Myths about college English as a second language

Marc Ward

The Chronicle of Higher Education; Sep 26, 1997; 44, 5; ProQuest Education Journals

pg. B8

Myths About College English as a Second Language

By Marc Ward

The furor this spring when stu-
dents, including many whose na-
tive language is not English, ac-
ceded to the Writing Assessment Test at the City University of New York— as well as a decision on May 27 by the trustees to require all of the system's com-
mand-college students to pass the test — has drawn national attention to the univer-
sity's debate over academic standards.

The focus on standards, however, has ob-
scured an important difference between past and present generations of students. Immigrants used to spend their working lives in factories and shops doing jobs that did not call for higher education. But con-
temporary immigrants must earn educa-
tional credentials to succeed in today's job market, and they have come straight to the City — and other urban campuses in large cities — in unprecedented numbers.

As a result, nearly 50 percent of incom-
ing CUNY students are first-generation immigrants or Puerto Rican migrants. In the past, CUNY students were often the children of immigrants, not immigrants themselves. They entered the university having already learned English in child-
hood as a first or second language. Many of today's students, however, are adults who need classes in English as a second lan-
guage.

Few policy makers understand that traditional standards of judging writing may not be the best way to assess their progress, and what problems these stu-
dents face in learning English.

CUNY's Writing Assessment Test re-
quires students to write a persuasive essay in 50 minutes on a topic such as the death penalty, or the role of religion in the mod-
ern world. Some politicians and faculty members have suggested that students should master skills before coming to college. Behind that deceptively simple position are unexamined assumptions about the way in which adults learn a foreign-
language. For example, when Boutros Boutros Ghali came to CUNY's Lehman College in 1995, he spoke with charm and wit about what he called "the United Nation."' Many linguists believe that people gen-
erally become more proficient in a second language if they learn the language as chil-
der rather than as adults, and some re-
searchers now feel that a naturalistic approach to learning English in the grammar of a foreign language. Only rarely can adults learn to speak without an accent in a new language.

Myth No. 3: College E.S.L. classes are rote. As is the case with all students, those in E.S.L. classes do a diverse group, including some who need remedial help and many who do not. But even in the case of non-native English students who are unprepared, their proficiency in Eng-

lish tells us little about their overall aca-
demic ability or preparation. In contrast, native speakers in remedial English classes often must review material that they should have learned in high school, and their weaker English skills may predict problems in other areas.

In E.S.L. classes, students study the pro-
nunciation, vocabulary, and structure of the English language. They also use Eng-
lish for academic purposes, such as dis-
cussing novels, writing term papers, or comparing arguments. Often they read complete works of fiction or autobiogra-
phies, and newspaper or magazine articles analyzing contemporary cultural trends. Sometimes E.S.L. classes are linked to oth-
er college courses, so that language skills are tied to a specific subject area or theme; but, regardless of the approach or subject matter, E.S.L. students usually work on ma-
terial that they have never seen before.

Although most universities award aca-
demic credit to students for learning even the basics of a foreign language, E.S.L. stu-
dents receive little or no academic credit for their freshman-level work in learning English. Since most enter college at the intermediate or advanced E.S.L. level, they are usually more proficient in their mater-
ial, E.S.L. students usually work on ma-
terial that is tied to their peers who re-
ceive credit in foreign-language classes.

In a 1994 report, the E.S.L. Task Force at CUNY concluded that E.S.L. students do as well as other students, as indicated by grades, retention rates, and accumulation of credits. Studies in 1995 and 1997 at Lehman College indi-
icted that E.S.L. students dropped out at lower rates and graduated at rates compa-


B8 THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION
S E P T E M B E R 2 6 , 1997

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.