

The Dynamics of ESL Drop-out: *Plus Ça Change...*¹

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Abstract: This study provides longitudinal insights into a pattern of drop-out that the authors had previously identified, by tracking educational outcomes among ESL youth for a single, large urban school. Over a span of eight years, distinct changes in the educational climate and, in particular, in the structure and funding of ESL programming have led to two distinct cohorts of ESL students: pre- and post-budget cuts. While the results show the general drop-out rate for ESL students remains unchanged at 74%, a comparison of the two cohorts suggests that accelerated integration into academic mainstream courses has had a detrimental impact on the educational success of intermediate level ESL students. Further, a new set of issues emerges related to the quality of success for ESL learners and the identification of ESL learners.

Résumé : Cette étude longitudinale présente un aperçu du modèle de décrochage que les auteurs ont identifié à partir des résultats obtenus chez un groupe de jeunes apprenants d'ALS (anglais langue seconde), dans une seule école en milieu urbain. Durant une période de huit ans, différents changements dans les courants en éducation et particulièrement dans la structure et les bases du programme d'ALS ont généré deux cohortes d'étudiants: l'une appelée « pré-coupeure budgétaire » et l'autre appelée « post-coupeure budgétaire ». Alors que les résultats montrent que le taux général de décrochage des étudiants d'ALS demeure inchangé à 74%, une comparaison entre les deux cohortes révèle que l'accélération de l'intégration dans les cours généraux s'est faite au détriment de la réussite scolaire des étudiants au niveau intermédiaire. De plus, un nouvel ensemble de problèmes, liés à la qualité de la réussite et à l'identification des besoins des apprenants d'ALS, est en émergence.

Introduction

Canada's demographic landscape is undergoing rapid and visible change as the federal government shapes its policies to accept an increasing number of immigrants to Canada (Robillard, 1999). The immigration target for the first year of the new millennium is 300,000, roughly triple the target of the mid-1980s (Duffy, 1999; Employment and Immigration Canada, 1985, p. 2). This trend is reflected in English as a second language (ESL) students' ever-increasing representation in the general high school population in major school jurisdictions across Canada. In large, urban centres such as Calgary, Toronto, and Vancouver (Dawson, 1998; Dempster & Alberts, 1998; McInnes, 1993; Rinehart, 1996), 20–50% of the students may be of an ESL background.

The educational success of ESL learners has become the topic of an increasing number of studies (Alberta Education, 1992a; Derwing et al., 1999; Eddy, 1999; Marshall, 1999; Radwanski, 1987; Watt & Roessingh, 1994a). The findings of these studies suggest that ESL learners remain disadvantaged in high school and that graduation remains an elusive goal for the vast majority of these students. And yet, their success in developing English language proficiency and completing high school is critical to their participation in Canadian society and economy, especially 10 years from now when the renewal of the workforce will become critical as the baby boom generation retires. Moreover, Canada is dependent on the educational success of these new, young arrivals. Immigration is cited as the only solution to the ageing Canadian population (Jedwab, 2000, p. 13), and federal immigration policy, as early as 1985 (Employment and Immigration Canada, 1985), sought to identify, select, and recruit immigrants who were expected to propel Canada into the new and emergent economy – one based on knowledge, information, and communication and on leading-edge technology on a global scale.

Longitudinal studies provide insights into trends in educational success in terms of both progress (defined as year-to-year movement forward within a structured program) and achievement (defined as status at exit point from high school). Such studies can locate where ESL students are most at risk for failure and early school leaving in the educational trajectory. These times of increased risk of school leaving may then be linked to changes in program structure and funding formulas which typically occur in the political cycles with concomitant fiscal and educational consequences. Therefore, findings of longitudinal studies such as ours can help inform policy and curriculum directions for the future.

Given the Alberta budget cuts to education in 1993, the present study examines the long-term effects of diminished ESL support upon the completion rate of ESL students in one large urban high school. This study builds on an earlier one which tracked the educational progress and achievement of 235 ESL learners at the same large, urban high school over a five-year period, 1988–1993 (Watt & Roessingh, 1994a, 1994b). Seeking to understand the nature and effects of impending budgets cuts in the 50–80% range on the educational success of ESL learners in 1993 (Calgary Board of Education, 1996), we continued to accumulate data from the same high school setting. The data now accounts for eight years (1989–1997) of ESL progress and achievement at the high school level and provides the basis for this analysis.

