Title V Project ACE Program

LEARNING ABSTRACTS

By Michelle Thomas

Meeting the needs of immigrant students has always been an issue in education. A more recent higher education challenge has been to meet the educational needs of immigrants who arrive in this country with degrees in hand (Ingash, 2000). A new program at Miami Dade College is designed to do just that. Funded by a Title V grant from the U.S. Department of Education in 2008, the Project Accelerated Content-Based English (ACE) program offers a fast-track English for Academic Purposes (EAP) program to students with strong academic backgrounds: those who hold degrees in their countries of origin, have completed some college courses, or are college bound. Not only does the EAP program save students time and money by reducing the number of English as a second language courses required before they enter an academic program of study or the workforce, it also allows them to pursue language studies with other academically prepared peers.

The Title V Project ACE program was funded to:

1. Develop an accelerated EAP curriculum leading to an

accelerated EAP model;

2. Provide professional development for faculty and staff;

3. Design specialized integrated enrollment and retention services for ACE students; and

4. Disseminate project findings to other colleges and universities.

Curriculum

The accelerated option in EAP is made possible by the design of the curriculum, which features content-based instruction, an instructional approach whereby students learn English at the same time they are studying content from academic disciplines like psychology or biology. During year one of the grant, research was conducted on the language typical of general education courses that students often take their first semester in college, which enabled EAP faculty to learn more about the language demands of the college classroom. This research resulted in the creation of an electronic corpus—a collection of language samples that can be analyzed for high-frequency vocabulary words and grammatical structures—and the identification of tasks most germane to academic success. Analysis of the corpus and tasks, in turn, informed development of the course curriculum.

A salient finding from the corpus demonstrates, for example, the need for students to have a strong reading vocabulary in English. Students who take the four analyzed courses are required to read more than 800,000 words in a semester; approximately 29,000 of these words are distinct. An English language learner at the intermediate level typically knows about 3,500 words, whereas fluent learners of the language know 10,000 or more words (McCarthy, 2007). Thus, courses created in the ACE curriculum emphasize the acquisition of vocabulary and strategies students may use when they come upon unfamiliar words in course readings. Corpus data also yields insights into which grammatical structures are most characteristic of a particular writing genre,

thus allowing instructors to teach grammar specific to academic tasks that students will encounter in their future college courses.

Most importantly, ACE provides a connection with regular college classes. Advanced courses offered under the auspices of Project ACE form a learning community with two additional academic classes, a three-credit psychology course required in all associate degrees at Miami Dade College, and a one-credit elective in library internet research. The learning community allows ACE students to earn four credits toward their degree while receiving support for those classes from a six-credit EAP course in reading and writing and a six-credit course in speaking, listening, and grammar. The opportunity to take a regular college-level class with college students is a highly prized experience for many ACE students, who feel that mixing with other college students verifies they can succeed in that environment.

Intermediate classes in the ACE curriculum are also offered within a learning community of two EAP courses, with eight credits in speaking, listening, and grammar, and an additional eight credits in reading and writing. Under Project ACE, language lab courses that were traditionally taken as separate courses at Miami Dade College are now integrated within the ACE curriculum.

The technology alignment was made in response to MDC English language learners' desire to see greater connections between language classroom and lab instruction. Hence, ACE courses are being offered in a smart classroom, a classroom that was remodeled to create an integrated language lab and classroom complete with mobile modular furniture to accommodate various configurations, Netbook computers, and Polycom conferencing capabilities. The classroom facilitates access to information from academic disciplines and provides opportunities for independent learning and flexible practice in the English language.

Since the program began in the fall of 2009, 251 students have participated, while other interested students are on a waiting list. After an initial admission process pilot for the ACE classes in fall

2009, the program admission standards were revised, increasing the minimum GPA expected to enroll and implementing a more rigorous application process. Despite the more demanding admission procedure, students are filling the ACE classes quickly. Inquiries clearly demonstrate the demand for specialized English language programs, a trend that has allowed Project ACE staff to identify new populations in higher education that may otherwise be underserved and to document their needs for future program planning. To date, 98 percent of the students enrolled in ACE completed the program, and 70 percent of ACE students have been retained; this figure does not include students who enrolled in other institutions of higher education or engaged in meaningful educational pursuits, like preparing for board examinations.

Professional Development

Given that content-based, corpus-informed instruction is new for many higher education language educators, faculty teaching the specialized curriculum with Project ACE and others who were curious to learn innovations in language teaching came to a workshop to retool. Pat Byrd, professor emeritus from Georgia State University and known for her scholarly contributions to linguistics and language education, was one of the workshop facilitators. She was joined by Kate Moran, Ph.D. candidate in applied linguistics from Georgia State University.

