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ARTICLES

THE DOs, DON'Ts, AND MAYBES OF COLLAPSING IEP LEVELS

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For many intensive English programs (IEPs), dwindling student enrollment has necessitated abrupt revisions. Self-funded programs must immediately seek ways to combine levels, adapt curricula, and support both learners and teachers. This article explores strategies used when collapsing levels at two university-housed IEPs: the IEP of ESL Programs at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (UWM), and the Intensive English Institute (IEI) at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC).

Program Backgrounds

The IEP at UWM has run a four-level (A1, A2, B1, B2), four-skill Common European Frame of Reference (CEFR)-based program until summer 2016 when it collapsed levels due to a severe drop in enrollments, shifting to: A1/A2 (Gold); B1/B2 (Black); B2+/C1 (Blue). In fall 2016, the IEP expanded into five different combined levels: A1; A2/B1 (Orange); B1 (Red); B1+/B2 (Green); and B2+/C1 (Blue).

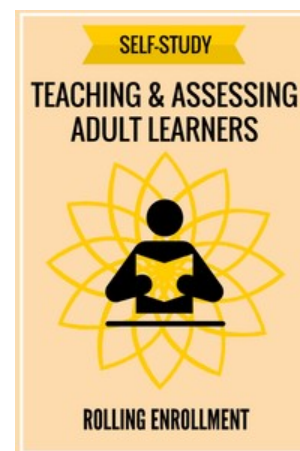
The IEI at UIUC has traditionally run a seven-level, skills-separate program. During the 2016 summer semester, the program collapsed into four levels: Basic (A1/A2), Intermediate (B1/B1+), Advanced Academic (B2/C1), and Advanced Everyday (B2/C1).

First Things First: Placing Students

An immediate challenge to collapsing levels is determining student placement using existing assessment instruments. The IEP places students based on a standardized computer-based test and an in-house writing sample. When the program enrollment numbers in the IEP were high (over 160) in 2014, the levels were broken into low, mid, and high (e.g., low B1, mid B1, high B1). By 2015 with the departure of key groups, the program

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collapsed the sublevels when it was obliged to enroll at least 15 students per level. This was done by analyzing CEFR level scores and placement test cut scores. Those who fell at the bottom of the B1 range were moved into the A2/B1 and those who were stronger moved into B1/B2. However, test scores were also compared to a writing sample, which was sometimes the deciding factor for moving a student.

Further, the IEP collapsed the A1/A2 levels for the first 8-week session because, since 2015, it has had so few A1s it has considered not admitting students at such low levels. However, with diminishing numbers, the program administrators thought collapsing was a better than eliminating levels. They also decided to combine the B1/B2 levels because the lower B2s more closely reflected language competency of the higher B1s. They then put the higher B2s with the C1s because there were so few of them and because the program did not have a formal C1 level. While in the second 8-week session and based on constructive feedback from instructors, the program administrators separated the A1s from the A2s and moved the higher A2s together with the lower B1s (See Table 1).

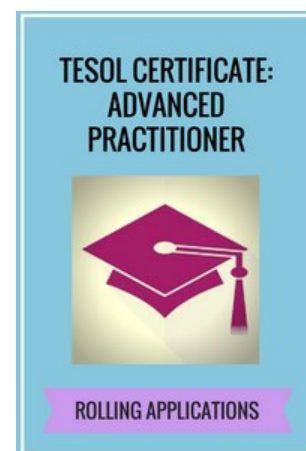
First 8 Weeks	Second 8 Weeks
A1/A2	A1
B1	A2/B1
B1+/B2	B1
B2+/C1	B1+/B2
	B2+C1

Comparable to the IEP, the initial strategy at the IEI was to simply combine levels using current cut scores, meaning that students who placed in two of the original levels (e.g., the two lowest levels) were automatically placed in the new combined class. Even with the combined level placement, however, there were still imbalances in the class numbers, with some classes having as few as two students at the lowest level. This led to adjusting placement based on (1) threshold aggregate scores and (2) outlier subskill scores. On a case-by-case basis, the placement team considered changing placement for these students (either up or down). Looking ahead, the IEI will need to consider new placement bands and guidelines.

True Beginners

Despite the overall decrease in low-level students, there always seems to be a few new students who are true beginners, a placement conundrum both of the programs face. The IEI felt obligated to continue offering these students programming as advertised. Similar to the IEP, a long-term strategy would be to include verbiage in the application packet that the program is unable to offer this level. This does little to help with placement during registration week.

