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The University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire faced the ethical dilemma of admitting non-native English speaking immigrants and refugees who were academically at-risk, but not providing the academic and language support the students needed to succeed. This paper provides a description and an evaluation of a transitional academic program designed to address these students' language and learning needs as well as help them integrate into the university. Its success is reflected not only in strong student improvement, but in the collaboration of many university departments and units to create an efficient and cost-effective administrative structure.

Non-native speakers of English require a high level of English language proficiency for full participation in the academic community of a university or college in both Canada and the United States (U.S.). Demographics, however, indicate that an increasing number of linguistically diverse students who do not have college-level English proficiency are entering our postsecondary institutions. Furthermore, this increase in English as a Second Language (ESL)(1) students and the resultant pressure for programming at the postsecondary level will only become even greater (Snow & Kamhi-Stein, 1998). For example, a survey of K-12 and adult ESL enrollments found that between 1985 and 1991, the ESL student population in K-12 classrooms in the United States increased by 51.3% to approximately 2.3 million students (Olsen, 1993). These numbers include immigrants, refugees, and native-born Americans of different language heritages.

The University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire (UW-Eau Claire), a comprehensive university with 10,000 students located in a city of 55,000 in the Upper Midwest, was until the late 1980s pretty much untouched by this dramatic increase in ESL students. However, by 1989, the growing number of ESL students at the university, and the academic difficulties these students were encountering, brought the issue of providing appropriate institutional support for students with weak language proficiency to the attention of faculty, advisers, and other support service staff. With many of these students coming in with American College Testing (ACT)(2) English scores of more than 10 points below the average student, it seemed apparent the institution was not meeting their needs (Bosher, 1992). UW-Eau Claire was in the ethical dilemma of admitting students who were academically at-risk, but not providing them with the support they needed to be successful.

Brinton, Sasser, and Winningham (1992) identified several key issues that many institutions with ESL populations have to address in order to meet the needs of their non-native speakers of English: (a) lack of curricular guidelines and continuity of instruction, (b) continued growth in the number of ESL university students, (c) gaps between high school skills and university expectations of ESL students, and (d) limited academic success of university ESL students.

These issues posed problems at UW-Eau Claire. The concern over how to address the issues outlined by Brinton et al. and how to best provide appropriate ESL services resulted in an external audit (Bosher, 1992) of the campus's existing English as a Foreign Language (EFL) program for international students. This audit recommended (a) the development of new ESL courses specifically for ESL students; (b) the development of a curriculum which focused on integrating academic listening, vocabulary, speaking, reading and writing skills; and (c) joining academic content courses with ESL adjunct classes and tutoring. In short, the university needed to develop "an academic bridge program for ESL students" which would "truly offer those students who are accepted the kind of preparation and support services needed to be academically successful" (Bosher, 1992, p. 15).

The result of the audit was the development of the Commanding English Program in 1994. Its theoretical and ethical foundations notwithstanding, the obvious question was did it work. Were the students actually able to succeed at the university level once they finished the program? Were faculty time and university money being wisely spent, or would these resources be better directed elsewhere? Even after completing the one-year program, these ESL students would probably still be at-risk students: were they improving, and was their improvement great enough to justify the program? After running the program for 4 years, an argument needed to be made that the Commanding English Program should be continued. After describing the program, this paper will assess the level of success the students in the program achieved and place their achievement in perspective with other at-risk students.

### Program Limitation and Goals

Despite a concern for many of the ESL students by faculty and staff, the university faced a serious handicap with trying to create a new developmental program to meet the students' needs. As there were not a large number of ESL students to work with each year--usually between 9 and 15--the university administration was unwilling to provide any financial resources to develop a new program. This lack of institutional commitment is common to many campuses trying to improve the academic success of their ESL students (McNairy, 1996). The administration insisted that any new program make use of existing services and programs on campus. With this financial limitation, representatives from the EFL program, Academic Skills Center, American Ethnic Office, Admissions Office, Academic and Career Services, and Academic Advising began meeting to develop goals for a structured program that dealt with the issues raised during the audit. While all brought different perspectives and agendas to initial meetings, all agreed that there were ESL students on campus who were not being well served and that efforts needed to be coordinated to address their needs.

First, it was seen as critical that the curriculum be academically relevant and that the students see it as playing an important role in their academic success. It had been UW-Eau Claire's experience that many ESL students who spoke English fairly well and had graduated from an American high school tended to assess unrealistically their academic language proficiency and were, therefore, not always receptive to the need for more ESL or study skills instruction. These students frequently had avoided classes with heavy language demands at the secondary level and hoped to do the same in college. For these students, courses unrelated to their major, particularly English language classes, often were considered unnecessary, perhaps even as obstructing rather than

facilitating their educational goals. Many students resented being put in "ESL" classes if they had been mainstreamed in high school.

