

# Redesigning ELA Curricula and Learning Outcomes Through Lesson Study

NGUYEN DAO, DANIEL PEÑA, AND BRIENNE BOESIGER

*Summary: This study highlights the ongoing review and assessment of English Language Acquisition courses at Skagit Valley College. Specifically, we employ the Lesson Study (Perry & Lewis, 2009) model to redesign our English Language Acquisition curriculum, with an explicit focus on actionable learning outcomes, connection with upper-level courses, and transferability to degree-seeking programs. Preliminary findings and analyses of the first cycle of implementation are presented in this article.*

*Keywords: lesson study, adult English language learners, basic education for adults, curriculum design, culturally responsive practices, Hispanic-Serving Institutions.*

## Introduction

### 1. HSI Mission and Revision of Current ELA Learning Outcomes

In recent years, the state of Washington has welcomed thousands of immigrants, notably from Mexico, Central and South America, and Ukraine. The immigrants' diverse backgrounds bring both challenges and opportunities for educational and professional training programs across higher education institutions in the state (Dao et al., 2023). To better secure federal fundings and meet the students' needs, since the 2010s, community and technical colleges in Washington have embarked on the journey of becoming minority-serving institutions. As of 2022-2023, eight community and technical colleges in Washington, including Skagit Valley College (SVC – our institution), have achieved the status of Hispanic-Serving Institution (Hispanic Association of Colleges And Universities, 2023). To sustain the HSI status and to embrace the spirit of servingness among HSIs (Garcia et al., 2019), the college has set the overall goal of enhancing culturally and linguistically diverse students' enrolment, retention, progression, transition rate, and academic success.

Therefore, all academic units at SVC have been tasked with revising curricula and program learning outcomes. Our English Language Acquisition (ELA) Department deems this operational plan as an opportunity to redesign key sections in the current curriculum, with an explicit focus on actionable learning outcomes, connection with upper-level Basic Education for Adults (BEaA) courses, and transferability to degree-seeking programs. In our current ELA program, there are currently six 10-credit leveled courses and eight supplementary courses (e.g., grammar, speaking and listening, and

digital literacy). With this design and three quarters in an academic year, multilingual learners are expected to finish ELA courses in two years and possibly transfer to English 101 – a gateway English course for certificate- and degree-seeking programs. However, we find that the expectations do not reflect the reality of many students as (1) they have ended up repeating the same courses several times and (2) there is no typical adult multilingual learner.

As Crandall and Sheppard (2004) notes, “adult English language learners (ELLs) differ in their languages and cultural backgrounds, their prior educational experiences and literacy, their employment history, their English language proficiency, and their reasons for participating in adult ESL and education” (p. 4). These students tend to bring a wide array of cultural background and linguistic experiences to the classroom. Thus, their funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992) are varied in terms of exposure to the English language, first-language literacy and educational level, socioeconomic-political situations, asylee status, exposure to discrimination, mobility, et cetera. Furthermore, second language acquisition research has found that it may take an individual with strong first language and literacy skills 2 to 4 years to acquire communicative fluency and 5 to 7 years to achieve academic fluency (Cummins, 2008). However, for those with low or few literacy skills in their first language(s), it may take them up to 10 years to acquire age-appropriate academic skills in the second language (Simpson, 2018).

To align with SVC's mission of sustaining the HSI status and address the drawbacks regarding the language acquisition timeline, we realize the need to overhaul the current ELA curriculum to better serve our diverse adult ELL populations, which comprise over 500 students across Skagit, Island, and

San Juan counties. Since Spring 2023, we have adopted a backward design approach to begin revising Level 5 and working backward to Level 1. Specifically, governed by the College and Career Readiness Standards, we have broken down the learning outcomes in each current level into three sub-levels and ensure that the outcomes scaffold from one to another based on Bloom’s Taxonomy (see Figure 1). At the time of writing, we have finished revising Levels 4 and 5, and these revisions will be officially implemented starting in Summer 2024.