This paper is organized as follows. First, it describes the background and rationale for the study. It also discusses some definitional issues. Second, the paper describes the study site and participants, outlines the design and procedure of the study, and presents the findings of eight years of tracking the educational success of 540 ESL learners. The paper concludes with a call for advocacy on behalf of ESL learners to ameliorate conditions of inequity that lead to the reproduction of the status quo and the marginalization of ESL learners within school systems.

Background issues

Research constructs such as educational success and ESL learners have become multifaceted and complex. Each construct is defined differently depending on who is using it. This variability results in difficulties in making comparisons across studies, as well as in interpreting the results of the studies. The picture is further complicated by the manner in which descriptive statistics are calculated and reported. The examples cited below highlight these problems.

In a study by Derwing et al. (1999, p. 535) that concentrated on ESL learners in two high schools in the Edmonton Catholic School Division, educational success was equated with either the completion of a high school diploma or the accumulation of 100 high school credits, regardless of whether these credits fulfilled the requirements for graduation in Alberta. The rationale for adopting this definition was the recognition that individuals do not necessarily need a high school diploma to continue their studies in adult educational programs. The study reports a completion rate of 54% among 486 ESL students (the sample originally contained 566, but 80 were removed because they transferred out of the school district) taken from Alberta Education's database. About 40% of the students actually fulfilled high school graduation requirements. An-

other 14% acquired 100 high school credits without achieving graduation. A comparison of the graduation rates of ESL learners and that of the general high school population (p. 536) leads the reader to draw the false conclusion that nearly 78% of ESL learners achieve either an advanced or general high school diploma. However, this is not the case. Rather, it is only 78% of those who were deemed ESL completers who figured in the calculation. From the total of 566, 14% could not be tracked. From the remainder, 36% dropped out, 10% were pushed out, 14% completed 100 credits without achieving a diploma, and 40% achieved a high school diploma, with 8% achieving an advanced status. Only by adjusting for differences in definition of ESL and educational success is it possible to compare the results of this study with those of other studies.

In a Calgary study of high school ESL learners (Frideres, 1998, as reported by Marshall, 1999), the definitions surrounding ESL students and their educational success are equally distinct to the author. The study looked at academic performance in the mainstream subject areas at various academically oriented high schools. By examining the small number of ESL students left in academically oriented subjects upon entry into the final year of high school and comparing their academic grades on average with the average grade of the native-speaking English (NES) population, Frideres's study concludes that immigrant (ESL) students were outperforming their NES peers. The NES group is comprised of about 60% of the general high school NES population that comprises the academic stream. As a result of the differences in the identification process, the study draws inferences based on an exceptional and select group of ESL students and compares them to a much larger sample of NES students without addressing the differences in the representative nature of either of the two groups. This type of comparison can be misleading to those who are unaware of the differences inherent in the definitions proposed by the study.

Finally, an Alberta Education (now Alberta Learning) study (1992a) suggested a drop-out figure of 61% for ESL students between Grades 8 and 12. The study was based on a sample of 165 ESL students who received funding and whose educational tracking records were complete. The definition of ESL student adopted here (i.e., a student who is eligible for ESL funding) is more commonly accepted and understood. Like the study by Derwing et al. (1999), however, this study is problematic in its sample of ESL students in that it excluded a vast number of records due to missing data. The Alberta Learning study (1992) also spans both junior high school (i.e., Grades 8 and 9) and senior high school (Grades 10-12), presenting a quite different population from stu-

dies that limit their scope to senior high school ESL students. Given the assumption that English language proficiency develops over time and the inclusion of students who may have completed their ESL eligibility in junior high school, it is reasonable to assume that the Alberta Learning study is reporting a comparable drop-out rate to that reported in our initial study (Watt & Roessingh, 1994).

These examples illustrate how the definitions of the constructs used affect the outcomes of research on ESL educational success and consequently the reader's understanding of the problem under investigation. ESL students and the instructional support they receive are more often than not defined by their funding status rather than by their need for instructional support. Moreover, the funding status of ESL learners may change as political forces swing between fiscal restraint and educational reinvestment. At the present time, the provincial government is reinvesting in education, and specifically in ESL, as reflected in the expanded definition of ESL learners to include Canadian-born children who arrive in Grade 1 in need of ESL support, and, more recently, the extension of ESL support to a fourth year of funding (Alberta Learning, 1999). However, the ESL funding structure varies province to province, thus making comparisons across provincial jurisdictions difficult.