A second goal was to develop a program that would not make ESL students reliant long-term on special assistance but provide them with a solid language foundation as well as appropriate learning strategies that would prepare them for the academic demands they would be facing (e.g., Levitz & Noel, 1995). Third, recognizing research that indicates the importance of teaching study and learning skills in the context of courses in which the students are enrolled (Levin & Levin, 1991; Robyak & Patton, 1977), there was a desire to integrate as much as possible into the academic classes any support features that were instituted. Finally, an emphasis on academic literacy was seen as crucial, focusing on the more challenging context-reduced, cognitively demanding language tasks of formal schooling, the academic language needed to understand, analyze, and critique complex ideas (Cummins, 1981).

## The Commanding English Program

### Student Profile

UW-Eau Claire requires all incoming students to take the University of Wisconsin English Placement Test (UWEPT) before enrolling. Any student with either a low UWEPT score (below 450) or an ACT English score below 17 is required to take a remedial English writing course (English 099) before taking the required first-year English writing course (English 110). In the late 1980s the university began receiving applications from more linguistically diverse U.S. students, and these students were placed into English 099. The educational backgrounds of these students tended to be varied and inconsistent as well. While some could read and write in their native languages, the majority used their native language for speaking but lacked reading and writing skills, unlike most international (EFL) students. Most of the ESL students were Southeast Asians (Cambodian, Laotian, Vietnamese, and Hmong); the largest group was Hmong. All had been in the U.S. at least 4 years and had graduated from American high schools. Seventy percent (Hisrich, Upton, & Stoffers, 1994) of the ESL students who were admitted but required remedial English composition failed to complete the university-required freshman composition course (Engl 110) even by the end of their second year, with most of them dropping out before then. That these students were at-risk is shown in Tables 1 and 2. Table 1 compares the mean ACT English score, the mean UWEPT score, and the mean High School Percentile Ranks of students placed into the Commanding English Program (CEP) sections of English 099, with the mean scores and rank of students placed into regular sections of English 099 during the fall semesters of 1994, 1995, 1996, and 1997. An analysis of variance was run to determine the level of significance.

Table 1 Standardized Test Scores and High School Rank (Fall Semester 1994-1997)

Scores and Rank	Engl 099- CEP Section (N = 46)		Engl 099- Regular Section (N = 71)		P
	M	SD	M	SD	
Mean ACT English Score	13.1	1.9	15.0	2.0	<.001

Mean UWEPT Score	415	46	462	33	<.001
Mean High School Percentile Rank	60	22	54	16	ns(*)

(\*) not significant

Table 2 Standardized Test Scores and High School Rank (Fall Semester 1994-1997)

Scores and Rank	Engl 099- CEP Section (N = 46)		All First-Year Students (N = 8353)		P
	M	SD	M	SD	
Mean ACT English Score	13.1	1.9	22.4	2.2	<.001
Mean UWEPT Score	415	46	588	40	<.001
Mean High School Percentile Rank	60	22	72	20	<.01

The freshman students enrolled in the ESL sections of English 099 during 1994-1997 were at academic risk due to their weak ACT English and UWEPT scores. These ESL students had statistically significant lower placement scores compared to not only the average UWEau Claire freshman [ $F(1, 2011) = 40.37$ ,  $p$  [is less than] .001], but even the average native English-speaking student who required remedial English [ $F(1, 104) = 27.53$ ,  $p$  [is less than] .001]. Furthermore, as noted by McNairy (1996), weak students who have been passed through an American high school based on criteria other than academic achievement often have an inability to evaluate and monitor their progress and to utilize resources sufficiently and effectively to promote their success. Assuming these placement scores are comparable to students in previous years, it is apparent why the ESL students who had been admitted to UWEC in the past were generally academically unsuccessful.

### Program Description

The Commanding English Program is an academic bridge program focusing on reading and writing for academic purposes with additional work on vocabulary development and study skills. The general concept, as well as the name, was adopted from the University of Minnesota's Commanding English Program,<sup>(3)</sup> but the program structure and curriculum were modified to meet UW-Eau Claire's specific needs. Following the design first argued for by Snow and Brinton (1988), this one-year program (a) engages students in intensive and extensive reading in college-level subject matter, (b) provides practice working with language to develop skills and strategies necessary for proficient writing, and (c) provides opportunities for the application of learning strategies (e.g., note-taking skills) in academic contexts through the use of adjunct courses connected to regular academic classes. The Commanding English Program curriculum includes courses which focus on reading and writing instruction, in addition to selected courses from various disciplines open to all other university students. In Table 3, the specific courses the students in this program take during their first semester are listed.

