Critical English for academic purposes: Building on learner, teacher, and program strengths

Kimberly Adilia Helmer*1

Department of English, John Jay College of Criminal Justice, The City University of New York (CUNY), 524 West 59th Street, New York, NY 10019, USA

Keywords:
Critical
EAP
CEAP
Needs analysis
Writing
Generation 1.5

Abstract

Using a critical EAP framework, the current needs analysis or rights analysis study (Benesch, 2001a), examines an EAP Writing Program at an urban Hispanic-serving college in the northeast U.S. Analysis of student-writing portfolios, student, professor, and EAP Writing-Center survey and interview data showed that restructuring institutional hierarchies better addressed program and student needs instead of a narrow focus on student “lacks”, “gaps”, or “deficiencies”, a common approach in traditional needs analyses. Using strategic institutional partnerships, the once marginalized EAP Program, primarily serving Generation 1.5 immigrant students, began its first steps in reimagining how to improve program course coherence, communication, content, and student learning objectives, as well as reimagining EAP teacher and student authority, building on and benefitting from stakeholder strengths.

1. Introduction

As a newly-appointed applied linguist in a literature-dominated English Department, I became the logical candidate asked to assess and design new curriculum for the Department’s 10-year old EAP Program. The EAP Program was located in an urban, 4-year college located in the U.S. Northeast and served primarily Generation 1.5 immigrants. Generation 1.5 immigrants are bi or multilingual U.S. residents who enter U.S. colleges and universities with some degree of U.S. primary and/or secondary schooling (Harklau, Siegel, & Losey, 1999).

Like “matryoshka”, or Russian nesting dolls, the EAP Program was a program within a Writing Program housed within the college’s English Department, while the college itself was contained within a larger university system. In part, because of these multiple institutional layers, the EAP Program worked in relative isolation with little direct oversight. Thus, it was the goal of the current study to investigate and reimagine this marginalized program.

I knew my first step in this process would be to conduct a needs analysis in order to take stock of the current program, understand stakeholder experience, and chart future directions (Braine, 2001; Dudley-Evans & St John, 1999). In part because of my limited experience teaching in the EAP Program, I personally encountered program challenges that alerted me to its need of systematic investigation. As I was organizing my courses, for example, I found neither program guidelines nor codified learning objects to consult, nor did I find any formal opportunities to meet fellow faculty members to discuss curriculum and teaching. Like unsupported English language learners, I felt it was either, “sink or swim”, not the most conducive environment for effective pedagogy.
During the needs analysis process, I found critical EAP (CEAP) (Benesch, 1996, 1999, 2001a) to be the theoretical framework to most directly identify program challenges, facilitate program revitalization, and align with democratic teaching principles. Using a CEAP framework, my goal was to critically understand the workings of power within the various institutional hierarchies and program relationships in an attempt to better serve stakeholder needs. Thus, the following overriding research objective and supporting research goals emerged and guided the current needs analysis study:

1. To conduct a re-evaluation of the curriculum and achievements of a U.S. University-embedded EAP Program by investigating the salient factors influencing the Program’s outcomes using a CEAP framework.

Supporting study goals:
2. To gain students’ perceptions of their learning experiences and explore how these can be used to inform a CEAP evaluation of the program;
3. To explore the related insights of writing tutors, EAP faculty and students;
4. To investigate the institutional and/or administrative structures impacting curriculum;
5. To design and initiate a recursive process of program restructure and curriculum redesign, implementation, and re-evaluation by integrating the findings from each of the critical analyses developed in objectives 2–4 above.

1.1. Critical EAP

Harwood and Hadley (2004) explain that the aim of pragmatic EAP is to teach English language learners the dominant discourses, conventions, and skills needed to successfully navigate the literacy demands of secondary and post-secondary institutional contexts. One might argue that “pragmatic” EAP characterizes most if not all “standard” EAP approaches that aim to prepare students for target-situation demands. Questioning these assumed aims of EAP, critical applied linguists take issue with this pragmatic framework (see Benesch, 2001a; Pennycook, 1997). By preparing EAP students to enter technical, academic, and economic markets without interrogating the ramifications of pragmatic accommodation, critical scholars argue that this will result in the maintenance of hierarchical and unequal power distributions that perpetuate assimilationist values that homogenize linguistic and cultural diversity (Belcher, 2006; Benesch, 2001a; Cadman, 2002; Harwood & Hadley, 2004; Pennycook, 1997, 2001).

At the local level, this pragmatism can also lead EAP programs to unreflectively accommodate to externally imposed demands and institutional structures. These accommodations can include course design and pedagogy, academic behaviors and discourses, and organizational hierarchies that subordinate EAP faculty to the academic demands of other disciplines or disciplinary departments (Chun, 2009; Le Ha, 2009; Pennycook, 1997).

In response, critical applied linguists propose theoretical frameworks that question, negotiate, and implement more equitable and democratic learning environments for multilingual learners and EAP professionals while also being sensitive to local and broader social, cultural, ideological, and political contexts (see Benesch, 2001a; Norton & Toohey, 2004; Pennycook, 2001). Though CEAP practitioners advocate for the critical examination of normative practices, they do not lose sight of the real-time academic demands students must meet.

Drawing on the work of Pennycook (1994, 1997), Harwood and Hadley (2004, p. 357) describe critical pragmatic EAP as an approach that raises learner awareness of normative discourses, but “stresses that students have choices and should be free to adopt or subvert the dominant practices as they wish”. Similarly, Belcher (2006) proposes that EAP students learn to appropriate and assert English in forms that are useful for their own communities’ purposes. Benesch (2001b) frames critical pragmatic EAP as an approach that supports students in gaining greater control and voice in their learning by questioning status quo practices while seeking solutions to unfavorable conditions.

