

“Tidal wave 1.5” and the evolving TESL response

Student demographics suggest that a typical preparatory class for 'College English' at the SBVC has a conflicting mix of two divergent sets of learners. One set, comprising L₁ students, needs to be trained in 'communicative competence' in the same class and at the same time as the other set, mainly comprising the L₂ learners, needs the basic linguistic proficiency in English. Indeed, as the preceding research note estimates, our ENGL 015 and ENGL 101 classes at SBVC end up with 20-25% students whose College English needs are such that they need to receive ESL-focused instruction. Alarming as this estimate itself is, it may well be on the lower side, based on the reasoning elaborated below.

The Coming Wave of “Generation 1.5” Students:

This second group of potential ESL students that has been identified here is not unique to the SBVC, however. Rather, college English programs all over the U.S. are becoming increasingly aware of their presence. As the number of students in our schools has increased, so has the number of high school graduates and their influx into the colleges. This trend, which the educational demographers have dubbed as “Tidal Wave 2” is expected, as shown in Figure 1, to continue well into this decade. Most of these students are immigrants and U.S. residents born abroad, and have been exposed to the American culture and schooling, but are still in the process of learning English. They therefore form a distinct group by themselves and are often dubbed as “Generation 1.5”.

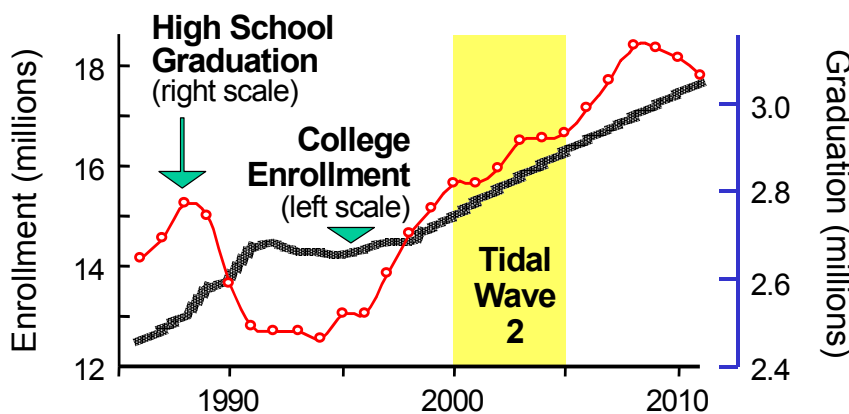


Figure 1:

Colleges are now bracing for the arrival of a rising number of high school graduates, often called the “Tidal Wave 2”, an increasing proportion of whom can be grouped as “Generation 1.5”

Source: National Center for Education Statistics.

Two characteristics make the English language learning needs of Generation 1.5 unique¹. One, since they have been in the U.S. for some time and have been schooled here, they are acculturated as well as orally fluent. Two, since they are still in the process of learning formal English, their writing is poor and grammar is weak. As Brett Thomas² notes in the December 2001 issue of CATESOL NEWS, these create problems in assessing and placing them in the appropriate English and ESL classes. These problems can be broadly grouped as follows:

- Because of their poor grammar and writing skills, sometimes these students get misplaced in low-level ESL classes.
- Their acculturation and oral fluency sometimes gets them mistakenly placed in very high-level English classes.
- Having already gotten placed out of ESL at the secondary school level, these students themselves feel too confident of their communicative competence to accept being placed in the ESL classes.

The result is the same in all these cases. Despite a plethora of already available facilities that can help an ESL learner prepare well for the Freshman Composition class, we are unable to help this group of learners whose numbers are certainly likely to rise. Indeed, their misplacement affects the rest of the class adversely, no matter whether it is a beginning ESL class, a preparatory class for Freshman English Composition, or the Freshman English Composition class itself.

