

Stakeholder Summary

Program-Specific ESL Courses Increase Academic Performance, Student Engagement

Many English as a Second Language (ESL) students say their limited language skills create barriers to academic success, such as not actively participating in class, trouble collaborating with other students and increased difficulty working independently. A new study by the **Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO)** finds that sheltered, program-specific ESL courses, such as OCAD University's English Language Pathway Program, can lead to increased academic performance and better overall student engagement. However, the designers of these programs must be mindful of the effects of isolating ESL students, as many participants felt disconnected from the larger student body.

Project Description

Impact of Sheltered ESL Support Programming on Student Engagement and Academic Performance at OCAD University examined the English Language Pathway Program, known as Pathway, which can be selected by ESL students in the first year of a four-year design degree. Pathway features a set of five ESL-only versions of required program-specific courses, with the remainder of courses being taken with native English speakers. Using interviews, surveys and institutional data, the authors of the study compare Pathway students to other ESL students who only took a first-year ESL writing course.

Findings

Pathway students said that the primary benefit of the program was the creation of a “safe space” where students could share experiences and create a community of support, reducing fear of judgment by their native English-speaking peers and allowing them to participate more in class. Many students commented on the level of isolation they felt from other students, but this was outweighed by the increased confidence they had gained. Pathway participants also said that the increased separation from native English speakers did not sufficiently challenge their language skills and limited their development.

While academic performance of Pathway students did improve in their first year when compared to other ESL students, the effect did not carry over in their second year of studies when they were fully integrated into regular classes. Students also felt challenged by the transition away from the “safe space” of Pathway. This is to be expected, say the study authors, as the purpose of the program was to ease students into postsecondary education and the shift to a more typical university experience would inevitably have challenges.

The study recommends continued use of sheltered ESL courses, particularly those designed with a block of classes to create a safe learning community. At the same time, program designers must be mindful of the effect of relative isolation and should consider a mix of sheltered sections, adjunct tutorials and study groups attached to regular course sections to help achieve increased interaction with native

English speakers. The authors also stress the importance of providing supports for students as they transition to a full load of integrated classes at the end of the sheltered ESL program.

Students who selected the Pathway option tended to come from families with higher parental education but weaker English speaking skills than other ESL students. The cultural backgrounds were extremely diverse, which the students appreciated as it encouraged greater cross-cultural interaction than typical classes.

Impact of Sheltered ESL Support Programming on Student Engagement and Academic Performance at OCAD University was prepared by Rebecca Smollett and Mina Arakawa from OCAD University, and Kateryna Keefer.