In contrast, studies pertaining to the educational success of the general high school population (Alberta Education, 1992a; Calgary Board of Education, 1993; Human Resources and Labour Canada, 1993;) are far more definitive and consistent in their findings. In these studies, educational success is defined by the drop-out rate (which includes the ESL student population). Although the term 'drop-out' has a negative connotation, it is widely used and understood in the research literature, by the media and among practitioners in the field. It describes the phenomenon of early school leaving or withdrawal for whatever reason. The generally accepted high school drop-out rate is about 30-35% (Alberta Education, 1992, 1997; Calgary Board of Education, 1993; Human Resources and Labour Canada, 1993). This figure is derived by calculating the number of students registered in Grades 10-12 who withdraw without having fulfilled the requirements for graduation from high school. Nationally, provincially, and locally there is consistency in defining, calculating, and reporting on this phenomenon. Moreover, the drop-out statistic has remained remarkably stable over several decades.

Buried within large statistical samples of general high school drop-out rates is the unknown story of ESL students' success and failure in school around which a number of questions may be raised. If the drop-out rate has remained stable over the years, while the ESL population is

escalating at an unprecedented rate (Dawson, 1998), what does this mean for how immigrant students fare in our educational system?

LeCompte and Goebel (1987) note that fine-tuned program planning depends not only on accurate identification and description of the at-risk students but also on understanding the phenomenon of drop-out itself. It is a process, not an event. Willett and Singer (1991) further make the point that looking only at outcomes ('whether') is an inadequate approach to the study of drop-out since the timing ('when') of drop-out intervention programming is of crucial importance in addressing drop-out. These researchers call for multi-wave/longitudinal studies that would track progress in such a way that the hazard of drop-out could be located in the educational trajectory of at-risk students. Aggregate statistical approaches to the study of drop-out/fallout that dichotomize the issue by focussing only on 'either you're in or you're out' do not provide the necessary insights to respond to the challenges of drop-out among youth and ESL youth in particular.

In the present study, as well as in our earlier work, we adopted the generally accepted definition of educational success, the completion of high school graduation requirements. Taking this approach allowed us to address the significance of the 'whether' aspect of Willett and Singer's (1991) argument. We also tracked the students' progress from year to year to address the 'when' in Willett and Singer's equation of educational success by revisiting the students' course registration records at the beginning of each semester. In sum, therefore, educational success can be thought of as the combination of year-to-year progress and successful completion of graduation requirements.

In order to understand the present study, we will first review briefly and summarize the findings of our initial work (Watt & Roessingh, 1994a, 1994b; Watt, Roessingh, & Bosetti, 1996a, 1996b). The study was undertaken in a large, comprehensive urban high school (Grades 10-12) in Calgary with a significant ESL population. All students who received ESL support (whether they were eligible for funding or not) during the years 1989-1992 were included in the study. Of the total of 295 students, we could account for the exit status of 235 students. The intake class of 1992 ($n = 60$) was still in program, and these students were not included in the drop-out calculations of our initial work. The students were tracked according to their intake placement in the ESL program upon entry into high school: beginner, intermediate, advanced. The goal was to understand the research construct of educational success for these students as reflected in their successful completion of high school graduation requirements as well as their year-to-year progress. To contextualize and gain insight into the quantitative data, we conducted

home visits (semi-structured tape-recorded interviews) with 40 students in the study: 20 who had successfully completed high school graduation requirements and 20 who had not. We noted the following:

- a general, or blended, drop-out rate of 74% for ESL students at this one, large urban representative high school
- a differentiated drop-out rate, depending on intake placement of the students: beginner (95%), intermediate (70%), and advanced (50%)
- a refinement of the notion of 'drop-out' to include what we eventually came to distinguish as fallout, push out, and drop-out. 'Fall-out' is associated with students who do not make visible progress and quietly disappear or 'fall out' of the system, possibly for lack of programming alternatives, a phenomenon seen largely among beginner intake students. 'Push out' is associated with students who encounter an age cap (19 years of age) and are required to finish high school requirements in an adult setting. Drop-outs seemed to take a more active involvement in their school leaving for a variety of personal reasons. A clear line of affect could be identified, from regret to anger at the system to frustration.
- the need for student to have time – firstly, to develop sufficient English language proficiency within the context of an ESL program and, secondly, to fulfil high school graduation requirements.

