

The Evaluation of Texas A&M University System's Support Activities Related to Limited English
Proficient Student Success Initiative, Cycle 1 Grants

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Texas Education Agency (TEA) contracted Texas A&M University System (TAMUS) to establish the Institute for Second Language Achievement (ISLA) to assist and support Limited English Proficient Student Success Initiative (LEP SSI) grant recipients. The first year of TAMUS's award from TEA (2004–2005) corresponded with the LEP SSI, Cycle 1 grant awards. A total of 20 LEP SSI, Cycle 1 awards were made for three education service centers (ESCs), 16 school districts, and 1 charter school in Texas. The LEP SSI, Cycle 1 grant period ran from May 1, 2004, to August 31, 2005. In March 2005, TEA contracted the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL) to conduct a formative evaluation of TAMUS's technical assistance to LEP SSI, Cycle 1 grant recipients. The goal of the evaluation was to supply formative information that would help strengthen TAMUS services for future grantees and ensure the likelihood that the expected long-term outcomes would be obtained. SEDL's approach was focused on the quality and effectiveness of the TAMUS professional development services for LEP SSI, Cycle 1 grant recipients. Both the online English as a Second Language (ESL) certification preparation course based at Texas A&M–College Station and the summer ESL institute trainings conducted by ISLA staff at Texas A&M–Corpus Christi were evaluated. This report presents the findings from SEDL's evaluation carried out during the time period of March 2005 through February 2006.

SEDL's study addressed several important evaluation questions relating to quality and effectiveness of the TAMUS professional development courses in preparing LEP SSI, Cycle 1 teachers to take and pass the ESL supplemental certification exam and better address the needs of limited English proficient (LEP) students. Below are major conclusions of this study.

- TAMUS achieved many of its goals in the first year including setting up offices, hiring staff, creating the project Web site, and implementing the newly designed summer ESL institutes and online ESL certification preparation courses. Cycle 1 grantees' plans and programs were proposed without knowledge of the TAMUS support services. Upon award of grants, Cycle 1 grantees began implementing their plans independent of the TAMUS services. As such, many of the ISLA campus-level support services were not implemented in Cycle 1 campuses.
- At its present stage of development, the TAMUS online certification preparation course is grounded in current research on ESL professional development and aligned with the TExES ESL supplemental certification exam. However, the course does not align with many standards for online courses. Expert reviewers recommended that the design of the online course: present materials in a variety of ways, addressing a range of learning styles; use structured activities to provide an effective framework for online learning; and encourage more dialogue, debate, and reflection among participants, thus deepening their understanding of the content with which they are working.
- In comparison to other ESL/bilingual professional development, the ISLA summer ESL institutes were viewed as "above average" or "excellent" by participants. Further, the institutes were perceived useful both for preparing for the ESL/bilingual certification exam and improving their LEP instruction. Improvements in teaching practice and student performance were perceived as outcomes of the ISLA trainings.
- Teachers who participated in the summer institutes reported the use of instructional strategies promoted by TAMUS with some frequency throughout a term. However, a

proportion of respondents indicated that they never or rarely use certain teaching strategies especially strategies that rely on the use of the LEP students' primary language. Only a small number of respondents reported using the strategies on a regular, daily basis unless they were methods which relied on English.

- While it is a goal of the TAMUS ESL professional development to help teachers better address the needs of LEP students, this represents a long range goal that has greater potential of being met after the courses have reached a mature level of development and implementation. Expert reviewers identified several limitations within the TAMUS online ESL course that make the outcome of changing teacher practices unlikely to be achieved in its current form. Specifically, the online course lacks job-embedded, problem-solving situations in a realistic context and opportunities for lesson planning, reflection on classroom experiences, and discussions of new understandings. The ISLA summer institutes may have greater potential for changing teacher practices, however future evaluation is needed to determine whether meaningful transfer of knowledge will occur in the classroom.

It is important to put these conclusions in the context of the LEP SSI grant initiative, TAMUS's efforts to support grant recipients, and SEDL's evaluation design. The remainder of this executive summary provides a historical overview of the LEP SSI and TAMUS support services, a summary of SEDL's evaluation approach, and key findings and recommendations organized by evaluation questions. The full report provides an in-depth presentation of the evaluation methods, findings, conclusions, and recommendations.