Table 3 Commanding English Program Fall Semester Curriculum

Course	Title	Credits
English 099	Composition Fundamentals	3
English 099 Adjunct	Grammar and Reading Skills	0
Psychology 100	Introduction to Psychology	3
General Education 102	Study Skills in the Discipline (Psychology 100 Adjunct)	1
Math Elective		4
Library and Media Education 110	Library Research Skills	1

English 099 is required for all students with an ACT English Score below 17; this includes, by definition, all Commanding English Program students. The English Department offers a section reserved for ESL students, but uses the same curriculum for all sections. The adjunct to English 099 provides intensive work on grammar and reading skills, using reading and writing assignments from English 099 as the content for the course.

Commanding English Program students are enrolled in a regular section of Psychology 100, which is open to all students and is taught by instructors willing to work with ESL students. Snow (1997) argues that placing weak ESL students in supportive mainstream classes provides the best help for their transition to mainstream coursework. Psychology 100 was chosen because it meets the General Education requirements for almost all majors. The adjunct course to Psychology 100, General Education 102, is open to all students who are at academic risk and is taught by the Psychology 100 teacher. The focus is on the study skills needed to be successful in university-level classes; assignments and tests for Psychology 100 are used as the course content.

Commanding English Program students also enroll in the appropriate mathematics course as indicated by their placement tests. The university has a general math requirement that all students must meet. Since the language demands are not as difficult in these math courses, Commanding English Program students are expected to begin working to meet their math requirements during their first semester.

Because these students are generally very weak in their understanding of how to use library resources for classroom assignments, including the use of computers for research, they are also expected to take Library and Media Education 110. This class provides an introduction to the library while also giving them one more credit necessary for full-time student status (12 credits).

Courses taken during the second semester by Commanding English Program students are outlined in Table 4.

Table 4 Commanding English Program Spring Semester Curriculum

Course	Title	Credits
English 100	Academic Reading and Writing for Non-native Speakers	3
Geography 111	Human Geography	3
General Education 103	Critical Thinking in the Discipline (Geography 111 Adjunct)	2
Math/Science/ Humanities Electives		4 - 8

English 100 is a course for Commanding English Program students who, after completing English 099, are still not ready to take the university-required College Writing course. Most of the CEP students take this course.

Commanding English Program students are enrolled in a regular section of Geography 111, which is open to all students and is taught by instructors willing to work with ESL students. This course was chosen because it meets General Education requirements for almost all majors. General Education 103 is an adjunct to Geography 111 and is limited to ESL students. With an overall curriculum designed to promote critical thinking skills, students focus on reading, note taking, test preparation, and study skills using the content and assignments for Geography 111.

To round out their schedule, students are carefully advised and placed into courses they need to take to meet their major, minor or other general education requirements. Most Commanding English Program students are only permitted to take freshman-level courses during their second semester

While grants from the West Central Wisconsin Consortium were used to help offset startup costs for the Commanding English Program, all courses and services are now provided as a part of already established university programs and functions. The Commanding English Program is able to operate with no specific budget because it has been embraced by a broad cross-section of university offices, departments, faculty and staff who have taken on duties as part of their regular responsibilities. The primary duties associated with this program are as follows.

**Recruitment and admission.** Having developed the program, it was decided to use it as a recruitment tool to increase minority enrollment. Recruitment is essentially year-round and is a joint effort between the Admissions Office and the American Ethnic Office. Recruitment efforts include (a) visits to state and regional high schools known to have high populations of ESL students, and (b) regular contacts with high school counselors who work with this population. Students admitted into the program are considered conditional admissions and must satisfactorily complete the requirements of the program in order to remain in good standing at the university.

**Advising.** Advising is carried out at several levels. Upon entering the university, students meet with an academic advisor specifically assigned to work with the Commanding English Program students. Students are provided an overview of the program and are assisted in the registration process. The student services coordinator in the American Ethnic office and an advisor in the Academic Advising Office also meet regularly with these students to make sure they understand the program purposes and requirements, and assist in selecting appropriate courses for the subsequent semester. The Director of ESL Programs communicates with the faculty advisers for all Commanding English Program students before the spring semester registration process begins to make sure that all are aware of what the program is and the special needs of the students participating in the program.

**Instruction.** As already discussed, the language-oriented and academic support classes (Engl 099, Engl 100, Gen Ed 103) are taught by ESL faculty and instructors. Academic courses (Psych 100, Geog 111, LMED 110) are taught by faculty who have agreed to work with at-risk ESL students in their classes.

