

# Strategies For Improving Academic Performance By Non-Native English Speakers In Graduate Programs

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## ABSTRACT

*Over the past decade, the number of non-native English speaking students in higher education has increased dramatically. Educators at all levels have experienced challenges in meeting the academic needs of these students and continue to seek strategies for addressing these challenges. This paper describes some of this research related to K-12 and suggests ways for applying the results to improve the academic performance of non-native English speaking students in U.S. graduate programs. Educators in higher education can benefit from the research focused on K-12 and should seek ways to replicate the successful strategies in the graduate classroom.*

**Keywords:** Graduate Education; International Students; ESL; English As Second Language; ELL; English Language Learner

## INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, the number of non-native English speaking students in K-12 and higher education has increased dramatically. Educators at all levels have experienced challenges in meeting the academic needs of these students and continue to seek strategies for addressing these challenges. Responding to federal legislation, much research has focused on problems faced by educators in K-12, and this research has yielded a number of successful strategies for helping non-native English speaking students adapt and succeed in the classroom. Research is just beginning to address similar challenges in higher education.

## REVIEW AND DISCUSSION OF LITERATURE

This section discusses the changing demographics in higher education, graduate education, and K-12 in the U.S., supporting the need for attention to non-native English speaking students. The sections that follow describe some of the effective strategies employed in the K-12 environment and suggest the need to apply similar strategies in graduate education.

For the purposes of this paper, the term “ELL” (English Language Learner) will be used. Some studies and articles reviewed used the term “ESL” (English as a Second Language). Both terms refer to essentially the same group of students. The term “ELL” simply recognizes that students may be learning English as a third, fourth, or more language.

## Enrollment Trends In Education

In K-12, the non-native English speaking student population is increasing rapidly in the United States. National policy holds schools to standards that assure annual improvement in English and content area skills for students classified as English Language Learners (ELL). Students are expected to perform well on state-mandated tests in one to three years after entry into a U.S. school. This is a daunting challenge considering the diverse

languages, cultures, and educational backgrounds of these students. From 1994 to 2005, 12 states have seen a 200 percent or more growth of the ELL student population, and 12 other states have experienced 100-198 percent growth. In 2004-2005, approximately 10.5 percent of the U.S. student population was classified as ELL; almost 80 percent of these students were from Spanish-speaking backgrounds (Payàn & Nettles, 2008). Many K-12 educators experience challenges with ELL students and feel underprepared to meet the needs of these students. Recent research questions how to teach these students in a manner that best prepares them for the mainstream classroom, for the demands of state testing, and most importantly, for an English speaking academic environment.

Higher education in the U.S., including undergraduate and graduate programs, has experienced a similar increase in the enrollment of non-native English speaking students. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (U.S. Department of Education, 2009), enrollment in post-secondary schools has increased significantly over the last 35 years, increasing at the fastest rate (26%) between 1997 and 2007. Much of the increase is due to the increasing number of Hispanic and Asian students.

Enrollment specifically in graduate schools has also increased. The Council of Graduate Schools (CGS) reports that there has been steady growth in the number of students enrolling in graduate programs over the past decade. By the fall of 2009, approximately 463,000 students enrolled in graduate programs for the first time; of these, 17 percent have temporary residency status. According to CGS, much of the increase has been the result of growth in the number of students with temporary residency status, many of whom are non-native English speakers (Bell, 2010). The CGS conducts an annual survey to examine applications, admission and enrollment in graduate programs. According to the 2010 report, there has been an increase in the number of international graduate students since 2005. The biggest growth consistently relates to the number of students from China. Between 2006 and 2010, Chinese students accounted for the largest percentage increase by nationality in four of the last five years. Table 1 summarizes the percentage increases in enrollment for international graduate students and for Chinese Students (Council of Graduate Schools, 2010, p. 9).

**Table 1: Percentage Increases In Number Of International Students Enrolling In College For The 1<sup>st</sup> Time**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Increase in Total International Students</b>	<b>Increase in Chinese Students</b>
2005	1%	
2006	12%	20%
2007	4%	19%
2008	3%	14%
2009	0%	16%
2010	3%	20%

**Current ELL Services: Problems And Solutions**

States differ in the level of special services offered to ELL students. According to Callahan, Wilkinson, and Muller (2008), ELL services that do not provide rigorous academic content may have a detrimental effect on long-term academic success. In their study of 64 high schools with Mexican-origin students, they looked factors such as whether the ELL-identified students received ELL services and whether these students completed algebra II and chemistry, courses which are strong indicators of college attendance. Results showed that in schools with low-concentrations of Mexican-origin students, the ELL-identified students performed significantly lower if they received ELL services. These students also did not typically enroll in chemistry or algebra II. The same negative outcome affected the second-and third-generation students too. In high-concentration schools, Mexican-origin students placed in ELL services performed well. These students earned significantly higher grades and enrolled in more math and science than the Mexican-origin students who did not receive ELL services. The researchers did note that although these students performed well, they still did not perform well enough to enter college. Further research is needed to examine the curriculum of Mexican-origin students and the reasons why these students are not prepared for post-secondary education.