BACKGROUND

TEA provides grants to school districts, open-enrollment charter schools, and shared services arrangements through the Limited English Proficient Student Success Initiative (LEP SSI). The LEP SSI initiative was designed in response to the following issues:

- The number of LEP students is increasing in the nation's public schools.
- In Texas, over 32 percent of the student population speaks a language other than English (TEA, 2005a). This percentage far exceeds the national average of 17.9 percent.
- Recent data in Texas show that the performance of English Language Learners (ELLs) falls far below the average passing rate for all students (TEA, 2005b).
- Title III of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act requires that children with limited English proficiency "attain English proficiency, develop high levels of academic attainment in English, and meet the same academic achievement standards as all children are expected to meet."
- Valid and equitable assessments are critical components to ensuring that the needs of ELL students are addressed.
- Most states with licensing requirements, including Texas, require a teaching certificate and bilingual education or English as a Second Language (ESL) endorsements. Yet a shortage of certified bilingual education and ESL teachers continues to be a problem in Texas.

A total of 20 LEP SSI, Cycle 1 awards were made for three education service centers (ESCs), 16 school districts, and 1 charter school in Texas (see Appendix A for a full list of grantees). The LEP SSI, Cycle 1 grant period ran from May 1, 2004, to August 31, 2005.

In June 2004, TEA contracted with Texas A&M University System (TAMUS) to provide technical

assistance to LEP SSI, Cycle 1 grant recipients, including curriculum analysis and alignment, student performance analysis, improvement planning, and professional development opportunities. As a key element of its support to LEP SSI grant recipients, TAMUS established the Institute for Second Language Achievement (ISLA) at Texas A&M–Corpus Christi, and began offering an online ESL certification preparation course based at Texas A&M–College Station.

Institute for Second Language Achievement (ISLA) Summer ESL Institutes

The main goal for ISLA is to *assist high-potential schools with planning and implementing effective practices that enhance language and academic achievement of ELL students*. ISLA goals include the following:

- Establish a research and development office.
- Establish a project Web site.
- Develop a prototype for online ESL certification of secondary teachers.
- Design, develop, and implement a series of professional development workshops for teachers in high-potential ELL campuses.
- Identify materials and resources available to improve ELL student learning.
- Implement 3–4 ELL improvement teams at Texas A&M University System institutions.
- Provide technical assistance to selected ELL campuses that may include online professional development, performance analysis of ELL students, program consultation, model improvement plans, and evaluation.

ISLA staff consist of a program director, an assistant director, three program specialists, and support staff. The ISLA staff provide regional assistance to school districts and schools with high populations of ELL students.

Online ESL Certification Preparation Course

In December 2004, Texas A&M–College Station offered its first ESL online certification preparation course through its Office of Continuing Education and Public Outreach. This online course was designed to give teachers an opportunity to prepare for the Texas Examinations of Educator Standards (TExES) ESL supplemental certificate exam test #154. The 7-week course targets elementary, middle, and secondary school teachers working with LEP students who do not hold ESL certification and newly certified teachers who need to refine their skills when working with English language learners. Teachers who register for the course pay \$450.

The online course consists of 7 weeks of lessons that include reading materials, links to resources, a discussion board, and quizzes over the content. The course framework is modeled after the test framework for the TExES ESL supplemental certification exam #154. The content of the exam is organized into broad areas called domains. Within each domain, the content is further defined by a set of competencies. The TAMUS online ESL preparation course covers the three domains subdivided into 10 competencies.

SEDL'S EVALUATION APPROACH AND METHODS

In March 2005, TEA contracted SEDL to evaluate the TAMUS support activities related to the LEP SSI, Cycle 1 grants. The formative evaluation was intended to review the overall quality and effectiveness of TAMUS technical assistance, research, and professional development services to the 20 LEP SSI, Cycle 1 grant recipients. SEDL's evaluation approach was designed to be flexible and to

collect and present formative evaluative information to strengthen TAMUS services for future grantees.

