# Introduction

# New Contexts for Research in Community College ESL

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THE IDEA FOR THIS BOOK EMERGED AT THE 2006 TESOL ANNUAL CONVENTION when several of the contributors collaborated on a panel presentation highlighting research on the teaching and learning of ESL in U.S. community college contexts. We shared a common passion for working with community college ESL students, which includes a diverse profile of immigrants, refugees, and international students. Our research projects addressed a broad range of challenges facing community college ESL programs today, such as meeting students' academic, professional, and personal needs; measuring success in ESL programs; aligning curricular goals across departments; and the role of technology in ESL instruction.

We recognize that, at many community colleges, the research aspirations of most ESL instructors often are thwarted by obstacles, including heavy teaching loads, limited resources (time, funding, research assistants, access to library materials), and perhaps by an institutional climate that does not support practitioner research and its dissemination. Blumenthal (2006) offers a similar critique, citing several forces that tend to work against innovative thinking in the community college, including "funding decisions, government regulations, turf battles, and, most unfortunately, bias and discrimination" (p. 1). In spite of these challenges, we know from experience that community college practitioners and administrators hunger for opportunities to exchange ideas and build the empirical base on community college ESL students.

For these reasons, we are delighted to be able to present this collection of previously unpublished studies on ESL learning and teaching in the U.S. community college context. We hope that the volume will help fill the research gap in the knowledge base about ESL in U.S. community colleges. Strengthening the empirical base about the needs of community college ESL students is critical in

light of the increasingly important role that community colleges play in providing language minority adults with opportunity to access post-secondary education.

The population of "immigrants, refugees, and international students who pass through the doors of community colleges" (Blumenthal, 2006, p. vi; see also Allison, 2006) is large, diverse, and growing. The "open access" policies of many community colleges attract students of various linguistic, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds, as well as students with a wide range of educational needs and goals and prior educational achievement (Aragon, 2001). Minority students—a diverse group that includes a large but undetermined number of immigrants and refugees—make up more than 30 percent of the total community college population (Phillippe & Patton, 2000). In 2004–2005, more than 84,000 international students were enrolled in U.S. community colleges, nearly a 20 percent increase from the enrollment four years prior (Institute of International Education, 2005). In addition, a study by Vernez and Abrahamse (1996) found that immigrant students are 10 percent more likely to begin and complete their educational trajectories at a community college compared to native-born students.

The phrase "community college ESL" refers to diverse instructional contexts, including credit- versus non-credit-bearing, non-academic, pre-academic, vocational, and academic, depending on the aims and aspirations of the institution and the ESL program (Machado, 2006). This diversity is a source of both strength and challenge for those charged with the task of providing instructional services to English language learners.

Increasing our understanding of the needs of community college ESL students is relevant in the broader discussion of U.S. economic and labor trends. Today, both strong English communication skills and some post-secondary training and education are increasingly regarded as essential (Carnevale & Desrochers, 2001; Murnane & Levy, 1996; Reder, 2000; Wiley, 1993). Without skills and credentials, many language minority adults are "locked out of full participation in the society in which they live and work" (Wiley, 1993, p. 1), unable to access well-paying jobs, economic advancement, and lifelong learning opportunities. While there undoubtedly are a myriad of social and political factors that restrict students' access to higher education (Saxon & Boylan, 1999; Wiley, 1993), community college ESL instructors can play a valuable role in ensuring quality academic preparation, the kind that supports ESL students' success in the classroom and, ultimately, their completion of educational programs and degree attainment.

While there remains a relative lack of research on community college ESL students, especially compared to research on ESL students in K–12 or in higher education contexts (i.e., intensive English programs, four-year colleges and universities), we have also witnessed an increased interest in evidence-based practice in community colleges. One notable effort is a series recently published by TESOL entitled *Perspectives on Community College ESL* (Carmona, 2008; Blumenthal, 2006; Spaventa, 2006). Other works that have contributed to the community college ESL knowledge base include *Beyond Access: Methods and Models for Increas-*

*ing Retention and Learning Success among Minority Students: New Directions for Community Colleges* (Aragon, 2001); *Adult ESL and the Community College* (Crandall & Sheppard, 2004); *Passing the Torch: Strategies for Innovation in Community College ESL* (Chisman & Crandall, 2007); and *Trends in Community College Curriculum: New Directions for Community Colleges* (Schuyler, 2000).