Monitoring. The progress of students participating in the program is monitored very closely, especially during the first two semesters on campus. Instructors report three times per semester on academic progress. Problems with study habits or poor test grades are noted quickly and are immediately addressed, either within the classes themselves, in tutoring sessions, or with their academic advisers.

Tutoring. Students are provided almost unlimited tutoring opportunities during their first year, as argued for by Carreathers, Beekman, Coatie and Nelson (1996). Tutors are hired, trained, and supervised by the ESL Program Manager in the Academic Skills Center. All students are assigned a tutor as a lab component of the English 099 class (fall) and English 100 class (spring) and attend sessions 1 to 2 hours per week to work on individualized grammar programs. During this time they can also receive assistance with reading and writing assignments. Optional tutoring is available for other coursework with the majority of students taking advantage of this service.

Mentoring. This optional program matches these first-year students with returning students of color to provide a role model, study partner, or simply someone with whom to share and discuss their university experiences (Carreathers et al., 1996). The number of contacts is mutually decided and varies. Over 70% of CEP students during fall semester of 1996 met with a mentor an average of fifteen times during the semester. The numbers have been comparable during other terms.

Communication. In order to facilitate communication between the wide network of instructors, advisers, tutors, mentors, and university officers involved with providing services to the students in the program, representatives from each of the units involved meet on a regular basis to discuss and plan. The Director of ESL Programs coordinates these efforts.

## Program Evaluation

The goal of the program evaluation was to determine whether the Commanding English Program was helping at-risk ESL students achieve academic success at the university. For the purposes of evaluating the program, academic success was defined by first-year grade point average (GPA), successful completion of the university's English competency requirement (a passing grade in Engl 110 and a passing score on the English competency examination), and the completion of three successive semesters. Consequently we asked whether the Commanding English Program positively influenced first-year GPA, the English Competency requirement completion rate, and the three-semester completion rate.

From fall semester 1994 through fall semester 1997, 46 ESI students started in the program. To provide a basis of comparison, the control group was native speakers of English enrolled in regular (i.e., non-ESL) sections of the remedial Engl 099. This group was chosen because they are placed into Engl 099 on the same criteria (ACT English and UWEPT scores) as the Commanding English Program Students.(4) Table 1 shows the mean ACT English score and UWEPT score for the two groups.

From fall 1994 to spring 1998, 46 students entered the Commanding English Program and 42 (91%) completed their first year with a mean grade point average of 2.45 (SD = .64) on a scale of

4.0. During this same period, from the control group of 71 native English speakers who took the remedial English 099 class, 55 (77%) finished their first year with a mean GPA of 2.09 (SD = .72). An independent t-test comparing these means shows the difference is significant (p [is less than] .01).(5)

This result indicates the Commanding English Program has had a positive impact on the first-year GPAs of students relative to their American counterparts who started out taking remedial English. As has been well documented (e.g., Ramirez, 1997), retaining students, particularly minority students, is dependent to a great extent on the level of academic success they achieve during their first year on campus. The curriculum and the structure of the Commanding English Program provide these students the support they need to address their academic shortcomings and achieve a good start to their university careers. This improvement in mean GPA is also valuable for two other important reasons. First, students who drop below a cumulative GPA of 2.0 are automatically placed on academic warning; Commanding English Program students appear to be at less risk of this. Second, several popular majors, like education and business, require a GPA of 2.5 or above for acceptance; Commanding English Program students have a better chance of reaching this cutoff with the support of this program.

In order to graduate, all students must complete the required English composition course (Engl 110) as well as pass an English competency test. Engl 110 is also a prerequisite to several other courses. Students are expected to complete the English competency requirement soon after they matriculate, and generally by their third semester on campus. For Commanding English Program students who started during 1994, 1995 and 1996,(6) 59% (19/32) completed the Engl 110 requirement by the spring of 1997. For the control group of native-English speaking students taking remedial Engl 099 during their first fall semester, 47% (24/51) completed this requirement in the same time period (no statistical difference). Of all new UWEC students, 85% (5269/ 6173) completed the English 110 requirement.

The fact that only 59% of the Commanding English Program students had completed the English 110 language requirement, in contrast to 85% for all new freshman in the same time period, illustrates the difficulty these students have in overcoming their weak language and academic abilities. Nevertheless, the Commanding English Program students are completing the English Competency Requirement at about the same rate (59% to 47%) as their native English-speaking peers who started in the remedial Engl 099 course. Having entered the university with significantly lower ACT English and UWEPT scores than these peers, Commanding English Program students are making progress in their language skills.