Although a key role of TAMUS was to provide LEP SSI grantees with outreach services and program design resources, LEP SSI, Cycle 1 grantees were generally unaware of the campus-level technical assistance offered by TAMUS. School districts, charter schools, and shared services arrangements (SSAs) that applied for the LEP SSI, Cycle 1 grants proposed plans and programs without knowledge of TAMUS's support services. Upon award of grants, Cycle 1 grantees began implementing their plans independent of the TAMUS services. As such, many of the ISLA campus-level support services were not implemented in Cycle 1 campuses. Instead, ISLA focused on providing LEP SSI, Cycle 1 grantees with access to professional development opportunities designed to prepare teachers for the bilingual/ESL certification exam and to better address the needs of LEP students. These opportunities included the online ESL course facilitated by instructors at the College Station campus and summer ESL institutes provided by ISLA staff from the Corpus Christi campus. To accommodate this change in direction, SEDL's evaluation was modified to focus on the quality of the TAMUS professional development courses in preparing teachers to take and pass the ESL supplemental certification exam and to better address the needs of LEP students.

The following evaluation questions guided SEDL's evaluation study:

1. To what extent were LEP SSI, Cycle 1 grantees supported by the TAMUS services?
2. How do the TAMUS ESL certification courses compare to “promising practices” in instructional technology and ESL professional development?
3. To what extent have the TAMUS ESL certification courses prepared teachers to take the ESL certification exam?
4. To what extent have the TAMUS ESL certification courses prepared teachers to better address the needs of LEP students?
5. How could the TAMUS ESL certification courses improve?

Methods for this evaluation included focus groups with ISLA staff, review of participation records for both the ISLA summer ESL institutes and the online certification preparation course, expert reviews of the online certification preparation course, and surveys of participants attending the ISLA summer institute trainings. Specific elements of the evaluation approach included:

- **Analyses of focus groups** conducted with ISLA staff to examine the extent to which LEP SSI, Cycle 1 grantee schools were provided with technical assistance and professional development from TAMUS,
- **Analyses of participation records** for both the ISLA summer ESL institutes and the online certification preparation course to determine the extent to which participants were from LEP SSI, Cycle 1 grantee schools,
- **Expert reviews of the TAMUS online certification preparation course** housed at Texas A&M, College Station to determine how it compares to “promising practices” in the fields of instructional technology and ESL curriculum, and
- **Surveys of participants attending the ISLA summer institute trainings** to gauge perceptions regarding the perceived effectiveness of the institute and whether the training resulted in changes in teacher practices.

Key findings from SEDL's evaluation study as organized by the evaluation questions are presented below.

KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

To what extent were LEP SSI grantees supported by the TAMUS services?

Overall, TAMUS achieved many of its goals in the first year including setting up offices, hiring staff, creating the project Web site, and implementing the newly designed summer ESL institutes and online ESL certification preparation course. However, TAMUS' support services did not focus exclusively on the LEP SSI, Cycle 1 grant recipients and TAMUS had limited success at providing outreach support services to Cycle 1 grantee schools. This resulted largely from the fact that the LEP SSI grant structure did not integrate the TAMUS support services into the grantees' planned scope of work.

Participation records indicated that participants of the ISLA summer institutes were fairly evenly represented by teachers from Cycle 1 schools and teachers from other schools. Because Texas A&M–College Station could not release unique identifiers, school, and demographic data on the teachers who enrolled in the online ESL course, the degree to which participants represented teachers from LEP SSI, Cycle 1 school was not possible to ascertain. When grantee status was known, 13 percent of the online participants came from LEP SSI, Cycle 1 schools.

SEDL recommends that TAMUS develop and implement a strategy-based outreach plan to deliver an expanded set of services to the target audience of LEP SSI grant recipients. This includes tracking detailed information on recipients of the services, including the online ESL course.

How do the TAMUS ESL courses compare to “promising practices” in instructional technology and ESL professional development?

The TAMUS online ESL course is in the early stages of implementation and was assessed with an eye toward modification and refinement. Results from the expert reviews concluded that the content of the online course materials and readings are grounded in current research on ESL curriculum and instruction. However, the design and delivery of the online course does not adequately address the majority of standards for online professional development as detailed in the Checklist for Online Interactive Learning (COIL) and the Seven Principles of Effective Teaching Online. The review found the technical features of the ESL online course to be confusing and difficult to navigate. A strength of the TAMUS online course technology was the provision of discussion boards that allowed participant interaction with the instructor. However, interactions were generally characterized by questions and answers, rather than opportunities by the instructor to stimulate deeper understanding. Further, the course structure provides little opportunity for participants to interact with one another. Both participant interaction and participant/instructor interaction are key ingredients to facilitating deep content understanding through dialogue, debate, and reflection.