Collections such as the *Perspectives on Community College ESL* series represent a valuable contribution to the dissemination of "professional wisdom" in the field of community college ESL. By the term *professional wisdom,* we refer to the ways that publications, such as the TESOL collection, have promoted "the effective identification and incorporation of *local circumstances* into instruction" (Whitehurst, 2002, slide 4, emphasis added). The exploration of *local circumstances* in community college ESL programs enables us to learn from the experiences and perspectives of real teachers and students. As Blumenthal (2006) observes, inquiries into local practice "celebrate the successes of hardworking and dedicated students, teachers, and administrators in community college ESL programs, while challenging us [the readers] as individuals and institutions to better serve our college missions and better advocate for our students" (p. 2). We believe these inquiries into community college ESL programs enable us to make important connections between effective practices in specific contexts and broader understandings of the mission and purpose of "community college ESL" as a field.

In this spirit of celebrating "professional wisdom," it is significant that nearly all of the contributors to this volume are practicing community college ESL instructors and administrators who have been able to carry out formal research projects in the context of their own institutions or ESL classrooms. The primary goals of the volume, then, are (1) to disseminate recent research on community college ESL programs, (2) to promote communication and reflection among researchers and teachers about community college ESL learning and teaching, and (3) to inform teacher educators and future teachers about ESL learning and teaching in this important context.

To further these goals, the contributors report on studies that use both quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis procedures. Conducted in a variety of settings across the United States, the studies include participants representing a range of first language backgrounds, cultures, countries of origin, ages, language proficiencies, and reasons for studying English. Each chapter follows a similar format: (a) a description of the research context and the issues that motivated the research, (b) a statement of the research questions and design, (c) descriptions of the data collection and analysis procedures, and (d) discussion of the study findings. Each chapter then concludes with a discussion of possible implications for practice and/or policy.

The volume includes five thematically organized parts. The first, "Research on Community College ESL Curricula," presents multiple perspectives on content-oriented courses. In Chapter 1, "Shifts in Focus: Examining Language Instruction in Content-Based ESL Lessons," Kathleen M. Bailey reports on an observational

study of content-based instruction in ESL lessons she observed at community colleges in Chicago (Illinois), Honolulu (Hawai'i), Houston (Texas), Miami (Florida), and Sacramento (California). Bailey explores a central question about instruction in content-oriented ESL classes: How do ESL teachers manage to focus on language during content-based lessons? Her analysis highlights a range of teacher behaviors that enable students to gain language skills while deepening their content knowledge of a wide array of topics, including poetic imagery, biology and ethics, the American educational system, civil rights, biology and the environment, and the spread of lethal viruses as a public health issue. Bailey's vignettes of six content-oriented lessons help us understand how language use varies across subject areas. Her vignettes also highlight the dynamic nature of teachers' shifts between a focus on language and a focus on content within a single lesson as they simultaneously strive to make the linguistic input and the content comprehensible and engaging for their students.

In Chapter 2, "Content Teacher Perceptions of Content-Based Assignments in Writing Courses," Lara Ravitch addresses important questions about the alignment of content-based ESL composition assignments with the requirements of subject-area community college instructors. Based at Truman College in Chicago, Illinois, Ravitch's study is able to refine our understanding of the specific ways that content-based ESL instructors can prepare students to develop the language proficiency, critical-thinking skills, and academic vocabulary they need to succeed in college-level courses in the disciplines. In addition, her study demystifies the expectations about academic writing held by subject-area community college instructors, which often remain tacit. (For a similar discussion about academic aural/oral skills, see Ferris & Tagg, 1996.) Ravitch surveyed ten subject-area instructors about the skills they believed content-based ESL composition assignments should develop. In the discussion of her findings, she demonstrates how the subject-area instructors' feedback led to important improvements in the design of the ESL composition assignments.