Based on the Callahan, Wilkinson, and Muller study, different environments will necessitate different strategies. The unacceptable strategy is to ignore the special needs of the ELL students. With ELL student populations drastically increasing in K-12, low academic success will result in students who are unprepared for post-secondary education, unprepared for career training and, ultimately, undereducated to be productive in the workforce.

In a mixed-methods study, Batt (2008) examines the perceptions of ELL teachers who worked most closely with ELL students to determine (1) the biggest challenges in ELL education and (2) methods to improve ELL education. Participants were purposefully chosen for the study based on two criteria: (1) if they worked with a large percentage of ELL students in their schools and (2) how motivated the educators were to give good input on how to improve ELL education. Among the ELL certified teachers surveyed, 79 percent taught in some form of ELL instruction, 30 percent taught in bilingual education, and 21 percent taught in mainstream classrooms where ELL students made up 23 to 43 percent of the students. The greatest challenges identified by these certified teachers were as follows:

- Not all educators who work with ELL students are qualified to teach ELL and, therefore, may not understand multicultural education.
- Many programs do not have sufficient numbers of educators who are certified to work with ELL or who are bilingual educators.
- In many programs, excessive extra duties are assigned to ELL educators, due perhaps to the above mentioned understaffing.

Teachers in the Batt study proposed two critical changes to overcome these challenges: (1) restructure schools and (2) provide meaningful professional development. With restructuring, teachers said that schools need to hire more ELL or bilingual education certified teachers and create an ELL consulting teacher position. A sheltered English program should be considered, as well as grouping students by the same language levels. The teachers also identified seven topics critical for professional development: parent involvement, ELL curriculum development, Spanish language class, first and second language literacy methods, sheltered English instruction, ELL methods, and establishing a newcomer center.

Based on the Batt study, one recognizes the breadth of the problems facing ELL students and their educators. Treating ELL students as a single cohort fails to acknowledge the differences between ELL students – different cultures, different educational backgrounds, various languages and dialects, etc. Teachers need to develop sound teaching methods that are adaptable in this diverse environment. The major strengths of the Batt study are the participants and their insights; in that, the study looks at the problems through the eyes of educated, experienced teachers who have worked closely with ELL students in a highly ELL populated state. The teachers working with these students are the ones who are most prepared to offer solutions for instruction.

#### *Related Applications For Graduate Education – ELL Services Needed*

Applying the research on ELL services in the graduate school environment, educators must recognize that the services for ELL students will depend on the unique demographics for each institution. As discussed in the Callahan, Wilkinson, and Muller study (2008), different environments will necessitate different strategies; this also applies to graduate education programs. Graduate programs with higher concentrations of ELL students may be in a better position to offer better services, but all graduate programs are responsible for offering effective instruction that meets the academic needs of the students. Wang, Martin and Martin (2002) note that it is the responsibility of educators to be aware of differences the non-native English speakers bring to the classroom and that educators must address the challenges to teach in diverse environments.

The Batt (2008) study reinforces the need for educators to seek strategies developed by successful teachers who are familiar with the ELL learning environment. Graduate educators, other than those teaching in an ELL program, typically are not familiar with new techniques for working with ELL students. This presents a particular challenge for graduate educators, which needs to be addressed.

Replicating strategies discussed above, graduate programs should seek ways to add ELL support resources. In graduate programs with significant populations of non-native speaking students, administrators may consider adding an ELL resource teacher, with experience in both a content area and experience in working with ELL students. Other graduate programs may consider developing partnerships with ELL teachers in other program or adding adjuncts or tutors with ELL experience.

### **Strategies For Improving ELL Education**

Research shows that sheltered instruction and professional development should be considered as key strategies for addressing the challenges of working with ELL students. In K-12, schools have experimented with sheltered instruction for ELL students. In these experiments, schools can be restructured to include sheltered classrooms, but a great majority of sheltered instruction can be implemented in the mainstream classroom. These changes are not as difficult as some educators might think. Administrators in K-12 have recognized the critical need for professional development to help teachers develop effective teaching skills for ELL students.

