

CILS Annual Report - 2008-2009

Preface:

The last report submitted included activities and events up to June 2008. Therefore, to avoid repetition, the current report will focus on activities from July 2008 to March 2009. For previous activities, please refer to 2007-2008 report. However, please also note that the budget includes all expenses from April 1, 2008 to March 30, 2009.

I. Mandate and Strategic Plan for the Past Year:

Established in 1994, the UBC Centre for Intercultural Language Studies (CILS) is a cross-campus Centre for research, outreach, and collaboration on issues broadly connected to language, culture, and education.

CILS is an interfaculty centre sponsored and supported by three major bodies: the UBC Faculty of Arts, the UBC Faculty of Education, and UBC Continuing Studies. Over the last fifteen years, CILS has provided service to the language teaching and learning community not only here at the University of British Columbia, but also in the broader professional field and amongst our sister postsecondary institutions in British Columbia. The Centre relies on a handful of dedicated people who are the driving force for sustaining the life of the organization. Unlike other centres, CILS has no buy out for the Director and all Advisory Committee members generously volunteer their time and expertise as well.

The specific main goals for the 2008-2009 year were:

- Increase the research-based activity of the Centre
- Continue to extend the strong network of outreach and collaboration with other units within and beyond UBC

II. Governance and Participation

CILS is lead by a Director and an Advisory Committee. The Centre's membership is comprised by about two hundred individuals who participate as attendees and/or presenters during the various events and activities organised and (co-)sponsored by CILS. Over the last two years, CILS has also relied on the work of an Administrative Coordinator who received an honorarium. This is the only paid position in the governance of CILS.

Director: The director is a member of the Faculty of Arts, or Education or Continuing Studies. This is a volunteer position usually held for one or two years. Over the past years, finding a person who is willing to donate time to the unit has proven challenging. Monique Bournot-Trites, from the Faculty of Education, accepted to be the Director for one year for 2008-2009, and she has generously agreed to stay in this position for another year while the search continues to involve in the directorship a member of one the three units (ideally, someone from the Faculty of Arts or Continuing Studies, to alternate representation from the three contributing units).

Administrative Coordinator: The person in charge of this position assists the Director very closely in organising the Advisory Committee meetings, as well as the events and activities of CILS. This position involves many hours of work, particularly during the preparation of our annual main event (the CILS Annual Research Symposium), as well as throughout the year (e.g., maintaining the CILS website, contacting the CILS membership by e-mail with announcements and invitations to different activities, seeking opportunities to co-sponsor events of interest, etc.). During 2008-2009, Sandra Zappa-Hollman, who had been employed as CILS graduate research assistant before, agreed to continue for one year after her Ph.D. graduation in order to provide a smooth transition between Directors. For 2009-2010, CILS searched for a new graduate student who would be able and willing to take on this responsibility.

Advisory Committee: The Advisory Committee is comprised by individuals representing the three contributing units: Faculty of Arts, Faculty of Education, and Continuing Studies. Most of the current Advisory Committee members have been involved with CILS for a number of years and thus are familiar with the Centre's goals and regular activities. This has also contributed to very fluid interactions and collaboration. Members of the 2008-2009 committee included:

Ken Reeder, Faculty of Education, LLED Department

Andrew Scales: Continuing Studies, Academic director of English Language Institute

Steven Talmy, Faculty of Education, LLED Department

Stefka Marinova-Todd, School of Audiology and Speech Sciences

Rebecca Chau, Faculty of Arts, Department of Asian Studies (new member)

Francis Andrew, Continuing Studies, Academic Performance Programs (new member)

This year's activities included regular meetings and numerous e-mail exchanges during the fall/winter (between September 2008 up to February 2009) to work on three research grant applications. Meetings were also held to set out the goals for the current year and to determine the overarching theme for the May conference and the year's academic events. Planning meetings and e-mail exchanges were also held in relation to the events organised.

Who accessed the Centre:

The events organised by CILS were very well attended by people from different departments and units of UBC, as well as SFU and the local colleges (e.g., Capilano College, Kwantlen College, Vancouver School Board, Vancouver Community College). Many present and past graduate students also attended the academic talks. The first talk given by Dr. Larry Vandergrift from University of Ottawa attracted about 40 participants, while the second talk given by Dr. Shahrzad Saif from University Laval, attracted about 35 participants. Feedback from participants highlight not only the high quality of the talks offered, but also the unique opportunities the events afford them as an actual space of contact among participants from diverse educational institutions. This allows participants to discuss timely and important questions common across educational communities.

