

**Rationale - Project ACE Curriculum Design Proposal (effective 05-01-2009)
(Accelerated Content-based ESL)**

Rationale for Alternative EAP Curriculum

At MDC, administrators and faculty are generally aware of the importance of the EAP student body because of its large size. These students constitute 17% of all credits taken at the College. Nevertheless, content and EAP faculty could benefit from greater collaboration. The ACE Project aims to increase ties and understanding by developing stronger curricular connections and facilitating articulation for students. These connections will be made transparent to the students. When students know their learning is meaningful and valuable, as well as enjoyable, they persist. Content-Based Instruction serves to facilitate relationships and reduce barriers perceived by students.

In recent years we have seen record high waves of immigration to the U.S., and these trends project increases in enrollment for college level EAP programs (Ingash, 2000). Society benefits when newcomers are educated and can transfer their skills in new settings. For example, an immigrant with a background in medicine may not readily be able to pursue licensing as a medical practitioner in the U.S. due to limited English proficiency, but may choose to earn another medically related degree at MDC. Such a student could benefit from the ACE-EAP curriculum providing a content-based foundation in English language learning offered in an accelerated mode.

The ACE Project curriculum design proposal was first developed as part of a Title V grant proposal at Miami Dade College after a review of findings from educational researchers and practitioners who are experts in the field of teaching academic English as a Second Language. Three key findings support the ACE Project curriculum proposal to design an alternative accelerated content-based ESL offering at MDC. They include research indicating that: (1) second language learners with higher academic literacy skills in the first language more easily transfer such skills into learning a second language (Cummins, 2001, Crandall & Kaufman, 2007, and Scarcella 2002); and (2) persistence of ESL students in college is negatively impacted by “structural barriers” such as programmatic isolation from other college disciplines or required developmental reading and writing courses unrelated to what they want to study (Ingash, 2000), and (3) systematic integration of content into language learning curricula promotes efficacy by reflecting authentic academic purposes (Met, 1998).

1. Strong educational background for ACE-EAP students

With respect to the relationship between first language (L1) academic background and second language (L2) learning, students admitted in ACE-EAP program at MDC will come with strong educational backgrounds. They will either have already attained university degrees or had some university level education outside of the U.S., demonstrating an aptitude for success in a rigorous higher education setting. While this background evidences a facility with learning academic content, ACE-EAP students still need to develop academic language skills in English and knowledge of ways to be successful in U.S. college degree courses. This is a goal they share with the traditional EAP student population at MDC. The difference is that the ACE curriculum will take advantage of these students’ capacity to transfer their higher academic literacy skill base and learn more quickly. In one sense, the ACE-EAP student population could be described as an “honors” subset of the general population. In addition to new admissions from outside of the college,

exceptional students enrolled in the regular EAP program could also apply for transfer admission to the ACE-EAP program if they have demonstrated a potential for success in an accelerated content-based program. Evidence would include a high GPA in traditional EAP course work, instructor recommendation, and an application packet including a writing sample.

2. Accelerated learning

MDC's traditional six-level EAP program is typical in some ways to those offered in other institutions of higher education, and it has been in place in its current form since 2000, with some limited competency revisions in the early years. The global goal of EAP programs as specified in Florida Department of Education documents is that EAP students are ready to mainstream into ENC 1101 (Composition 1) and freshman level general education course work upon completion of the 1600 series of EAP classes (level 6). At present, the six-level EAP program has four courses per level in Grammar, Speech-Listening, Reading, and Writing (24 courses), two Accent Reduction courses, and companion lab sections for the Accent Reduction, Speech-Listening and Writing classes. The total number of EAP course offerings is 40. Essentially, the learning outcomes for the four core course groups are as follows:

- **Reading:** to develop the ability to comprehend text appropriate to the level and expand vocabulary
- **Writing:** to progress from the construction of simple sentences to the ability to produce academic essays
- **Speech-Listening:** to be able to understand and respond in oral communication
- **Grammar:** to understand and use the various tenses and grammatical structures in both speech and writing.

With all of these course offerings, it can take a student who begins with very limited English skills up to two years, or longer, to complete six levels taking 14 credits per term with four 3-credit courses and two 1-credit labs for a full-time load. For some, this extensive exposure to work with ESL is needed. As Cummins (2001) notes, "it typically takes at least 5 years for ELL [English Language Learners] students to catch up academically to their native-speaking peers in L2 (English)." Although most of Cummins' research has focused on elementary and secondary students, it is clear that developing social communication skills in a second language is different from developing academic competence in a second language for any age group. It is one thing to be able to talk about the weather or social interests, and quite another to be able to discuss freshman level academic topics such as eco-systems in science, paradigm shifts in psychology, or ethics in business.

Thus, while many of the ESL students at MDC need the two-year program, others, with strong academic backgrounds and high success potential, may benefit from an accelerated model. Scarcella (2002) states, "Learners who are highly literate in their first language are often able to pick up oral English fairly quickly, developing competence in vocabulary, grammar, and pragmatics." (p. 213). In another section Scarcella elaborates on this theory of transferability.

Just as learners' knowledge of their first languages helps them access basic reading materials, it also helps them to access more advanced academic ones. These learners have already studied such academic subjects as science, social studies, literature, and mathematics ... They are able to predict the placement of important information in these texts, and they have already been exposed to the ways different academic texts are organized. They have already encountered many academic genres in their first languages and they are comfortable with the same genres in English. Their superior

knowledge of subject matter and extensive background knowledge help them make sense of the English that they hear and read ... (p. 214)

Students admitted to the ACE-EAP program need to be self-motivated language learners with strong study skills and developed habits of academic discipline in order to succeed in a fast-paced program.

3. Content-based instruction focused on study of language and skills required by general education courses at MDC

With respect to integration of authentic content into the ACE curriculum, current grant-related research is underway to gather authentic spoken and written language collections from high frequency general education courses taken by students at MDC. The collection is to lay a foundation for an electronic corpus to be analyzed and used to inform curriculum development. In the long run, research and curriculum development for ACE-EAP courses may also influence MDC's core EAP curriculum, but for now, the ACE courses can provide a unique venue for an experimental course design on a more limited initial scale. One of the grant objectives is to build in mechanisms to promote replication of the curriculum in other settings if it proves successful (including multiple MDC campuses). To our knowledge, corpus-based research of this scale, tied to a curriculum development project, has never been undertaken at a community college. At the university level in the U.S., leaders in this field of research include Georgia State University, Northern Arizona University, the University of Michigan, and Brigham Young University.

The curriculum being developed for the ACE Project will provide students with opportunities to learn with authentic content-based instruction (CBI). CBI is defined by Brinton Snow & Wesche (2003) as the "concurrent teaching of academic subject matter and second language skills." For the ACE Project, language learning is tied to content from common general education required courses along with exposure to literature and lecture materials from the students' indicated majors. Widdowson (1990) states that second language teaching is more effective when course content is purposeful and relevant to expanding students' "schematic horizons." In other words, curriculum content reflective of actual general education course materials and assignments will enhance the students' knowledge base while they are learning ESL, and such a purposeful CBI curriculum will also enhance student' motivation. The students will have increased awareness of major requirements, and they will have a better understanding of how undergraduate students may navigate options when making requirement and elective decisions.

References

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