CEAP approaches also benefit EAP professionals by providing a framework to negotiate more equitable and theory-based teaching practices, curriculum design, and program structures through a process of critical problem posing and reflection. Using a CEAP lens, the current study provides a situated case where a critical needs analysis or rights analysis (Benesch, 2001a) afforded the possibility for and realization of program reform.

2. Traditional and critical needs analysis

Although the concern surrounding pragmatic accommodation is not a recent critique within the field of EAP it persists in practice. I found in my review of EAP needs analyses that the pressure remains for EAP programs and students to conform to the linguistic and academic demands imposed by their institutions without analysts questioning the merits or end results of such demands (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1999; Moslemi, Moinzadeh, & Dabaghi, 2011; West, 1994). Most often the prescription for student accommodation is determined through the process of combining present-situation to target-situation needs analyses. These analyses compare EAP students’ current linguistic, academic, and pragmatic competencies to the students’ expected competencies for target-language academic or occupational contexts. Though other needs analysis methods may not explicitly utilize this terminology, fundamentally, many employ a similar objective of determining what students are
expected to know. Student expectations are based on varying data sources that include, but are not limited to, stakeholder interviews and surveys, course documents, student work, and classroom or workplace observations (see Flowerdew & Peacock, 2001). Once these data are analyzed, needs analysts design curricula that will help students approach or meet these data-driven learning objectives.

Although understanding target-language, target-situation needs can be useful for designing sound programs, needs analysts, particularly within accommodationist paradigms, risk situating students within a deficit model of learning that focuses on teaching to perceived developmental levels and not to student strengths, potentialities or possibilities (Belcher, 2006; Muñoz, 2009; Vygotsky, 1978). Discursively, it is not uncommon for EAP needs analyses to characterize learners in terms of their knowledge “gaps”, “lacks”, or “deficiencies” (Liu, Chang, Yang, & Sun, 2011; Oanh, 2007). In fact, “deficiency analysis”, in which learner “lacks...determine the syllabus” (West, 1994, p. 4) was the terminology many needs analysts used during the late 1970s and 1980s to describe what today would be called the “present-to-target-situation needs analysis”. Although “deficiency analysis” no longer exists in name, its underlying deficit orientation largely remains in practice as a guiding principle for curriculum design.

By emphasizing student lacks or gaps, the locus of change or accommodation resides within the individual learner, an orientation that is bound to a meritocratic ideology of education. This ideology situates the individual student as responsible for academic success or failure without acknowledging the role of inequitable stakeholder positions, institutional structures, or broader sociopolitical contexts that can affect student performance and marginalize culturally subordinated learning groups such as linguistic minority students (Benesch, 1996; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001; Swartz, 2009).

The focus on learner “needs”, “gaps”, or “deficiencies” takes attention away from root or structural causes that can contribute to student failure or poor performance. By definition, this deficit model of education also fails to capitalize and build upon students’ cultural and linguistic resources; in contrast, an additive model of education builds on strengths and diverse sources of knowledge shown to be pedagogically productive for working with linguistic and societal minority students (see Bennet, 2003; Canagarajah, 2011; Luz Reyes & Halcón, 2001). This additive approach is particularly relevant for working with Generation 1.5 EAP students exposed to prejudicial English-only assimilationist discourses. A CEAP approach to needs analysis described below and in the present study resists characterizing students in deficit terms and avoids situating “need” solely in student lapses without first considering larger institutional structures that may not be conducive to promoting student and teacher success.

Critical needs analysis (Benesch, 1996) or rights analysis (Benesch, 1999, 2001a) is an alternative for understanding how to offer students and teachers more equitable and additive learning environments that are also sensitive to the workings of power in institutional settings. According to Benesch (2001a, p. 107), the shift in terminology from “needs” to “rights” highlights the point that “student need” is too often conflated with “institutional need”, a conflation that assumes that student and institutional needs are one and the same or complementary thus obfuscating any signs of “ideological battle” inherent in educational decision making. Benesch (1999, p. 315) explains that “rights” does not imply that students are entitled to certain rights, but highlights extant power relations and serves as a “conceptual framework for questions about authority and control...[and] offers its own opportunities for negotiations and resistance”. Thus, rights analysts consciously seek transformational opportunities for increasing student voice in their own learning.

Though rights analysis data collection can be similar to traditional needs analysis (e.g., classroom observations, interviews, surveys, collecting student work, etc.), it differs in its coupling of critical reflection “for understanding and responding to power relations” (Benesch, 2001a, p. 108). Rights analysts do not focus on seeking instructional solutions to address institutional demands placed upon students, but instead look for openings where students can assert their views in an attempt to level power imbalances. Using this framework, teachers and students challenge unreasonable or inequitable institutional structures and in turn, propose alternatives to institutional policy and target learning objectives.

3. Research design and methodology

In order to answer the study’s research objective of re-evaluating the EAP curriculum and achievements, data came from a yearlong process of data collection from Writing-Center tutors and EAP Program students and teachers in order to understand stakeholder perceptions and related insights regarding the program. I further triangulated these perceptions with classroom observations and collected student-writing portfolios. Using grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), I coded and categorized data to form explanatory themes to address research goals. Using a CEAP theoretical lens to understand the workings of power underlying themes, I then recommended curricular and structural reform.

Because I used a grounded theory approach for data collection and analysis (described below), I did not create rights analysis instruments per se. However, as I sifted through the data, I found that a rights analysis framework to be most appropriate and equitable for understanding and seeking solutions for an under-served and marginalized EAP Program. Below, I detail this process.