#### *Restructuring And Sheltered Instruction*

Sheltered instruction is an instructional approach that helps ELL students learn grade-level academic content by incorporating techniques and strategies that also promote the English language acquisition process. Sheltered instruction frequently takes place in a separate (sheltered) classroom for ELLs, but sheltered instruction can also take place in a mainstream classroom. Development and implementation of sheltered instruction strategies is based on research by the Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL) on the *Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP)*, which is publicly available on the CAL website (Center for Applied Linguistics, 2011). While teaching the regular academic content, teachers applying sheltered instruction techniques use slower speech and clear enunciation, visual aids, scaffold instruction, vocabulary developments, student-to-student interactions, adapted material and supplementary material (Echevarria, Short & Powers, 2008).

Hansen-Thomas (2008) identifies the objective of sheltered instruction, which is to provide high-quality, academically challenging material that native speakers of English should already be receiving. Sheltered instruction focuses on: cooperative learning, academic and key content vocabulary, wise use of the student's first language and cultural background in lessons, and hands-on activities. Specific teaching strategies and techniques, such as slowing down speech and writing important vocabulary words on the board are also implemented.

Crawford, Schmeister, and Biggs (2008) define sheltered instruction as one method of instruction for ELL students where teachers use tools such as visuals, supplementary materials, cooperative learning, and hands-on activities to teach language and content. With the wide range of student abilities in mainstream classrooms, sheltered instruction reminds the teachers of good practices that should be used in any classroom. Sheltered instruction is easily implemented with proper support of teachers and administration. Many facets of sheltered instruction can also be implemented in the mainstream classroom. The focus on cooperative learning, building academic language, and letting students use their first language help provide equal educational opportunities for all students. Experienced, effective mainstream teachers use similar techniques in traditional classrooms.

Curtin (2005) examines how ELL students perceive mainstream and sheltered instruction. In her study, she describes the reality of ELL students as they are transitioned from a sheltered classroom to a mainstream classroom. The study took place in an urban, economically disadvantaged middle school in Texas. The six participants in the study were seventh and eighth grade students from Mexico who had spent one year in sheltered instruction then slowly transitioned into the mainstream classroom. The results of the study imply that mainstream teachers do not always work well with ELL students, exhibiting teaching behavior that is in direct contrast with ELL teachers. Participants in the study felt that the teachers in sheltered instruction provided helpful techniques that could easily be implemented, such as using examples that provide step-by-step directions. There were also more hands-on activities and cooperative learning groups in the sheltered classroom, and students were more at ease with ELL instructors. Sheltered instruction is beneficial, but many of these methods identified by the students as beneficial could be implemented into the mainstream classroom as well. Based on Curtin's study, effective teaching incorporates similar

techniques for all students; mainstream teachers in the study would have benefited from understanding and replicating some of the techniques used during sheltered instruction.

In a study related to ELL students in science, Medina-Jerez, Clark, Medina, Ramirez-Marin (2007) examined current research on ELL students in the science classroom, possible obstacles these students may encounter, and ideas to promote learning in the sciences. Their ideas reflect many features of sheltered instruction. The authors encourage group work, cross-curricular planning, explicit teaching of vocabulary, and alternative assessments that allow dictionaries and extra time. They also stress the importance of using technology in the classroom and the importance of parent involvement. Medina-Jerez, Clark, and Medina present techniques that encourage first language use while motivating students to learn content in their second language. Some of the techniques in this article cannot be generalized to every ELL group. For example, encouraging parents to be involved would prove difficult in some ELL groups for a variety of cultural and linguistic reasons. Another consideration would be how the ELL students view such things as group work; this may vary between the different cultures among ELL students. Many school districts cannot provide sheltered instruction because of funds or lack of certified staff. This study provides techniques that can be incorporated into a mainstream classroom to benefit non-native English speaking students.