Present study: Study site and participants

The present study builds upon the initial study and was conducted in the same school. Approximately 40% of the general high school population at that school spoke a language other than English as their first language. The native languages included, in descending order of frequency, Vietnamese, Chinese, Arabic, Spanish, and Punjabi. The number of ESL learners identified for instructional support peaked in 1990–1991 at approximately 8% of the school population. The ESL population and the school as a whole have experienced declining student enrolment over the duration of the present study due to a demographic shift of the population to another region of the city and as a result of the nature of the immigrant population towards the business class, noted earlier (Jedwab, 2000). Nevertheless, diversity remains a key feature of urban life wherever there are significant levels of new Canadians, and the present study continues to capture this feature of the changing Canadian demographic landscape.

The school setting may be thought of as a microcosm that reflects the larger, newly emerging Canadian reality. The students variously origi-

nated in sophisticated, big-city Beirut, the refugee camps of Bangkok, rural Vietnam, and the mountains of Kurdistan. Some have an intact, academically oriented educational background, and yet others have never been to school and have never held a ballpoint pen. Among the ESL learners are talented individuals who went on to become pharmacists, doctors, and electrical engineers, as well as others who continue in their struggle to find a place for themselves in Canada. Many of these students work in the service sector (cleaning, restaurant work), surrounded by same first language co-workers and marginalized by their lack of English language proficiency. They have arrived from 43 different countries and speak 29 different first languages. In general, the single life experience they have in common is their refugee and/or immigrant status upon arrival in Canada in the 1990s and their subsequent low economic status, at least in the early years after their arrival.

The present study, like the initial study, included all the students who received ESL support while registered at the high school. This included students who met the ESL funding eligibility guidelines established by Alberta Education (now Alberta Learning) as outlined in Part 2, Section 9 of the School Grants Manual (Alberta Education, 1992a), as well as students who did not. That is, they were beyond the three-year funding limit or were Canadian-born but nonetheless were offered support on the basis of demonstrated need.

Methodology: Design and procedure

The present study follows the same methodology and definitions for educational success and ESL learners as used in our previous study. The present study extends the data to complete tracking the intake class of 1992 (whose exit status we were unable to determine in our earlier work), and it includes a cohort of ESL students who experienced their high school years in the same high school setting during times of fiscal restraint and ESL program reductions, beginning in 1993. The present study divides the longitudinal data into two cohorts of students. The first cohort consists of the 1989–1992 ESL intakes ($n = 295$) and represents the pre-cut years of the study. The second cohort consists of the 1993–1996 intakes ($n = 210$) and represents the post-cut years of educational programming. The total number of students in the study for whom we can fully account in the educational outcomes is thus 505. The intake class of 1997 ($n = 35$) is included to reflect diminishing ESL enrolments and a changing ESL class cohort profile, which we discuss later. These students are not yet fully accounted for in the graduation statistics and thus are not figured into the drop-out rates.

The salient methodological features of the study include:

- the development of a class cohort profile according to intake placement level in the ESL program (i.e., beginner, intermediate, advanced) for the years 1989–1997. Table 1 illustrates the intake profile of 540 students.
- the data were obtained progressively by examining the student files each September and recording their placement, from beginner to intermediate to advanced ESL, then eventually into full integration into mainstream classes, and where applicable, the graduation date. In this way, patterns of fluctuations and standard progress for all intake and English proficiency levels were calculated.
- a detailed profile of the successful high school completers was developed. Available files provided a detailed profile of these students including such variables as: date of arrival, age on arrival, previous educational experiences, intake placement level in ESL, years of ESL support, final marks in social studies and English courses throughout high school, age at graduation, and number of years spent in high school.
- the calculation of a general drop-out rate for all students for whom data was complete (i.e., exit status was known or could be predicted by checking age and program requirements left to complete).

Findings

The findings of the study can be described in two broad trends: those that were consistent across time and across the two cohorts and those that demonstrate comparative patterns between the two cohorts.

TABLE 1
Intake placement levels for ESL students

Intake placement	Pre-cut cohort				Post-cut cohort					Total
	1989	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	
Beg.	16	30	44	18	19	11	19	19	17	193
Int.	17	30	27	20	15	17	27	11	11	175
Adv.	22	26	23	22	20	27	12	13	7	172
Total	55	86	94	60	54	55	58	43	35	540

Note. The intake figures for 1989–1991 were reported at 232 in the 1994 publication. A shift to computerized student record keeping has made our work less laborious but more accurate. Three additional students were added to this data set.

Consistent trends across time

General drop-out rates

Our earlier general ESL drop-out rate of 74%, which included 235 students in the years 1989–1991 (Watt & Roessingh, 1994a) remains essentially unchanged despite the addition of the last four years of student intakes. The general drop-out rate of 74% appears to be stable. Table 2 illustrates this information.

