

Position Statement on Academic and Degree-Granting Credit for ESOL Courses in Postsecondary Education

With the growth in the number of nonnative-English-speaking students at postsecondary institutions in the United States and other English-speaking countries, there has been an increased demand for English as a second language (ESL) or English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) courses in postsecondary academic institutions. Unfortunately, ESL or ESOL courses are frequently mischaracterized as developmental or remedial courses, and thus are not always acknowledged for academic or degree-granting credit. These policies and practices fail to recognize that ESOL courses offer a rigorous, standards-based academic program that requires students to perform at a level similar to and on par with the subject matter in other degree-bearing courses, such as courses in English composition or in foreign language. TESOL International Association advocates that ESOL courses in postsecondary academic institutions receive academic, degree-granting credit.

In postsecondary institutions, nonnative-English-speaking students require a strong foundation of advanced language and academic skills. To enter specific academic and professional discourse communities such as business, humanities and the arts, science, engineering, and medicine, learners require additional knowledge and expertise in content, specialized vocabulary, grammar, discourse structure, and pragmatics.

Nonnative English speakers who are enrolled in ESOL courses in postsecondary institutions are required to do so because they have demonstrated a need for additional course work to be able to compete successfully with native speakers of English. The material studied in these ESOL courses demands the highest level of second language proficiency, including knowledge of contrastive phonetic, syntactic, semantic, and rhetorical information, as well as an understanding of university expectations and classroom norms in a new culture. Postsecondary ESOL coursework is designed to continue the normal cognitive, academic, linguistic, and cultural development that accompanies the acquisition of an additional language, and does not equate with remediating first language skills.

Moreover, postsecondary students may be required to take a minimum number of credits in order to be considered full-time students. Without degree-granting credit for their ESOL coursework, students enrolled in such courses may not reach the credit threshold to be considered full-time students. In addition, degree-granting credit for ESOL coursework can increase motivation and performance for students enrolled in such courses. Just as native-English-speaking students earn degree-granting credit for their foreign language study and for courses in linguistic analysis, nonnative English speakers enrolled in ESOL courses are similarly entitled to academic credit for their study of English as a second or foreign language.

TESOL International Association (TESOL) advocates that institutions of postsecondary education in the United States identify those ESOL courses that will be credit-bearing upon successful completion and/or satisfy academic requirements for degree-granting purposes, and that these institutions grant such courses appropriate credit hours. TESOL also urges institutions to offer assessment opportunities that would allow nonnative English speakers enrolled in ESOL courses to receive equivalent credit for appropriate coursework upon demonstrating mastery of expected content and/or skills.

*Approved by the Executive Committee
June 2012*