

A Snapshot of ESL Students' Integration Patterns

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This study investigates the progress and achievement of a sample of forty ESL students in a large urban school district in Western Canada. The data for the study was gathered from official school records over a four-year period, personal files of

the teachers and anecdotal reports from school personnel. The findings are summarized and statements concerning the implications for existing policy and provisions for ESL programmes are made.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the progress and achievement of a sample of 40 English as a second language students who entered ESL programmes in a large urban school district in British Columbia at some point during the 1981-82 school year. Although the focus is on a small group of students in one school district, many of the points raised speak to important issues regarding policy and provisions for the length of time it takes to learn English, and the numerous and complex variables which affect both the rate at which students are mainstreamed, and their success in mainstream placement. As well the study offers one possible scenario for gathering information of this type. Information which provincial policy makers and district administrators need to be cognizant of when they set guidelines for ESL funding and plan provisions for ESL learners.

Background

Cummins (1984) re-analysed data from a Toronto Board of Education survey of 25% of the grades 5, 7 and 9 classrooms in the system. The survey included 1,200 immigrant students from a variety of ESL backgrounds. His re-analysis showed that "it took immigrant students who arrived in Canada at age 6-7 or later, between 5 and 7 years, on average, to approach grade norms in English verbal academic skills." This finding is consistent with other data from ESL, French immersion and bilingual programmes in both Canada and the United States. For example, Swain and Lapkin (1982) reported that it took students in French immersion programmes approximately six years to read as well in French as their native francophone peers. Wong-Fillmore (1983), in her work with Chinese and Mexican-American students, has gathered data which has led her to become convinced, "that it may take most learners from four to six years to acquire a second language to a high enough level of proficiency

to be able to deal with its use in the classroom.” Leyba (1978) and Rosier & Holm (1980) have shown in their evaluations of successful bilingual programmes that it is only in the later grades of elementary school that students achieve U.S. norms in academic skills. Wong-Fillmore (1983) and others (Carlson, 1981; Iwasaki, 1981; Saville-Troike, 1983) have also shown that there are large individual variations, ones which are not easily explainable by simple causal relationships, in the rate and success at which grade-appropriate levels of achievement are attained.

These research findings, while relatively few in number, are not only consistent, but cogent and clear. Yet across Canada we still find ESL funding guidelines (and teacher expectations) limited to a 2 or 3 year period for provisions of additional language support, and ESL programme options which are designed primarily for the initial stages of language learning, with little attention being given to programme options and provisions for continuing to improve the students linguistic competence after mainstreaming or for facilitating their integration into mainstream academic classes. The standard assumptions of the current policy being that all ESL students can achieve full mainstream placement in a maximum of three years and that this can be accomplished by providing initial support programmes to learn basic English skills. If these issues are to be addressed we need to gather a large body of sound data to present to the policy makers and programme planners on both the length of time required for ESL students to be able to succeed unsupported in the mainstream classrooms and on the factors which affect their academic success. Armed with this information of this type we will be better able to appeal for adequate levels of funding for ESL and to develop intervention programmes on a knowledgeable and judicious, rather than *ad hoc* basis.

The study reported here is one district's pilot attempt to gather information of this nature. The following questions motivated the study:

- (1) How long does it currently take a student to progress from their full-time ESL placement on entry to full integration at grade level?
- (2) How well does the student achieve once fully integrated?
- (3) What areas look to be fruitful, as possibilities for determining predictors of academic success?
- (4) What procedures need to be developed to broaden the context of investigation for future research?

The Study: Subjects and Setting

The subjects were twenty primary-aged and twenty secondary-aged ESL students who entered school in Canada during the 1981-82 school year and were placed in full-time ESL programmes. The primary-aged students represented four different language backgrounds: Cantonese, Punjabi,

Tagalog and Hindi. The students ranged in age from 6 to 8 years when they entered school

Nine of the twenty elementary students were born in Canada. The others came from China, India, Fiji and the Philippines. The secondary-aged students represented seven different language backgrounds: Punjabi, Polish, French, Vietnamese, Spanish, Mandarin and Cantonese. They ranged from 12 to 16 years old and came from India, Poland, Canada, Vietnam, Argentina, China and Hong Kong.

The elementary school attended by the students has a large multi-cultural student population. The majority of students are Indo- and Chinese-Canadians, while smaller groups are of Greek, Portuguese, British and South-east-Asian origin. The school has a very large population of students for whom English is not the language of their home. The secondary school the students attended also has a large multicultural population. A recent survey showed that approximately 65% of the school's 1300 students speak a language other than English at home. This school has a very large Chinese and Vietnamese-Canadian student population, while smaller groups are of Central American, Indian, Cambodian, European and South-east Asian origin.

Procedures

One elementary and one secondary school offering full-time ESL programmes in 1981-82 school year were randomly selected from a choice of 22 elementary and 15 secondary schools offering such programmes. In the elementary school twenty students were enrolled in the full-time ESL programme in the year chosen. These programmes are self contained programmes, i.e. the students stay together in one room as a group for much of the day. The ESL teacher is responsible for the total programme. The progress and achievement of all the students enrolled that year were researched from point of entry up until the end of the 1985-86 school year. In the secondary school, 60 students had been enrolled in full-time programmes for the 1981-82 year. Twenty students were randomly selected from the sixty-name enrollment list and the progress and achievement of these students were also researched from point of entry up until the end of the 1985-86 school year.

