

ESOL Service Learning Tutoring Project at Oregon's Portland Community College

Project Description: Students from beginning Spanish courses and low-level writing/reading courses provide weekly, one-on-one tutoring to the lowest levels of ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) students in literacy skills, vocabulary, and sentence formation. The tutors also provide insight for ESOL students into American culture through guided activities led by the ESOL instructor. The hour a week takes place as one of 9 hours of regular instruction per week and has proven to be well worth the use/loss of regular class time.

After attending an initial orientation during week 2 of classes by an ESOL instructor, every Wednesday, a group of Spanish students from first- and second-year classes and Writing 115 (first course in college composition sequence) students go to the same ESOL classroom and tutor one-on-one (or in groups of up to 3 ESOL students), under the supervision and direction of the ESOL instructor, who provides specific activities and directions for the tutors to follow each week.

In future iterations we hope to expand the number of composition students, so that Spanish students can be paired with native Spanish-speaking partners, while composition students work with students whose native language is other than Spanish. Currently there are over 30 student tutors participating in the project.

Who are the level 1-3 ESOL students?

Students in ESOL levels 1-3 are immigrants, refugees and long-standing US residents, all of whom want to improve their proficiency in English. Those on international student visas are restricted at Portland Community College must take credit courses, so they must place into Level 5 or higher in the eight-quarter sequence of ESOL courses that prepare non-native speakers for regular college courses across the curriculum that earn them transferable college credits. Many of the

students in ESOL levels 1-3 qualify for food stamps and minimal health insurance through the Oregon Health Plan. While PCC does not check students' immigration status for ESOL courses, undocumented immigrants are not eligible for food stamps or the public health plan. Many ESOL level 1-3 students lack basic education in their home countries, and many Spanish speakers are actually using Spanish as their second language, having grown up using one of several indigenous languages. So those students are not only acquiring literacy for the first time, they are also learning to develop a new set of academic behaviors and expectations. This can be bewildering and frustrating, compounded by students' urgency to learn English in order to improve their working and living situations. Native English speakers serving as tutors learn a great deal about the native cultures of their counterparts, and they are also often able to help legal immigrants develop the savvy and vocabulary necessary to navigate the bureaucracies of public assistance that can radically improve the quality of their lives and make it easier for them to take full advantage of the educational opportunity the non-credit, fee-based lower-level ESOL courses present.

The vast majority of students in levels 1-3 also work full time to support families, both here in the U.S. and in their home countries, thus making study time a precious commodity indeed. Some diaspora ESOL students are also dealing with traumatic experiences that resulted in their immigration, thus adding to their stress making it even more difficult to focus on applying themselves in their ESOL classes. All of this, of course, on top of having to contend with adapting to a new culture and often radically different support systems than those upon which they relied in their home countries.

Many low-level ESOL students are marginalized within the larger society and even isolated within their (often lower-income) language communities. Yet most express a very strong desire to interact with their native English speaking counterparts at PCC. Business as usual at the college, where many students are only able to spend minimal class hours on campus, conspires against such alliances. So the use of class time for

one-on-one or small group tutoring fills an important void and, despite initial impressions fears of less progress through the curriculum actually accelerates ESOL students' progress. For example, one ESOL student commented that his ESOL instructor was the *only* native-English speaking American he interacted with before introduction of the tutoring program. Accessing PCC student services is another daunting task for those with limited English skills, and here too the native English tutors can serve as conduits to important information and resources.