The IEI ran a pull-out class to support the beginners. The pull-out happened in place of the reading course, the students' weakest subskill. During the summer semester, the curriculum focused on classroom language, foundational vocabulary, and homework assistance. The class began with the summer curriculum and then moved into the lowest level reading



curriculum during the 15-week fall semester. The IEI will cease the pull-out class in the spring semester due to staffing costs and replace it with a mandatory, 2-hour per week tutoring program.

Current Students

Another challenge with collapsing levels comes in the messaging to current students. As an affective variable, student perceptions can and do impact learning, which is a very real concern. At the IEP, two strengths are the program's flexibility (weighing the students' needs when deciding what levels to collapse) and the teachers' skills with differentiated instruction; however, it is challenging for teachers and frustrating for students if they think the class is being "dumbed down" for the lower level students.

Similarly, the IEI has had mixed success in communicating program changes to students. In anticipation that the program would need to collapse levels, the administration visited each class to inform students and to answer questions. At the beginning of each semester, advisors have explicitly communicated to Basic Level students how they will be supported (sometimes through an interpreter). These students have responded enthusiastically because of the individual attention. Upper level students, however, have not always reacted positively when they realized that their class had a broader range of students.

Curricular Challenges

Curricula in IEPs are finely tuned over the years to perfectly match the needs of a given student population. Sudden population changes can leave teachers scrambling to figure out what to include, what to adapt, and what to exclude. Ideally, if the IEP had sufficient administrative support to track split placements in some skills (reading/writing over listening/speaking or vice versa), the program teachers believe they would see more evidence in need of individualized learning plans, reflecting students' needs per each skill and level. From an administrative perspective, however, this is unfeasible.

The solution that teachers found most effective was to level individual tasks according to the specific student learning outcomes (SLOs) that students had to meet in each level. For example, A2 students have to meet SLOs different from B1 students even though they share classes. The IEP also had success assigning students to learning teams where the more advanced students could benefit by assuming a teacher role, allowing them to assist in the learning process. Demonstrating from the beginning that students, regardless of level, are working toward their own SLOs and communicating what those are has made a significant difference in the effectiveness of collapsing levels. Unlike the IEP, the IEI did not separate SLOs or assignments for students at different levels within the same class, but this is something the institute will need to address.

In terms of determining the SLOs for its newly combined levels, the IEI is turning to its diagnostic exams, traditionally given during the first week of class to reaffirm student placement. With a wider range of proficiency levels, diagnostics now serve as a true diagnostic tool, informing teachers of whether the class is on the lower- or upper end of a level, and helping these teachers to adapt at the outset. Another strategy was to begin each class with material from the lower level curriculum and then transition to the upper level curriculum. Moving forward, the program is working to identify adaptable texts along with key units that are accessible to a wider range of student proficiency levels.

Supporting Teachers

A final challenge is supporting teachers who, for many years, have had the

luxury of tailoring instruction to students within a very thin slice of the proficiency scale. Both of the programs have leveraged in-house expertise. In the IEP, there are a few instructors, retirees from Milwaukee Public Schools, who now teach in the IEP and who have been instrumental in advising other instructors on best practices in differentiated instruction. By designing and demonstrating tasks, rubrics, and assessments that differed according to two different sets of SLOs, these veteran teachers have been able to show that, with enough practice and a bit of extra work, scaffolding can be done effectively with minimal stress for the students. Similar to the IEP, the IEI also hosted workshops led by teachers with differentiated instruction experience. Further, 1 year ago the IEI began a series of targeted discussions on differentiated instruction through its in-house professional development program to include reading group discussions (see Beacher, Artiglieri, Patterson, & Spatzer, 2012; Gregory & Chapman, 2013).

The Results

At the end of the day, the goal is student learning. In the IEP, initial progression statistics are still being tracked because of low numbers, but overall student comments indicated that collapsed levels had little correlation with satisfaction rates. For the IEI, collapsed levels during the summer led to progression rates in the 75–85% range. The majority of students who did not progress were the usual cases (e.g., students with excessive absences). Despite the challenges, administrators of both programs are encouraged by these results as they continue adjusting toward a more permanent level structure.

Resources

Beacher, L., Artiglieri, M., Patterson, K., & Spatzer, A. (2012). Differentiated instruction for English language learners as "variations on a theme". *Middle School Journal*, 43(3), 14–21. doi: 10/1080/00940771.2012.11461807

Gregory, G., & Chapman, C. (2012). *Differentiated instructional strategies: One size doesn't fit all*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

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