Note that the average drop-out rate in the pre-cut years of 1989–1992 is 76%, while the average drop-out rate for the post-cut years is 73%. In the initial study, we reported a drop-out rate of 74% for the 235 students in the intake classes of 1989–1991 (Watt & Roessingh, 1994a, 1994b). The addition of the 1992 class intake increases the drop-out rate of the pre-cut years slightly, to 76%. The overall average of the 1989–1996 years of 74%, therefore, appears to reflect no significant change, at least on the level of overall drop-out for the entire ESL population in the study.

Differentiated drop-out rates

English language proficiency at point of entry into high school continues to be a strong predictor of educational outcomes. Analysis of the data on the beginner, intermediate, and advanced ESL students demonstrate reasonably consistent differentiated non-completion rates. Table 3 displays the differentiated drop-out rates for the two cohorts.

Differentiated drop-out according to intake proficiency level, therefore, also showed no significant change over the entire duration of the study.

Table 2
General drop out rate for ESL students 1989–1997

Cohort	Intake year	# of graduates	% of graduates	% of drop-out
Pre-cut years	1989	17/55	31	69
	1990	24/86	28	72
	1991	19/94	20	80
	1992	12/60	20	80
Subtotal		72/295	24	76
Post-cut years	1993	17/54	31	69
	1994	11/55	20	80
	1995	15/58	26	74
	1996	13/43	30	70
Subtotal		56/210	27	73
Total		128/505	26	74

TABLE 3
Differentiated drop-out: pre-cut and post-cut cohorts

Intake placement	Pre-cut cohort (1989-1992)	Post-cut cohort (1993-1996)
Beginner	103/108 students = 95%	62/68 students = 91%
Intermediate	71/94 students = 75%	55/70 students = 79%
Advanced	49/93 students = 53%	37/72 students = 51%
Total drop-out	223/295 students = 76%	154/210 students = 73%

Profile of the successful ESL student

The general profile of the student who can attain graduation requirements has remained unchanged. In broad terms, successful ESL students have a good educational background prior to entering the high school and have studied English before, either in the Canadian junior high school system or prior to arrival in Canada. As is evident from the differentiated rates, the degree of English language proficiency at point of entry into high school has a significant impact on the likelihood of educational success.

On the surface, then, it would seem that little has happened to change the direction or degree of ESL drop-out across the eight years encompassed by the two sets of data. The drop-out rate for these students is approximately 2.5 times that of the general high school population. The figure of 74% as the cumulative drop-out rate for ESL students at this school has nearly a decade of stability.

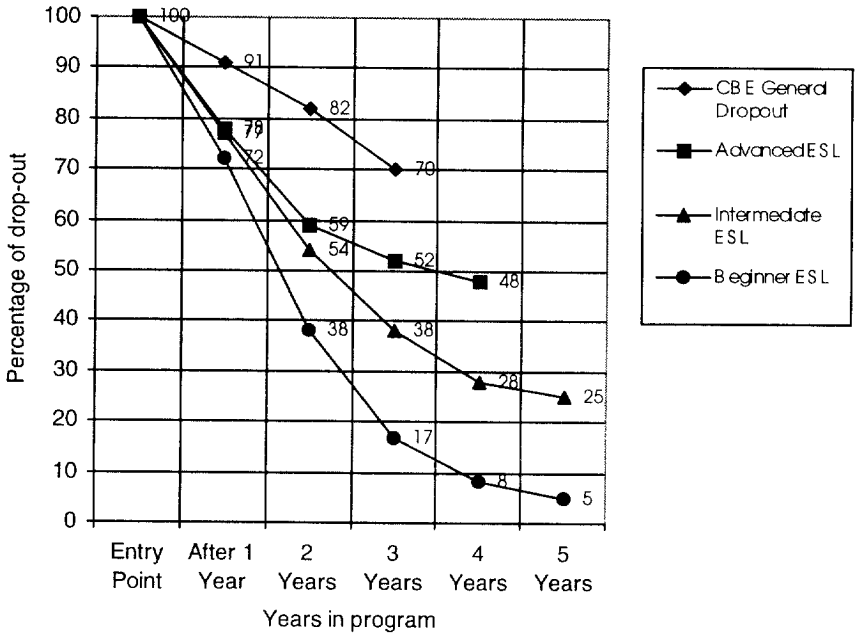
A recent concern that has emerged in the literature is the notion of 'dropback' (Derwing et al., 1999). These are students who did not initially complete high school but who subsequently enrolled in adult settings in efforts to fulfil graduation requirements. These students were located for the pre- and post-cut cohorts. Recalculating the drop-out rates to take account of those who later were able to meet with success resulted in an overall drop-out rate of 71%.

