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Transitioning From ESL to Corequisite English Courses at CUNY

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Multilingual learners (MLs)—students who use more than one language and are actively developing proficiency in English—represent a large and important share of the nation's community college students, particularly in regions where large numbers of immigrants reside. MLs arrive at community college with varied educational histories, linguistic repertoires, and goals. Many wish to pursue credit-bearing programs of study that lead to credentials and thus require an educational pathway that allows them to advance academically while continuing their English language development. The first point of entry into college for such students is often English as a Second Language (ESL) programs—noncredit, multi-level course sequences that provide a critical opportunity for language growth but that can also slow down entry into credit-bearing coursework (Hodara, 2015). Although not all MLs seeking college credentials participate in ESL, those who do often transition from ESL into either developmental or college-level English courses.

Traditional developmental English courses—which, like ESL, may also be offered through a multi-course sequence—can further delay progress for former ESL students (as well as non-ESL students) who are deemed underprepared for college. Indeed, many students placed in traditional developmental education course sequences stop out before enrolling in credit-bearing coursework. In response, substantial reforms to developmental programming have emerged across the nation over the past decade, becoming well established in some states and institutions (Bickerstaff et al., 2022). These include changing the placement process, shortening the lengths of prerequisite course sequences, and replacing prerequisite courses with corequisite supports or courses offered in concert with college-level English courses—all of which are aimed at getting more students into college-level courses earlier in their postsecondary experience and improving their outcomes.

Research shows that corequisite developmental models and other reforms can improve student success rates in gateway English courses (Coca et al., 2024; Kopko & Daniels, 2023; Miller et al., 2022). Yet for MLs, these reforms also raise new questions. As corequisites become a much more common entry point into credit-bearing English, they function as a key transition route for MLs, replacing longer developmental course sequences with an accelerated pathway. The shift highlights the need to examine not only how well corequisites meet MLs' ongoing language development alongside their academic progress but also whether existing structures and supports are sufficient to smooth MLs' entry into these courses. Corequisites can accelerate progress and expand access for many students. Yet for some MLs, compressed timelines may reduce opportunities to build English proficiency, making it harder to persist in college without additional tailored supports.

In recent years, the City University of New York (CUNY) has undertaken sweeping developmental education reforms, including replacing prerequisite developmental education with corequisites (Fay et al., 2024), and has also adopted new placement measures for entry into ESL and English courses (CUNY, n.d.-a). These changes have reshaped ML pathways into credit-bearing English. They were implemented largely by individual CUNY colleges, which were given broad flexibility in designing innovative approaches to support student success, especially in ESL. In this report, we draw on qualitative data collected from five CUNY community colleges—including interviews with faculty and staff and institutional documents—to examine how MLs under the new regime transition from ESL to credit-bearing English. Specifically, we ask

- How do MLs at CUNY progress from ESL into corequisite and other credit-bearing English courses, and how do these pathways vary across campuses?
- What barriers and enabling factors shape MLs' transitions, particularly in the context of systemwide developmental education reforms and evolving placement policies?
- What instructional models, placement practices, and support strategies show promise for improving MLs' access to, and success in, credit-bearing English while supporting ongoing language development?

In examining these questions, we describe both promising practices and ongoing challenges in designing pathways that are responsive to MLs' needs, with implications for institutions beyond CUNY.

Background: Multilingual Learners, Corequisites, and the CUNY Context

While reliable estimates are unavailable,[1] the ML population is known to be large at community colleges located in states and regions where many immigrants live. For example, at least one in four community college students in California are likely MLs (Llosa & Bunch, 2011), and an estimated 38% of students enrolled in credit courses in City University of New York (CUNY) community colleges are not native English speakers (CUNY, 2021).[2] Many MLs want to pursue credit programs at community college, and some of them prefer to avoid noncredit ESL programs altogether and instead try to place directly in developmental education courses as a pathway to credit-bearing coursework. Other MLs, and likely many of those with less proficiency in English, enroll in ESL programs with the aim of transitioning into credit-bearing coursework and programs of study. While data are scarce, it is broadly understood that many such students never transition into college-level courses and that those who do often encounter challenges (Raufman et al., 2019).