Figure 1. Breakdown of current learning outcomes

## 2. Overview of the Lesson Study Model

To promote and assess the effectiveness of our outcome work, we have decided to adopt the Lesson Study model (Perry & Lewis, 2009) that foregrounds evidence-based teaching and learning approaches. Originally conceptualized and developed in Japan (Isoda, 2010), Lesson Study (LS) is a professional development model in which a learning community of instructors collaborates to identify students’ learning challenges, plan and teach key lessons, and reflect on these lessons (Lewis & Perry, 2014, see Figure 2). These serve as core components in promoting professional learning communities of instructors, reviewing course syllabi, and redesigning curricular content. A wide range of research suggests that LS implementation has resulted in positive shifts in (1) the affordances of instructor-instigated curricular changes and (2) subject matter knowledge and pedagogical practices that are responsive to students’ needs, which altogether contribute to student engagement and learning (Coenders & Verhoef, 2019; da Ponte, 2017). While the LS model has been widely implemented across K-12 classrooms, it has been emerging as a promising tool for reforming pedagogical and curricular practices in tertiary contexts (Bickerstaff et al., 2019, 2021; Langman et al., 2022).



Figure 2. Lewis and Perry's (2014) Lesson Study cycle

Furthermore, the LS model provides a platform for creating sustainable professional development, which, due to its structured approach, allows for sustained engagement and continual growth in teacher expertise. More recent evidence suggests that by including students’ voices in redesigning lessons and curricula, LS is likely to result in students’ positive learning experiences (Wood & Cajkler, 2018). In addition, implementing student-focused professional development (such as LS) in inclusive ways could increase the success and retention rate of culturally and linguistically diverse students enrolled in HSIs and other minority-serving institutions (Garcia et al., 2019). Thus, the LS model would not only benefit our adult ELL populations but also align with SVC’s operational plans and Washington State’s vision for BEdA programs, which are geared toward the central idea of embracing students’ voices through incorporating culturally responsive research and pedagogies (Washington State Board for Community & Technical Colleges, 2020). Through adopting LS, we also aim to nurture BEdA faculty learning communities, especially among ELA instructors, thereby promoting life-long learning and program sustainability through engagement in academic excellence and research.

## Adapted LS Model as the Guiding Framework and Methodology

Regarding our specific context, we have adapted the LS model that pays critical attention to actionable learning outcomes, connection with upper-level courses in the BEdA Unit, and ways of sustaining those potential changes (see Figure 3). The adapted LS model entails the following stages and details:

**Revise existing learning outcomes:** The professional learning community (PLC) of instructors discusses students’ needs and revises the existing learning outcomes.

**Plan key lessons that serve as transition points between courses:** The PLC research best practices regarding how to implement the revised learning outcomes. The PLC integrates both language objectives and content objectives (Dao et al., 2023) to create one or two key lessons and assessments that take into consideration the revised learning outcomes and connection with upper-level ELA courses.

Teach and observe the key lessons: Each member of the PLC teaches the planned key lessons in their respective classrooms. Other team members observe the implementation and take observation notes. This process includes visual and audio recordings for data collection and reflection purposes. Each observation should last one hour per lesson.

Collect feedback from participating instructors and students: The collection of feedback includes two core components. The first component is the LS planning and reflection meetings, during which the PLC reflects on the revised outcomes and the taught lessons. The team member who was in charge of their lessons will explain their brainstorming process. The meeting takes place every two weeks and lasts for two hours. The second component is whole-class surveys. The survey focuses on (1) students' reflection on the taught lessons, (2) their learning experiences in the ELA course and at SVC in general, and (3) their transferability to certificate- and degree-seeking programs.

Evaluate the collected data and implementation of lessons: The PLC evaluates the collected feedback, discusses the results, and plans the next steps accordingly.

Redesign the ELA curriculum based on the data: The PLC collaborates with other BE&A departments to restructure the learning outcomes if necessary. This may result in the expansion of current courses and/or the addition of new ones, with a focus on creating pathways for retention and transition to upper-level courses.



Figure 3. The adapted Lesson Study cycle

The six steps outlined above necessarily serve as the guiding framework for implementing changes as well as the methodology for collecting and evaluating student data. Data presented in this article was collected during the LS cycle's initiation in the Winter Quarter of 2024, including lesson artifacts, observation notes, visual recordings, and samples of student surveys. We focused on implementing a special lesson using a key set of the revised learning outcomes in ELA Level 5 (see Figure 4). The lesson was taught in the

ELA Level 5 class in the morning, with 19 students of diverse backgrounds who gave their consent to be part of the study. The permission for investigation was granted by the administrators.

**Language objectives: SWBAT:**

- Use correct forms of verbs
- Use a combination of past, future, and present tenses
- Use transition words to signal time sequence

**Content objectives: SWBAT:**

- Recall details of lived experiences.
- Organize details of lived experiences in a cohesive way.
- Compose a recollection of lived experiences in a cohesive way.