Comparative patterns between the cohorts

Drop-out trajectories

While there is stability in some of the overall findings, there are nonetheless patterns that distinguish the measurable quality of the educational experiences of the pre- and post-cut cohorts. Figure 1 shows the cumulative drop-out for ESL students in the years 1989-1992 ($N = 295$). For purposes of comparison, it also includes the cumulative drop-out for

FIGURE 1
 Cumulative drop-out 1989-1992
 N = 295



the Calgary Board of Education’s (CBE) general high school population for the years 1991-1992. The CBE had a total enrolment of 96,000 students, of whom 23,000 are in Grades 10-12 (1993).

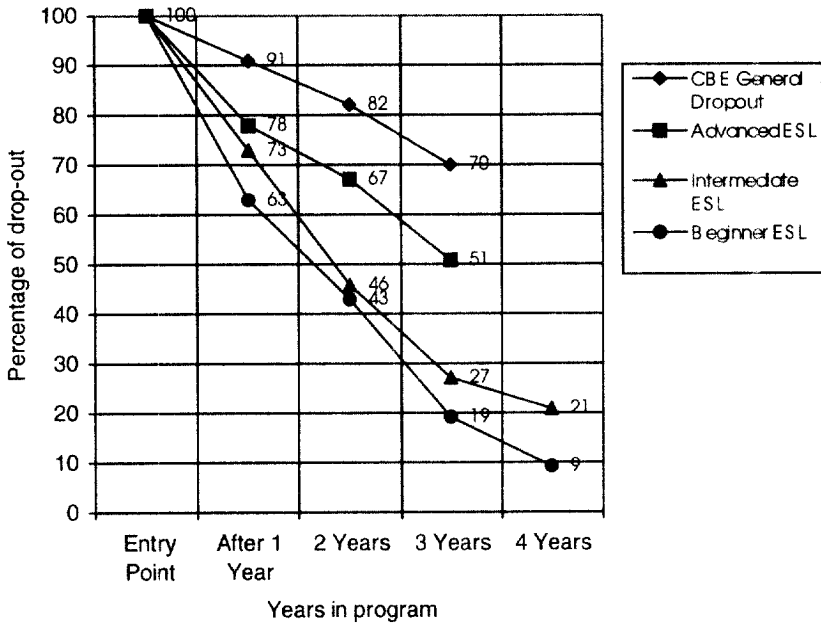
Figure 2 shows the cumulative drop-out for ESL students in the years 1993-1996 (N = 210). CBE cumulative drop-out figures were actually not available for the years illustrated in the figure, but it was assumed that the CBE drop-out rates remained stable, so they are reprinted here.

Note that the drop-out trajectories remain distinct for each level of English language proficiency in both the pre-cut and post-cut cohorts. The steepest rate of withdrawal continues to occur within the first year of high school. The drop-out trajectories for the intermediate ESL students in the post-cut cohort parallels that of the beginner level ESL students. That is, while the drop-out rate has remained stable for the intermediate students, they disappear from the system faster. It would appear that accelerated integration has failed the intermediate students.

Aggregated annual drop-out

The concept of risk distributed over time applies directly to the notion of progress and may be demonstrated in an aggregated annual drop-out