3.1. Data collection and instruments

I first began the study by visiting and writing observational field notes of EAP courses at each of the program’s three levels as well as collecting course syllabuses. Next, I conducted and transcribed a 90-min semi-structured focus-group interview (Seidman, 1998) with professionally-trained EAP Writing-Center tutors ($n = 8$). Tutors were encouraged to reflect on current
and past experiences and elaborate freely (Patton, 1987). I chose to interview writing tutors as they have a unique perspective on the program through their intensive mandatory one-on-one tutoring with EAP students. Interview questions included their pedagogical approaches to working with student writers, EAP student challenges, the range of writing assignments, and the kinds of learning activities or assignments they would suggest to help students overcome these challenges. I conducted the focus-group interview during a regularly paid staff meeting.

During the second semester, I designed, piloted, and administered end-of-the–academic-year 15-item student (n = 121) and 27-item teacher (n = 6) questionnaires (see Appendices A and B) in order to examine how teachers and students phenomenologically experienced the EAP Program. The first four student questions were Likert scaled and the remaining 11 questions required a narrative response. Student surveys asked students to comment on their best/least favorite classroom and tutoring experiences, most/least helpful learning activities, and asked students to offer suggestions for improving classes and tutoring. Likert-scaled items, for example, asked students to agree/disagree on a 5-point scale regarding their satisfaction with their academic English progress, the amount of attention paid to writing, and if they had friends in the course. Faculty surveys, for example, asked teachers to describe their courses, successful assignments, experience with the Writing Center, and how the EAP Program could better support their teaching. The survey also asked for faculty suggestions for improving the program and provided participants the space to reflect on practice. I chose open-ended formats for both student and faculty surveys in order to avoid imposing my own pedagogical assumptions while encouraging participants to express themselves freely.

For further triangulation, I collected a representative sample of student-writing portfolios at the end of each semester to see the range of writing assignments and analyze student-writing processes. I emailed faculty questionnaires while teachers administered student surveys during class in order to ensure a high response rate. The college’s Dean of Undergraduate Studies provided EAP teachers a stipend to participate in the survey; students did not receive monetary compensation.

3.2. College context

Northeast Senior College (NSC) is an urban non-residential public college (i.e., tax and tuition-funded) with close to 15,000 graduate and undergraduate students. Forty percent of the student body is Latino (40.1%), 25.9% White, 22.7% African American, 10.6% Asian/Pacific Islander, and .3% Native American. NSC is part of a larger university system that includes 2 year, 4 year, and professional and graduate schools. For students seeking undergraduate admissions, they are subject to University-designed reading, writing, and mathematics entrance-placement exams. Similar to its “sister” colleges that grant bachelor’s degrees, NSC provisionally admits EAP students who have passed the math exam, but have not yet passed the reading or writing exams on the condition that students pass these exams within 2 years.

3.3. The EAP program

The English Department’s Writing Program oversees the EAP Program, though the program’s main priority is to run first-year writing courses. In the U.S., most colleges or universities require either one or two composition courses (or their equivalents) of all entering students.

Using University writing test scores, EAP students are placed into one of three content-based, 6-h-a-week writing courses: EAP 1–EAP 3, the higher the number, the more advanced the course. Students must pass their assigned EAP writing courses in order to be eligible to retake the University writing exam. Students enrolled in EAP writing courses also co-enroll in credit-bearing, non-EAP general education courses that either rely less on academic English or help students to further acquire academic English (e.g., math, physical education, art, speech, etc.).

For each proficiency level, the EAP Program runs two to three course sections. During the student-professor data-collection period, there were two sections of EAP 1, three sections of EAP 2, and two sections of EAP 3. Historically, because the college has had a social science focus, EAP 1 and EAP 2 prepare students for these majors while EAP 3 focuses on “literacy as a scholarly topic”. EAP 3 also has the twin objective of preparing students to retake the University writing exam. In addition to these three content courses, each semester, one course per level is part of the college’s First-Year Experience (FYE) program. FYE’s purpose is to increase student retention by organizing learning communities (LCs) (i.e., paired courses that share students and course themes) and first-year seminars (i.e., general education courses that include college-readiness skills).

---

2 One EAP professor was unable to participate.
3 Anonymous student surveys were administered at the end of the semester during the same period that students filled out course evaluations, a regular practice on U.S. college campuses. The college had been conducting rigorous outcomes assessment of student learning and it was not uncommon for students to receive additional surveys in their courses. Teachers told students their responses would help the EAP Program improve. As their teachers and independent readers assessed student portfolios, students understood that if they chose not to fill out the survey, it would not negatively affect this assessment.
4 All names used are pseudonyms.
5 I have changed course names and numbers for the purposes of anonymity. The ascending numbers, however, reflect the actual course sequence based on student proficiency.
3.4. Study participants

3.4.1. Students
At the end of the spring semester, EAP students (n = 121) were administered the rights-needs analysis questionnaire in their respective EAP courses. Demographic information showed that Spanish (32.6%) and Mandarin/Cantonese (31.4%) made up the majority home languages spoken by EAP students, followed by Bengali (5.8%), Haitian Creole (5.8%), Korean (5.8%), Polish (3.5%), and other combined languages (15.1%). The majority of students (54.4%) had lived in the U.S. 3–5 years, followed by 30.8% who had lived in the U.S. 6 or more years, while 14.7% had lived in the U.S. less than 2 years. Most of these EAP students were Generation 1.5 immigrants.

3.4.2. Faculty and writing tutors
Demographic information solicited from the faculty questionnaire found that professors6 (n = 6) had been teaching at the college an average of 8.5 years, ranging from 1 to 15 years. Four of the six professors were adjunct faculty while two were full-time tenured or tenure-track professors. All professors held MA TESOL degrees, including the two full-time professors who also held doctorates in applied linguistic fields. EAP Writing-Center tutors, including the Center’s director (n = 7), also held MA TESOL degrees and had worked full time in the tutoring center for an average of 5.9 years.