Many mainstream educators are concerned about working with ELL students and believe these students need to be in sheltered ELL classes because of the language barrier. Research in effective ELL teaching, however, indicates that ELL language instruction can be incorporated into the daily lessons in mainstream classes. Traditional methods for language instruction, such as dictionary use, word lists, memorizations, and so forth are outdated in today's classrooms for native and non-native speakers alike; they do not take in to account what research indicates about how students learn new words. These methods and techniques must be analyzed to find areas of improvement. Bromley (2007) describes effective strategies of direct instruction for new words. ELL and mainstream students need the fastest results possible in language acquisition. Bromley looks at some of the characteristics of English and how words are learned. English is a unique collection of words with 25 percent of the words being foreign born. It is six times larger than French and continuously evolves with new words from science, technology, and a changing culture. Furthermore, 70 percent of the most common English words have several meanings, and 60 percent of multisyllabic words can be analyzed by their parts to help figure out their meaning. The immense and growing nature of the language means students need to be equipped with dictionary and thesaurus skills. Bromley suggests several techniques to help with vocabulary instruction. One of the techniques she suggests is vocabulary notebooks that help give students ownership of their learning. The author also supports teaching fewer words well than teaching the entire list of new vocabulary. English Language Learner (ELL) students need to learn no more than five words at a time. Bromley also points out that vocabulary mini-lessons can be taught throughout the unit to incorporate most of the words.

#### *Restructuring: Alternative Methods*

Wright (2009) analyzes individual variations in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) development in the immersion environment. She examines the changes in grammatical proficiency and responses to different types of questions during immersion. Chinese-speaking postgraduate students at a British university volunteered for the study. Students were tested by computer and asked to respond as quickly as they could. Students were tested within two weeks of coming to Britain and then tested after ten months of study in the immersion environment. Results on speed and accuracy were analyzed by SPSS and t-charts. Conflicting data was seen in whether significant changes would take place in grammatical proficiency, but the results did show a noticeable improvement in the overall speed between the two tests. Time task design did create some flaws in the task design that the study could not correct. She concluded that simple questions are easier to acquire than complex questions and response speed increases with more time in the immersion culture.

Dual immersion programs gradually increase the amount of instruction in English as the students get older. Potowski (2007) replicated one of the few studies on immersion programs. The study measured Spanish proficiency in speaking, writing, and reading; production of specific verb forms; and production and recognition of appropriate Spanish in society among graduates of a dual immersion program. The study took place at the Inter-American Magnet School, one of the oldest dual immersion programs in the country. Participants in the study were from the

eighth grade and consisted of 30 native Spanish speakers, 17 native English speakers, and five recent U.S. arrival students. Results of the study showed that language minority students statically tested better than native English-speaking students on every test except reading. This suggests that dual immersion programs help the language minority students continue growing in their first language while they learn a second language. The specific characteristics of the dual immersion program were not identified. According to Potowski, teachers and students tend to rely more and more on English than the second language. The optimal levels of the first language use were not always adhered to and students fell back on the native language of the culture – English. While this program is exciting and inventive, it does not address the lack of qualified teachers who can teach content and teach in a second language.

### *Sheltered Instruction In Higher Education*

In addition to research related to K-12 instruction, some studies have evaluated sheltered instruction in higher education. Much of the existing research applies to undergraduate education, but results should be transferable to the graduate school environment. Research with specific strategies in higher education is summarized below.

Looking at postsecondary education, research shows that university students who are non-native English speakers benefit from sheltered instruction practices. According to Bifuh-Ambe (2009), more than 70 percent of foreign students in American universities are from areas where very little or no English is spoken. In a qualitative case study, they found that ELL university students face challenges similar to ELL students in secondary and elementary schools. These challenges were in receptive and expressive language; writing; content area material; and teaching, learning, and assessment models. The study showed that university professors can help their students by using many of the same techniques found in sheltered instruction: explaining new vocabulary, using visuals, providing prepared notes, and modifying and using a variety of assessments. Universities need to consider hiring ELL trained staff and creating services to aide these students.

Wang, Martin, and Martin (2002) studied English literacy problems for Asian graduate students by reviewing other studies and by interviewing a Chinese doctoral student. They identified common problems encountered by Asian students and proposed strategies similar to those found in sheltered instruction programs, such as focus on vocabulary, content outline, and semantic maps. They also noted that Asian students have problems understanding English due to a speaker's rate of speech, accent, and slang.

Baik and Greig (2009) identified at-risk ELL students in an undergraduate program and tested the benefits of using a sheltered tutorial program. This program used a task-based approach to supplement classroom activities and help students improve their English language skills. Baik and Greig's study suggests that discipline specific programs help ELL students improve and can provide long-term benefits. There was a positive correlation between attendance and academic results, and the authors stress the importance of early identification and intervention of ELL students who struggle.

Working with Chinese ELL students in Australia, Miler (2005) experimented with strategies for helping students improve their written and oral communication skills. Miller focused specifically on problems that Chinese students have in using English articles a, an, and the. Results of her study indicated that students were initially resistant to lessons on grammar but nevertheless demonstrated improved communication skills after participating in the study.