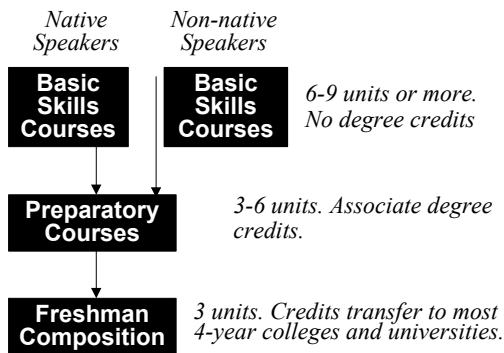
The Alternative Responses:

These “at-risk” Generation 1.5 students clearly need remedial courses in both, writing and grammar. It is not that native speakers do not need similar remediation. More often than not, they indeed do. In order to examine how we can address this problem, therefore, let us examine the practice in our sister community colleges elsewhere in California. There have, in the main, been three kinds of responses to resolve this problem:

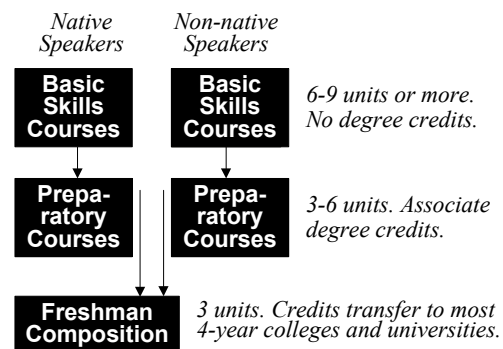
- Strengthening the preparatory program for Freshman English Composition by adding courses in basics skills for the native speakers.
- Separating the preparatory programs for native and non-native speakers, in addition to strengthening the basic skills program for native speakers.
- Providing separate preparatory and Freshman Composition classes for native and non-native speakers, in addition to strengthening the basic skills program for native speakers.

These three alternative strategies are conceptually illustrated in Figure 2 below, where they are labeled as Model 1, Model 2 and Model 3, respectively. Note that all the three models recognize the basic problem of “limited English proficiency” of these generation 1.5 learners and therefore emphasize stronger curricular inputs at the basic skills as well as preparatory levels. The difference is that Model 1 combines native and non-native speakers in a single setting at the preparatory level, whereas Model 2 separates them at this level as well and Model 3 separates them even in the Freshman Composition class.

Model 1: Expanding the preparatory program



Model 2: Separating the preparatory programs for native and non-native speakers



Model 3: Separate preparatory programs and composition classes for the native and non-native speakers

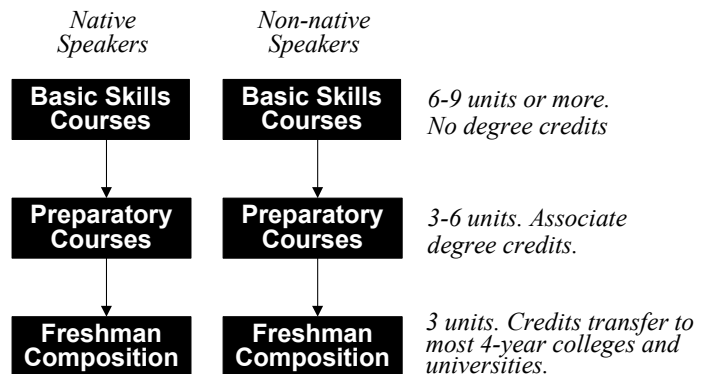


Figure 2:

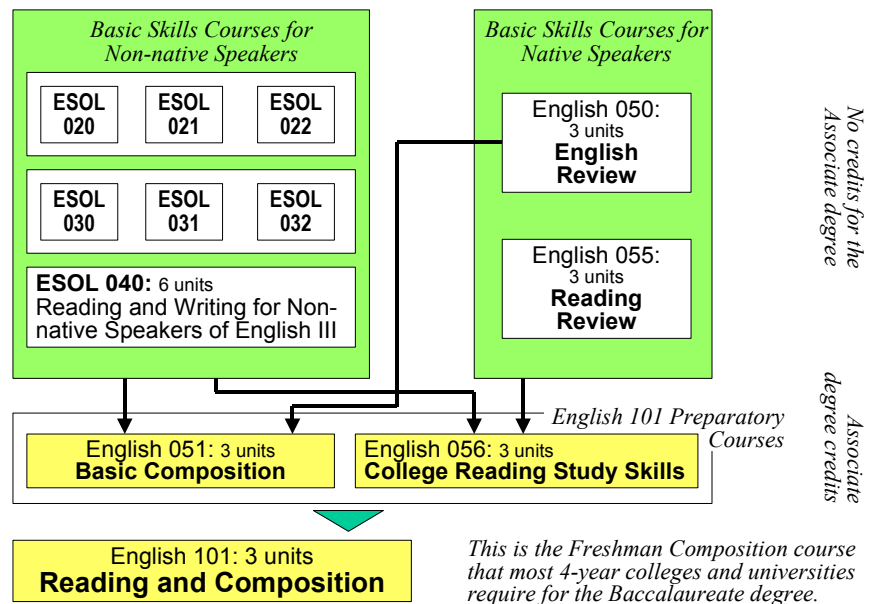
The community colleges in California have generally adopted three alternative strategies to tackle the generation 1.5 related problems of “limited English proficiency”.

Earlier, our English and ESL programs catered to the ESL students on one hand and, on the other hand, the native speakers who either needed to acquire all the literacy skills or needed to overcome their compositional deficiencies. In most of our community colleges, we now need to add a fourth group, the non-native speakers of generation 1.5 whose near-native proficiency in the oral skills often masks significant deficiencies in the use of formal or written language. Many community colleges and most of the 4-year colleges and universities also have the foreign students who have already mastered the literacy skills in their native languages.

English sequence at the San Diego Community College District (SDCCD), shown in Figure 3, is typical of Model 1. The native and non-native speakers here first acquire the basic skills, separately, and then join to take 6 units of preparatory courses, before advancing to the Freshman Composition class.

Figure 3:

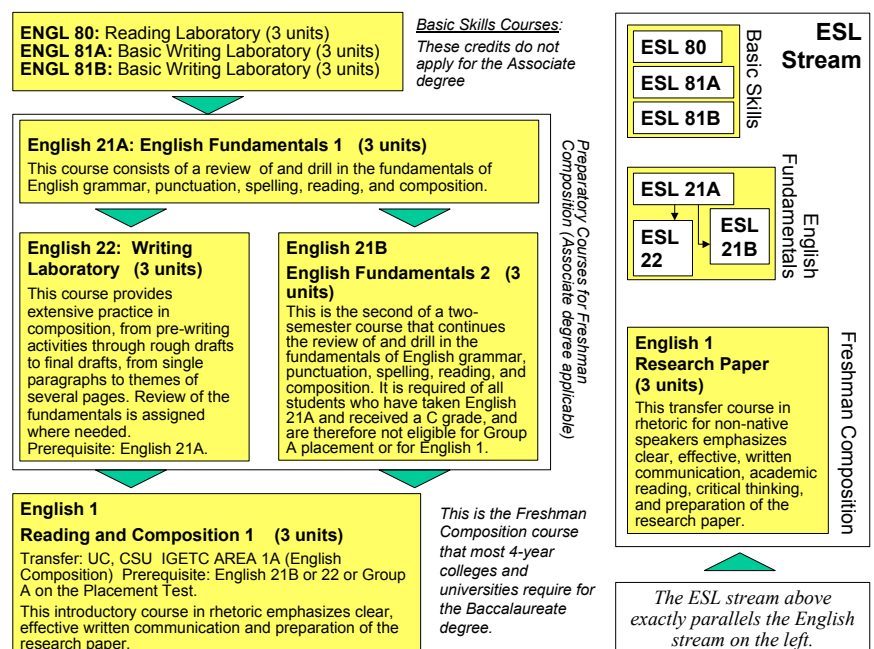
The sequence of English courses at San Diego Community College District comprises two 3-unit preparatory courses for Freshman Composition for those lacking the district's appropriate assessment skill levels for reading and writing.