3.5. Data analysis
To code data, I applied grounded theory (GT) to a CEAP approach to traditional needs analysis. GT, as initially conceptualized by Glaser and Strauss (1967, p. 1), provides researchers “a general method of comparative analysis”. Glaser and Strauss explain that “[g]enerating a theory from data means that most hypotheses and concepts not only come from the data, but are systematically worked out in relation to the data during the course of the research” (p. 6). In this approach, theory emerges from the data through a recursive analytic process of initial coding, comparison, and categorization, which spurs further comparison, refinement, and progress toward inductive middle-range theories (Charmaz, 2005; Dey, 1999; Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Using GT’s process of open coding, I analyzed the transcribed 90-min focus-group interview, student and professor open-ended survey responses, and classroom observation notes to uncover emergent categories and overarching themes (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). Using the constant comparative method (Charmaz, 2003; Freeman, 1989), I compared coded items placed within initial categories to see if categories were sufficiently descriptive or in need of collapsing/expanding. The preliminary categories and their contents were further compared within each category and across categories in order to create what Rubin and Rubin (1995, p. 251) call “overarching themes” which are “put together to build an integrated explanation” of the question or problem under study. For the student surveys, because of their sufficient number, student-coded responses were tallied into percentages in order to determine which concepts had most salience for students; this process facilitated the formation of “themes”. A graduate research-fellow assisted me in the procedure of coding, categorizing, and tallying, which we undertook independently and then compared and reached consensus regarding our codes, categories, and ultimate themes.

4. Key findings and discussion

From the GT analysis of student surveys, Community of Learners emerged as the most robust theme, addressing study goal (2) of using student perceptions of their learning experiences to inform a CEAP program evaluation. Community of Learners both pointed to a programmatic strength and, for one level of learners, a weakness that prompted me, in cooperation with college administration, to begin a process of curricular and structural reform or study goal (5). Another theme that emerged from student data, Instrumental Writing, also addressed study goal (2) and, indirectly, study goal (4), investigating the impact of institutional structures on curriculum. Professor Interaction also emerged from student data, addressing study goal (2).

Data from course syllabuses, student portfolios, teacher surveys, and a tutor focus-group interview generated the theme, Program Under the Radar. Among other study goals, this theme explored the related insights of program tutors and EAP faculty, or study goal (3). Additionally, Program Under the Radar (inductively) revealed the impact of institutional and administrative structures, study goal (4), providing evidence for initiating the first steps for restructuring the EAP Program organization, addressing study goal (5).

Taken as a whole, these findings address the overarching research objective of re-evaluating the EAP Programs’ curriculum and achievements through a CEAP framework ultimately leading to program restructure and curriculum redesign.

4.1. Community of learners, instrumental writing, professor interaction

When questionnaires asked students from each level: “What did you like best about this class? Please write one or two specific examples”, the most robust response (42.7%) centered on positive peer experience. Students described that they

---

6 As not all teachers have doctorates at the college, the honorific, “Professor”, has become the institution’s locally constructed naming practice, as it is more inclusive and egalitarian.
enjoyed learning from one another, working in small groups, and relying on peers as emotional and academic resources, forming the coded theme, Community of Learners. Below are some representative comments:\(^7\):

(1) Since we’re all international students, we can understand the hardships we face in learning English. So it feels comfortable to be here.
(2) All my classmates are English learner. I don’t feel inferior in the class. It encouraged me to feel free to participate more.
(3) I really like the fact that we became like a small family and everybody help me out. This was great.
(4) I liked the fact that I got to work with other Students that had opinions totally opposite of mine. I got to learn a lot from them.

Comments 1–3 represent the affective dimension of this category. Through intensive peer interaction, learners experienced empathetic support from peers who understood the challenges of acquiring academic English coupled with the additional stress of learning academic English while enrolled in non-EAP college classes. Because students shared similar English language proficiencies, they expressed that they suffered less anxiety surrounding class participation and assignments. Arguably, this positive affective environment helped students to feel safe to take risks with language—a characteristic of successful language learners. Two of the six EAP professors (EAP 1 and EAP 2) also wrote that students benefited from the non-threatening environments fostered in their classes. For example, one teacher explained in the written survey:

I observe that students feel at home because they are in a non-threatening environment. They are able to express their thoughts and feelings without having to worry about mispronouncing words, making grammar mistakes, or being laughed at. Students are able to collaborate effectively whether in pairs or groups, socialize and build each other’s confidence.

In the same way as the students, this teacher invokes the positive role student collaboration has had on creating a positive classroom climate and, like student comment (3) which characterized classmates as a “small family”, the professor draws on the metaphor of home/family to describe the class’s affective atmosphere.

Comments 3 and 4 represent the cognitive dimension of this category, underscoring sociocultural factors that contribute to learning and cognition (Vygotsky, 1978). Students expressed the benefits of peer support (i.e., peer scaffolding occurring within the zone of proximal development) and benefits gained from socially constructing knowledge (Blumenfeld, Marx, Soloway, & Krajcik, 1996; Wells, 2000). Additionally, when professors commented on their most successful assignments, the most experienced teachers (i.e., EAP 1, EAP 2) mentioned collaborative tasks, group projects, and field trips—experiences or work that can enhance peer bonding and help students to co-construct knowledge and understand other ways of knowing. My classroom observations of EAP 1 and EAP 2 support these student and teacher remarks: I routinely observed students engaged in group and paired goal-oriented in-class work and formal presentations in the context of relaxed, friendly, and engaging classroom climates marked by easy laughter and forthcoming and focused classroom interaction.