Corequisite developmental reforms should help MLs who start in ESL programs transition to credit-bearing courses more quickly. Under the corequisite reform model—which is now allowed or required in at least 29 states (Education Commission of the States, 2025)—students who would traditionally take prerequisite developmental reading or writing courses enroll directly in college-level English courses with concurrent academic support. While the corequisite model has been found to benefit students generally identified as needing academic help by moving them into college-level coursework faster and improving their success rates in introductory courses (Coca et al., 2024; Miller et al., 2022; Ran & Lin, 2022), current research provides limited insights into how MLs experience corequisite English courses, particularly courses that integrate ESL supports.

Most developmental education reforms introducing corequisites have been designed with native English-speaking students in mind, leaving the distinct needs of MLs underexplored and underevaluated. Studies of large-scale developmental education reforms in states such as California, Tennessee, and Texas reveal that programs serving MLs are often excluded from corequisite mandates, leaving many students in traditional ESL or developmental tracks (Daugherty et al., 2018; Hayward, 2020; Ran & Lin, 2022;Rassen et al., 2021; Rodriguez et al., 2019).[3] These exclusions highlight a longstanding policy pattern in which reforms that aim to expand access for students inadvertently bypass MLs, contributing to uneven opportunities for progression into credit-bearing coursework (Avni & Finn, 2021).

How MLs are placed into appropriate coursework is a key concern. Research on high school English Learner (EL) status illustrates the complexity of factors shaping the developmental education placement of MLs. Some studies show that incoming college students classified as ELs in high school are more likely to be placed into developmental English courses rather than directly into college-level English once in college (Flores & Drake, 2014), while others find that this relationship disappears after accounting for demographic factors such as race and ethnicity (Howell, 2011). These mixed findings suggest that placement into developmental or ESL coursework is shaped by institutional discretion, assessment tools, and local context rather than student status alone.

Critical to the issue of developmental placement of MLs, there is emerging evidence that accelerated and tailored developmental models, which may accompany changes in placement, can improve outcomes for MLs. In Florida, Mokher et al. (2023) found that students previously classified as English as a Second or Other Language (ESOL) in high school experienced the greatest gains following statewide developmental education reforms under Senate Bill 1720, which replaced traditional remedial courses with accelerated instructional strategies like corequisites. The gains likely stemmed from increased access to credit-bearing coursework and the removal of barriers that had historically delayed MLs' entry into college-level English. Similarly, a pilot study found that the use of a customized corequisite support course for MLs at a Virginia community college—designed to embed academic language development into first-semester composition—was associated with improved student outcomes, pointing to the promise of ML-focused corequisite models (Bayraktar, 2023).

Despite these encouraging examples, many questions remain. We still know relatively little about how placement practices, institutional structures, and curricular models shape MLs' progress as they move from ESL into credit-bearing English. Current evidence suggests that while reforms like corequisites can create new opportunities for MLs, they may also compress time for language development and increase the demand for integrated academic and cultural supports. Understanding these dynamics is critical for designing pathways that accelerate student progress while sustaining the language development and sense of belonging that are essential to MLs' long-term success.

CUNY offers a critical context for exploring these questions. As the nation's largest urban public university system in a city home to over 3 million immigrants, CUNY serves a large and diverse ML population. About 2,000 new students were assigned to academic ESL in fall 2024.[4] In recent years, CUNY has undertaken sweeping reforms that affect MLs, including replacing prerequisite developmental education with corequisites and adopting new placement measures that, for MLs, often make use of Proficiency Index (PI) and Accuplacer ESL scores (CUNY, n.d.-b; Fay et al., 2024). These changes have reshaped ML pathways into credit-bearing

English. Individual CUNY colleges have retained considerable flexibility in designing their own particular ESL pathways and in providing innovative approaches to support MLs. There is variation, for example, in the number of courses in current ESL sequences across the colleges, and campuses have also introduced ESL-tailored corequisite courses, paired ESL/general education courses, scaffolded learning communities, and culturally responsive pedagogies, which continue to shape ML students' pathways. Lessons from these efforts can inform not only practice within CUNY but also nationwide discussion about how community colleges can design effective pathways for MLs.

