared. Smoke's (1988) survey of 198 former ELL developmental writing students at City University of New York found that students often felt underchallenged and underprepared, particularly for writing research papers. Similarly, by engaging in classroom observations, this researcher saw that a pedagogy consisting of decontextualized grammar, vocabulary activities, and writing assignments about personal topics left many students feeling stultified. As Minji, a Korean student, noted, "So after [the instructor and the course] feel that boring, who wants to be in that class one more time?" (Curry, 2002, p. 56). Minji was not alone in her dissatisfaction; 75% of her peers dropped out of this course.

In ESOL and basic education courses, students are commonly assigned to write about personal topics as a way to draw from their prior knowledge. While appropriate personal subjects can serve as a useful starting point, if assignments do not support the practices and genres of the disciplines, ELLs will be underprepared for academic writing in disciplinary courses. In a classroom this researcher observed, for example, students wrote recipes from and descriptions of their countries—assignments that did not challenge them to develop academic literacy. Although the students drafted narratives about more recent events and experiences, they were not asked to develop these texts into academic essays. This researcher thus concluded that the instructor needed to make stronger links between the basic writing curriculum, students' aspirations, and the academic curriculum in order to better support ELLs in learning academic literacy (Curry, 2003).

Part-Time Faculty

The reliance on part-time or adjunct faculty is another structural aspect of the community college that can affect how well ELLs learn academic literacy. Throughout the community college, adult learning divisions rely most heavily on adjunct faculty, although many other academic divisions also employ a high percentage of part-time language and writing instructors (Brill, 1999; Pratt, 1997). While adjunct instructors are often as well trained as full-time faculty, their part-time status may preclude them from being well integrated into the college's culture, they may lack guidance or support for their teaching, and they must often work at multiple institutions to make a living. Because of these working conditions, many adjuncts may have difficulty holding office hours, meeting with full-time colleagues, or participating in professional development activities. As a result, they may have less time for informal advising and mentoring and less knowledge of what is going on in their departments, divisions, or institutions. In this study, for example, the part-time instructor's lack of knowledge about students' backgrounds, coupled with his stated feeling of being out of the loop in the division, contributed to his inability to advise students or challenge them pedagogically. Grubb and Associates' (1999) research shows that, overall, adjunct instructors provide roughly the same quality of instruction as full-time faculty. However, if adjunct faculty are less available to support students outside the classroom, they may negatively affect ELLs who often need help in navigating the college environment.

Testing

Another institutional practice with important implications for ELLs is the testing of students' English and writing proficiency. Students initially encounter the gate-keeping function of testing when diagnostic assessments of their language proficiency determine their placement within a community college or one of its divisions. In addition, in order to move from open-access adult or basic education divisions into degree-granting programs, ELLs must often take English grammar, reading, and writing tests.

Writing skills can be assessed indirectly or directly. Indirect tests, such as multiple-choice grammatical usage tests, measure students' ability to manipulate discrete components of language. Because they do not ask students to write, indirect tests reveal little about ELLs' writing com-

petencies. While direct measures ask students to write, testing conditions often do not reproduce real world social, academic, or professional contexts. ELLs may be unfamiliar with the topics used in writing exams (Haswell, 1998) and may be anxious about writing in a limited time. Additionally, ELLs usually only have time to write one draft, cannot use dictionaries or other resources, and often focus on the surface-level features of writing rather than argument and structure (Hall, 1991). While testing student proficiency may be necessary, options such as portfolio assessments that are more fair to ELLs should be considered as well as tests.

Teaching and Learning English Academic Literacy

Although some students can rely on previous cultural capital when entering U.S. colleges, few immigrant or international students are likely to have studied academic writing, much less academic writing in English, as it is seldom an explicit part of the curriculum in other countries (Ivanic, 1998). Teaching academic literacy practices to ELLs involves taking into consideration students' experiences with academic reading and writing in both their first language and in English, as well as the materials used for particular assignments, and students' ultimate objectives. Like many college students, ELLs frequently need instruction in the foundational practices that support academic writing in the disciplines, such as reading and analyzing academic texts, taking notes, consulting a dictionary, using library resources, creating bibliographies, and avoiding plagiarism.

