Indicating a Shift in College Culture

Author Response to: Whitestone's and McPherron's Reader's Comments and Views on my Brief Report, "Toward a Holistic Approach to Supporting English Learners in Universities"[1] (Vol. 3, No. 1, 2016)

John Beaumont*

Borough of Manhattan Community College

City University of New York

In their responses to my article, Sara Whitestone and Paul McPherron point out ways in which colleges and faculty can better serve English learners. The ideas they discuss can be seen as features of a larger cultural shift that needs to happen to meet the needs of English learners and other students with developing academic literacies. This shift is a change that can be facilitated by ESL faculty but must be embraced at all levels of the college. As Whitestone points out, English learners are engaged in a process that does not end with the completion of ESL courses, and that anxiety at the ESL-ENG divide can be eased by engaging with students, not as members of a perceived ESL subgroup, but as individual members of a larger multilingual population with varying literacy needs.

McPherron similarly notes that asking content faculty to identify their ESL students as a subgroup is not necessarily useful if it singles them out as a group in need of specialized treatment beyond the training of the content instructor. In the seminar I described in my original article, asking "What is an ESL student?" or "Who are they?" was useful only in that it helped faculty recognize that all students fall along a language and literacy spectrum and would benefit from support not only in ENG 101 but in other courses as well. As McPherron asserts, addressing the language needs of English learners cannot be the exclusive domain of ESL instructors but needs to become a responsibility shared by all faculty across disciplines. There is a multilingual reality—a cultural shift—that colleges need to embrace.

In fact, this cultural shift begins with the recognition that our student population is multilingual and comes with a vast array of literacy skills. The shift also involves opening channels of communication within departments and across disciplines about how to be effective in meeting students' various language and literacy needs. This change must be facilitated by academic administrators who fund college-wide initiatives and set the discourse, bringing attention and focus to this shared mission.

One indicator of the cultural shift at my college is a tutoring program for English learners in ENG 101 classes. Due to grant funding restrictions, only students enrolled in ESL courses can seek out tutoring in the ESL lab. After placing out of ESL, students like Whitestone's Seonae would go to the college's Writing Center and work with tutors trained in college writing, but who lacked pedagogical backgrounds in language acquisition and development. To address this need, the college is funding a pilot program, organized in collaboration between ESL and ENG 101 instructors, to train Writing Center tutors to work

---

[1]Beaumont, J. (2015). ENG 101 instructors' perspectives on the ESL experience. *NYS TESOL Journal, 2*(1), 89–97.

with English learners who have fulfilled the ESL requirements. The long-term plan is to have these certified tutors work with English learners in other courses across disciplines, where the need is just as great.

A second indicator of this shift involves ESL faculty reaching out to other departments. The aim is not to train faculty to act as ESL instructors but to provide them with basic knowledge and the resources to work with one another, ESL faculty, and tutors to meet the needs of their students. Currently, two ESL instructors and the ENG 101 coordinators are preparing a simple guide for ENG 101 instructors in how to give students useful feedback on their writing. This guide will be introduced in pre-semester orientations and discussed at meetings of the ENG 101 faculty. By providing this outreach, interaction, and support, ENG 101 teachers (and eventually other content faculty) will have their issues, concerns, or anxieties recognized and be better able to offer English language and literacy support to their students.

In addition, initiatives such as the BMCC Teaching Academy are being expanded. In the Teaching Academy, instructors make a four-semester commitment to focusing on their teaching and their students' learning. In cross-disciplinary groups, instructors observe one another, give nonjudgmental and constructive feedback, and experiment with small, incremental changes in their methods. These reflective practices enable faculty to see their teaching in new ways and, in turn, understand how alternative teaching approaches can benefit their diverse classrooms. While the Teaching Academy is not designed to focus specifically on English language learners, it is a model of the type of open, cross-disciplinary discourse around teaching and learning that makes addressing the needs of a multilingual student body possible. Such interaction is an essential part of the needed change.

The participants in the six-hour seminar described in my original article may have walked away with a heightened awareness of who their students were and with tools for working with English language learners. I question, however, whether the impact of such isolated workshops can last. A better direction may involve a concerted institutional change—i.e., to have faculty and tutors engage in sustained training, practice, and discussion across disciples at all levels of the college. Whitestone and McPherron remind us to view our students as highly multilingual and as having a range of language and literacy skills. Yet across many two- and four-year colleges, a monolingual English model remains dominant—and while it does, students will largely be seen as deficient. Our efforts to serve English language learners will be more successful if our discussion of how to serve them is part of a larger cultural shift in how the college community supports language and literacy development across the curriculum.

*Corresponding author: jbeaumont@bmcc.cuny.edu