

ACCOMMODATING ESL STUDENTS IN THE UNIVERSITY

by Kristi L. Kanel

University systems have been accommodating learning-disabled students for decades, while at the same time holding limited English proficiency students to the same standards as mainstream students. With the increasing prevalence of people in the United States whose dominant language is other than English, there will no doubt be an increase in university students who would be considered ESL (English as a Second Language) students. Much has been written about academic standards and accommodations as they relate to the learning-disabled population. This article proposes that true cultural responsiveness must include certain accommodations for the ESL students. Building such an organizational culture at the university level would help ESL students to enter professions in which they would clearly be useful.

The impetus for this article comes from a series of discussions held during a course that I recently taught at California State University, Fullerton. This class, entitled "Working with Spanish-speaking Families in the Human Services," was designed for students who would one day be

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-serving this population in mental health, social services, and educational settings. Considering that there are about 35.3 million Latinos in the United States, the likelihood of this population needing human services is high, especially in California where there are over 10 million Latinos.¹

A recent study shows that one of every three students in school is of a racial or ethnic minority, and that one in seven students between the ages of five and seventeen speak a language other than English at home; more than a third of these are of limited English proficiency.² In some areas,

the number of Hispanic children—many of whom are ESL students—entering schools is higher than the number of whites.³ At least some of these Hispanic students will someday enroll in colleges and universities. But many will not become proficient in English by the time they reach college, nor will those Latino college students who have not gone through the U.S. K-12 schools.

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ESL students from completing their degrees, reducing the number entering professions such as counseling, social work and teaching, areas in which non-English-speakers are vitally needed to serve the growing multicultural population in the United States. In a 2001 survey, 268 Southern California Latinos whose dominant language is Spanish and 43 therapists who regularly treat Spanish-speaking clients were asked about their views on the mental health needs of Latinos. Seventy-one percent said that they believe there are not enough Spanish-speaking therapists to meet the needs of the population.⁴

The nation's Latinos and other ethnic minorities such as Vietnamese and Middle Easterners need services provided by university-trained professionals. Certainly those who speak these languages and understand the culture could provide the types of services needed by this group at least as, if not more, effectively than those not familiar with the culture and language. Despite the fact that they possess the practical skills necessary for these service professions, many would-be professionals do not succeed in university settings because of university language standards and other organizational cultural characteristics that hamper the *academic* success of ESL students.

It may be time to modify standards, particularly in fields in which service to ethnic minorities is the focus. Usually, workers of similar eth-

nic background provide these services most effectively. Unfortunately, despite affirmative action efforts, minorities at universities often do not perform well under traditional academic standards and are subsequently denied entrance into graduate programs where they are greatly needed. It is mainly at the graduate level that those in the helping professions have decision-making responsibilities that allow them to create and implement social programs that would benefit ethnic minorities.

Because the university programs that focus on helping professions are more service-learning oriented than traditional academic programs, I suggest that standards must be created that assess for successful *employment* performance, rather than assessing for skills such as critical thinking, grammar, and articulation, skills that can be said to be culturally weighted in favor of non-ESL students.

Rethinking academic standards that have long been considered a

cornerstone of a strong educational system will be a challenge for university cultures. Such standards were set to provide accountability and to ensure educational fairness for all learners, and also help guide students and teachers toward learning goals. Even so, it is not a novel concept to have both content and performance standards.⁵ However, typical performance standards are weighted in favor of students writing out their knowledge, rather than performing it. I suggest that performance standards should assess the students' ability to *perform* an action or service called for in particular positions found at helping agencies.

For example, I teach a course in which students learn how to conduct crisis intervention interviews. Students are graded on actual interviews that they conduct with other students who role-play clients. The criteria used for evaluation have been developed by researching what counselors in the community do when conducting crisis intervention sessions. I believe that if a student can demonstrate the skills utilized successfully by those employed in the field, that student deserves to receive a high grade in this course even if his or her English skills as demonstrated on written exams are not good. Even the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission suggests that applicants for jobs or for promotion be rated on criteria shown to be related to successful job performance. Why can't we university professors evaluate our students on their ability to demonstrate skills that are necessary for successful job performance rather than

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skills necessary to pass the GRE?

Although accommodations for learning-disabled students have been widely accepted by the academic community, many teachers have very little understanding of language development and may not be equipped to work with students whose language skill levels and intellectual potential are vastly disparate.⁶ But the reality is that these students at some point in their lives will be in the job market, and there is a need for their skills. Educators must find ways to ensure that such students receive the education that meets their unique learning styles.

Without accommodations, many ESL students will not have the chance to fulfill their potential, which was the reason behind accommodating people with disabilities in the first place. We have accepted that a blind student should be allowed to have his text read aloud to him or translated into Braille. It seems that ESL students need to have similar 'breaks' so that they can learn, grow, and develop skills for a successful and rewarding career, which in turn would contribute valuable resources to the communities where they would serve.

Optimally, accommodations should only remove construct-irrelevant variance for students with disabilities and should have no effect on students without disabilities. Research is needed to answer questions about the validity of test results for students with a variety of disabilities using a variety of accommodations.⁷ This type of research should but has not so far included accommodations for ESL students. Such research must



point the way toward accommodations whereby non-disabled and non-ESL students are not unfairly disadvantaged.