Student comments indirectly show that teachers provided students ample, effective collaborative opportunities where they could come to understand the value of their peers as important resources. For students to understand this is particularly significant at a commuter college where forming peer bonds is more difficult than at a residential campus, yet it is these peer bonds that aid in student retention; statistics show that students with strong peer support are more likely to bond with and persist at their institutions (Harper, 2006; Kellog, 1999; Tinto, 2000). Also, as the majority of faculty members was adjunct professors, they could not spend significant time on campus beyond their designated office hours, underscoring the need for students to form strong peer bonds.

Though these responses were heartening, only EAP 1 and EAP 2 students provided comments regarding peers; not a single EAP 3 student mentioned classmates as an example of what they liked best about classes. Though the mention of peers did appear in other responses, it did not appear with sufficient frequency to form a category and theme. In contrast, this group commented that they preferred skill building (61.1%) (e.g., writing practice exams, learning grammar) in order to pass the University writing exam, forming the theme Instrumental Writing. Instrumental Writing entails that students viewed learning to write well as more of a means for passing the University writing test and not a means for intellectual or personal discovery or expression, a negative repercussion of the testing regime.

What is troubling about Community of Learners is that despite the well-known benefits of collaborative learning (see Curry, 2004), EAP 3 students did not acknowledge this benefit, suggesting that EAP 3 teachers did not sufficiently utilize cooperating tasks for optimal learning. Indeed, teacher responses and classroom observations confirmed that EAP 3 professors presented more teacher-fronted lessons. As a result, EAP 3 students did not experience or recently see the benefits of collaborative learning; approximately half of these students’ first experience with the EAP Program was EAP 3. This finding suggests that the cognitive, affective, and retention benefits surrounding the formation of peer bonds were lost on a group of students who would have undoubtedly benefitted from academic and emotional peer support as they were under the immediate pressure of having to pass the University writing exam or risk college dismissal. As professors were also under implicit pressure to get

\(^7\) Please note that student comments represent their current interlanguage. I have not made any grammatical corrections in order to honor their actual form of expression.
high student pass rates, a teacher-fronted classroom may have been believed to be more expedient and effective for achieving this goal.

A theme common to all class levels for what students “liked best” about classes was “Professor Interaction” (26.2%), defined by positive student–teacher interaction and helpful essay feedback. Thus the combination of professor and peer support was important for EAP 1 and EAP 2 students, whereas EAP 3 students preferred, or were only exposed to, activities focused on professor-led test preparation, a preference undoubtedly fueled by the end-of-semester high-stakes writing exam.

These findings showed that the immediate challenge for redesigning EAP 3 curriculum was to meet students’ short term goal of passing the University exam while also providing a classroom structure that fosters the building of strong peer bonds where students experience that they and their classmates are important affective and cognitive resources, leading to greater confidence, academic achievement, and interpersonal relations (Blumenfeld, 1992). Below I present another relevant theme prompting the reexamination of the EAP Program’s organizational hierarchy.

4.2. Program under the radar

Through coding course syllabuses, professor and student surveys, tutor focus-group transcript, and representative student-writing portfolios, I found a common theme, summed up colloquially as: Program Under the Radar. Though the above-described EAP Program had been extant for 10 years, data showed a lack of coherence. I found no consistent and unifying learning objectives, text types, and comparable assignments across courses. This lack of unifying consistency suggested program neglect. For example, though the English Department requires that professors include learning objectives on their syllabuses, most EAP professors had not, suggesting poor oversight. Despite the lack of explicit course learning objectives, EAP professors articulated individual course objectives in their faculty surveys. In these surveys, most teachers emphasized skills-acquisition, argumentative essay writing, and grammar instruction. As most syllabuses did not contain learning objectives, I consulted the original proposed EAP writing curriculum housed in the Office of Undergraduate Studies, but I found that there were no records on file. My investigation therefore showed that old and new faculty had no access to a record of unifying or guiding course objectives to reference for organizing courses and scaffolding assignments.

Although the majority of EAP professors emphasized similar course objectives, the road getting there was quite different from teacher to teacher. From the analyses of the tutor focus-group transcript, course syllabuses, and student portfolios, I found that text types and their levels of difficulty varied widely across same course levels. To illustrate, in EAP 2, one teacher used newspapers, magazines, and an ESL textbook while the other two used academic articles and literature.

Text type or genre might not have been a concern if they spark original argument and critical analysis; however, the findings also showed that text type did correspond with assignment difficulty. In courses with more basic texts, students wrote more generic essays such as “The Importance of the Internet”, while those courses with more sophisticated readings yielded more analytical papers such as the portrayal of internalized racism in immigrant fiction. In sum, same-level courses prepared same-level students unequally for their future course work. Hence, as this case demonstrates, “gaps” or “lacks” in student abilities may not necessarily be due to student “deficiencies”, but are a result of program shortcomings, in this case, a lack of program cohesion, consistency, and course oversight.

In terms of theory-driven practice or praxis, data also showed a lack of theoretical cohesion between EAP professors and Writing-Center tutors. For example, EAP professors espoused teaching students a writing process that progressed from idea generation to fine-combed editing on final drafts; however, through my analysis of student portfolios, I found that Writing-Center tutors began this editing process on the earliest drafts. In written surveys, when asked about their EAP Writing-Center experiences, students and professors commented negatively about this practice. Below are some representative student comments:

1) I would like they could give us more time to work on our essay instead of using one half hour to working on the essay, and other half hour to work on grammar practice.

2) They didn't really cared about writing assignments, they most cared about grammar.

The reference to the “other half hour” in comment (1) refers to the center’s practice of dividing the tutoring session into two parts: one half devoted to students’ writing assignments and the other half devoted to their own grammar curriculum. It is interesting to note that most EAP professors did not know that this had become the new tutoring format. Comments (1) and (2) suggest that students would have preferred to have used tutoring time to develop and expand their early-draft essay ideas instead of focusing primarily on grammar instruction.