Expository Writing

Basic and first-year writing courses tend to cover what are usually considered the underlying conventions of descriptive, narrative, and expository writing, and typically ask students to write in a variety of subject areas. Variants of the process approach to writing, in which students are taught strategies for inventing ideas, drafting, revising, and sharing their work, are popular in many classrooms. Although no singular agreed-upon model for an academic paper or essay exists, common conventions for expository writing include creating a thesis that develops into an argument, beginning paragraphs with related topic sentences, and supporting arguments with evidence. In the past, many educators have assumed that students can automatically apply and adapt these conventions across the disciplines in what Bhatia calls "generic competence" (as cited in Paltridge,

2002, p. 19). However, different disciplines have specific rhetorical conventions, activities, communicative needs, and genres (such as laboratory reports in the natural sciences or summary reports in business). As Paltridge (2002) points out, “To effectively use an academic genre, students also need knowledge of the culture, circumstances, purposes, and motives that prevail in particular academic settings” (p. 20).

Essayist Literacy

In the humanities and social sciences, *essayist literacy* is the dominant form of writing (Gee, 1996) and is characterized by a linear style in which the author advocates a particular point of view, analysis, or course of action and supports it with accepted types of evidence. In addition to understanding the linear and argumentative nature of much academic writing, ELLs must grapple with issues of voice and identity. Whereas the writer’s voice takes center stage in personal and reflective writing, many academic genres have traditionally obscured the writer’s presence. Assignments often require writers to take an objective stance toward the topic and the audience, a position that many students find uncomfortable. Pointing to the complexity of this task, Steinman (2003) notes that she has “expected students to take a stand, to offer a clear opinion, [and] to exhibit confidence on a topic after little reflection or information on their part” (p. 84).

To gain an authoritative voice, students need a knowledge base that will enable them to craft thesis statements, make claims, build arguments, and draw on appropriate evidence. Students can obtain this knowledge by reading in the subject area and by discussing readings in class. They must also learn to draw on the academic registers of English, that is, language of a more formal and specialized nature than what is used in daily life. Snow (in press) identifies three components of academic discourse that students must understand in order to succeed in essayist literacy: (1) linguistic understanding of lexical or word choice issues, syntactic or sentence structure issues, text structure, and language functions, (2) background knowledge of content, and (3) cognitive knowledge and critical thinking skills. She notes that students need to build both their disciplinary vocabularies and their more general academic vocabulary that encompasses metalanguage such as *however*, *therefore*, and *in conclusion*. As Santos (2004) reports, “while the meanings of technical words are often reinforced by class lectures and discussions, students may be ex-

pected already to know the meanings of academic words” (p. 1). ELLs need guided practice in combining these vocabularies with the other components of academic discourse in their essays.

Contrastive Rhetoric

The field of contrastive rhetoric, an area of applied linguistics that compares texts across languages and cultures, demonstrates that variations in second-language writing can be rooted in particular textual and cultural traditions (Connor & Kaplan, 1987). These traditions include the writer’s stance toward the subject matter, the degree of directness in making claims, expectations about the audience’s knowledge, and assumptions about how much work the writer must do to make the text accessible. Other conventions include text organization, uses of evidence (including personal experiences), and whether repetition and digression are restricted or encouraged. Because ELLs tend to draw on native-language writing strategies when writing in English, aspects of student writing that appear inappropriate or unusual to the instructor may represent students’ transfer of the rhetorical preferences of their first language. However, Valdes (1992) suggests that “unexpected discourse characteristics in the writing of beginning writers (those who have no experience writing in their first language) may not actually be discourse transfer, but simply the product of beginning writing development” (p. 111). For basic ELL writers, moving from first-language transfer into learning new forms of discourse is of crucial importance.

ELLs, like most other community college students, need explicit instruction in academic literacy. As Benesch (1988a) points out, “many freshmen are unused to taking an active role in their own learning and many come to college with little experience in certain linguistic and academic activities such as reading critically, taking notes from readings and lectures, formulating questions, and writing coherent essays” (p. 57). It can be difficult for students to manipulate these complex elements of language and rhetoric, not only because they are new but also because they represent the dominant White middle-class culture of the academy. Indeed, faculty may not realize the extent to which academic practices are racially and socioeconomically situated, as faculty demographics have not kept pace with changes in students’ race, ethnicity, and linguistic backgrounds (Paltridge, 2002). While well-educated middle-class ELLs may not find learning these linguistic and rhetorical features problematic,

other students may find the culture manifested in academic discourse alien or uncomfortable. As Brammer (2002) writes, “Learners will vary in their acceptance, rejection, or negotiation of the dominant culture. For some learners, at least, accepting or adopting the White middle class codes means selling out or losing identification with their family and community” (p. 23). Yet to participate in the conversations of the academy and the larger society, ELLs need to negotiate these tensions, and community college faculty and administrators need to recognize the complexity of this enterprise.