Study Sources, Data, and Method

This study draws on qualitative data collected from five CUNY community colleges, selected because they serve large numbers of students referred to ESL. The five colleges are distributed across four New York City boroughs—the Bronx, Brooklyn, Manhattan, and Queens—each serving distinct local communities. While all the colleges enroll substantial ML populations, they differ in terms of student demographics, immigration trends, and language backgrounds, reflecting the diversity of CUNY's student body overall. These colleges offer a window into how MLs experience the transition from ESL to credit-bearing English across different settings.

The research team conducted hour-long interviews with a total of 26 faculty and four staff and administrators across the five colleges. Participants included ESL, English, and other faculty, academic advisors, placement and testing office staff, and campus leaders engaged in developmental education and student support reforms. Their insights provided both institutional and classroom-level perspectives on how placement, instructional design, and support services shape MLs' pathways. In addition to interviews, we drew on CUNY institutional documents—including assessment and placement guidelines, policy briefs, and systemwide reform directives—which provided important context for understanding placement procedures, developmental education reforms, and the institutional mandates shaping ML pathways.

The ESL Placement Process

Placement into the appropriate academic ESL, corequisite, or English composition course is a two-step process for MLs at CUNY. Some parts of the placement process are centralized, with CUNY's Central Office establishing systemwide policies that provide pathway options for students. Other parts of the placement process are college-specific, with individual colleges in the system establishing their own assessment strategies and placement practices.

First, students who do not meet CUNY's general requirements for demonstrating readiness to enroll in regular English composition courses are directed to take the Accuplacer ESL (which CUNY began implementing in spring 2023) if (1) previous ESL coursework is indicated on their high school transcript or (2) they attended an institution where the language of instruction was not English for a period of six months or more.

Second, multilingual students who take the Accuplacer ESL and do not meet the cutoff score required to enroll directly in a regular credit English composition course are directed into the appropriate ESL or corequisite course at their college through college-specific cutoff scores

and placement policies (they might also be recommended for the CUNY Language Immersion Program [CLIP], which provides intensive, pre-matriculation English to accepted students who need substantial help in language development). Different colleges in the CUNY system offer different sequences of ESL course levels, so each college determines its own Accuplacer ESL cutoff scores to determine placement into the ESL courses offered. The college-specific cutoff scores are established by ESL faculty members. At some colleges, the "border cases"—cases in which students attain high scores on the Accuplacer ESL—are further assessed by designated ESL and/or English faculty members. The faculty members read these students' essay responses from the Accuplacer ESL and confer with one another to determine whether each student should be directed into a corequisite English course instead of a high-level ESL course.

Importantly, three of the five colleges in our sample house ESL and English faculty in two separate departments, while two colleges have a joint English and ESL department. These organizational structures influence both the degree to which cross-disciplinary collaboration is required and how easily it occurs.

Although not part of the formal placement process at CUNY, at all the colleges in our sample, ESL faculty members reported administering a first-day diagnostic assignment to get a sense of incoming ESL students' English language reading and writing competencies. Based on the diagnostic assignment, faculty members may recommend a different ESL course option for students who seem to be inappropriately placed.

According to faculty, administrators, advisors, and testing staff we spoke with, the current placement process for MLs is an improvement over the previous writing-based assessment, as the Accuplacer ESL evaluates more than reading and writing competencies and provides a fuller sense of students' skills. However, interviewees also emphasized that while broader than previous tools, the Accuplacer ESL still has limitations, underscoring the need for more accurate and adaptable tools and processes to ensure students are placed into courses that match their skills and support their progress.

Faculty also said that the current identification markers that flag students to take the Accuplacer ESL are imperfect, often relying on high school records that can be unclear or inconsistently documented, creating the potential for misplacement. Additionally, different high schools record K-12 ESL coursework differently on their transcripts, leading to inconsistencies at the postsecondary level in how students are identified and placed.