Finally, in Chapter 3, "'A Long Little Story': Exploring the Experiences of Nursing Students as English Language Learners," JoAnn Mulready-Shick examines the complex challenges facing nursing students who are non-native speakers of English and who struggle with the communication demands of the nursing curriculum and the clinical setting. This chapter is unique in that Mulready-Shick is not a TESOL professional but rather a trained nurse and administrator of an undergraduate nursing program at University of Massachusetts–Boston. Mulready-Shick describes a study in which she uses interpretive phenomenological methods to analyze the experiences and perceptions of nursing students who self-identified as English language learners. In her discussion, Mulready-Shick weaves together reflections on her own experiences as a nursing educator of immigrant students over the past twenty years with insights about nursing students' identity, learning strategies, and academic needs.

Part 2, "Technology in Community College ESL Programs," includes two chapters that expand our knowledge base about the role of technology in the ESL classroom from the perspective of teachers and students (see also Brutza & Hayes, 2006). In Chapter 4, "Community College ESL Learners' Access to and Perspectives on Technology," Cristie Roe reports on survey research conducted at Phoenix College in Phoenix, Arizona. This chapter explores ESL students' responses to the use of computers in their ESL classes. Roe calls attention to the critical need for examining the meaning of technology from the perspective of students themselves, given that community colleges often attract large populations of refugees and other immigrants who may not have had access to computers in their early education or may have limited access outside the community college classroom. She found that her respondents were evenly divided in terms of their self-reported computer use prior to coming to the United States (i.e., they had never used a computer, used one a few times, or used one many times). Yet the students' attitudes about computer use were very positive.

To be able to gauge the impact of technology on ESL learning and teaching, we must first answer basic questions about the nature of technology use (i.e., which tools, which contexts, when accessed). In this regard, Chapter 5, "ESL Teacher and Student Perspectives on Technology in the Community College Classroom," by Marit ter Mate-Martinsen, helps to lay important groundwork in ESL research. Based at Santa Barbara City College, this survey-based study of ESL teachers' use of technology and ESL students' perspectives on the use of technology in their classrooms provides the ESL field with replicable survey tools and a process for documenting technology use at other community college campuses. Her findings highlight the variation in teachers' utilization and effective integration of technology in ESL classrooms. Her analysis also suggests that effective use of technology depends on the teachers' access to resources and their own level of confidence and familiarity with technological tools. With respect to the students' perspectives, ter Mate-Martinsen found that many low-level and part-time evening students relied on access to computers on campus due to limited access to computers outside school, a finding that positions the community college as an important gateway to technology for many ESL students.

Part 3, "Retention and Persistence Issues in Community College ESL Programs**,"** includes three chapters. In Chapter 6, "Differences in Academic Vocabulary Knowledge among Language-Minority Community College Students: Implications for Transition," Maricel G. Santos raises questions regarding what we know about the academic vocabulary skills of English language learners who are making the transition out of predominantly English-focused instruction and entering academic content instruction. Santos explores the possibility that variation in academic vocabulary skills may be linked to the differences in academic integration level, referring to the degree to which students participate in the academic life of the college. In this study, which was conducted at Bunker Hill Community College in

Boston, Massachusetts, Santos finds that academic vocabulary development likely requires an investment of instructional resources over time, including while students are in ESL programs and during their early ventures into regular subject-area course-work. Santos reported unexpected findings about academic integration—namely, that academic vocabulary scores appeared to dip, not rise, at increased levels of academic integration. At first glance, this seems to suggest that academic integration does not benefit students' academic vocabulary knowledge; however, Santos argues that this trend should prompt further inquiry into the nature of academic integration experiences and the possible implications that these experiences may hold for academic language development.

Like Santos' chapter, Chapter 7 by Elizabeth M. Zachry and Emily Dibble also describes research conducted at Bunker Hill Community College. Zachry and Dibble's study, "Transitioning from ESL and the GED to Post-Secondary Education: A Case Study of a College Transitions Program," provides a descriptive analysis of Bunker Hill's innovative efforts to move General Educational Development (GED) recipients and English language learners beyond basic skills programs and into vocational/academic degree programs. By examining data collected throughout the program's six-year history, Zachry and Dibble are able to provide clear evidence that the program is meeting many of its transitional goals. For example, the study indicates that students in the Transitions program have matriculated into degree programs at greater success rates than students with comparable skills sets who did not participate in the program. Zachry and Dibble also describe the array of programming components that make up the program's transitional model, highlighting components that appear to be particularly beneficial to ELLs. This discussion demonstrates that supporting the transition of ELLs requires an investment of both human and institutional resources.

