Advocating for and Implementing Credit for ESOL Classes

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Many higher education institutions are working hard to implement inclusive practices to help all of their students succeed, but offering a curriculum that includes credit for English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes is one area that still separates ESOL students from the rest of the student body. As Deborah Osborne has written in College ESL Quarterly, "It is flirting with hypocrisy to welcome the diversity and wider perspectives that international students bring to universities, and extol the virtues of internationalization, while ensuring that many are kept insulated and apart from the university" (2015). Osborne’s statement suggests that institutions should explore all ways to implement changes to avoid isolating and excluding these students, even in the credit given for their language skill accomplishments.

International students bring many benefits to higher education institutions. However, many universities require these multilingual students to take multiple ESOL classes to satisfy admission requirements without providing credit for those mandatory courses. To foster equity and inclusion and internationalize, institutions should offer degree-credit for ESOL courses. Doing so values multilingual learners’ prior learning, recognizes the students’ journeys toward global citizenship, and highlights the rigor of English language programs and expertise of faculty.

Granting credit values emerging multilingual students’ prior learning and language skills and rewards them for the credit and time spent focusing on English as an additional language. Therefore, students’ skills are recognized as assets to the institution and community versus deficits they must overcome. Having a for-credit ESOL structure provides one way for higher education institutions to live out a mission of inclusion and equity for our multilingual students that aligns with current Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) statements. Furthermore, the benefits range from a tool for shortening time to graduation for current students to a recruitment asset as prospective students gain awareness that the university supports internationalization and globalization in ways that reduce barriers and offer support toward their goals of degree completion.

Offering credit for ESOL courses clearly benefits multilingual students, but it should also be noted that doing so brings often under-highlighted benefits to English language programs as well. Through increased recognition, English language programs may move out of the shadow of continuing education, or worse yet - remedial education, and be on par with other departments, such as languages and humanities departments. Just as offering credit allows an institution to publicly recognize the value of multilingual learners, it also validates ESOL faculty, allowing them to be included as subject-matter experts seen as equal to colleagues and counterparts across the university.

**Case Study: Washburn University IEP, Topeka, KS**
One example of a university that recognizes its multilingual students’ value is Washburn University (WU) in Topeka, Kansas.
The figure below explains the path WU followed towards offering General Education credit for ESOL coursework.

![Figure 1](image)

**Figure 1**
**Washburn University IEP – Journey to Credit**

WU took the first step toward offering degree credit for ESOL classes in 2012 when the most advanced level of the Intensive English Program (IEP) was approved for general elective credit; in other words, the remedial label was removed from the courses. Students were then able to use ESOL course credits for part of their degree credits for graduation as elective credits. Rationale for this first step toward credit included mapping the course student learning outcomes to those in intermediate and advanced language courses taught in the Modern Languages department. That same year, TESOL (2012) published a position statement advocating that higher education institutions award degree-granting credit to ESOL coursework, so this was also used for rationale in this process. The proposal was approved later that year. As the diagram illustrates, the next step was to collaborate with different stakeholders across campus to approve these same ESOL courses for foreign language credits in some of the majors that required them. This process was straightforward after comparing course outcomes with the other WU language courses.

While making these strides, the ESOL administrator formed an IEP Advisory Council and met with English Composition instructors, academic advisors, and departmental advisors. In addition, IEP faculty became involved in teaching WU college orientation courses for mixed groups of multilingual learners and local students, presenting to faculty across campus about multilingual learner needs, and representing these learners on the WU Academic Committee for Diversity and Inclusion. Consequently, IEP faculty became more visible across campus to better advocate for ESOL student needs.

Building all these relationships led to the next several steps on the WU journey toward more credit for ESOL courses. Multilingual learners who had completed the IEP can now apply up to twelve ESOL credits toward the International Studies minor at WU while also fulfilling their study abroad requirement for that minor program. The most recent step was the approval of the Level three IEP courses for general education credit in humanities. These classes now hold the same credit that Spanish, French, or Japanese language courses already had at WU. When this was announced to one Japanese student, he remarked that it was “game-changing.”

Beyond the scope of the diagram, plans are currently underway to remove the remedial label from the Level two ESOL courses at the IEP. Then, these courses in intermediate-level English language could also count as elective credit, much like the Level three courses did before they became general education credit. At the same time, Washburn University ESOL
administration is not forgetting that this credit change can also benefit U.S. resident multilingual learners who might come to WU from area high schools and is using it as a recruiting tool. Dual-credit courses are becoming an option for these students to earn general education credit at WU even while they are still enrolled in high school.

What type of credit makes sense for your institution?
Through the previous examples, it is clear that there could be different paths toward including ESOL credits in degree curricula. The specific types of ESOL credit offered vary across institutions but may range from any number of the following types of credit: free or general electives, general education, foreign language, humanities, diversity, intercultural knowledge and competence, graduation credits, or a minor in ESL/ESOL. Somewhat surprising, the credit offered could even differ across an institution based solely upon a student’s major. For example, one college or program might award foreign language credit for ESOL courses, while another awards free elective credit. Both are beneficial to the students provided they are awarding degree credits that would otherwise be met with additional courses, which can now be satisfied with required ESOL courses.

How does an institution start this process? Where might one begin?
Often laying the groundwork for pursuing credit starts long before ESOL courses appear on transcripts and begin to satisfy degree requirements. It can involve learning more about the university system and becoming actively involved in shared faculty governance by attending faculty committee meetings, particularly those related to general education requirements or transfer credit. It could include ESOL administrators presenting to university committees on the needs of international students studying in the U.S. or simply educating academic advisors on the various policy requirements that uniquely affect those students. In other words, taking advantage of any opportunity to represent international students’ value and needs along with that of the highly qualified faculty employed in the language programs is foundational to advocating for ESOL credit.

Who are your allies and partners?
Gaining degree-credit for ESOL courses requires partnering with allies across campus to help advocate for multilingual students and navigate through what might be a complex system of on-campus bureaucracy and seemingly endless hurdles. In some situations, it may mean fostering interdepartmental collaboration where possible until circumstances change. Building relationships and advocating for multilingual learners is the key to laying the foundation to credit change. Examples of possible allies might include:

- international programs and/or international student and scholar services offices
- faculty committees
- DEI committees or groups
- admissions and recruiters
- English or humanities departments
- language departments
- university academic advisors and/or academic affairs offices

Once the groundwork has been laid, the rationale determined, and allies identified, the next steps will depend on the institutional context and circumstances. More and more higher education institutions nationwide are offering credit or at the very least, starting the much-needed conversation around the topic. The time is right to make this push, which supports our students, programs, and profession resulting in numerous benefits to all stakeholders and most importantly a more equitable, inclusive, and welcoming.
environment for multilingual students, our primary focus.

References


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