

PROMISING PRACTICE

ALL In: Accelerated Language Learning as a Practical Methodology for Today's ESL Classroom

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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The past 10 years have seen a major shift in English and English as a Second Language (ESL) placement and pedagogy in California's Community Colleges (CCC), driven by a developmental education reform movement known as *acceleration*. Popularized by the faculty-led California Acceleration Project (CAP), the acceleration movement focused on reducing or eliminating prerequisite pathways in English and math due to a decade's worth of state-wide data showing that each level of remediation statistically reduced a student's chances of ever reaching or completing the

first transfer-level course in the respective discipline (Hern & Snell, 2010). Faculty from many of the state's 117 community colleges participated in CAP's communities of practice, starting with the first cohort in the academic year 2011–2012, and returned to develop accelerated pathways at their own colleges. As these models proved successful and the data supporting acceleration mounted, CAP leaders joined forces with the College Futures Foundation and other partners to lobby for legislative action to compel a system-wide change. The resulting legislation, Assembly Bill 705 (Cal. Assemb., 2017), was signed into law in October 2017 and implemented as of January 1, 2018. This law required that all state community college districts maximize the probability that incoming students would access and complete their first transfer-level English and math class within a year of first enrolling and that students who enrolled in ESL courses would access and complete their first transfer-level English class within three years of first enrollment (Rodriguez et al., 2022).

The ESL provisions in AB705 essentially limited CCC credit ESL pathways to a maximum of five semesters, reserving the sixth semester for the transfer-level English class to make completion within three years logistically possible even for those starting in the entry-level ESL course. Furthermore, maximizing the probability of transfer-level English completion, as required by the law, implied reducing ESL sequences to as few levels as possible, given the inevitable attrition of students within and between each level (Hern & Snell, 2010). ESL faculty at each college were left to determine the curriculum, materials, and methods they believed could achieve the most effective and efficient rate of English acquisition so that even entry-level adult English learners could be ready for the language demands of a first-year composition class after five or fewer semesters of ESL instruction. Reeve (2017) suggested that the ESL field could greatly benefit from pedagogical strategies similar to those developed by CAP practitioners for use in accelerated English courses.

As early adopters of CAP principles, ESL faculty at Cuyamaca College in San Diego, California, overhauled their entire program starting in 2016. Cuyamaca's ESL program's redesign involved reducing the time required for students to progress to college composition from as many as nine semesters to a maximum of five and as few as three. To maximize students' language acquisition within this truncated timeframe, Cuyamaca faculty developed the new pedagogically-based Accelerated Language Learning (ALL) program.

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The Pedagogical Makeover

The legislation shortening ESL sequences in California highlighted the need for a revised curriculum that maximizes language acquisition in much less time. Pressure arose for a methodology that optimizes the limited time given for students to reach the necessary English proficiency to proceed with college-level academic work. New methodologies to teach adult language learners are somewhat rare these days compared to the many such methodologies that appeared in the 60s and early 70s (Celce-Murcia, 2014). However, recommendations to adjust the ESL curriculum continue to emerge. For example, Baranowska (2020) presented research suggesting teachers increase their adaptation of current technologies like videos and subtitles, and Ellis (2020) suggested a makeover to more modular curriculums in ESL and English as a Foreign Language teaching.

The ongoing pursuit of more effective and quicker methods of teaching English language learners so they can partake fully in the opportunities presented by their new culture and language has resulted in what we, the authors, are calling Accelerated Language Learning (ALL). Our ALL program incorporates elements that have long been present in optimal language teaching. This remodeled classroom practice has proven to be both practical and highly effective with ESL students at the community college level for the past 5 years at Cuyamaca College in El Cajon, California.

After briefly reviewing literature pertaining to communicative approaches to language teaching and learning, this article will set out the course structure, content, and instructional strategies we have used to demonstrate how and why ALL has worked so well with today's students at Cuyamaca.

Background From the Last 50 Years

Krashen, citing Smith (1988), put it this way: Our problem in language education, as Frank Smith has pointed out, is that we have confused cause and effect. We have assumed that we first master language 'skills' and then apply those skills to reading and writing. But that is not the way the human brain operates. Rather, reading for meaning, reading about things that matter to us, is the cause of literate language development. (Krashen, 2004, p. 150)

Krashen's model, referred to in early literature as the

monitor model (Lei & Wei, 2019), and his ideas on language acquisition have inspired many approaches to teaching English to non-native speakers. The curriculum outlined in this article is no exception. Krashen's theories were not universally accepted from the onset. The general complaint against them was the lack of empirical evidence to support the claims or the inability to test some of the ideas (Cook & Cook, 1993; Ellis, 1994; Greg, 1984; McLaughlin, 1987; Zafar, 2009).