Built into the fabric of current school culture are curricular, pedagogical, and evaluative practices that privilege the affluent, white, and male segments of society.⁹ Hogan-Garcia¹⁰ refers to these biases as *organizational culture* and proposes that they reflect the national culture, which is often incongruent with the cultural backgrounds of many ESL students. The challenge for university systems is to expand the notion of what a “proper” college education is, and to rethink old standards that emphasize critical thinking, writing formal essays, and articulating in a standardized manner, all strictly in English. These traditional standards may not be relevant for those entering the helping professions where developing human relationships and emotional connection are the essential skills for students to learn.

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ESL students must contend with the stress of having to speak and

listen to what is to them a foreign language in front of others. This causes anxiety, which can hinder learning and self-esteem.¹¹ Such students may have the capacity to understand the material and even perform skills necessary for a counseling job, but would be hampered due to the type of emotional stress that is similar to the anxiety experienced by students suffering from attention deficit disorder, dyslexia, or other recognized learning disorders. These latter students receive accommodations such as having longer periods to take exams, having someone take notes for them, having interpreters, having texts read to them, and the use of dictionaries during exams. I propose that similar accommodations be available to ESL students.

Colleges and universities adapted when it came time to accept distance learning, Internet usage, and accommodating the needs of the disabled. Solutions that would help ESL students succeed academically, relying on individual instructors being willing to put forth the effort, have been offered. Since there is a significant need for ESL college graduates to fulfill the requirements demanded of a multicultural society, the motivating incentive for socially conscious professors to implement institutional changes is there. Villegas and Lucas have developed a model in preparing culturally responsive instructors, who, I propose, should incorporate these ideas as a way of assisting ESL college students.

First, teachers must systematically infuse multicultural issues

throughout the curriculum. Often, multicultural issues are discussed as related to health care and human services. It wouldn't be a large leap for the professor to engage in open dialogue with ESL students about their cultural needs as students in the course. Such emphasis would not only help ESL students, but *all* students to understand such cultural issues.

Villegas and Lucas¹² propose that truly culturally responsive teachers recognize that there are multiple ways of perceiving reality, influenced by one's location in the social order. This is not enough. The instructor must have an affirming view of students from diverse backgrounds and see diversity as a resource for learning, rather than as a problem to overcome. Teachers must see themselves as responsible for and capable of bringing about change to make schools more equitable and responsive to all students. It would also help if professors knew about the lives of their students and designed instruction to build on what their students already

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know, while stretching them beyond the familiar. Acknowledging that ESL students already know a great deal and have had experiences and concepts that can help fellow classmates expand their learning can play a big part in accommodating these students.

Other accommodations include using pertinent examples and analogies from the ESL students' lives to introduce and clarify new concepts. Professors could also take some extra time with these students and guide them into using strategies to monitor their own learning and help them set high performance expectations that are realistic.

Lastly, ESL student anxiety can be reduced by making such learners aware that fluency in a foreign language can take several years. Candid discussions about the special issues facing ESL students could relieve many of the emotional stresses these students encounter, thereby increasing the likelihood of successful completion of college degrees.

This type of frankness may be a bit risky in this politically correct era, but we need to take this risk to ensure that all segments of our society are represented in the helping professions. In the course previously mentioned, "Working with Spanish-speaking Families," we engaged in much frank give-and-take on these issues. Students unanimously agreed that these discussions were extremely eye-opening and motivated them to come to class and feel more engaged with their studies, increasing the likelihood of academic success.

During these classes, many of these students shared stories of their experiences. We talked about struggles with literacy in their families, Mexican culture, and differences between mainstream values and Mexican values regarding education. What we discovered is that even if Latinos do complete high school, they may not make it through college due to attitudes of professors that do not accommodate Latino customs. A good example might be policies about make-up exams. Many Latino college students are responsible for driving family members to Mexico when a relative dies or has fallen ill, thus requiring rescheduling an exam. Some professors will not bend on this policy. Recognition of special needs of Mexican students would be helpful in this area.

For decades, universities have accommodated students with disabilities because it is believed that for them to contribute to society, accommodations are justifiable. By the same token, trained professional ESL students are also needed in society. Is it not justifiable then to accommodate them as well? [nea](#)

ENDNOTES

- ¹ U.S. Census Bureau 2001.
- ² Villegas & Lucas, 2002, p. 1.
- ³ Gittelsohn & Godines, 1999, p. 6.
- ⁴ Mental Health Association of Los Angeles, 1997. The agencies surveyed were primarily social services-type agencies and mental health agencies that serve low-income minorities such as Latinos, African Americans, and Koreans and Vietnamese in the Los Angeles area. The mental health association found that there was such a great need for bilingual/bicultural workers that they initiated a program at local high schools in which minority students who would not traditionally be admitted to college would be trained in high school to perform human service duties at these community agencies.
- ⁵ Giacobbe, Livers, Thay-Smith, & Walther-Thomas, 2001, p. 11.
- ⁶ Coleman, 2001, p. 52.
- ⁷ Johnson, 2000, p. 263.
- ⁸ Villegas, & Lucas, 2002, p. 23.
- ⁹ Hogan-Garcia, 1999, p. 24.
- ¹⁰ Casado & Dereshiwsy, 2001, p. 539.
- ¹¹ Villegas & Lucas, 2002, p. 21-23.
- ¹² Ibid.

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