Figure 4. The key set of learning outcomes in ELA Level 5

## Findings

### 1. Overview of the Target Lesson

The lesson implementation was broken down into two 2.5-hour instruction sessions. On the first day, with guidance and support from the teacher, students were prompted to write a narrative paragraph focusing on topics they learned during the course, such as immigration to the U.S., obstacles, stress, friends and families, community, work, individual strengths, and educational and professional plans. As the observer notes, “the students committed to the activity and communicated occasionally for clarification. Some of the Ukrainian-speaking students communicated in Ukrainian for explanation of some of the prompts and assistance with how to express certain things in writing. For the most part, students were focused on writing.”

On the second day, students were prompted to use their written narratives to create a mind-map on a given poster, in which each one of the prompt questions connects to a different aspect of the mind-map. Then, they participated in a Gallery Walk and listened to their friends present their projected lived experiences. They were encouraged to ask reflection questions regarding their friends' life journey and give sticky-note comments on the posters in their first language(s) (see Figure 5). Like the first day, the students were engaged and stayed on task.

### 2. Coding of the Data & Student Writing Samples

Essentially, data were coded in terms of the learning outcomes of the target lesson and the goals of the LS project. Thus, we examined the students' writing samples based on (1) how they narrate their lived experiences (e.g., immigration, obstacles, stress, and traumas) and (2) how they discuss their educational or professional plans with transferability to degree-seeking programs at SVC. A salient pattern among



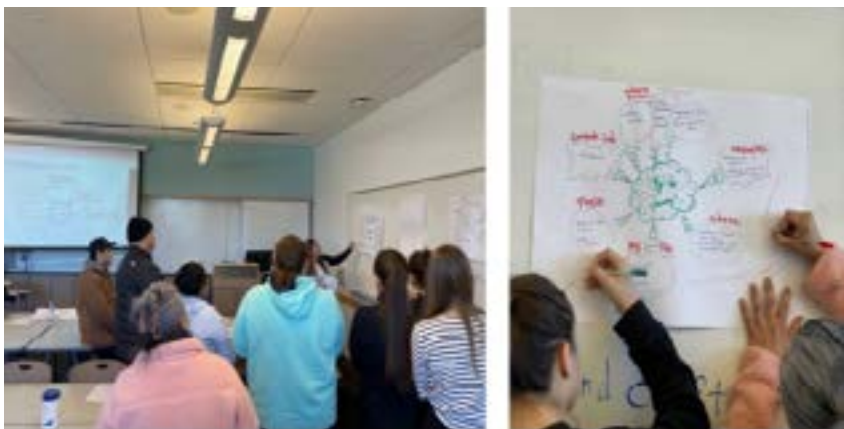


Figure 5. Students participating in the Gallery Walk activity

the narratives includes war-torn traumas from Ukrainian students (see Figure 6) and plans to aspiration to move to upper-level courses and pursue a degree or career beyond ELA (see Figure 7).