Finally, in Chapter 8, "Unlocking the Door: ESL Instructors' Diaries Examining Retention of Migrant Hispanic Students," Bengt Skillen and Julie Vorholt-Alcorn present a diary study that chronicles instructors' efforts to understand migrant students' low retention rates and to identify supports to student retention while teaching at a community college satellite campus in rural Oregon. Skillen and Vorholt-Alcorn explain that for many migrant students, regular attendance and completion of ESL courses are elusive goals, making it critical that community college ESL teachers identify and disseminate model strategies for working with migrant students. To this end, Skillen and Vorholt-Alcorn's reflective account over the course of a summer teaching cycle reveals promising practices in support of migrant student retention, such as inviting student input into retention policies and building class rapport. (See also Stasinopoulos, 2006, and Stone, 2006, who discuss the importance of building a good rapport with their students.) Notably, this study demonstrates how the authors' responsiveness to retention issues increased as they learned more about their students' everyday lives outside school (at home, at work) and their students' perceptions of teachers as authority figures. This shift in thinking is captured beautifully by Skillen, who writes, "my goal turned into a

concerted attempt to understand my students before having them understand me as a teacher" (p. 115, this volume).

"Identity Construction and Development among Community College ESL Students," Part 4, presents chapters that showcase fresh new data on who community college ESL students are. In Chapter 9, Duffy Galda examines the experiences of three elderly Eastern European refugees studying ESL at Pima Community College in Tucson, Arizona. Galda's case study brings together a series of quotations drawn from in-depth interviews with the three refugees. Based on the interviews and classroom observations, Galda's study presents learner portraits that illuminate the experiences and perspectives that elderly (retirement age and above) ESL students bring to the community college culture. Galda documents five powerful and pervasive themes that emerge as important: their life experiences, literacy history, learning strategies, learning goals, and social identities.

In Chapter 10, Hanh thi Nguyen, Francis Noji, and Guy Kellogg address students' identity construction in a content-based instruction program. The subjects were international students attending ESL classes at Kapiʻolani Community College in Honolulu, Hawaiʻi. Nguyen, Noji, and Kellogg draw on theories of language socialization to examine how utterances index the speaker's and hearer's stances toward what is being said (see Goffman, 1981). Specifically, they employ discourse analysis methods to examine electronic discussion postings throughout one semester in a content-based, pre-academic class focusing on civil rights in the United States. They document how students make sense of new academic concepts by relating such concepts to their personal lives, in the process gaining a sense of self relative to the second language they are learning. This chapter adds a unique perspective to a growing body of literature on content-based instruction in the community college context. (See also Crandall & Kaufman, 2002; Kasper, 2000; and Pally, 2000.)

Part 5, "Defining and Assessing Success in Community College ESL Programs," includes chapters that showcase diverse perspectives on the meaning and measurement of success for community college ESL students. Chapter 11 by Molly J. Lewis challenges conventional perspectives on the measurement of success among ESL students. The typical administrative view tends to prioritize passing a proficiency exam, completing a level or program, or transferring to a four-year school. Lewis' study seeks to deepen our understanding of how ESL students define success and how their shifts in goal orientation may reflect exploration of new identities as users of English. Lewis used survey data collected from a group of ESL students enrolled at Hartnell College, a predominantly Hispanic-serving institution in Salinas Valley, California. Her qualititative analysis began by coding for types of learner goals, followed by a thematic analysis of the data. After identifying patterns in her data, Lewis then used the chi-square statistic to examine variation in the students' self-reported motivations for studying ESL. She found that students at beginning levels of English tended to report language-focused learning goals (e.g., *I want to improve my English*), but at more advanced levels of English, students tended to report goals tied to their job or profession. Lewis' study sheds light on the evolv-

ing and dynamic relationship between identity development and English learning goals for community college ESL students at different points in their language development. Her findings also underscore the limitations of uni-dimensional and static approaches to gauging student success.

