

Ventura College Sabbatical Leave Proposal

Improving Language Instruction for Multilingual Students

Submitted by Karen Harrison

English as a Second Language (ESL)/English for Multilingual Students Department

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Instructor's Sabbatical Leave Status

Full-time hire date: August 2004 Part-time hire date: August 2001

Previous Sabbaticals: 0

Background of Sabbatical Project

During the past 15 years that I have been teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) at Ventura College, there has been a large increase of students from a widening variety of cultures. Simplistically put, there are three main populations: recent arrivals who have been in the U.S. under 8 years, international students who are only temporarily in the U.S. to increase their English skills and get degrees before returning to their native countries, and the long-term language learners (also known variously as Generation 1.5 students, dual language learners, or early arrivals.) who have been in the country for over eight years. This last group is the most rapidly increasing one. It is made up of students who have been educated in our K-12 system yet still lack academic English skills. Though the Gen 1.5 students often graduate from high school, they continue to be severely challenged in academic reading and writing. When they come to VC, they are frequently identified as basic skills students. Some, of course, are. Many others, however, are dealing with language development issues. These students generally only speak English in school and with some friends. They do not have much, if any, language support at home, so their lack of reading and writing skills is compounded by their lack of practice with the language. A significant reason they struggle with reading and writing is because their vocabulary is minute compared to their native English speaking counterparts who come to college with upwards of 40,000 words in their repertoire.

The importance of reaching this group of students is essential when we consider that this diverse population is ever growing. According to the Educational Testing Service (ETS), immigration increased to 50% of the population growth in the U.S. between 2004 and 2015—and is continuing to rise. I currently have students from nine countries besides Mexico represented in my classes. Mexico, India and China are the largest contributors to our increasing immigrant population, but students from Mexico are by far the largest population and fastest growing. A concern is that a large percent of those immigrants report not being able to speak English well or at all ("A Perfect Storm", 2007: ETS).

Of the 3,000-4,000 students who take the English placement test at Ventura College, approximately 5% cannot get into an English class due to their low scores. Based on students' verbal communication skills, these students are helped to enroll in other transfer classes. Considering the low success rates of many students, it is probable that they struggle, barely getting by, or fail. In either case, they end up feeling

like school is not for them and they drop out. Success rates among these students would improve if they were guided to a class that focused on their language development needs while they concurrently attend other classes.

The significant challenge is that there is also a growing level of complexity in teaching English language learners because their English skill sets are as diverse as they are—even if they come from the same country. Students have varying degrees of education. Many are the first to go to college. A large number come from families that are in poverty and have little to no education while others have a high level of education and their parents are professionals. Still other English language learners are professionals with degrees, with varying levels English skills.

My Masters studies were focused on teaching every level of language acquisition in each skill set: reading, writing, and oral communication along with pronunciation. To continue my professional growth and stay on the cutting edge of teaching best practices, I have been to both state and regional CATESOL conferences for the past 15 years. Universities such as UC Davis, UCSB, UCLA, and San Francisco State have all found the need to create new disciplines or courses to meet the needs of increasing enrollments of multilingual English learners. In 2010, San Francisco State, Cal State East Bay, and San Jose State each reported that about 60% of all accepted incoming freshman lacked the proficiency in English to pass the entrance exam. The Cal State Board of Trustees approved an Early Start policy that was designated to start in 2012 due to these dire circumstances (“Cal State plan,” Mercury News, 2010). If these colleges needed to create courses to bring students’ skills up to a level needed for university work, it is safe to assume that Ventura College and other community colleges are dealing with the same or even more complex situations.

Purpose of Sabbatical Project

The purpose of this one semester sabbatical is to advance my education on language acquisition, create course materials, optimize and innovate my teaching tool kit, and incorporate it all into a textbook. The book will be specific to students’ needs, will include strategic activities that excite and motivate, and will be easily editable for EngM 51: Academic Writing and Grammar. My goal is to introduce students to what they need to know to be prepared to take vocational and/or transfer courses and become employment-ready for jobs that provide living wages.

Components of Sabbatical Project

On site Research: Multilingual English learners in transfer classes are often not prepared for the writing requirements. I will research what types of written assignments will be given to them by conferring with instructors in various disciplines on campus. Then I will create writing lessons and activities to support my students in what will be asked of them.

Academic Study and Best Practices: I will go to other colleges or meet professors online to discuss what they do in their departments and courses. Dana Ferris at UC Davis, Jan Frodesen at UCSB, Christine

Holten at UCLA, and Mark Roberge at San Francisco State have all contributed greatly to the field of language acquisition, so I will make myself available to meet with them. I will also confer with authors, such as Keith Folse, who wrote some of the writing books I use and whose conference I recently attended. I will read teacher resources and professional journals to research the latest information about Generation 1.5 students and teaching writing across the disciplines. Finally, I will investigate professional development coursework.

Activity/Material Development and Book Compilation: I will develop motivating activities to make difficult forms of the language more accessible. During this sabbatical, I will edit my existing materials, research cutting edge activities, and incorporate them into a textbook.

Value of Sabbatical Project to VCCCD and Ventura College

The VCCCD district and Ventura College are working diligently on serving a diverse population. My project for improving English language learning instruction will benefit the district and the college because it addresses their goals of providing access and equity to diverse populations and improving student success outcomes.

Value of Sabbatical Project to Ventura College Students

Students will greatly benefit from my enhanced teaching skills and my renovated classroom toolkit. They will be empowered by practicing and gaining the skills necessary to successfully reach a level of English where they can feel more confident in their abilities and have more choices regarding education and employment.

Value of Sabbatical Project to the Instructor

This project will help me become a more effective teacher and scholar. What I will learn from this time on sabbatical will be invaluable. It will help me provide lessons for my students that will allow them to more quickly develop the language skills they need to be more successful in their other coursework. Additionally, I will have a text that students can fully use and which I can easily edit each semester depending on their needs.

I appreciate the committee's consideration of this project.
Most respectfully,

Karen Harrison, MA TESOL
Associate Professor of English to Speakers of Other Languages