FIGURE 2
 Cumulative drop-out 1993-1996
 N = 210

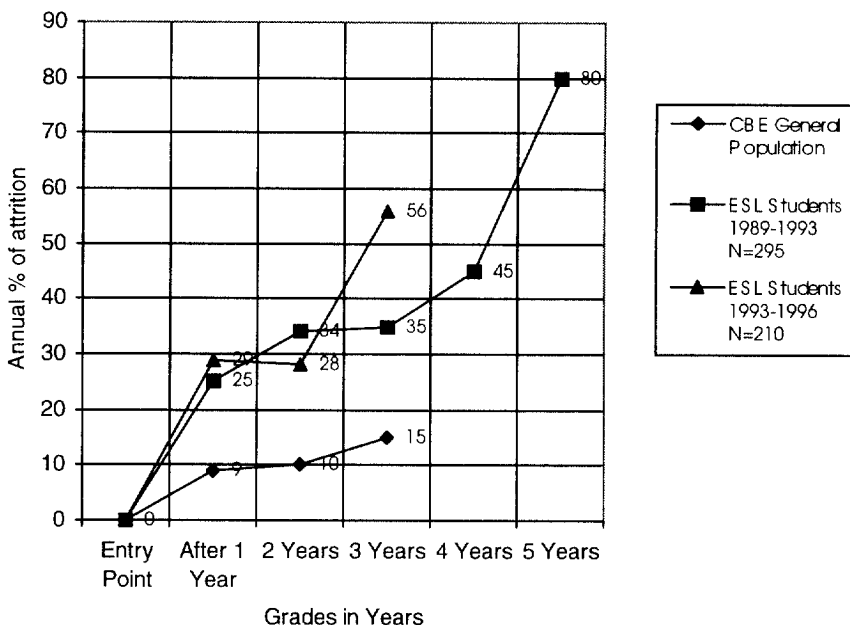


rate. Here, the entire population of each cohort is tracked for their year-to-year withdrawal. The drop-out rate is calculated as a percentage of the annual enrolment rather than as a percentage of the initial enrolment. Figure 3 displays the annual drop-out rates for the pre-cut and post-cut cohorts, as well as the CBE general student population.

Clearly, the ESL population reveals a higher risk pattern over time than the general high school population (of which they are a part). There is generally an increase in withdrawal for all students from year to year, with the greatest withdrawal rates for the general population in the third year (15%). ESL learners, on the other hand, disappear from the system in the early stages of their high school experiences at triple the rate (25-29%) of the general population (9%). Retention rates seem to stabilize somewhat in the second year of high school for all students before showing a sharp increase in the third year. It is in the post-cut years (1993-1996) that ESL learners are at greater risk than ever before of early school leaving.

In the pre-cut years, schools generally had a more flexible registration policy for students who were unable to complete their high school requirements within three years. ESL students, in particular, often returned to their local high school to fulfil graduation requirements, to up-

FIGURE 3
Annual drop-out rates:
The distribution of risk by grade



grade their marks, or to complete a technical/vocation program focus before direct entry into the workplace or placement in apprenticeship programs, for example. In our earlier work, we noted that successful ESL high school graduates generally took four and a half years to complete their diploma requirements. While it can be seen that these students were at risk of not completing their programs (45% withdrew in the fourth year), significant numbers nevertheless benefited from the opportunity to return to their local high school. This opportunity is no longer available to students.

The sharp increase in ESL drop-out shown in Figure 3 after the third year in the post-cut cohort reflects policy changes that permit students only six semesters in high school. While school principals may decide to accept some returning Grade 12 students, they do not receive any remuneration for these students. The accelerating drop-out rate and the elimination of the fourth (and fifth) year of high school attendance prompted us to consider the impact of these changes on the academic success of ESL students. The quality of educational success has changed over time.

University entrance requirements

All of the universities in Alberta require students to present a pass mark for English 30, a Grade 12 literature-based course. The Ministry of Education (Alberta Learning) sets a provincial examination for the course that counts for 50% of the students' final mark. Table 4 summarizes successful completion rates for this course.

In the graduating classes of 1992-1995 (i.e., the pre-cut years), 26 of 82 (32%) ESL graduates completed English 30. This represents 8% of the overall ESL population in the pre-cut cohort and is comparable to the 8% figure reported in the Derwing et al. study (1999) for those ESL students who achieved an advanced high school diploma (English 30 is a requirement for an advanced diploma). In contrast to the pre-cut years, only 14% of the graduates (4% of the ESL population) completed English 30 in the post-cut years. Compared to native English-speaking students, ESL students now have a vastly reduced chance of fulfilling this requirement. In blunt terms, compared to their NES counterparts, ESL students have a one in 10 chance of passing the English 30 examination.

ESL students are now placed in the mainstream English courses earlier than before. Generally, however, it is now the non-academic stream in which they are placed and where they remain - whether or not they are academically competent. Local data (Latimer, 2000) suggest that academically competent ESL learners (as reflected in their high school mathematics marks) are vastly over-represented in the non-academic English literature program track.

The changing shape of the intake cohort profile

The distribution of the English language proficiency on intake for each annual cohort has changed (see Table 1). In recent years, there are fewer

TABLE 4
Successful completion of English 30*

Student population	Graduation rate	% Completing English 30
General high school, Alberta	65%	40*
ESL(prior to cuts)	24%	8
ESL (post cuts)	27%	4

* (Alberta Education, 1997. Department statistics show that 65% of the Grade 12 population attempt English 30, and 96.4% of these students successfully pass the course. ESL students are included in the general high school population. This leads to the conclusion that ESL students are vastly over-represented in the numbers of students who fail English 30).

advanced level students arriving from junior high feeder schools: only seven in the 1997 intake cohort. Further work would be required to determine whether these students have been placed in mainstream settings and are meeting with success, or whether they fail in the mainstream courses without showing up inside the ESL drop-out profile as reported in this study.