However, in a review of Krashen's theories and the criticisms against them, Lei and Wei (2019) concluded that:

This theory has played a crucial role in facilitating the teaching of second language all over the world, and some effective teaching methods have been based on [Krashen's] main claims in the theory for facilitating the learners to better acquire the second language. Despite various criticisms from all perspectives, Krashen's Monitor Model has played a significant role in the field of second language acquisition and second language teaching. (p. 1463)

For over 50 years, research has demonstrated that language teaching is done best when following broad communicative principles that practice language in settings where the words are meaningful for a student. This *communicative approach* (Canale & Swain, 1980) has been a principal philosophy in language teacher training programs, and the techniques associated with this approach have produced dynamic, student-centered methodologies such as the natural

approach (Krashen & Terrell, 1988), communicative language teaching (Hymes, 1979), silent way (Gattegno, 1972), suggestopedia (Lozanov, 1978), content-based instruction (Mohan, 1986), total physical response (Asher, 1969), and the even more recent teaching proficiency through reading and storytelling (Lichtman, 2015).

Unfortunately, in contrast to the emphasis on communicative approaches in ESL teacher-training programs, most actual ESL classrooms and textbooks have continued to emphasize explicit grammar instruction as key to language learning (Admin, 2022). While an argument can be made for the importance of grammar in language comprehension and production, the necessity of explicit, front-loaded grammar instruction does not necessarily follow.

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Much as children do when learning their native language, adult language learners engage myriad strategies apart from rote practice of grammar rules, such as reading and listening without explicit instruction, and all of these combine to produce a knowledge of grammar.

Implicit Learning

Thus, the growing dissatisfaction with explicit teaching approaches has culminated in linguistic investigator Van Patten’s conclusion: “Language is too abstract and complex to teach and learn explicitly” (2020, p. 19). His meaning, simply put, is that rules and paradigms in a language do not express what actually is in the mind of speakers and listeners, and therefore, we cannot ‘teach’ a language outside the constructed framework we have made. It takes engagement in language to learn it, and this is the focus of communicative techniques that aspiring language teachers take much trouble to learn—but which are too often abandoned in language classrooms.

We propose to restore a best-practice approach to teaching English as a Second Language. We call on language programs to exchange their textbooks for real-world reading content and to follow an instructional cycle that embraces nearly all of the communicative techniques that institutional conventions have unintentionally repressed. Our ALL model has the advantage of being structured like the English composition courses in place at most California community colleges, and it centers the

importance of Krashen’s input studies, including the idea that reading is the most important language input of all (Krashen, 2004). This focus on implicit rather than explicit teaching characterizes the ALL methodology.