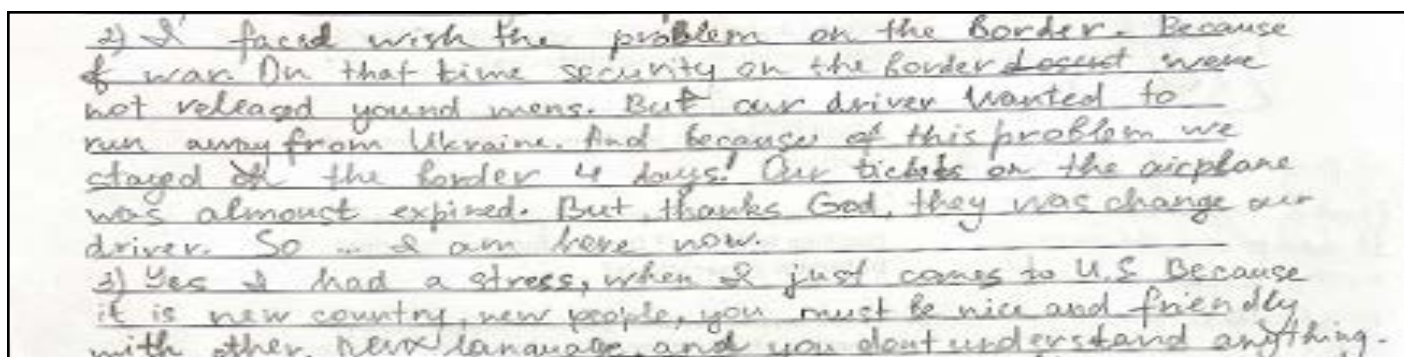


Figure 6. War-torn traumas of a student from Ukraine

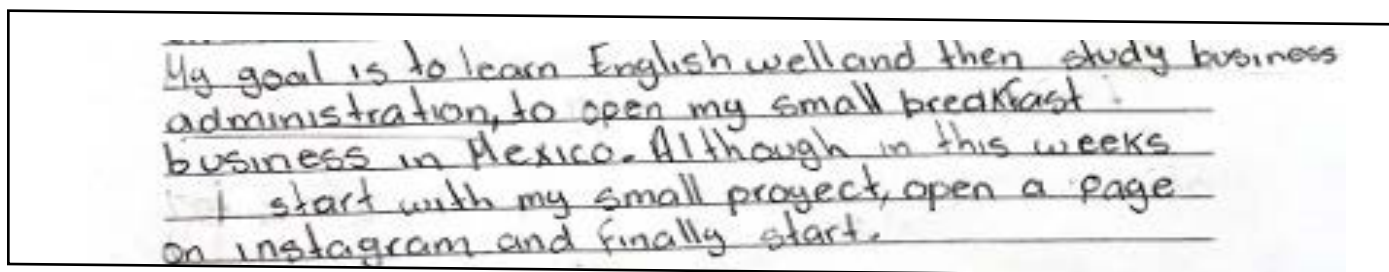


Figure 7. Aspiration to pursue a degree and start a business of a student from Mexico

### 3. Student Survey & Reflections

As noted above, a core component of LS involves the inclusion of students' voices. We thus designed a 12-item survey that focuses on (1) students' reflection on the target lesson, (2) their learning experiences in the ELA course and at SVC in general, and (3) their transferability to certificate- and degree-seeking programs. The survey was distributed on Canvas as an assignment, and the response rate was more than 50% with 10 out of 19 students completing the survey. Here we present some noteworthy responses.

In particular, 90% of respondents said "Yes" to the question "Did this lesson help you reflect on your life journey and influence your future plans?". Regarding the open-ended questions, students are encouraged to answer them in their

first language(s). For instance, in the question "what was helpful about this lesson?", three of the salient responses are:

- *To review my immigration journey with more details. First thing is that I can describe my journey, and lastly that I we immigrants mostly share the same challenges.*
- *Review past topics and improve the way of writing and narrating.*
- *Esta lesson me ayudó a entender mejor varias cosas en inglés. (This lesson helped me better understand various things in English.)*

When it comes to their educational or professional goals, only 20% of respondents mention they have taken ELA classes with the main purpose of improving their English. The other 80% express their wish to pursue higher qualifications or get a promotion at work (see Figure 8).

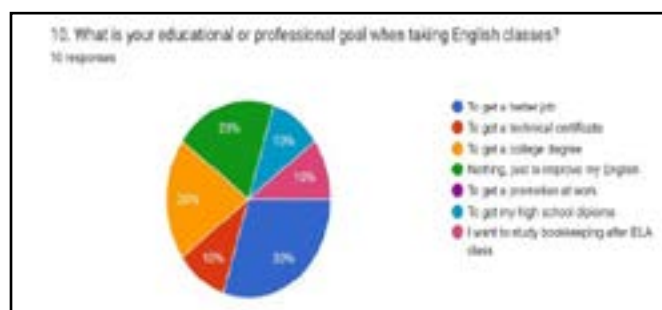


Figure 8. Students' responses regarding educational or professional plans

### Discussion & Conclusion

Through our preliminary analyses of the ongoing LS cycles, we concur that most students in the target ELA Level 5 class

met the revised learning outcomes, with most outlining their professional or educational plans and aspiring to seek a degree beyond ELA. This aligns with our initial purposes of enhancing ELA students' progression and transferability to upper-level courses and degree-seeking programs. In addition, LS as a professional development tool seems to have proven its worth in bringing about positive changes in equity-driven curricular design and pedagogical orientations among our professional learning community of instructors.

In terms of limitations, this LS project is in its early stages and essentially acts as action research – which at its core identifies issues, applies a solution, collects and analyzes data, and makes the necessary adjustments (e.g., Burns et al., 2022). This cycle repeats until the desired outcomes are established. This poses both opportunities and challenges, especially when it comes to sustain- able practices (i.e.,

who would lead and sustain LS in the long term), time commitment, and incentives for involving part-time faculty. As part of the ongoing outcome revision work, future analyses will address some of these limitations outlined here.

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