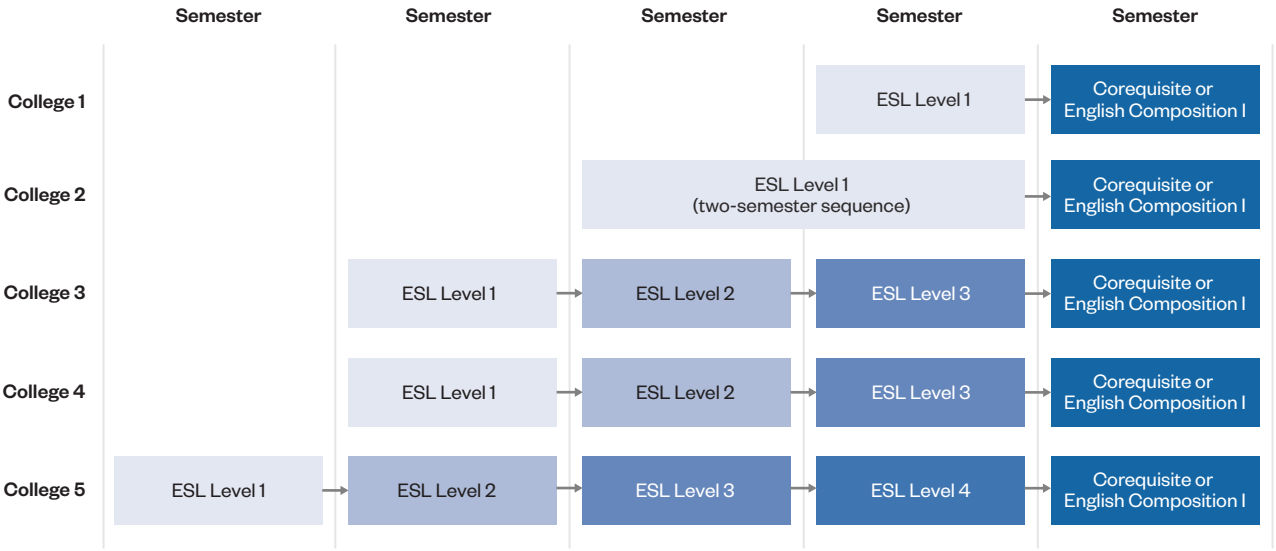
Pathways From ESL to English

At all the colleges in our sample, ESL students are expected to start in the course into which they are placed, and then they must progress through the academic ESL course sequence and pass the highest-level ESL course offered by their college before they can enroll in credit-bearing corequisite or English composition courses. Decision-making for whether students are placed into a corequisite English course versus a standalone English composition course following their completion of the ESL sequence varies across colleges, with some granting departments or faculty greater discretion to make case-by-case judgments.

As Figure 1 illustrates in simplified form, the sequence of ESL courses that leads to credit-bearing English courses varies by college. While some colleges offer only one level of ESL coursework, other colleges offer as many as three or four. Such variation across colleges means

that students with similar profiles can be placed differently, resulting in different pathways and timelines through ESL and into credit-bearing English—even within the same college system.

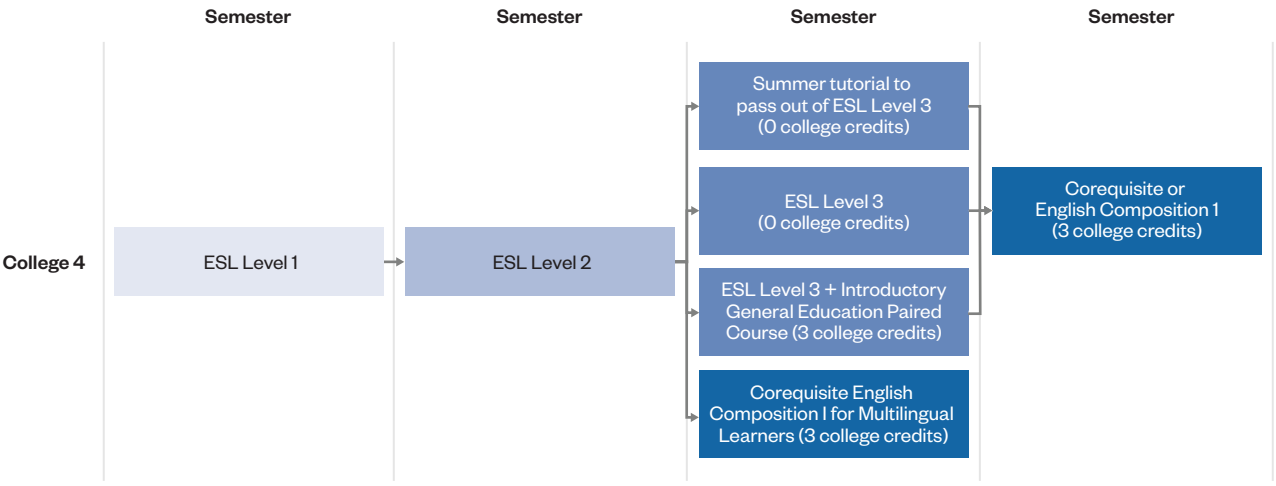
Figure 1. Variation in Pathways From ESL to Corequisite or English Composition Across Colleges



Note. For ease of exposition, the course options and pathways are somewhat simplifi d in this figu e. We discuss some of the complexities in the text.