Strategies to Support English Language Learners

Although helping ELLs develop academic literacy is a complex undertaking, several strategies exist to support these students in the classroom. These include ESOL courses linked with disciplinary content, writing across the curriculum programs, and academic learning communities. In all of these areas, faculty need to learn about and incorporate students’ backgrounds, build on their competencies, understand their needs and aspirations, and draw on differences among them (Kutz, Groden, & Zamel, 1993). The following sections focus on specific approaches to supporting students: communicating requirements and expectations clearly, using cooperative learning, teaching contrastive awareness between languages and cultures and between disciplinary discourse conventions, linking ESOL courses and disciplinary content, and creating learning communities.

Communicate Clearly

The first step in supporting ELLs as they learn academic literacy is ensuring clear and explicit classroom communication. Some cultures consider it rude for students to question a teacher. Explaining to ELLs that questioning is considered a valued form of participation in U.S. classrooms and having them practice such participation will help these students (Chen, Boyd, & Goh, 2003). It is also important to provide explicit instructions (in writing when possible) for classroom activities and assignments. Using a detailed syllabus throughout the term introduces students to this academic practice and helps them understand expectations for readings, homework, deadlines, and assignments. Similarly, class discussions about the key words in essay questions will help students to understand the nuanced differences among the instructions *describe*, *discuss*, *examine*, and *analyze* (Coffin et al., 2003). Some students also

appreciate receiving examples of the texts they are expected to produce, although faculty should make it clear that students are not simply to imitate exemplars.

Implement Cooperative Learning

Cooperative learning activities, if structured carefully, can reinforce the idea that writing is a social rather than an individual activity. One approach is to use cooperative learning groups that provide peer feedback on drafts of student papers. This approach may be—at least initially—uncomfortable for some students, as few ELLs will have had experience with peer review and may feel that they lack the knowledge to comment on others' writing. Modeling how to approach an essay, reminding students about the assignment instructions, and providing reviewers with a sheet of guiding questions can help to develop students' critical abilities. Classes that have students with varying levels of educational attainment can set up ongoing pairings in which a more educated partner helps a less well-prepared student. This strategy can work whether students have similar or dissimilar English proficiency levels (Nitri, 1999).

Teach Contrastive Awareness

Another useful strategy for teaching academic literacy is to increase ELLs' awareness of differences in disciplinary texts (e.g., among research papers for history, sociology, English, or anthropology) or in broader genres such as memoranda, laboratory reports, letters to the editor, reflective essays, or expository papers. To teach contrastive awareness, Steinman (2003) proposes three activities. First, students can write in their native language about a familiar topic and then write on the same topic in English, noting the similarities and differences. Alternatively, students can discuss what they view as important in writing in their native language and consider how they can incorporate these valued characteristics into their writing in English. Finally, reading about other ELLs' experiences in learning to write in English will help students to realize that different characteristics of writing may have cultural bases and that others have overcome the challenges of second language writing.

To understand differences in disciplinary conventions and text types, ELLs can identify the audience, purpose, structure, and register for several dissimilar texts on the same topic. For example, students might discuss how an environmental controversy is written about in newspaper stories, in web pages, in press releases, in textbooks, and in academic

journal articles. Involving students in choosing the topic or in selecting an issue of local relevance helps raise student interest. Students can then do library research, make presentations, and write papers on a subject they enjoy. Shor (1997) proposes grounding writing topics in students' lived experiences: "We can invite students to do literacy projects about their education, the college, the community, their jobs, or society-at-large, including media criticism and media production" (p. 100). Media analysis of advertisements or television programs can also increase students' understanding of U.S. culture and link their popular media experiences with academic subjects (Curry, 1999).

While these proposals are not novel, they share a holistic vision of teaching that integrates a content base with the practice of writing rather than focusing on discrete language components and skills. Some contemporary ESOL and basic writing textbooks incorporate topics from daily life and use readings from current sources as the basis for language activities. It is crucial to retain this holistic focus on analyzing and creating academic essays, as research shows that the decontextualized study of grammar alone does not transfer to writing (Wyse, 2001).