From the above student comments, it is obvious that students are still working on accuracy and Writing-Center tutors are most likely responding to professors across the disciplines’ tendency to respond to sentence-level issues in student papers, a practice not uncommon in other institutions (see Jerskey, 2011). However, EAP Writing-Center tutors should know that EAP

8 Professor and tutor scripts were easily distinguishable.
9 The college’s Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) coordinator, who runs the college’s WAC certification training program, commented that faculty typically address sentence-level issues.
professors are more tolerant of students’ developing academic English. Indeed, EAP professors’ comments mirrored those of students:

1. They [tutors] primarily did line-by-line analysis for corrections. Perhaps more could be done with techniques for idea and paragraph development (i.e., to generate more ideas and details) since students often come up short and need to expand paragraph development.

2. I usually see grammar corrections and very rarely written comments about students’ writing.

Writing tutors in the focus-group interview in turn expressed that “professors expected” them “to check” student work and if they did not “correct” student work, students would believe that their writing was accurate.

Though the above comments bring up myriad issues regarding appropriate student feedback, Writing-Center practices, and perceived student and professor expectations, my main concern in terms of program development was that these responses indicated a general lack of formalized channels of communication and program oversight. This finding helped to explain why program professors’ and tutors’ praxes were not in-sync, demonstrating the need for institutionalized structures for collaboration and communication.

To understand the EAP Program’s lack of oversight, its untenured Writing Program Administrator (WPA) supervised over 220 sections of composition annually without a Writing Program staff. In addition, contrary to The [U.S.] Council of Writing Program Administrators’ professional guidelines for excellence, the WPA was under the same publication standards for obtaining tenure as college colleagues without administrative duties. Spread thin, overseeing the larger first-year Writing Program by necessity took precedence over EAP. Additionally, the lack of program coordination was undoubtedly connected to the absence of faculty or professional development meetings due to limited funding to pay part-time EAP faculty to attend. In sum, the EAP Program consisted of a string of courses without any real program coordination and cohesion due to administrative and budgetary constraints.

Embedded within critical frameworks is an “orientation toward transformative goals” through critical reflection (Pennycook, 2001, p. 161). Thus, CEAP and its accompanying rights analysis afforded me the opportunity to take a systematic accounting of the program, instigating a creative cycle of productive problem posing solving and further critical reflection. Below I discuss the first steps in this recursive process or, study goal (5).

5. Pedagogic and program implications: creating cohesion

Findings indicated that the EAP Program’s hierarchical structure needed re-evaluation in order to promote greater program communication and course cohesion. The most obvious solution to lighten the WPA workload would be to assign a coordinator position to a tenured applied linguist charged with EAP Program oversight. Unfortunately, the English Department did not have a tenured professor in its ranks who could take on this position, though this would not solve the budgetary shortfall. In my role as needs-rights analyst, I then needed to find a creative solution to work through program constraints. Thus challenged, I decided to seek mutually beneficial strategic partnerships within the college to help meet the program’s immediate needs. Jerskey (2011), in a case study of a college Writing Center, also explains how strategic partnerships within seemingly rigid institutional structures, brought about program growth and vitality.

5.1. Strategic collaborations

First-Year Experience (FYE), as previously mentioned, organizes learning communities (LCs) and first-year seminars. At Northeast Senior College, LCs are paired courses that share students and have some degree of content and assignment coordination while seminars provide students with disciplinary content coupled with academic skills development. Financially and philosophically, the college and university support FYE programs as a means of increasing student retention and graduation rates. Indeed, according to Northeast Senior College’s Office of Institutional Research, FYE students show significantly higher GPAs, rates of credit accumulation, and first-term retention as compared to control groups.

The course partners for all FYE LCs are first-year composition and select EAP courses. The Writing Program, therefore, was well acquainted with FYE’s program goals and benefits. These included program-wide learning objectives (in conjunction with departmental course objectives), outcomes assessment instruments and procedures, paid faculty development meetings, instructional-technology support, student academic coaches and peer mentors, funds for class excursions, and sufficient staff to implement and oversee its program elements.

As indicated by the prior discussion, the EAP Program also needed to form a greater strategic alliance with the EAP Writing Center. By situating all EAP courses within the FYE framework, the EAP Program could form greater ties with the Writing

---

10 The Council of Writing Program Administrators’ “Portland Resolution” (see Hult, Joliffe, Kelly, Mead, & Schuster, 1992) resolved that WPA administrative work be considered a scholarly pursuit in and of itself and that WPAs receive adequate funding for clerical and research support; conditions not met for Northeast Senior College’s WPA.

11 The WPA did receive a reduced teaching load from seven courses per academic year to four.

12 FYE data is based on a 2011 Office of Institutional Research study; Current data are not yet available.
Center as the Writing Center worked closely with FYE on other academic initiatives. Through the FYE partnership, the EAP Program would retain its intellectual authority over course design while benefitting from FYE’s administrative support structure and funding. Indeed, by year’s end, through a series of FYE compensated meetings, Writing-Center tutors, EAP faculty, and both program directors jointly created learning objectives across courses, beginning a process of greater communication, coherence, and unity across the EAP Program and Writing Center.

In terms of FYE course type, faculty survey and tutor focus-group interview data suggested that the EAP Program adopt the seminar model over the learning community model. Freshmen seminar professors across the college teach general education courses that include explicit academic and interpersonal skills and strategy instruction. A major benefit of adopting the seminar structure was that its learning objectives aligned with EAP professor suggestions for improving courses. Joint objectives included: developing cognitive and metacognitive learning strategies, promoting student involvement in campus-wide events, building awareness of academic-support services, and fostering student collaboration and collaborative skills. Collaboration, thus codified, would help to ameliorate the lack of student collaboration found in EAP 3 classes.