The 12-hour workshop familiarized participants with select readings from the literature, including articles by Metz (1994), Coxhead and Byrd (2007), and James (2006). They were also presented a model of content-based instruction developed by Project ACE curriculum and assessment specialist Kelly Hernandez, lead faculty Cynthia Schuemann, and Pat Byrd. By referencing the model, faculty can consider and integrate course competencies from content area courses in addition to course competencies for EAP as they plan instruction and write syllabi.

With respect to corpus-informed instruction, faculty also gained insights into the language of the college classroom through Byrd's and Moran's analysis of the corpus. For example, analysis

of the spoken language samples revealed that professors often deliver lectures using a conversational register or manner of speaking. While this register may make the content easier for native English speaking students to grasp, the colloquial language interspersed with abstract academic content words may be hard to follow for non-native speakers of English. Hence, English language learners need to be taught to listen for transition words that function as signposts for important information given in lectures. Similarly, the corpus also illustrated linguistic shifts in the written texts that may be hard for students to navigate. The psychology textbook, for instance, alternates in style from conversational tone to formal academic prose. Hence, faculty learned to examine textbooks from the content-area lectures to look for patterns of language use that may be unfamiliar to English language learners, and watched lecture clips from the general education classes for the same. They also worked with online tools, such as Word Profiler (www.lextutor.ca/), to explore the vocabulary use in sample texts and plan instruction accordingly.

Faculty found the workshop extremely beneficial not only for teaching the new curriculum, but also in their regular professional practice. On the evaluation, one participant reported that she had gained, "an understanding of corpus-informed EAP and how it can be incorporated not only in the ACE project classes, but also in my own." Subsequent professional development workshops for Project ACE will be offered online.

Specialized Integrated Enrollment and Retention Services

Noting the effectiveness of integrated academic-student services retention strategies based on Johnson and Kreuzer's (2001) comprehensive student development model, the ACE Project is also designing a plan for integrated academic-student services using a team approach to increase retention and student success. Program coordinator Ernesto de la Hoz and recruitment, retention, and research specialist Madelyn Cintron-Rodriguez took the Johnson and Kreuzer model and studied the process

that prospective students follow from first point of contact with college personnel to graduation. The integrated enrollment and retention services plan incorporates best practices already in place at various campuses throughout MDC, thereby increasing buy-in from colleagues. This research resulted in the creation of a concept map using Webspiration (www.mywebspiration.com); the concept map is being used to guide discussions with program chairs from other MDC campuses that would like to offer the ACE program in the future. The instrument also points to where each student service encounter can be measured for program evaluation purposes. For example, student success in the ACE courses is monitored through student referral and subsequent participation in academic support programs.

Project Dissemination

An important grant activity is the dissemination of the ACE model to other campuses and institutions, and activities are well under way to that end. Other campuses throughout MDC plan to offer ACE classes in 2011. Project ACE faculty and staff recently presented at the International TESOL conference to an audience comprised largely of community college faculty interested in building their own corpora for language teaching. Another presentation was made at the League's Innovations conference in March 2010, and a presentation on the corpus-informed curriculum was made at the Southeast Regional TESOL conference in Miami, Florida, in September 2010. More information about the Title V Project ACE can be viewed on YouTube by the title, *Learn English with Project ACE.*

References

Coxhead, A., & Byrd, P. (2008). Preparing Writing Teachers to Teach the Vocabulary and Grammar of Academic Prose. *Journal of Second Language Writing, 16*(3), 129-147.

Ingash, J. (2000). Linguistic Diversity, Immigration, and Today's

Undergraduates: Demographics In J. W. Rosenthal (Ed.), *Handbook of Undergraduate Second Language Education* (pp. 3-27). Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Earlbaum.

James, M. (2006). Transfer of Learning From a University Content-based EAP Course. *TESOL Quarterly, 40*(4), 783-805.

McCarthy, M. (2007). *Assessing Development of Advanced Proficiency Through Learner Corpora.* Retrieved May 11, 2010, from Pennsylvania State University, Center for Advanced Language Proficiency Education. Website: http://calper.la.psu.edu/downloads/pdfs/CALPER_ALP_Corpus.pdf

Met, M. (1998). Curriculum Decision-making in Content-based Language Teaching. In J. Cenoz and F. Geness (Eds.), *Beyond Bilingualism: Multilingualism and Multilingual Education* (pp. 35-63). Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

Michelle Thomas is Title V Project ACE director at Miami Dade College-InterAmerican Campus, Miami, Florida.