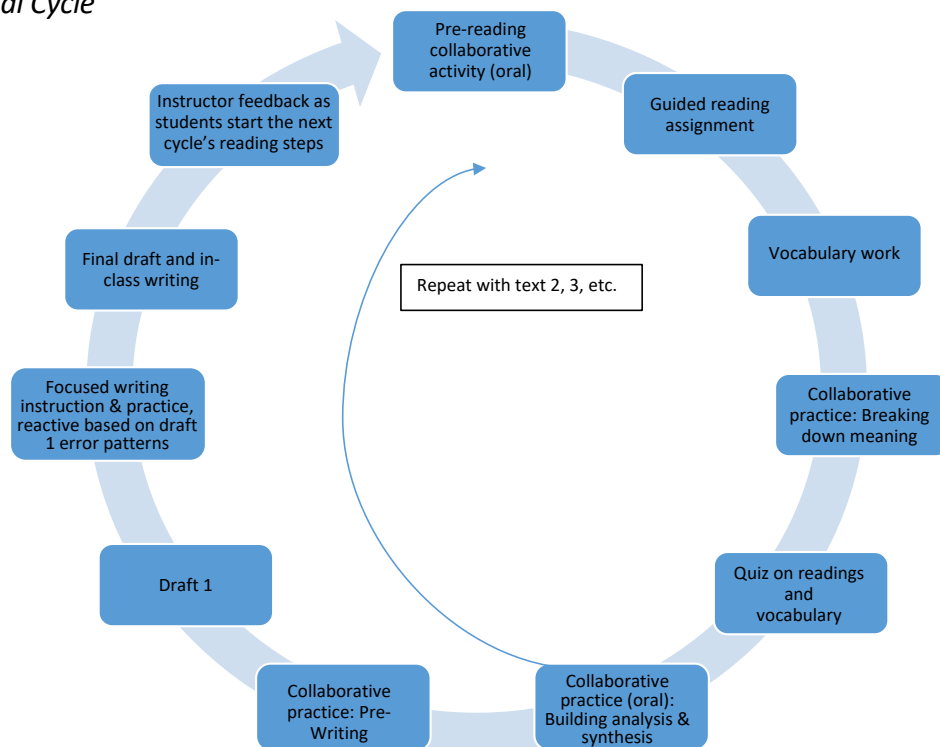
The Instructional Cycle

The process of instruction in ALL centers on authentic reading assignments with scaffolded activities to engage students in making meaning from these challenging texts and to support students in producing texts of their own. The instructor’s role is not to lecture or otherwise direct the input and subsequent learning but rather to facilitate the activities that allow students to become architects in the decoding of the input—the learning—mostly with the help of their fellow students.

The ALL instructional cycle (see Figure) is flexible enough to allow teachers the latitude to find what Krashen has currently relabeled from his original *comprehensible input* to the *optimum input* (Krashen, 2020). While Krashen does not define the parameters of this optimum input, he insists it is out there to discover. In ALL, determining this measure is accomplished through class cooperation to achieve an understanding of new language and ideas together. In a typical semester, this cycle can be repeated several times.

The activities and practice mentioned in the cycle are interactive exercises whose underlying principles are borrowed directly from those communicative methodologies enumerated above. A text is

Figure
The ALL Instructional Cycle



read, discussed and broken down for meaning, and then synthesized into a written and oral response. To make it easier on students, longer texts are often broken down into three or more parts, resulting in the cycle within the cycle, before continuing to the written portion of the curriculum.

A 6-week curriculum segment that follows the ALL instruction cycle, including readings and activities, is available by emailing either Guillermo Colls (guillermo.colls@gcccd.edu) or Laurie Woods (laurie.woods@gcccd.edu) These materials are used in Cuyamaca College's intermediate ESL level, which meets 6 hours per week (twice weekly for 3 hours). The curriculum requires the novel *The Circuit: Stories from the Life of a Migrant Child* (Jimenez, 1997). All lessons are based on the community language learning style (La Forge, 1971).

A pre-reading activity initiates the ALL instructional cycle. Students work in groups to interpret and respond to a series of questions without input from the instructor. Students in each group explain the questions to each other and come up with answers before sharing their answers with the other groups. Only after the full community of students has processed their question-and-answer combinations does the instructor come in to verify conclusions, which then sparks another round of group discussions. To view a sample lesson from the curriculum, see the Appendix.

Observations and Outcomes

Cuyamaca College's implementation of ALL pedagogy corresponded with a restructuring of the whole ESL program. The "traditional" ESL program model consisted of five levels that students had to complete sequentially from their respective starting points (determined by intake assessment). Our new program consisted of just four levels and allowed students who completed any level with a final grade of A or B to skip the next level, which many opted to do. To assess the effectiveness of the ALL method in meeting AB705's requirement that community colleges prepare ESL students to successfully complete transfer-level English composition within three years, we compared the outcomes of students who started in the lowest level of our ALL program in spring 2016 with those of an earlier cohort who had started in the lowest level of our traditional program in spring 2013. We found that the ALL program doubled the proportion of students who completed the ESL program and progressed to and passed

English Composition within three years. While only 17% of students in our spring 2013 cohort persisted through and passed all five levels of ESL plus English Composition in their sixth term (fall 2015), 34% of our spring 2016 cohort made it through the 4-level ALL program plus English composition within five semesters (by spring 2018), with some (12% of the starting cohort) doing so in just three semesters (by spring 2017). The new program, therefore, showed a marked acceleration in language learning as measured by total throughput through transfer-level English.

Students in the ALL cohort also demonstrated a remarkable leap in writing proficiency, further demonstrating this method's efficacy in preparing students for success in college composition. To demonstrate the dramatic difference in student writing at the end of just one semester in an intermediate-level ALL class, we compared final compositions from a student enrolled in the traditional ESL program and a student enrolled in the pilot ALL programs. These began the semester at the same levels of English composition proficiency.