Another benefit of adopting the seminar model was that EAP professors who had worked in learning communities had expressed frustration with their attempts to coordinate with their LC partners. Writing-Center tutors confirmed this finding by remarking that LC professors needed to communicate course objectives and course content with one another more effectively as they saw little cross-course coordination. Seminars on the other hand, are stand-alone courses, allowing EAP professors to work independently. By shifting all EAP courses to stand-alone seminars, the EAP Program resisted EAP’s traditional accommodative service function where EAP practitioners relinquish their own disciplinary knowledge in order to support another’s, a role common to EAP-LC alignments (see Benesch, 1999).

As marginalization through neglect was one of the key findings in the current study, shifting to stand-alone seminars avoided placing EAP faculty and the program itself into a structure that potentially could further marginalize. Pennycook (1997, p. 264) explains: “If one of the difficulties faced by EAP practitioners is marginalization and displacement into a secondary role compared to the other disciplines, this problem cannot be overcome by accepting a role as a service department providing what other departments feel they need”. Spack (1988, p. 260), cited in Pennycook, further explains that when EAP professors teach subjects in which they do not have the same degree of expertise as a professor in that field, EAP teachers may “find themselves in the uncomfortable position of being less knowledgeable than their students”. This observation may explain why at the college, LC writing-teacher student evaluations were generally lower than the same teachers’ non-LC sections. This suggests that students may be comparing the two LC instructors and finding their writing teacher less effective, as their command of the disciplinary content could never compete, or that the writing-teacher’s focus on skill building compares less favorably to the other professor’s content. This phenomenon merits further study, but goes beyond the scope of the present study.

Related, Pennycook (1997) explains that EAP’s accommodative service role places EAP teachers in an uncritical position relative to taught subject matter. By EAP practitioners not focusing on language or linguistics as course content, teachers lose the critical opportunity “to help students to develop forms of linguistic, social and cultural criticism that would be of much greater benefit to them for understanding and questioning how language works both within and outside educational institutions” (p. 264). This suggests that EAP faculty members, trained in linguistic topics, should design thematic courses with “language” as their focus. If EAP professionals were to adopt such topics, faculty could then teach disciplinary content taught through their EAP professional expertise, a powerful combination for all stakeholders. In sum, EAP practitioners “need to remind [themselves] that [they] are far from lacking a content area of [their] own” (Belcher, 2006, p. 140).

Applied linguists’ disciplinary knowledge shares a strength with multilingual and Generation 1.5 students who have lived experiences with such topics as interlanguage development, code switching, language contact, and language varieties; course topics from which professors can connect schematically, providing students opportunities for authentic projects. Delving into linguistic topics not only develops student self-knowledge, but also the intellectual tools needed to question unproblematized societal linguistic discrimination. Indeed, at a peer institution, faculty have found that sociolinguistic courses developed student language awareness that positively reinforced concepts learned in students’ developmental courses (Price, Jacknick, & Mataire, 2012).

As the college’s EAP Program moves to redesign curriculum, starting with EAP 3, we intend to use sociolinguistic course themes, building on student and teacher strengths as “folk” and applied linguists, and not simply to “serve” other disciplines’ content knowledge. This, coupled with a more coherent EAP Program through FYE support and greater Writing-Center communication, will help EAP learners reach their linguistic potentials and approach university assessments more confidently.

6. Conclusion: educating for justice

Through systematic and data-driven critical needs or rights analysis, the college’s Writing Program found ways to contest power relations and strengthen its EAP Program through critical self-reflection and by tapping student, professor, and institutional strengths. This additive approach to curricular innovation and redesign avoided a too narrow focus on student

---

13 The WPA also wrote and received a professional development grant to fund collaborative meetings from the University’s ESL Discipline Council, a University-wide body of applied linguists representing each sister campus.
learning “gaps” or “deficiencies” as its starting point. Instead, by using CEAP, the rights analysis uncovered more root concerns.

Emergent themes suggested that the pressure of a high-stakes University writing assessment negatively affected the formation of peer bonds by favoring teacher-fronted instruction over collaborative learning. For courses in which students were not preparing for the exam, students reported that they formed family-like bonds with peers, a phenomenon correlated with higher academic performance and retention. Findings also suggested that the EAP Program suffered from a lack of program cohesion and coordination due to a lack of adequate administrative oversight. To remedy this, the EAP Program strengthened ties with the EAP Writing Center and aligned itself with the college's First-Year Experience, a successful, well-funded, fully staffed academic program with complementary and established learning objectives. Additionally, by building on teachers’ linguistic content knowledge and students’ strengths as multilingual-muticultural language users, the content for the program’s test-preparatory course will focus on language and sociolinguistics.

Instigating change takes time and patience though I am encouraged by Paulo Freire and Myles Horton’s conversation regarding the unfolding of their “spoken” book in which Freire explains: “…we make the road by walking” (Horton & Freire, 1990, p. 6); a statement that encourages boldness, action, improvisation, discovery, and contemplation. In line with the college’s mission of “Educating for Justice”, the current rights analysis, critically examining established hierarchical relationships, is the first of many steps in an on-going process of critical reflection and program reform in an on-going pursuit of equity in learning.

**Acknowledgments**

I am indebted to Amanda Springs for her tireless assistance coding survey data. I thank C.B. McKenzie and Sarah Benesch for their encouragement and feedback on earlier drafts, and I thank JEAP reviewers for their careful reading and direction provided during the drafting process. Finally, I wish to remember my teacher and friend, Leo van Lier.

This work was supported (in part) by a grant from The City University of New York PSC-CUNY Research Award Program.

**Appendix A. EAP student survey**

_EAP Program survey_14

Thank you for taking this survey. Your answers will help us serve you better. We appreciate your thoughtful responses!