In a qualitative study of a cross-cultural Masters program in Khartoum, Sudan, Cronjé (2009) describes the importance of a program taught in a second language and second culture to be flexible. Cronjé also emphasizes the importance of watching for cues to aide in the understanding between the students and the professor. When the procedures and assessments presented problems for the students, the author could deduce this from body language, facial expressions, and vocal tone.

*Related Applications For Graduate Education – Sheltered Instruction*

Many of the applications described in the research on sheltered instruction can also be applied in post-secondary education. Much of the existing research applies to undergraduate education, but many results should be transferable to the graduate school environment. Research similar to that by Baik and Greig (2009) is needed to study methods for identifying at-risk ELL students in graduate programs. To help these students improve their academic performance, graduate schools may need to develop sheltered classes that are structured to work solely with at-risk ELL students. Such classes could focus on discipline-specific vocabulary and jargon, writing skills and oral communication skills. Replicating strategies discussed above, graduate faculty may consider providing vocabulary lists, reading guides, and content outlines that can assist students in grasping the relevance of the course material.

*Professional Development*

Professional development must be conducted to help teachers accept the idea of sheltered instruction. Hansen-Thomas (2008) recognizes the importance of professional development in their article and provides readings on quality programs for professional development concerning sheltered instruction.

Crawford, Schmeister, and Biggs (2008) examine the effects of interactive professional development for ELL teachers. Their study took place in an elementary school where 294 of the 425 students were identified as ELL. Five years ago, only 100 students were identified as ELL in the school. The researchers used the Levels of Use interview protocol to gather data from 23 teachers who had taught at the school for two consecutive years. The following spring, a professional development team met with ELL teachers at the school and a plan of action was devised. “Enhancing English Language Learning in Elementary Classrooms,” a 45 hour, formal professional development class was given and accompanied with observations and coaching from professional development team members. Pre-intervention data showed that teachers had a strong desire to learn more about effective ELL methods. Post-intervention results showed that teachers were using many strategies that were learned from the intervention. Teachers recognized the improvement in skills and knowledge that they had attained from the intervention, but they also felt overwhelmed when they understood the vast amount of time needed to prepare for sheltered instruction. More study on the time-consuming tasks of ELL preparation and instruction is needed since they differ from mainstream preparation and instruction. Teachers believed they learned the most from having the opportunity to practice what they learned and the opportunity to receive individual mentoring and coaching.

Studies on the importance of professional development validate the need for additional ELL resources for educators. Research shows that intensive and individualized professional development is effective. ELL instruction is relatively new, and follow-up is important for teachers. The differences among the students – their languages and dialects, educational backgrounds, and cultures – create a myriad of possibilities and classroom situations. It would be beneficial to have a mentor or coach to refine what has been learned in professional development.

*Related Applications For Graduate Education – Professional Development*

Applying these same principles in the graduate school environment, educators must be open to learning new techniques to improve academic performance by non-native speakers. In typical graduate programs, educators are content experts and frequently have extensive experience. Many graduate educators, however, may not be aware of techniques for supporting students who are non-native English speakers. With the increasing number of ELL enrolled in graduate programs, professional develop is needed to share effective teaching strategies that will help improve the academic performance of the ELL cohort.

**CONCLUSION**

There is a pressing need to address the academic challenges faced by non-native English speaking students in graduate programs in the United States. With the number of international students increasing rapidly, educators need to seek ways to meet the academic needs of these students. There is extensive research related to effective

teaching strategies for ELL students in K-12; educators in graduate programs can benefit from studying this research and applying the strategies that have proved effective.

Based on existing research, a number of proven strategies may be effective in the graduate classroom. For example, sheltered classes that are structured to work solely with at-risk ELL students may be needed. Such classes could focus on discipline-specific vocabulary and jargon, writing skills and oral communication skills. In the traditional classes, graduate faculty may consider providing vocabulary lists, reading guides, and content outlines that can assist students in grasping the relevance of the course material. Graduate programs may want to seek ways to add ELL support resources, such as ELL resource teachers, adjuncts or tutors. With increased awareness, graduate faculty may seek opportunities for professional development that will enhance teaching skills in the increasingly diverse classroom environment.

Additional research is needed to help graduate educators determine best practices in the classroom and to determine effective methods of identifying at-risk students who are non-native English speakers. Providing effective instruction to students who are ELL ultimately raises the level of instruction for all students, potentially improving the academic performance of ELL students as well as other students in the classroom.

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