Both papers were given a grade of B in the respective classes. The two compositions we analyzed came from classes with the same instructor. This instructor had taught Cuyamaca's intermediate, five-level-below-transfer course for many years and continued to do so while teaching one pilot section of the ALL class that would eventually replace the older course.

The student who authored the "Childhood Memories" sample described three of their simple pastimes with little detail of what made them favorite. The student who authored

the "Daily Struggle" sample described in five paragraphs the hard life of children of migrant workers in California with an introduction, support, and conclusion—and with simple citations as well. Since student permissions were not available to publish these samples, we used the NEO Syntactic Comparison Analyzer (Lu, 2010; Python Package Index, 2023) to compare multiple elements of the two papers. Relevant elements are reported (see Table). The students from the pilot ALL program displayed a higher level of syntactic elements in every category. For example, the composition from the ALL program was approximately nine times longer, their average sentence length and clauses per sentence almost doubled, and their use of dependent clauses and coordinate phrases increased eight-fold and six-fold, respectively.

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Table

Comparison of the Complexity of Two Final Papers From a Traditional and an ALL Pilot Class

Syntactic element	Traditional ESL class	ALL pilot class	% change
Words	101	923	813.9
Sentences	9	45	400
Mean length of sentences	11.22	20.51	82.8
Clauses per sentence	1.44	2.4	66.7
Dependent clauses	5	45	800
Coordinate phrases	4	28	600
Complex nominal ^a	2	94	4600

Note. The analysis was conducted using the NEO Syntactic Comparison Analyzer (Lu, 2010; Python Package Index, 2023).

^aA complex nominal is a group of words in which the main noun is determined by the presence of modifiers. For example, in “a nice cup of tea.”

Implications for Teaching and Learning in the ESL Classroom

ALL demands more of students, and our results at Cuyamaca suggest that students will rise to meet those greater demands. At this point, we claim that English can be taught more quickly and efficiently through the ALL method, making this curriculum an attractive alternative to traditional, textbook, and grammar-based approaches. Acceleration has shown signs of effectiveness beyond the audience it was first conceived for. While this methodology is being conducted in several community colleges in California at present, ALL is also being taught in a San Diego area high school with very positive results. Mountain Empire High School in the San Diego area adapted Cuyamaca’s curriculum to their 5-day high school schedule and reported vast improvement among their English language learners. Several other high schools are now exploring the possibility of using ALL.

Conclusion and Future Implications

As an adaptation of acceleration principles, the ALL curriculum requires two key elements. First, the levels of English as a Second Language courses need to be reduced to minimize the exit points where students drop away before completing their goals (Hern & Snell, 2010). Second, and very crucial, the teaching pedagogy has to change to allow for equivalent or superior language learning within the reduced timeframe. The ALL program’s instructional cycle and pedagogical methods achieve this.

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Appendix

ALL Sample Lesson Plan

This lesson uses the following ALL Instructional Cycle components:

- Pre-Reading Collaborative Activity
- Guided Reading Assignment
- Homework

Reading Material: *The Circuit* by Francisco Jimenez—University of New Mexico Press, 1997.)

Pre-Reading Collaborative Activity

- Show the following pictures:
- Picture of migrant farm workers working in a field. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/02/us/coronavirus-undocumented-immigrant-farmworkers-agriculture.html>
- Pictures of children working in the fields. <https://nfwf.org/farm-workers/farm-worker-issues/children-in-the-fields>
- Ask students:
 1. Who are these people?
 2. Is there a name for this type of worker?
 3. What exactly do they do?
 4. What crops do migrant workers gather?
- Next, ask students to work with a partner and write down five words or short sentences that describe this kind of work.
- Then, ask three to four groups to discuss their words or short sentences.

Guided Reading Assignment for Chapter 1

(The Guided Reading is a daily activity to activate schema. They will be re-reading the chapters several times, including one chapter a day with the instructor's read-along.)

- The instructor reads Chapter 1 aloud as the class follows in their books.
- The class may ask questions at any time.
- The chapter is only eight pages, so try to complete it in 20 minutes.

Homework:

Read the first three chapters of *The Circuit* for homework and be prepared to discuss the following questions in the next class meeting:

1. How does the family cross the border?
2. How much money do they have?
3. Why does the main character want to pick cotton?
4. Does he do a good job babysitting?
5. What is the character's first day of school like?
6. Why does his head hurt?

Partial comprehension is okay. The next meeting will begin with the breakdown of meaning, starting with vocabulary. Then, the students will read these chapters again.

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