

The Reading and Writing Lab for International Students at Carroll University

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International students face a difficult transition as they move to the United States for school. In addition to the typical adjustments they make as first-year college students, they also adjust to speaking in American Standard English (ASE), which, at the very least, is their second language (even their third or fourth). Therefore, their college English class is imperative to helping them succeed and build confidence in their speaking and writing. Often, those less confident in their English skills need additional help understanding facets like sentence structure, use of articles, style and diction. For many international and non-native English speaking students, ASE is not taught in enough detail in an average three-credit English class. Attending an additional English Reading and Writing Lab can also increase their skills and encourage active learning that connects the classroom to their life outside the classroom.

I facilitate the Reading and Writing Lab offered at Carroll University, a small private university in Waukesha, Wisconsin. This lab provides a space for students to work on assignments together or to practice specific writing and reading skills with me, an expert equipped to tutor on issues that many student volunteer services cannot. They often come in pairs or small groups and tackle issues together, which ensures their effectively integrating into the campus and expanding their resources. They can begin at a level they choose and work independently through their homework or complete mini-lessons on the formalities of academic writing.



Designing and facilitating such a lab ultimately accommodates non-native English speakers who are often the linguistic minority. According to the Institute of International Education (IIE) (2018), the percentage of international students in American higher education has risen from 3.8% in 2006/07 to 5.3% in 2017/18. In SY 16/17, the IIE's *Open Doors* report found that one-third of all international students matriculate from China. Among the colleges and universities educating these students, 83.3% report their largest concern for this population as their English preparedness. Additionally, 76% worried about engaging them in the classroom, and 71.9% worried about integrating them on campus (Baer, 2017). The results are a reminder of the difficulties that all international students may face regardless of country of origin.

To put these percentages in perspective, at Carroll, that number averages only one to two international students in any given class. Thus, rather than enrolling them in an ASE English class where they may be the only international student, we enroll them in a class where ASE is not the native tongue. I have found that my own inclusive class of non-native English speaking students who need extra help with ASE to feel more confident because they are surrounded by similar people. This inclusive class was also encouraged to participate in a Reading and Writing Lab facilitated by an active professor (me). In this environment, they are more open to learning the basic tenets of English because they do not feel isolated, which can occur in other, more inclusive classrooms.

We found that creating a class specifically for non-native English speakers--both first- or second-generation American students and international students--encouraged relationship building and confidence among them in both the classroom and on campus. This type of connection encourages active learning, deeper learning, and extensive discussions that may otherwise not have occurred in an English class where everyone's skills are more varied. The rate of increased confidence can rise faster when a group of students can work on their struggles with other classmates without fear of isolation.

The weaknesses in ASE among the class and their want for further understanding was the common denominator that brought them together during lab time, which centers around activities that allow them to put the information they are learning into action. Writing in different styles can help them acquire a larger vocabulary and practice different uses of language. Experimenting with writing styles also helps them explore and determine how to convey information to readers, and it provides the opportunity to decipher which techniques best illustrate their point. Creating scenes where they are film critics, source analysts, or angry constituents can provide situational assignments that will both test them and invoke a deeper thinking process extending as the entire class works together. Allowing a mixture of techniques that crosses the boundaries of different writing styles creates writers willing to go outside of established conventions to create more depth in their work.

Sometimes, the students feel that limited lab time is insufficient for them to work on all of their skills, so having a lab connected to a class is a good way for them to transition the information from the classroom to other avenues. The lab is also a bridge to other campus services, and it helps lessen their trepidation when seeking extra help. The connections a Reading and Writing Lab provides helps expand their usage of these services by providing opportunities to connect with other coordinators and volunteers.

At Carroll, on average, those who visit the Learning Commons throughout the semester raise their grade by an entire letter. Additionally, through data collection such as card swipes, Carroll has seen a rise in international student visits to the Learning Commons

after they visit the Reading and Writing Lab. They also feel more comfortable with asking for different services that will increase their understanding of class material.

Different versions of Reading and Writing Labs are popular across the country. A quick glance at Wisconsin shows that most colleges and universities have a version of writing lab or center. However, a lab designated to help first-year students who are non-native English speakers, run by a faculty member, can increase the amount and type of help students can receive.

With the increasing presence of non-native English speakers in the United States, it's imperative that universities make clear connections with international and non-native English speaking students. By pairing inclusive classrooms and a Reading and Writing Lab as a method for students to improve familiarity with ASE, students will increase their confidence and understanding of English, become familiar with campus resources, and form connections and relationships with faculty and other campus staff. This higher increase in participation will create a more positive and effective experience for both international and non-native English speaking students.

References

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