Discussion

Many issues emerge from the findings. The most significant issue relates to the progress of intermediate level ESL students. At first glance, there is a contradictory pair of patterns. On the one hand, intermediate ESL students appear to be entering the mainstream classes much faster – an offshoot of having the instructional hours reduced by half and of a possible overestimation of their English language proficiency, based on available service. On the other hand, once in the mainstream, they are marginally successful in terms of passing courses until they reach the third year of courses, when departmental examinations play a role in increased drop-out. Our explanation for the sudden drop-out bulge of intermediate level ESL students in the third year of high school is that accelerated integration and marginal promotion through academic course work at the Grade 10 and 11 levels leave many of them unprepared for the gatekeeping role of final year courses. And, far too many of these students, who might have been academically competent judging from their mathematics and science course selections, are now left languishing in the non-academic English program track.

The intake year of 1993 (the first year of the post-cut cohort) represents the pivotal year for explaining the impact of such factors as:

- the heightened risk of drop-out for ESL students over time
- the accelerated pace of mainstream integration
- the diminished numbers of students who successfully completed university entrance level English (i.e., English 30)
- the under-identification of ESL students from junior high school settings.

The primary structural change to ESL education also occurs in 1993, when fiscal restraint at the local level forced the elimination of 50% (and more) of the ESL program offerings. Our concern is that a significant number of ESL students may have been 'pushed out' of ESL educational support and into non-academic mainstream courses where they are more difficult to identify and track. In short, this is an issue of identify-

ing ESL need. Junior high schools often operate para-professionally staffed 'early integration' models for their ESL support. At point of entry into high school, these students may choose not to be identified for ESL support and may become part of the general population. Based on our own observations and on those of research findings (Collier, 1989; Cummins, 1986), even students who have arrived in upper elementary school years are often in need of ESL support, for five to eight years. In the present educational climate, such extensive ESL support is rarely provided.

Conclusion

The continued pattern of ESL drop-out both as an aggregate statistic of 73-76% and as one that can be differentiated by English language proficiency sets the tone for the challenges that face educational jurisdictions in the future. The loss of so many academically competent learners needs to be understood as lost human and educational capital. The economic fate of individuals who do not complete high school is a matter of record (Human Resources and Labour Canada, 1996). Their educational fate is not (Dempster, 1993).

Compounding the problem of responding quickly and effectively to ESL drop-out is the challenge presented by the dynamic nature of immigration demographics. Unlike the educational program planning for a stable, predictable population, immigration demographics can change from year to year and, with them, the specific educational needs of the group. While diversity remains a key characteristic of large, urban school boards, changes in federal immigration policies have significantly changed the learner profile of more recent arrivals. There is a marked concentration of ESL learners from the Pacific Rim countries, and, generally, these students have high expectations for academic success and 'fast tracking' through high school (Roessingh, 1999). An educational system needs to be flexible enough to meet sudden changes in the educational needs of ESL students.

ESL drop-out rates in the population of students that we studied have not changed substantially over nearly a decade. The ESL high school drop-out rates that we have reported may vary for different jurisdictions in different times or for ESL populations that are defined in different terms. However, we would expect that whatever the differences in statistics, the general conclusions would remain the same: ESL students are at high risk for drop-out, and that, in the absence of systemic/structural change (Dawson, 1997), the educational success of ESL students is unlikely to improve. Until the education system recognizes

the core nature of ESL instruction in the educational development of ESL students, few of the students that we studied will ever realize their true academic potential.

The reforms that are needed have been highlighted in countless ESL program reviews, conference papers, and academic publications over the past 15 years (Calgary Board of Education, 1985, 1990, 1996; Derwing et al., 1999; ESL Task Force, 2000; Naylor, 1994; Vancouver School Board, 1989; Watt & Roessingh, 1994a, 1994b). These recommended reforms reflect the findings of a growing research base related to the academic success, and more significantly the lack thereof, for an increasing population of ESL students who are destined to become the mainstream. The final challenge for researchers in this area is to privilege the examination of issues that promote equitable educational decisions. The politics of educational reform will eventually respond to those who advocate equity for students whose academic success is critical to the future of Canada.

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