Link ESOL Programs to Disciplinary Content

Programs that link disciplinary content courses with ESOL programs can be effective, as "students need to see that language skills develop within meaningful contexts and colleges can best provide for ESL students by making this experience available" through content-based instruction (Smoke, 1988, p. 17). Benesch (1988b) has collected descriptions of such linking initiatives from across the country. In one, an *adjunct model*, students in an intensive preparatory program take introductory courses such as psychology, geography, and computer science along with intensive ESOL courses, and "assignments in the ESL component of the adjunct program are based almost entirely on material from the content course" (Snow & Brinton, 1988, p. 41). Students benefit by reading authentic academic texts and interacting with native-English speakers in classes and lectures while they are supported by the ESOL staff. In a *tutoring model*, ELLs taking a disciplinary course attended weekly meetings with a trained tutor to help with their oral and written skills (Hirsch, 1988). Wiley (2001) discusses other forms of tutoring groups, and describes "enriched" and "stretch" programs that "manipulate not only the curriculum but also the sequence and time students spend in writing

courses” (p. 174). Finally, Benesch (1988a) describes a collaboration between English and psychology professors to teach linked ESL reading and writing and social science courses based on the assumption that “not only students but also their professors need greater awareness of the demands of college study” (p. 58). In this two-way exchange, faculty meet weekly to discuss the content and literacy issues that arise from the collaboration.

Create Learning Communities

Learning communities have been increasingly incorporated into U.S. higher education over the last 10 years. Minkler (2002) defines learning communities as intentionally restructuring the curriculum “so that students are more actively engaged in a sustained academic relationship with other students and faculty over a longer period of time than in traditional course settings” (p. 47). While learning communities may be configured in various ways, Minkler asserts that “the ones that seem to fit the community college campuses the best are the linked (two) or clustered (three or more) classes with a common student cohort, and [the classes that are] a fully team-taught community comprising two or more courses” (p. 51). Wiley (2001) notes that learning communities have successfully mainstreamed basic education students; those who participated in learning communities have generally persisted longer and have been more academically successful than students who were not involved in a community. In addition, Minkler (2000) cites research demonstrating that “retention rates for students in developmental classes are higher when those classes are linked to content classes” (p. 50). The earlier discussion of the disciplinary basis of many genres of academic writing helps to explain this phenomenon: As students learn academic literacy in the context of disciplinary content, they are motivated to understand particular domains and link their literacy practices to their deepening understanding of content.

Mlynarczyk and Babbitt (2002) describe a highly successful community college program for ELLs designed to “accelerate students’ learning of academic English (speaking, listening, reading, and writing)” (p. 72). In this program, students spend 25 hours a week attending courses and working with their cohorts and are supported by faculty and tutors. As Mlynarczyk and Babbitt note, “What has intrigued us even more than the high pass rates and good grades in the academic courses is the special

classroom atmosphere. . . students are more motivated and more effective learners when they are members of a well-functioning learning community” (2002, p. 73). Barrett and Wootten (1994) also present a successful program that emphasizes active learning and whole language use and note an unusual camaraderie among students and faculty. Learning communities thus represent an intriguing way to help ELLs at the community college learn academic literacy. Learning communities help ELLs to join the culture of the academy, use academic language for oral and written communication, and learn disciplinary content and discourses. They also seem to challenge basic learners to attempt college-level disciplinary courses while still supporting their academic abilities.

Conclusion

This article has demonstrated the complexities in helping ELLs gain academic literacy. Like many community college students, ELLs often have little preparation for understanding and using the discourses of the academy. This complexity makes teaching and learning academic literacy a challenge for both ELLs and community college faculty and administrators. The outdated perception of ESOL courses as service stations where “deficient” or “underprepared” students can be “fixed” is giving way to successful programs in disciplinary writing, writing across the curriculum programs, and learning communities. These initiatives represent an increasing awareness of the role of language in learning and constructing knowledge. Linking instruction in language and writing with disciplinary content helps to establish higher expectations for student achievement, which must then be supported by faculty and administrators. The increased communication and collaboration this approach entails may be difficult to achieve with large numbers of part-time faculty (Grubb, 1999), and other institutional and societal constraints may also make a holistic approach difficult to implement. However, these collaborations are successful in teaching students academic discourse and practices and can be highly rewarding for faculty and students alike.

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