Because it is unrealistic to assume that a newly developed and implemented course will automatically reflect all of the promising practices in instructional technology, SEDL recommends that TAMUS use the expert reviews to prioritize refinements to the ESL online course within the parameters of the contract budget.

Results from the survey found that participants viewed the ISLA ESL trainings positively. In comparison to other ESL/bilingual professional development, all but one respondent rated the ISLA institute as “above average” or “excellent.” Key influences to participating in ISLA institutes identified by teachers included the content of the training, the time of year it was offered, and the

availability of a stipend for attending. Least influential were state or district professional development requirements, recommendations by other school staff, and the sponsor or trainer of the institute. Teachers perceived the institute materials as useful both for preparing for the ESL/bilingual certification exam and for improving their LEP instruction. The majority of respondents also perceived the ISLA institute training as instrumental in current, or future, improvements in their teaching as well as their students' performance.

SEDL recommends that TAMUS continue to gather perceptions of summer institute participants and use the results to further strengthen the ESL trainings.

To what extent have the TAMUS ESL courses prepared teachers to take the ESL certification exam?

According to participants of the ISLA summer ESL institutes, the trainings provided new and useful resources and information that prepared them for the ESL certification exam. In the months following the summer institutes, seventy one percent of those who reported taking the ESL exam indicated they had obtained ESL certification.

Results from the experts' review of the online course concluded that the content of the course is aligned with the TExES ESL supplemental exam, the online course provided useful certification resources to teachers, and the weekly quizzes were considered helpful in that the quiz questions were similar to those asked on the TExES ESL exam. These positive findings were mitigated by the expert reviewers' conclusion that the course structure was confusing and their concerns about the density of reading materials relative to the course length.

SEDL recommends that TAMUS use SEDL's evaluation results to prioritize ways to begin refining the online ESL course and summer ESL institutes in ways that will help teachers better prepare for the ESL certification exam.

To what extent have the TAMUS ESL courses prepared teachers to better address the needs of LEP students?

While it is a goal of the TAMUS ESL professional development to help teachers better address the needs of LEP students, this represents a long range goal after the courses have reached a mature level of development and implementation. At this time, the evaluation findings speak to the teachers and reviewers' perceptions of the courses' potential to impact LEP students. Survey results indicated that most ISLA summer ESL institute participants perceived that their teaching and their students' performance had improved, or will improve, as a result of attending the institute. Teachers who participated in the summer institutes indicated that they use instructional strategies promoted by TAMUS with some frequency throughout a term. However, a proportion of respondents indicated that they never or rarely use certain teaching strategies especially strategies that rely on the use of the LEP students' primary language. Only a small number of respondents reported using the strategies on a regular, daily basis unless they were methods which relied on English.

Additionally, the expert reviewers concluded that the online course is an important step to providing teachers with access to ESL professional development opportunities. However, several limitations within the TAMUS online ESL course were identified that make the outcome of changing teacher practices unlikely to be achieved by the course alone. Recommendations for increasing the likelihood of obtaining such outcomes included providing job-embedded, problem-solving situations in a

realistic context, and opportunities for lesson planning, reflection on classroom experiences, and discussions of new understandings. The ISLA summer institutes may have greater potential for changing teacher practices, however future evaluation is needed to determine whether meaningful transfer of knowledge occurs in the classroom.

SEDL recommends that TAMUS prioritize refinements to the online ESL course and summer ESL institutes in ways that will help teachers better address the needs of LEP students.

How could the TAMUS ESL courses improve?

The overall purpose of SEDL's evaluation is to identify both strengths and weaknesses of the TAMUS ESL certification courses so that modifications or refinements can be made to increase the effectiveness of the courses for future teachers. Drawing from the TAMUS site visits, summer ESL institute surveys, and expert reviews, SEDL presents several recommendations to improve the content and delivery of both courses.