The data from the study were gathered from official school records over the 1981/82-1985/86 school years, personal files of the ESL teachers and the ESL department head, and anecdotal reports from school personnel.

The findings: Elementary

Out of the twenty students whose progress and achievement were examined, 14 (70%) were fully integrated (i.e. totally mainstreamed) in grade-age appropriate class without any form of additional language sup-

port by the end of the four-year period. The records showed that one student was fully integrated after 2 years, nine after 3 years and 3 after four years. Thus 50% of these elementary students were mainstreamed after 3 years and were no longer receiving ESL support. For 20% of the students it took a year longer. Two students (10%) were almost fully integrated after four years but were still receiving one thirty-minute period per day of additional language support. Three (15%) students in the sample were unable to cope with the progression towards integration and were placed in District Special Education ESL classes. One child in the sample was deceased.

Of the 14 children who were fully integrated, five were doing very well indeed. They were obtaining at least B averages in their academic courses and were reading at or above grade level. Five of the students were doing reasonably well. They were obtaining passes or C grades in their content courses and were reading less than one year below their grade mean. Their teachers judged that these students could still benefit from some additional language support.

These teachers were not sure, however, that a return to the ESL resource room, the only other option currently available, was what was needed for these students. Four of the students who had been fully integrated were having problems in their grade-appropriate classes. They were failing at least one of their academic courses and were reading at more than one grade below the mean. Interestingly, these students were all in grade 4 and whereas they appeared to be successfully integrated in grade 3 their teachers judged that the move from primary to intermediate had placed far greater demands on these children's cognitive academic language proficiency than had been anticipated. It was felt that it was critical for these children to be re-scheduled into language support programmes if they were to catch up with their native speakers peers in the years to come. Once again, however, it was unclear if the kind of language support available, i.e. a return to the resource room, was the best option for these children.

Secondary

Out of the twenty student sample examined, 12 (60%) were fully integrated in age-appropriate classes without additional language support by the end of the four-year period researched. One student achieved full integration in one year, two students in two years and nine students in three years. Only two of these students had failures recorded after integration. One student failed the typing 9 and computer 9 courses. The other failing student had been fully integrated one year after her arrival in Canada. In her first year of mainstream classes, she completed the year and passed all her grade 9 courses. The following year, however, she failed all but P.E. in the first term, at which point she transferred out of the district.

Discussions with school personnel indicate that there were social variables which seriously affected the academic performance of this student, and the student's ability to handle grade level courses was much more accurately reflected by the preceding year's achievement record. Thus, school records indicate that twelve (60%) students were fully integrated and once integrated were able to achieve at a satisfactory level. Approximately two-thirds of the students were achieving C/C+ averages. It is not possible to know, however, whether or not, as some of their teachers suspected, language was still a barrier for some of these students and if they would have obtained a higher grade average had they been receiving on-going language support. The other third of the students had very high level grades (As and Bs) and these students have now graduated and are attending a community college.

There were 45% of the sample studied who, for a variety of reasons, were not able to achieve full integration in four years. A review of the records show that these students can be divided into two distinct groups. One group consists of four students who are progressing toward integration but at a slower-rate. These students are all almost fully integrated into age-appropriate mainstream classrooms. They are still receiving some form of additional language support, however, either in small group or individual tutorial programmes or in transitional English classes. They are receiving passing grades in their content classes but their teachers judge that the extra help is crucial for their continued success.

The other group consists of four students who were all unable to cope in the regular ESL stream. These students all have very special learning difficulties which have been assessed by district psychologists and reported to a district screening committee who in turn have placed them in a special education class for ESL students.

To return, then, to two of the questions which motivated the study:

- (1) How long does it currently take a student to progress from full-time ESL placement on entry to full integration at grade level?
- (2) How well does the student achieve once fully integrated?

In response to question (1), the results from the elementary and secondary samples are remarkably similar and are summarized in the chart below:

Elementary (n = 20)	Integration Time	Secondary (n = 20)
0 (0%)	after one year	1 (5%)
1 (5%)	after two years	2 (10%)
9 (45%)	after three years	9 (45%)
4 (20%)	after four years	—
2 (10%)	still receiving support	2 (10%)

1 child deceased (3 elementary and 4 secondary students had special education placements).

In response to question (2), it appears that in elementary school 25% of the children were doing very well, another 25% were coping, but some 30% were either still receiving or were seriously in need of on-going support after four years. In the secondary school sample almost all (eleven out of the twelve) students who had been integrated were, according to their records, achieving either very or reasonably well. (One student experienced socially related problems one year after successful integration). It is important to note, however, that several teachers did raise questions as to whether or not some of those successful students were, in fact, realizing their full potential and in all cases the teachers reported long hours (i.e. 4 or 5 hours per night) of home study that these students undertook to maintain their grade means. Four students were still receiving on-going additional support to maintain grade means.