Additionally, as shown in Figure 2, even within one college, a student's pathway and timeline through ESL may vary, depending on that college's offerings. Figure 2 illustrates the numerous ways by which students at one college in our sample may fulfill their final ESL requirement and proceed into an English corequisite or standalone composition course. The variety of offerings available to students elevates the importance of clear and comprehensive advising to ensure students are well informed about the options and the related tradeoffs.

Figure 2. A Variety of Ways to Fulfill the Final ESL Requirement at College 4



The Shaping of ML Pathways

Across the sample of CUNY community colleges in our study, faculty and staff described how institutional conditions, classroom practices, and systemwide developmental education reforms collectively shape MLs' transitions from ESL into corequisite or standalone college-level English. Colleges have developed a range of models to speed up progress, sustain engagement, and affirm students' identities. At the same time, systemwide reforms—such as the elimination of prerequisite developmental education outside of ESL—have compressed pathways and brought about new norms and assumptions about what progress should look like for multilingual students, creating both opportunities for acceleration and challenges in ensuring that MLs' ongoing language development needs are well met.

Cross-Departmental Collaboration

A consistent theme across colleges highlights the importance of collaboration between ESL faculty and faculty from other departments. Interviewees reported that when faculty across departments worked closely together, they were able to better align courses and create smoother transitions and more coherent learning experiences for students. Joint planning allows instructors to coordinate assignments, reduce redundancy, and scaffold skills across courses, helping students see continuity rather than disjunction as they move from ESL into English composition and other credit-bearing college courses. For instance, one ESL faculty member shared that collaboration helped English faculty "understand the very specific ESL/ELL student population, what those needs are, what to expect from those students, and the best ways in which to approach [relevant] classes and assignments to help move students along." In contrast, we were also told that limited collaboration often results in gaps between courses, with students struggling to bridge differences in instructional approaches on their own.

At two colleges in our sample, collaboration between ESL and English faculty led to the creation of a corequisite English composition course specifically for advanced-level ESL students. Students in this course earn college credit for English composition while fulfilling their final ESL requirement, with extended contact time in class with the same instructor as in any other corequisite English composition course. The faculty and department chairs at these colleges who were interviewed noted that it is important that the faculty members who teach the ESL-specific corequisite English course be equipped to teach both English composition and ESL. They also emphasized that it is critical for students to be informed about the tradeoffs between a non-credit-bearing ESL course and a credit-bearing corequisite English course for ESL students: In the corequisite English course, students must progress through the college-level English composition curriculum over the course of the semester, even while they are still developing their English language proficiency skills. This means that students who enroll in the corequisite English course for ESL students must be advanced and confident enough in their English language skills to take on a credit-bearing course.

At another college, cross-departmental collaboration enables ESL students to participate in a year-long, cohort-based learning community. In this model, a cohort of about 23 students takes ESL alongside introductory credit-bearing college-level courses in areas such as speech and psychology, supporting both language development and progress toward general education requirements. Faculty and department chairs who were interviewed said that regular cross-departmental meetings, interdisciplinary assignments, and collaborative strategies to

holistically assess student work are critical for operating the learning communities. They also emphasized that the cohort structure fosters strong peer support and a sense of belonging among students. However, the learning-community structure also necessitates a full-time course schedule, limiting participation to those students who are able to commit to such a schedule. This example highlights that while concentrated instructional time can accelerate students' readiness for credit-bearing courses, the intensity of these models may limit access for students with significant external commitments. The findings suggest that balancing robust academic support with flexibility remains a central challenge in designing equitable pathways for MLs. Additionally, these examples illustrate both the promise and the constraints of collaborative models, especially as colleges adapt to systemwide reforms that accelerate students' movement into credit-bearing coursework.