As a result of the events offered, which focused on language assessment (our theme for the year), collaboration was initiated with Elizabeth Wallace, Manager Professional Development Programs, in the Faculty of Graduate Studies to discuss issues related to English language requirements at UBC. The focus on language assessment and the interest of the different stake holders indicated that this theme was timely and responded to a need in our educational community.

Furthermore, during the writing of grants, we established collaborative relationships with individuals representing other departmental units and institutions: Dr Ross King, Professor, Asian Studies, Faculty of Arts; Dr Christine Rouget, Associate Professor, French, Hispanic, Italian Department, Faculty of Arts; and Dr. Shahrzad Saif, Associate Professor, Department of Languages, Linguistics and Translation Laval University, Quebec.

CILS also served as a platform to Monique Bournot-Trites in the application of a grant to Human Resources and Skills Development Canada for funding and research of a student exchange programme (the Europe-Canada Programme, Cooperation in Higher Education, Training and Youth - Transatlantic Exchange Partnerships).

The talks organised were highly successful in attracting a wide and diverse audience. We received very positive feedback and encouragement to continue offering similar types of events. Some of our challenges have to do with offering presentations that address the needs and expectations of highly academically-oriented members as well as practitioners. The choice of the topic for our events therefore becomes key to attract our diverse membership. “Language assessment” and the focus on the “Common European Framework”, which is currently adopted in Canada as a basis for language teaching and assessment, proved to be successful topic choices.

II. How Goals were Achieved

a. Increase the research-based activity of the Centre

This goal has been successfully met as we applied for three grants over the course of 2008-2009. The three grants are as follows:

- Hampton fund research grant: The Decision Making Process for the English Requirements for UBC Graduate Students across Academic Units – Requested amount \$66,774.00 (see summary in appendix).
- Teaching and Learning Enhancement Fund (TLEF): Academic language needs of non-native -speaking undergraduate and graduate students at UBC – Requested amount: \$51736.00 (see summary in appendix).
- Canadian Association for University Continuing Education (CAUCE) - Building Transformative Learning Communities: A formative evaluation of the UBC ESL Conversation Facilitators Program – Requested amount: \$3500.00 (see summary in appendix).

Of these three grants, we successfully secured funding for the CAUCE application. Furthermore, Continuing Studies supplemented the amount with an additional \$1500.00. The other two applications, while not funded, received feedback which identified the topics as timely and provided some suggestions for resubmission. Therefore, next year, we plan to resubmit revised grant applications.

- b. Continue to extend the strong network of outreach and collaboration with other units within and beyond UBC

The events allowed us to achieve this goal by increasing the number of people on our e-mail list, maintaining as well as diversifying our membership. In addition, the CAUCE research project will be an opportunity to establish close collaboration with the UBC Learning Exchange as well as with members of the East Vancouver community, especially immigrants with English language needs. We view this as a wonderful chance for CILS to reach out to the community and provide service while also addressing the research agenda.

Through the publicity and archive of events in the CILS website, the Centre received enquiries from people (some of the messages came from as far as Australia) who were interested in finding more about potential possibilities of research through CILS and/or some of its members. CILS also provides students with opportunities to volunteer and to meet with academics as well as practitioners in their field of interest.

V.A. Planning for 2009/2010

Given your mandate, and in light of your goals, successes, and challenges in the past year, identify your main goals and plans for the coming year. Again, be sure to consider expectations on Centres/Institutes as outlined in the attached documentation, as you consider ways in which to develop or enhance the work of your unit. Include any plans and implications for finances/resource generation or allocation

We would like to see CILS continue to grow as a catalyst for research collaboration. To this end, and as mentioned above, we plan to resubmit possibly both the TLEF as well as the Hampton Grant applications in order to have access to external sources of funding for research. We are particularly encouraged by some of the positive feedback and comments received to revise the proposals.

We also expect to continue our service to the teaching community by offering a series of lectures featuring invited local as well as non-local or even international speakers, each expert in their own fields of interest. Our intent is to increase the number of co-sponsored events, something that in the past has proven quite successful (both cost-wise and also as a means of extending the reach of the Centre). We have already identified an opportunity to co-sponsor a talk with the Centre for Teaching Academic Growth this coming fall, and we expect to do the same with other units across the campus.

We also aim to find creative ways in which CILS serves as a Centre that provides graduate students with regular opportunities for face to face and online discussion on a wide range of topics related to language teaching and research. In addition, provided funding is secured for the research projects we have in mind, opportunities to hire more graduate research assistants will arise.

Next year, we are planning to charge \$10 per participant at the annual symposium to cover for the catering. This way, we will save some money that could be used to organise forums for graduate students.

Furthermore, a graduate student (MA) will act as assistant to the director and will be paid \$4500 for the year instead of \$6500 for this position this year. The Website will be transferred to NCIE and will be maintained by Shawna Riebling.