The sample size is small but the similarities in the findings between the elementary and the secondary students suggest that some tentative conclusions may well be in order: (1) that the assumption that a maximum of two or three years of ESL instruction is sufficient for all students to achieve grade level norms is quite unrealistic; (2) that initial and on-going support appears just as critical for very young ESL learners as it is for the secondary-aged learners (this has not always been acknowledged by some Boards of Education); (3) that the assumption that successful integration in one grade, means successful integration in the next grade, i.e. that the language demands on students do not increase at the higher grade levels, is questionable; (4) that a range of provisions, i.e. levels of organization, approaches and materials need to be considered to help students after mainstream placement. These may include other less widely used models such as mainstream integration within class support booster programmes, and short-term bilingual tutoring.

In the process of analyzing the records and talking with the ESL and content teachers several variables emerged as a response to the third question. What areas look to be fruitful as possibilities for determining predictors of academic success?

There are probably many more but the following general areas were the most apparent: previous educational background, e.g. number of years of schooling; type of education system in the home country; linguistic competence in L1; type of courses taken and grades achieved; the nature of the initial ESL experience, e.g. length of time in ESL programme, type and quality of programme; the nature of the initial ESL experience, e.g. length of time in ESL programme, type and quality of programme; the nature of the integration processes, e.g. gradual and supported or sudden, total and unsupported; courses tried first; attitude of receiving teachers; learner variables and learning style characteristics, e.g. age, sex and attitudinal characteristics; the use of the L1 as a learning resource; social

style characteristics, e.g. sociability, talkativeness and activity preferences; the influence of peers on schooling; the influence of home on schooling. It is not anticipated that any single variable or even any group of variables will adequately predict academic success. Rather, the thought is that the variables listed above would be a good starting point to look for different patterns of interactions among the variables, which in combination are likely to predict success for students (or conversely which are likely to predict students at risk).

One question remains to be addressed: (4) What procedures need to be developed to broaden the context of investigation?

School Boards are very rich sources of information. They keep records on students, they employ school personnel who have their own documentation and internal record-keeping systems and they have students who have lots to tell about the language learning experience. This study found that the district records yielded information on such factors as first language, country of origin, age on arrival, length of residence, number of schools attended, placements, and grade 'scores' and as such were useful for gathering data as a response to questions regarding rate of integration and achievement levels after integration. It was also found that progress records could be useful in determining gross predictors of academic success and in identifying content areas where ESL students are experiencing the greatest difficulty. The records do not, however, reveal the full story. Structured interviews with teachers and students collecting data on variables such as those discussed above were considered necessary, if we seek to go beyond gathering data on rate and predictors of achievement and to begin to design a range of provisions for ESL students after mainstream placement. In order to do this, we must gather information which will give crucial insights into how we might more closely link the learning process with the histories, experiences, potentials and dreams that ESL students bring to school. For this type of information the students and their teachers are obvious, yet unexploited, goldmines and whereas the anecdotal reporting procedures used here were informative it was felt by both teachers and researchers that structured interviews would have been a satisfying and more productive means of data collection and could profitably be extended to include students.

Conclusions

In conclusion, it is perhaps useful to summarize the findings and main points raised in this study:

- (1) in keeping with the findings of others, (Swain & Lapkin, 1982; Cummins, 1982; 1984; Wong-Fillmore, 1983; Leyba, 1978; and Rossier & Holm, 1980), this study showed that the assumption that ESL students

either primary or secondary acquire full proficiency rapidly i.e. in one, two or a maximum of three years is quite unrealistic.

- (2) the data also suggest that students who have achieved full integration need careful monitoring to ensure that help is available on special occasions or at critical periods, when needed, and that such help should be allotted to students when language problems are obstacles to students achieving their potential, regardless of their grade score.
- (3) this study also found that from the analyses of progress record cards and from the anecdotal reports from school personnel that certain areas look to be rich sources of predictors for academic success. They include: students' previous educational background, linguistic competence in the L1, initial ESL experience, integration profile, use of L1 as a learning strategy, learning and social style characteristics, influence of peers and influence of the home.
- (4) Finally this study found that while the analyses of progress record cards was productive, the anecdotal reporting would have benefited from more structure. The suggestion is that structured interviews would be a better procedure for data collection in future studies of this kind. It was also felt that data gathering should be extended to student interviews.

The main point of this paper is, of course, that while there are those of us who may be convinced by work such as Cummins (1982, 1984) and Wong-Fillmore (1983), and, or by our own past experiences, that existing policy and provisions for ESL programmes need to be carefully re-examined; the conventions remain largely unchanged. There is a distinct need for more studies, on a larger scale and across diverse settings, such as the one reported here. Studies, which will yield data, which will speak powerfully to issues related to length of time needed to learn English and to expanding our knowledge of the variables which critically affect ESL students' levels of achievement. With studies of this nature we will be better equipped to advocate and to plan for policies and provisions which will adequately address the multiplicity of needs of our ESL students' needs which are currently being masked under the common label of ESL students.

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