Contrast this with the parallel streams of English and ESL courses at Santa Monica College (Figure 4) not only at the basic skills and preparatory levels but continuing to the level of Freshman Composition as well. This is an example of Model 3 described above.

Figure 4:

Parallel English (left) and ESL (right) streams at the Santa Monica College.



College credits for the ESL courses:

This example of parallel English and ESL streams at the Santa Monica College illustrates a growing trend in the 4-year and community colleges. Until recently, students received no degree-applicable credits for taking the ESL classes. At the Santa Monica College, and increasingly at many community and 4-year colleges and universities, students in these courses do earn foreign language transfer credits³.

There are two reasons for this. One, this helps the increasing number of non-native speakers plan their educational and financial logistics better. The other is the assumption that unawareness of their need to learn grammar and writing is not the only reason why the “at risk” students of generation 1.5 seem so reluctant to take ESL classes. They are unlikely to seek the courses that they need not, in terms of the degree-applicability of the units such courses carry, and nudging them to non-degree applicable course units by way of prerequisites is no longer a workable proposition. Therefore, the trend in many of the California community colleges has been to grant college credits for the ESL courses. Indeed, as of Fall 2000, as many as two-thirds of them offered such courses, according to the statistics compiled by Katheryn Garlow⁴, a former CATESOL (California Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages) President. Table 1 compares her statistics with the corresponding data for SBVC.

	Statewide	SBVC
Total number of ESL courses offered	1839	11
Number of courses applicable to the Associate degree	569 (31%)	0
Number of courses that earn CSU transfer units	514 (28%)	0
Number of courses that earn UC transfer units	61 (3%)	0

Table 1:

Many of the California community colleges now offer Associate degree-applicable ESL courses and many of them also transfer to the 4-year colleges and universities.

Source: Katheryn Garlow’s data, referenced in the footnote below.

Implications for English and ESL instruction at SBVC:

The English and ESL program at SBVC clearly has some catching up to do in order to prepare the generation 1.5 students for Freshman Composition. A large proportion of our students belongs to this group and its numbers are rising. The demographic setting of San Bernardino, which makes English the second and not the first language for many of our students, is only a part of the reason for this. An equally important reason is that recent high school graduates comprise a significantly larger proportion of students coming to the SBVC than is usual with the sister community colleges. Compared to the community colleges elsewhere in California, therefore, this makes enhancing the preparedness of generation 1.5 students for Freshman Composition class an urgent and challenging task for the SBVC English/ESL program.

Increasing as their numbers are, it would be grossly unfair to blame the problem of freshman underpreparedness entirely on Generation 1.5 students, however. True, as for English, much of this problem at the level of University of California rests on the students who speak English as a second language. At UC Riverside, for instance, almost 5% of the Fall 1999 freshman class and 4% of the Fall 2000 freshman class failed to pass the Subject A requirement. Students entering the UC must pass this exist exam — which is designed to ensure that they have the reading and writing skills needed to do undergraduate-level work — by the end of their first year or leave the campus. Many of these students are ESL speakers whose situation is succinctly described in the following extract from a recent article by Matthew Tresaugue⁵ in ‘The Press Enterprise’:

“One of those students was Andrea Negrete, a chemistry freshman from Saddleback High School in Santa Ana. She couldn’t speak English four years ago when she came to the United States from Peru. To learn the language, she read captions while watching television shows.

The Subject A test stumped her, so she enrolled in the summer program. She learned to write introductions and conclusions. Although she failed the test in a second attempt, she was encouraged because she understood better how to organize an essay.”