Structural Implications of Systemwide Reforms

Systemwide reforms to eliminate prerequisite developmental education and modify ESL placement have helped to reshape how MLs move through ESL and English composition pathways. Changes at the colleges have expanded opportunities for accelerated entry into credit-bearing coursework, but they have also narrowed the range of entry points into ESL and English composition—raising questions about how to support students who enter with widely varying levels of English proficiency.

Faculty and staff we spoke with noted several structural challenges. Placement processes remain rigid: Once students are placed into ESL or English, they generally cannot move "down," even when early assessments suggest misplacement. Programs like CLIP (discussed later in this report) offer intensive instruction but are typically a one-time choice, leaving little flexibility for students who later decide they would benefit from immersive pre-matriculation support.

Departmental organization also plays an important role in shaping how ML pathways are designed and how reforms are implemented. At many CUNY colleges, ESL and English departments were separated long ago, and few faculty interviewees reported knowing the original rationale. The separation has created silos: Departments often operate autonomously with limitations in communication, shared curricular planning, or coordination of student pathways. Faculty at two colleges expressed concern that this separation contributes to a sense of "othering" MLs and reduces opportunities for collaboration. One faculty member described the split as creating a "psychological kind of separation," reinforced by the perception that English and ESL professors "don't do the same things"—despite the fact that English faculty have always taught students learning English. The division makes it harder to align ESL and English under the systemwide shift to corequisites, underscoring how institutional structures can both enable and constrain the design of smoother, more equitable pathways.

Finally, the elimination of prerequisite developmental English and changes in ESL placement have shifted some students who might previously have enrolled in remedial English into ESL instead.[5] This has broadened the range of students served by ESL courses, including those with general literacy gaps rather than strictly English-language acquisition needs. Faculty noted that this creates new pressures for ESL programs and classes to address a wider variety of learning needs while still moving students efficiently into credit-bearing English.

Supporting Expedited Pathways to College Credit

To accelerate MLs' progress into credit-bearing coursework, several CUNY colleges have made changes to the lowest or highest ends of their ESL course sequences while providing continued language support. These approaches aim to reduce the time students spend in non-credit-bearing ESL courses while ensuring they receive sufficient scaffolding to succeed academically in credit-bearing college courses.

As mentioned previously, at two campuses, collaboration between ESL and English faculty has led to the creation of an ESL-specific corequisite composition course for advanced-level students. The course allows students to earn college credit for English composition while fulfilling their final ESL requirement, combining the rigor of college-level writing with embedded language support. Faculty described this course as a structured bridge that enables students to engage with the same curriculum as their peers while continuing to strengthen their English proficiency.

Colleges have also pursued similar acceleration strategies through a paired-course model that links the highest-level ESL course with a credit-bearing general education course. The ESL course paired with a credit-bearing course allows students to contextualize learning English language skills within a subject and to earn credit for a general education course while fulfilling their final ESL requirement. At one college—where the ESL faculty, linguistics faculty, and critical thinking faculty share one department—the paired course combines the highest-level ESL course with an introductory linguistics or critical thinking course, and one faculty member from the department teaches both parts. At another college, the paired course is offered as a learning community and combines the highest-level ESL course with an introductory natural science or astronomy course, and an ESL faculty member and a science faculty member collaborate to teach the two parts. The paired structure can help build students' engagement and confidence because they receive focused support on language mechanics and can then apply and hone those skills during content-driven class time and in assignments.

The paired course model reflects an effort at these colleges to allow students in ESL to begin earning credits as soon as possible. However, in the paired courses there is a tradeoff in instruction time between the course content and ESL language skills support. For example, at one college, the highest-level ESL course meets six hours per week for language instruction but carries zero credits, whereas the paired ESL and introductory critical thinking course meets for three hours of critical thinking content and for only three hours of language instruction, earning each student three credits that satisfy CUNY's Common Core general education requirement with successful completion of the paired course.