Chapter 12, "Access to Freshman Composition at Stake: Comparing Student Performance on Two Measures of Writing" by Cynthia M. Schuemann, is based on her work at Miami Dade College in Florida. She compared scores on two tests of writing—a standardized multiple choice sentence skills test and a holistically scored exam—taken by students in an advanced writing class at a large urban community college. The multiple choice instrument was the sentence skills section of the Computerized Placement Test (CPT), part of the College Board Accuplacer® battery (a high-stakes assessment instrument used extensively by colleges in the United States and Canada to evaluate student readiness for freshman composition courses). Using descriptive statistics and *t*-tests, Schuemann's analysis indicates that the CPT sentence skills test can be a valid and reliable placement instrument for advanced-level ESL students who intend to pursue community college degrees. The study also shows that the sentence skills test discriminated equally well among students, regardless of their gender and age. However, Schuemann also addresses situations in which ESL students who can do well on contextualized writing tasks do not perform as well on decontextualized sentence skills tests. Her study provides an important addition to our understanding of assessment issues for the ESL community college population. (See also Machado & Solensky, 2006, who investigated concerns with computerized placement testing for ESL students.)

In the final chapter, "Student Learning Outcomes and ESL Student Success in the Community College Classroom," Marit ter Mate-Martinsen highlights the variable interpretations of "student learning outcomes" (SLOs), referring to the "overarching specific observable characteristics" (Snowhite, Adams, Gilbert, Reilly, Welch, & Rheinheimer, 2005, p. 8) used to gauge learner progress and achievement. SLOs represent a source of innovation in curriculum reform in community college ESL as the expectation is that all stakeholders—teachers, administrators, and students—should be able to comprehend the scope and purpose of SLOs. The tensions around this expectation are highlighted in ter Mate-Martinsen's analysis of the experiences and perspectives of two ESL instructors who work at Santa Barbara Community College ("Jane" and "Barbara") as they learned to develop their own SLOs for course syllabi, assignments, and projects. In interview sessions with ter Mate-Martinsen, Jane (the ESL instructor) shared her struggle to write SLOs in English for students who are still learning English, by raising critical questions about the ultimate purpose and impact of SLOs: "Is there really a way to make SLOs clear and meaningful to a true beginning-level ESL community college student? Ultimately, for whom are SLOs being written at the beginning levels?" (p. 192, this volume). This chapter concludes by discussing what the teachers learned from the SLO writing process and providing the reader with suggestions on how to implement SLOs effectively to enrich classroom pedagogy and student learning.

This volume showcases a diverse range of research tools and methods, which seem to mirror the diversity of experiences, settings, and contexts under investigation in this collection. It is our hope that this collection will be immediately helpful to community college teachers and program administrators, as well as teacher educators and prospective teachers, in stimulating much-needed dialogue on what we know and inquiry into what we still need to discover about community college ESL students. As several chapters in this volume indicate, there is a need for conversations not only within ESL programs but also between ESL programs and other campus departments who enroll these students once they exit ESL programs.

We also hope that these studies will help to spark future research on ESL programs in the community college context. The contributors include both novice and established ESL researchers as well as experienced ESL researcher-practitioners—a dynamic that very much enriches the range and depth of perspectives reflected in this volume. We hope this richness sends an encouraging message to other community college practitioners—from all levels of research experience—to pursue their own lines of inquiry on ESL teaching and learning.

Because one of this volume's primary goals is to promote communication and reflection about teaching and learning practices in the community college ESL context, we encourage you to ask yourself questions as you read these chapters: What are the issues that motivated this research? Are these issues and study findings relevant to your work context? How do the contributors address their research questions? What tools did they use to gather data? Are there aspects of these studies you could replicate in your own context? What research questions would you want to ask about these topics? Questions such as these will enable you to interpret the merits of each study in light of your own community college context. We remain resolute that the capacity for practitioners to discuss (at the very least) and pursue their own lines of inquiry (ideally) is critical to the growth and vitality of the field of community college ESL.