V.B. What goals and directions do you anticipate over the next 3 years? – please take into consideration your mandate and the impact of the work in your reply.

In the next three years, we hope to be involved in more research and work with more graduate students in order to have a critical mass of students involved in programmes of research pointing to similar domains. That way, it will be easier to organise events corresponding to the needs of those graduate students. We also want to work more closely with our partners outside of UBC in order to bring together the theoretical expertise found at UBC and the classroom experience of practitioners in order to answer some research questions or problems from the field. In addition, we hope that CILS could be a place of debate about the questions of Graduate studies related to English requirements and tests used as entrance requirement for international graduate students.

Appendix

Hampton Fund Research Grant: Summary of the proposal

The Decision Making Process for the English Requirements for UBC Graduate Students across Academic Units

Universities across Canada set English language standards for students entering their programs in order to ensure that inadequate language skills do not impact negatively on students' future academic success. UBC, as a case in point, has similarly implemented minimum English language requirements at the undergraduate level, but the English Language Admission Standards (ELAS) for graduate students vary considerably across academic units. Moreover, there seems to be wide variation in the rationales, where they exist, behind those standards, as the processes to set these language standards tend to be socio-political and cultural in nature as many variables come into the final decision. It is precisely these decision elements that we want to investigate in a large and academically diverse university setting. Therefore, the three objectives of the present research are: (1) to describe the current practices concerning English requirement standards for graduate students across academic units within one representative of large research-intensive universities, UBC, and the rigour with which those standards are applied, (2) to find out how different academic units come to their final decision about minimum English language requirement for entrance in their graduate programs, and (3) to compare the process of establishing standards at UBC with best practices described in the literature.

In order to meet those objectives, we will begin our research by conducting a comprehensive literature review to find out what are the best practices suggested in the language assessment and graduate admission research. Based on the information gathered, and after a consultation with individuals responsible for admissions at the UBC Faculty of Graduate Studies, a questionnaire will be created and will be made available online. All graduate advisors from all units offering a graduate program at UBC will be invited to fill out the questionnaire. Based on their responses, academic units will be clustered according to the levels they require for English language competency or the general way the decision making process was established in the different units. Subsequently, several graduate advisors representative of each cluster will be chosen to participate in an interview in order to gather more in-depth data. The questionnaire data will be entered in a database and analysed quantitatively, while the open-ended questions and the interviews will be transcribed verbatim for qualitative analysis.

The outcomes of this research will have both theoretical and practical implications. On the theoretical level, the findings from this study will contribute to the literature on fundamental issues in language standard-setting, and reveal how academic organizations mediate sometimes competing claims from social, cultural, educational, and political contexts of standard-setting. On a practical level, (1) we will provide a comprehensive description of practices in one representative research-intensive university at the graduate level relative to English language standards and the way the latter have been established in the various academic units; (2) academic units will be able to reflect on their own practices and not only affirm their best practices but also reflect critically upon concerns that they may identify; (3) we will synthesize our findings in a set of recommendations for achieving most reliable and empirically-driven English language admission standards for various academic units across large, research-intensive universities in general, and for, UBC, in particular. Finally, we anticipate that based on the findings from the present study, future research could test the effectiveness of the language standards that are set in place across various departments in universities, by determining whether students who have met the ELAS are coping well or are struggling while studying in a foreign language environment.

TLEF – Summary of the proposal

Academic language needs of non-native -speaking undergraduate and graduate students at UBC

A university-wide policy requires all applicants to the UBC undergraduate programs to provide proof of English language proficiency. In the graduate programs, each unit has its own standards for English language proficiency. Presently, in the absence of a valid in-house assessment tool, incoming non-native-speaking (NNS) applicants are admitted based on their scores on one of the standardized tests of English (such as TOEFL, IELTS, MELAB). However, there is significant debate in the testing community as to whether such tests are valid for measuring the language abilities students should possess in order to perform successfully in academic contexts.

This self-study seeks to identify, and categorize the academic English language needs of the NNS students admitted to different undergraduate and graduate programs at UBC. Data will be gathered from the stakeholders in a range of faculties using such instruments as questionnaires, interviews, and observations. Furthermore, the course plans for a representative sample of undergraduate and graduate courses will be analyzed in an effort to delineate the language-related tasks required for successful completion of those courses.

CAUCE – Summary of the proposal

Building Transformative Learning Communities: A formative evaluation of the UBC ESL Conversation Facilitators Program

This proposal seeks the support of CAUCE research funds to determine the most effective aspects of a university-community engagement program, in order that it can be strengthened, and successfully replicated in other locations. The study will be overseen by the UBC Centre for Intercultural Language Study and the UBC Learning Exchange