The expert reviewers recommended a variety of ways to improve the TAMUS online ESL certification preparation course. Suggested improvements to the delivery of the course included adding a course orientation, displaying content from within the course Web pages, promoting meaningful interactions among participants, and using a variety of formats in addition to text such as streaming video. Recommended improvements to facilitate better learning and application of the course content included expanding the reflective components of the course to elicit real-work experiences and adding assessment tasks that require participants to demonstrate their knowledge in authentic ways.

Overall, participants of the ISLA summer institutes generally praised the institute, reporting that it was valuable in enhancing their instructional techniques and in impacting LEP students' academic performance. A few respondents identified what they considered to be the least helpful components of the institutes which included the second language learning theories, student assessment information, and the lecture format by the presenters.

GENERAL CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FROM SEDL'S STUDY

SEDL observed that the ISLA summer ESL institute and the online ESL certification preparation course have the dual goals of preparing teachers to pass the ESL/bilingual certification exam and improving teachers' ESL instruction with the intent of better meeting the needs of ESL students. As they currently exist, the two courses represent alternative delivery mechanisms for accomplishing the goals.

SEDL recommends that TAMUS develop and articulate a "theory of change" and logic map which describe and make explicit the process by which the TAMUS services achieve the goals of supporting LEP SSI grantees. Such conceptual tools will increase the likelihood that the ISLA summer ESL institute and online ESL certification preparation course lead to the desired outcomes. Both the online ESL course and summer institutes will benefit from better alignment between course content, delivery mechanism, and anticipated outcomes.

Given that the two goals may require different intervention strategies, the question arises as to whether each type of professional development course is trying to accomplish too much. Is it realistic to expect two different course formats to equally prepare teachers for the certification exam and improve their classroom instruction? SEDL recommends that TAMUS consider refining the goals of

the two courses in such a way that there is stronger alignment among the course content, delivery mechanism, and anticipated outcomes for each course. More specifically, it is recommended that TAMUS course developers and ISLA staff consider focusing the goals of the online course on preparing teachers to pass the certification exam and focusing the goals of the ISLA summer ESL institute on the improvement of teacher practices.

Limitations of SEDL Evaluation Study

SEDL's evaluation of the TAMUS support of LEP SSI, Cycle 1 grantees had several limitations which future evaluations should address. In addition to a focus on the online ESL course, modifications to the evaluation design introduced a focus on the ISLA summer ESL institutes. Although the goals for online course and institutes are the same, the ISLA summer ESL institutes were assessed only in terms of the participants' perceptions of the institutes as useful and informative. The content of the ISLA summer ESL institutes was not reviewed. The TAMUS online ESL course, on the other hand, had its content assessed but did not include participant evaluations. Therefore, the findings cannot speak to the quality of both the course content and participant reactions for both of the two courses.

SEDL recommends the following components be added to the evaluation approach:

- Conduct an expert review of the ISLA summer ESL institute content.
- Assess participants' perceptions of the online course with surveys.
- Continue assessing participants' perceptions of the ISLA summer ESL institutes using the survey method.
- Evaluate the full spectrum of support services that TAMUS offers.
- Track the number of LEP SSI teachers who have taken and passed the certification exam before and after receiving TAMUS services and compare the passing rates to state averages.
- Conduct site visits to a sample of the LEP SSI grant recipients to assess the LEP SSI grant recipients' perceptions of the support they've received from TAMUS.
- Administer pre- and post-participation surveys to participating teachers from the LEP SSI grant recipient campuses. The surveys should collect information about teachers' knowledge, attitudes, and instructional practices prior to and following the receipt of TAMUS support services. A design of this type, used in conjunction with a documentation of the TAMUS support services that were received, will allow for changes and outcomes to be identified.

Summary of the Evaluation Study

In summary, this formative evaluation of the first year of TAMUS technical assistance to LEP SSI grant recipients revealed that two of the support services, the ISLA summer ESL institute and the online ESL certification preparation course, reflect some of the field's best practices, with room for improvement. Both courses have the potential to provide excellent preparation for the ESL/bilingual certification exam, and teachers attending the ISLA summer ESL institute believed that the experience would positively impact their ability to meet the needs of their LEP students. The recommendations offered above are intended to improve the online course and summer institutes specifically, as well as the overall program initiative.