A major goal of the Commanding English Program is the retention of students. While the overall success of the program in seeing its students successfully graduate can only be determined by re-evaluating the program in a few more years, a strong preliminary indication can be seen by looking at whether these students have completed their first three semesters. For Commanding English Program students who started during 1994, 1995 and 1996,(7) 78% (25/32) completed their first three semesters. For the control group of native-English speaking students taking remedial Engl 099 during their first semester; 53% (27/ 51) finished their first three semesters. Looking at all new students, 76% (4720/6173) did.

The Commanding English Program appears to be very successful at helping its students stay enrolled in the university. The percentage of program students who completed their first three semesters (78%, SD = .42) was significantly better (independent t-test,  $p = [is\ less\ than] .001$ ) than the native English-speaking peers who started out taking remedial English (53%, SD = .50). In fact, the rate at which they completed their first three semesters was comparable to that of all new students (78% vs. 76%).

## Conclusion

The question this article seeks to answer is: Does the Commanding English Program work? In short, yes. The ESL students admitted into this program are academically at-risk, entering the university with placement scores much weaker than the average student's. In fact, their scores are much weaker than the average remedial student's. Their initial placement scores notwithstanding, the Commanding English Program students are meeting the academic challenge and showing a surprising level of success.

The Commanding English Program at UW-Eau Claire has been a successful academic bridge program for several reasons. The program provides the kind of academic preparation as well as the appropriate support services necessary to help ESL students who are at academic risk gain the skills and attitudes they need to be academically successful. The Commanding English Program is very structured, with students expected to take specific classes during their first year on campus. This allows faculty and advisors to closely monitor and work with students, which permits them to quickly respond to and assist students who are experiencing difficulties.

Furthermore, students see the program as relevant and beneficial to their long-term academic success. Most of the courses that they are taking meet graduation requirements. The few language and academic support classes they are expected to take deal directly with and support the material that they are studying in other classes. The language and study skills that are taught address the academic material that they know they must learn in order to do well in their classes. In general, there is no trouble with attendance in these support classes as students see the value and importance of coming.

Lastly, the Commanding English Program does an excellent job of integrating these ESL students into the university community. From the beginning, because of the expectations of the program, students develop relationships with academic advisors, faculty advisors, and with the instructors of the courses they are taking. They learn how to interact with people in a variety of offices across campus and how to get answers to their questions. With the mentoring and tutoring program provided, students have regular contact with good students who explain what it takes to do well at the university as well as how to deal with academic and personal issues.

As this program assessment shows, students do respond and learn to succeed when they are given the support they need. Colleges and universities across Canada and the United States differ in structure and mission, and the ability and desirability of implementing a full-fledged transitional academic program for post-secondary ESL students, such as the Commanding English Program, would vary greatly. Furthermore, the Commanding English Program is not magical. Students in the program still have many problems, which will make long-term success

at the university a challenge. In many respects, these students will have to work harder than their native English speaking counterparts to achieve similar successes. What the Commanding English Program does, and what universities and colleges across North America are ethically bound to do if they admit at-risk ESL students, is provide the academic and language support these students need as they transition from high school to college. It also provides this support in such a way that students see the relevance and take advantage of the help offered. The Commanding English Program is but one good model to follow, but it is a model that is working.

## Notes

(1) In this paper, ESL refers to students who have attended high school in the United States and Canada and who consider the U.S. or Canada their home, either as refugees, immigrants, or naturalized citizens. EFL (English as a Foreign Language) refers to international students in the U.S. or Canada who have completed their secondary education in their home countries and intend to return to their countries.

(2) This is one of two standardized, national tests that almost all American high school students take and which American universities use to determine student proficiency levels.

(3) Information about the University of Minnesota's Commanding English Program can be found at the following internet site: <http://www.gen.umn.edu/programs/ce/>.

(4) The Commanding English Program was started because it had been found that more than 70% of ESL students needing the remedial Engl 099 were not completing their English proficiency requirements and dropping out (Hisrich, et. al.), as compared to about 50% for native speakers of English. All ESL students needing Engl 099 are required to be in the Commanding English Program, so there was no true control group (i.e., ESL students needing remedial Engl 099 who are not enrolled in the Commanding English Program).

(5) The mean GPA for all UWEC students completing their first year during 1994 - 1998 was 2.69 (SD = .83).

(6) Students starting fall semester 1997 were not included since the CEP students would not have been eligible to take Engl 110 until fall semester 1998. These statistics were not available at the time this paper was written.

(7) Students starting fall semester 1997 were not included since the CEP students would not have been eligible to take Engl 110 until fall semester 1998. These statistics were not available at the time this paper was written.

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