**Please circle the class you are currently taking:**

EAP 1  EAP 2  EAP 2 (Learning Community)  EAP 3

**After the statement, please circle the word or phrase that best describes your opinion:**

1. I am satisfied with the progress I made in improving my academic English this semester.
   - Agree strongly
   - Agree somewhat
   - Neutral
   - Disagree somewhat
   - Disagree strongly

2. Enough attention was paid to writing English in this course.
   - Agree strongly
   - Agree somewhat
   - Neutral
   - Disagree somewhat
   - Disagree strongly

3. I prefer to take writing courses with EAP students rather than with native English speakers.
   - Agree strongly
   - Agree somewhat
   - Neutral
   - Disagree somewhat
   - Disagree strongly

4. I have friends in this course.
   - Agree strongly
   - Agree somewhat
   - Neutral
   - Disagree somewhat
   - Disagree strongly

---

14 All identifying institutional names have been changed.
Please answer specifically and completely.

5. What did you like best about this class? Please write one or more specific examples.

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

6. What class assignments or activities helped you to improve your English most? Please write one or more specific examples.

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

7. What did you not like about this class? Please write one or more specific examples.

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

8. What suggestions do you have to make your EAP/ENG class more helpful in improving your English?

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
EAP WRITING CENTER

Please circle:

9. Enough attention was paid to writing assignments in my tutoring sessions.
   Agree strongly  Agree somewhat  Neutral  Disagree somewhat  Disagree strongly

Please answer specifically and completely.

10. What did you find most helpful about your tutoring sessions at the Writing Center this semester? Please provide one or more specific examples.

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

11. What did you like least about your tutoring sessions at the Writing Center? Please provide one or more specific examples.

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

12. What suggestions do you have to make your tutoring sessions more helpful?

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

13. Please write any additional comments below about the class or the EAP Program:

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________
Appendix B. Faculty survey

EAP Program faculty survey

Directions: Thank you for participating in this survey! Your responses will be used to help us assess our current program and assist us plan for the future.

The following questions are clustered around the following topics: Background Information; Courses, Teaching, and Assignments; Learning Objectives; Portfolio Assessment; EAP Writing Center; Learning Communities; Future Directions; and Additional Comments.

Where appropriate, please indicate the EAP course and semester for which you are responding. Indicate N/A for any questions that do not apply.

Please type your responses directly into the Word document. In order to be paid ($140.00), your forms must be received by 3 PM, Friday, June 18th. Please return and save them as a Word .doc file with your last name as part of the file name. After surveys have been collected, all responses will be made anonymous. A follow-up meeting is planned at the start of the semester to discuss responses. Thank you again for your participation!

Background Information
1. Name:
2a. All EAP courses taught at the college:
2b. EAP courses taught this academic year 2009/2010:
3. How many years have you taught in the EAP Program?
4. List or indicate any additional expertise or interests that you have that could translate to future course development (e.g., filmmaking, web design, creative writing, law, art, theater, photography, other academic fields, etc.).

Courses, Teaching, and Assignments
5. Please give a descriptive overview of your EAP course or courses this academic year. Include such items as course theme, course texts, assignments, technology used, etc.
6. Describe your most successful assignments and why they succeeded.
7. Describe what your class/classes (i.e., students, you, the course itself, etc.) did well.
8. What changes would you make regarding your course/courses the next time you teach it/them?
9. Describe how the English Department and the EAP Program can better support your teaching.
Learning Objectives
10. What are the learning objectives for your course or courses? Of these, which learning objectives are most crucial for your students? Which learning objectives are the hardest for students and why? (Please note the course in your responses.)

Portfolio Assessment
11. The assessment criteria for the recent portfolio review (i.e., Reflection, Development, Support, Organization, Making Sense, Mechanics/Grammar, Revision, Growth) can be viewed as course learning objectives. How well did these criteria match your course learning objectives? How successful were these criteria in defining what a student should learn in EAP courses? How would you revise, delete or add to these criteria?
12. Describe your portfolio exchanges this year. Include in your answer both strengths and areas where it could be improved.
13. It was suggested that portfolios should contain at least a table of contents, reflective cover note, a sample of in-class writing, and writing that included outside sources. (It is also implied that portfolios include paper drafts that lead up to final drafts.) How well were you able to fulfill these minimum criteria? Would you add other criteria?
14. After reviewing you and your colleagues’ student portfolios, what did this experience teach you about the EAP Program, your teaching, assignments, etc.? How useful is portfolio exchange as a faculty development device?
15. What suggestions do you have to make the portfolio process work more effectively for students, professors, and Writing-Center staff?

EAP Writing Center
16. Describe you and (if possible) your students’ experience working with the Writing Center.
17. How do writing tutors usually comment on your students’ writing? Describe your satisfaction with these approaches.
18. If you could offer any suggestions to Writing Center and Writing-Center tutors what would it be?
19. In a focus-group interview with Writing-Center tutors, tutors commented that they would like greater communication with EAP professors. Do you have any ideas of how we could communicate better with our students’ tutors?
20. This spring semester Writing Center reorganized tutoring sessions. Were you aware of this?Yes ☐ No ☐
21. Writing-Center tutoring sessions are currently divided into two parts. The first half of the session is devoted to grammar instruction based on a diagnostic test. The second half of the session is devoted to student papers. What comments do you have regarding this new protocol?

Learning Communities
22. If you have ever taught in an EAP learning community (LC), describe your experience. Include how it may or may not benefit students, your experience working with your LC partner(s), and how on a programmatic level we could improve LCs for EAP students.

Future Directions
23. In what future directions would you like to see the EAP Program move in terms of services, courses, curriculum, Writing Center, etc.?

Additional Comments
24. What additional ideas or insights do you have to help direct the future of the EAP Program?

Thank you for your valuable insights!!

References