A deputy chair who was interviewed explained that students are advised to choose the intensive ESL course over the paired ESL–critical-thinking course if they are not ready for a grade yet and want to continue to focus on their language skills. Faculty reported that students sometimes rush into a credit-bearing course with fewer in-class hours dedicated to English language support. Those students can then struggle academically in the credit-bearing course with consequences for their GPA. At colleges that offer an ESL and credit-bearing paired course option, faculty members we interviewed emphasized the importance of informing students about that tradeoff as they decide which course they want to take. Faculty and administrators described the model as helpful in maintaining student motivation, reducing time to degree, and creating a smoother transition into broader academic requirements. However, they also noted that sustaining paired courses often depends on targeted funding, departmental collaboration, and scheduling flexibility.

Additionally, in response to a systemwide effort to reduce the number of noncredit courses standing between students and credit-bearing courses, some colleges have made changes to their lowest-level ESL courses. Both CLIP and lowest-level ESL courses are designed to serve students with the greatest English language proficiency needs. Four of the five colleges in our sample eliminated or restructured their lowest-level ESL course by incorporating CLIP into their ESL pathway. For example, one college reduced the number of sections offered for their lowest-level ESL course because many of the students who place into that level choose or are directed into CLIP instead. Another college previously offered four levels of ESL but eliminated the lowest level altogether and now directs the students who would have placed into that level into CLIP instead. Two colleges in our sample offer only one level of ESL and direct their lowest-placing ESL students to CLIP; interviewees at these two colleges reported viewing their ESL course as a bridge between CLIP and English composition.

Interviewees explained that CLIP is designed to accelerate students' progress through ESL prerequisites by offering intensive instruction, but they also acknowledged that not all students advance as quickly as intended. Additionally, CLIP is voluntary and requires a small fee, and its intensive 25-hours-per-week schedule is not feasible for all students, particularly those with job or family obligations outside of college. Therefore, students with the greatest English language needs can still choose to enroll in their college's ESL courses instead, which sometimes presents additional academic challenges for students as they must keep up with peers who are more advanced in their English language skills.[6]

These types of expedited models for students in ESL reflect colleges' shared effort to balance acceleration with adequate language support. They demonstrate how institutions are experimenting with multiple entry points to help MLs advance toward degree requirements while recognizing that the intensity and structure of each model may differentially affect who can participate and succeed.

Affirming Linguistic and Cult al Identities in ESL Instruction

At several colleges, ESL instruction is intentionally designed not only to develop English proficiency but also to affirm MLs' cultural identities and lived experiences. Faculty interviewees described how these practices help foster belonging, build student confidence, and support persistence through demanding course sequences. For instance, at one college, faculty use culturally relevant texts and assign narrative writing early on to build MLs' confidence and foster belonging.

> *I always begin with "How to Tame a Wild Tongue," which is a multilingual text. And it's specifically about being degraded for using your primary language and being told that mixing languages is somehow improper. And so that's another "tone" thing. I hope the message I'm sending by assigning that text is, you belong here if you identify with this. So I try to assign a handful of authors that speak to where students are coming from in terms of background and professional interests.*

Faculty explained that such assignments allow students to draw on their own experiences and voices. This combination of using affirming content and relatable early writing tasks was described as critical to fostering a sense of belonging in the classroom.

At another college, instructors who teach the ESL-specific corequisite English course reported taking a similar culturally affirming approach. Rather than focusing solely on grammar or

language mechanics, they encourage students to discuss their home languages and reflect on the role of multilingualism in their academic lives. Faculty noted that they tailor feedback to acknowledge students' linguistic backgrounds, prioritizing the development of confidence and academic engagement alongside language accuracy. According to one faculty member we interviewed, MLs are often hesitant to participate in class due to a lack of confidence in their English proficiency. The ESL-corequisite course is designed to combat this by providing highly tailored language support—such as addressing the use of articles "a" and "the" among Russian speakers, who don't use them in their native language—which ultimately helps students feel more comfortable sharing their work and speaking with their peers. The ESL-specific corequisite structure allows faculty to provide personalized language instruction that might not be possible in a college-level class.

These practices illustrate how ESL instruction can simultaneously advance language development and affirm students' cultural and linguistic identities. By grounding instruction in students' lived experiences and adopting an asset-based approach to feedback, faculty create spaces where MLs feel both challenged and supported. These efforts underscore the role of culturally responsive pedagogy in shaping equitable pathways from ESL into credit-bearing English.