To the extent that under-preparedness for undergraduate course-work is an ESL problem, our seeking to help ESL students prepare better is clearly the desired solution. This is not to say that Freshman Composition poses no problems to the native speakers. For instance, at the California State University system, nearly 7% of fall 2000 freshman class had to be ousted due to the failure to master basic English and Math. Figure 5, taken from a recent article by Rebecca Trounson⁶ in the Los Angeles Times, summarizes the system-wide declining trend in Math and English proficiency levels at CSU since 1989. The University authorities there now believe that, at the level of English skills, a significant proportion of these students is unable to read analytically. The fact remains that the Math proficiency level has declined far more rapidly than English proficiency level, however, and there is no evidence that the ESL students tend to be particularly deficient in basic Math skills. Obviously, if poor reading ability is indeed what is holding many of these students back, then many of them are likely to be native speakers who too need remedial instruction. Be that as it may, the implication this has for our English program at the SBVC is simply this — we need to also address the remedial segment of our English program for the native speakers.

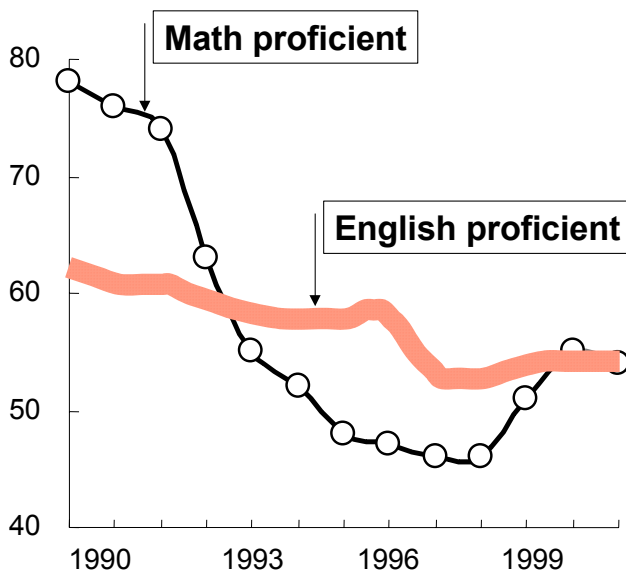


Figure 5:

The percentage of first-time CSU freshmen with college-level proficiency in Math and English has been persistently declining.

Source:
Los Angeles Times
(January 31, 2002)

We clearly need to organize two different tracks of preparatory College English classes, in order to cater to the needs of the SBVC students who can be broadly identified into the following two groups, in terms of their preparation for the Freshman Composition class :

- The ESL students who have acquired native to near-native proficiency in the language skills, and can compete with the native speakers in most college courses, except for the weaknesses in syntax, idiomatic usage, and grammar that limit their paragraph and essay writing skills.
- Many of our native speakers, and many non-native generation 1.5 students who have acquired the native fluency in oral skills need extensive training and practice in grammar, punctuation and usage.

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1. Linda Harklau, Kay Losey and Meryl Siegal (Ed.). *Generation 1.5 Meets College Composition: Issues in the Teaching of Writing to U.S.-Educated Learners of ESL* (Lawrence Erlbaum, 1999).
 2. Brett Thomas, Preparing for the Coming Wave of Generation 1.5 Students, *CATESOL News*, vol. 33, no. 3, p. 15 (Dec 2001).
 3. As a matter of fact, ESL program's Home Page on Santa Monica College's web site specifically notes that students completing the ESL 21A and ESL 21B earn transfer credits (for a foreign language). This is an advantage that the equivalent English courses (English 21A and English 21B) do not offer (<http://www.smc.edu/esl/diff.html>).
 4. Katheryn Garlow, "How Much Credit Do We Give ESL Courses?," *CATESOL NEWS*, vol. 33, no. 2, p. 1, 4-5 (August 2001).
 5. Matthew Tresaugue: 'English policy is issue at UCR', The Press Enterprise (November 14, 2001).
 6. Rebecca Trounson: 'Cal State ouster rate rises slightly', Los Angeles Times (January 31, 2002).