Together, the institutional conditions, classroom innovations, and systemwide reforms described throughout this section illustrate the creativity and constraints shaping ML pathways. Collaborative models, paired and accelerated courses, and culturally responsive instruction demonstrate promising strategies. At the same time, compressed timelines, rigid placement processes, departmental silos, and reduced entry points for MLs highlight ongoing challenges. The integration of systemwide reforms with local innovation underscores the importance of designing pathways that are both accelerated and responsive, ensuring that opportunities for faster progress do not come at the expense of sustained language development and equitable student access.

Conclusion

This study highlights both the challenge and promise of designing effective pathways for MLs from ESL into corequisite English and other credit-bearing courses at CUNY. Systemwide reform within traditional institutional structures has created new pressures, underscoring the need for pathways that balance faster progression to credit-bearing courses with sustained language development. Colleges have responded through innovative approaches—including modified ESL sequences, combined advanced-ESL/corequisite courses, paired ESL/general education courses, and culturally affirming instruction—that demonstrate the potential for promoting acceleration with adequate support. The following recommendations build on the study's findings to suggest ways that colleges and systems can strengthen coordination, expand transitional supports, and promote equitable opportunities for MLs to succeed.

Strengthen coordination between ESL and English departments. Departmental silos can lead to inconsistent curricular alignment and limited shared planning for ML pathways. Considerable effort is required to bring departments together. Colleges and systems should consider activities such as establishing regular joint planning meetings and developing shared curricular maps and learning outcomes for ESL and corequisite courses that could better coordinate ML pathways.

Explore transitional models that help students move from ESL to credit-bearing English more smoothly. Instructional structures explicitly designed to bridge noncredit ESL coursework and credit-bearing English composition can be helpful, especially in reformed environments that may not otherwise provide consistent support to MLs transitioning to college-level courses. Model features to consider include expanded corequisite English sections tailored for advanced-level ESL students, paired/linked courses that integrate language development with disciplinary content, and the use of scaffolded assignments and extended contact hours during the transition semester.

Integrate sustained language and cultural supports throughout ESL and into corequisite courses. MLs' academic success depends not only on access to college-level courses but also on the availability of ongoing, embedded language development and culturally affirming instruction, especially as students transition from ESL into college courses through corequisites. The implementation of these practices may require that faculty receive preparation in asset-based, language-aware instructional approaches. Training instructors to integrate language development into their pedagogy—and to select texts, assignments, and assessments that reflect students' diverse cultural backgrounds—helps ensure that MLs receive consistent and meaningful support as they transition to college coursework.

This report contributes to a growing body of research on how community colleges are adapting developmental education reforms to better serve MLs. While it highlights innovative strategies—such as tailored corequisites, paired ESL/general education courses, and culturally responsive instructional approaches—further study is needed to understand their relative effectiveness and scalability. Future research should examine which institutional and instructional designs best support MLs' continued language development and academic success, both within CUNY and in other community colleges and systems.

Endnotes

1. Enrollment counts in ESL and GED-prep language courses capture only a subset of the ML population.
2. Based on fall 2021 data. More recent campus-level data show that roughly one third of entering students at Queensborough Community College (QCC), CUNY, located in an area with a large immigrant population in New York City, are non-English native speakers (QCC, 2023, 2024).
3. Some colleges undertaking corequisite reforms still offer traditional prerequisite developmental courses.
4. CUNY offers multiple types of ESL programming for students with different goals and for those at different stages of their academic journey. The CUNY Adult Literacy Program offers community-based ESL and basic skills classes, often funded through adult education streams, to support students who may not want or may not yet be ready to matriculate. The CUNY Language Immersion Program (CLIP) provides intensive, pre-matriculation English instruction for students who have been admitted to CUNY but placed into ESL. Finally, academic ESL pathways (which we focus on predominantly in this report) are housed within community colleges and designed as multi-level, noncredit course sequences that prepare students to transition into credit-bearing, credential-applicable programs.
5. While it is not clear why this is so, incoming students at CUNY are now flagged as potentially needing ESL in the placement process based on previous ESL or non-English instruction in high school. It is also the case that some colleges that previously had a practice of diverting some students who placed into ESL into prerequisite developmental courses may not want to assign similar students directly into corequisites.
6. It also presents instructional challenges, as faculty teach students with a greater variation in needs.

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