

Surpassing Circumstances: Integrating ELLs, Learning Processes, and University Life

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Abstract

Often, university English Language Learners struggle to integrate into the life, culture, and academic practices of their school. These challenges increase with administrative limitations, linguistic barriers, and cultural misconceptions. As a response, a program-wide project was developed to help ESL students at a 4-year Midwestern private liberal arts university get involved in campus activities, improve their English in all four modes of language, and break down barriers among their peers. Details of the project, challenges, examples, and outcomes are discussed, providing a fresh outlook on how to address institutional constraints utilizing creative pedagogy.

English language instructors are fortunate to be in positions where they can interact directly with international students and have a positive impact on their lives. Unfortunately, these instructors and their students often fall victim to circumstances beyond their control. Without administrative influence, instructors are often limited in their ability to respond to challenges. It is within these trials that instructors have the potential to hone their creative thinking skills and discover alternative solutions to confront issues. This article seeks to illustrate a challenge presented to the English as a Second Language Program at a 4-year Midwestern private liberal arts university and demonstrate how instructors in non-administrative roles can utilize careful consideration, creativity, and collaboration to address the problems they face in their unique teaching contexts.

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Since its inception, the English as a Second Language (ESL) Program at said university has been housed in a building that is considered part of the "main campus" but located about a mile away. Due to the intensive nature of the program, which includes daily classes from 9:00 a.m. to 3:45 p.m., equaling about 30 contact hours per week, reserving classrooms without ousting other professors and their classes from closer locations was undesirable. This initial challenge combined with the assumption that the ESL classes needed to "stay together" in one area has resulted in off-campus room assignments. While the current location is relatively new and contains well-kept facilities that provides a positive learning environment, the program and its students have faced several unintended physical, emotional, and linguistic consequences.

The location of the ESL classes in relation to the main campus causes several physical concerns for students. First of all, the time required to travel to and from the main campus multiple times per day requires between four to six travel hours per week, depending on the location of students' housing assignments and whether or not they return to an on-campus cafeteria for lunch, in addition to the required 30 contact hours of the program. This travel time detracts from the students' study time and discourages them from scheduling appointments with tutors, conversation partners, or advisors. Time constraints aside, the distance from the main campus to the alternate location averages about 13 miles per week, the equivalent of a half marathon. While some students joke that the long walk is better for them to maintain their health, there have been situations with older or disabled students that have required special transportation arrangements to be made at the expense of their own convenience and that of their instructors.

In addition, these physical challenges can often lead to or combine with negative emotions. Each semester, new ESL students are given a Goals & Expectations survey where they

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provide background information on their education and express preferences on a variety of topics regarding their university experience. Data from three semesters of surveys indicates that the ESL students value meeting and working with native English speakers over all other aspects of their university life, including entertainment services, campus amenities, scholarships, and affordability. Group after group of ESL students have indicated that the limited opportunities to engage in such interactions leads to feelings of isolation, and often inferiority, as well as hinders domestic students from participating in multicultural interactions.

Beyond the physical and emotional aspects are practical implications that impact the ESL students. Research shows that second language learners acquire knowledge as well as develop pragmatic competence from meaningful interaction in the target language and its culture (de Bot, Lowie, & Verspoor, 2005; Lightbown, & Spada, 2011). The distant location of the classrooms excludes the ESL students from many cultural and linguistic experiences of the main campus that would provide them with authentic learning opportunities, such as ordering a drink at the coffee shop or checking out a book from the library, preventing them from reaching their full potential as language learners and as citizens of the university community.

Jumping to conclusions about cultural misunderstandings, language subordination, and biases would easily project the blame on administrators or other outsiders, but realistically these many implications must be considered from an administrative perspective, especially with the implementation of any new program. First, programmatic seniority plays a large role; displacing a longstanding, successful program from one of the larger schools to make room for a new program can leave a poor impression on those students and faculty who are negatively affected. Also, newer programs must often prove their worth before being considered for further investment. Finally, administrators must balance the availability of facilities with the demands of

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the new program. In this case, the quality of facilities and programmatic unity has outweighed the influence of distance. In so many words, administrators face constant pressure to please everyone and are forced to make difficult choices when circumstances are less than ideal.

The advantage of such challenges is that they can provide instructors with opportunities for creativity and growth. While the administrative capabilities of instructors may be limited, they do have the academic freedom and tools to combat some issues. From this realization, the idea of creating an academic solution to an administrative problem was born. This solution, deemed the Campus Activity Project (CAP), has served as a temporary solution to help students cope with isolation, increase their meaningful interactions, and improve their language skills.

The CAP involves two parts: participation in extracurricular activities and application of language skills. Students must attend four school sponsored activities per semester with any combination of at least two different activities. They can choose from sporting events, lectures, special events, the campus film series, club meetings, theatrical presentations, community service, and any other activities if they are approved by an instructor. Choosing their own activity allows the students to be agents in their own education while encouraging them to integrate with the other university populations and practice their skills in all four modes of language. In addition, the number of required activities equates to about one per month, helping them to engage in campus life without overwhelming or detracting them from their studies.

For each activity, the students must complete a one-paragraph summary and one-paragraph response, further enhancing their educational experience by giving them practice with academic writing and an avenue to express their opinion regardless of their English proficiency level. They must also include a picture of themselves at the event or some other proof of attendance. Each activity is worth 25 points for a total of 100 points per semester and factored

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into their Reading & Writing class, a total large enough to motivate students to invest in the project without disproportionately influencing their overall grade.

The results of the project have been encouraging for students, instructors, and administrators. It has influenced the students in myriad positive ways. It allows students to develop intrinsic motivation for completing the project and improving their skills. Once students see their potential, they gain more confidence in their abilities. They also appreciate the opportunity for self-evaluation, reflection, and autonomy. One student noted in her response:

"I choose this activity because is my first time that I participated in a karaoke and I wanted to do some new and funny that day...This activity help me to pay attention to the songs in English for that I can understand more or less the message the song. I believe that this activity help much to train the ear because normally the Americans speak quickly. Sincerely went a challenges for me, but I feel confidence..."

Another student used the project as a catalyst to continue learning. After viewing a movie in English, she stated,

"The film has a lot new vocabulary for me, so I don't understand them. There are few sections, the actors speak quickly and linking each word, so I don't know what they are talking about. When I return my room, I review a film with subtitles [in my native language] on the Internet so I have a better understanding of the film."

These are just two examples of over 100 students who have participated in the CAP, benefited from it, and taken it a step further to successfully continue their language education.

Thus far, the CAP has turned out to be a sufficient compromise to offset an unavoidable

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circumstance. The project required understanding the complexity of the classroom location with regards to all its stakeholders and consequences. Additionally, the implementation of this project has made clear the necessity to be more inclusive with international students, especially those at lower English proficiency levels. Since the time of the original presentation, the campus has experienced growth and construction, and administrators have prioritized the integration of ESL classes into the main campus this coming fall.

The development of the CAP and the collaboration required serve as an example for other instructors who face unique challenges within their own contexts. Valuable advice for instructors who wish to provide quality educational experiences despite the conditions of their context includes considering their role as an advocate for their students, contemplating the tools they have within the limitations of their position, and demonstrating their willingness to collaborate and be creative. Incorporating these values into an academic approach will help instructors to develop a solution that is beneficial, meaningful, and practical for their students.

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References

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Tracy Flicek is an alumna of Lindenwood University where she completed her BA in Spanish and International Studies (2010), an MA in International Studies (2011), and an MA in TESOL (2012). During her time as a student, she participated in multiple study abroad opportunities, was a member of the dance team, and received numerous awards including Scholar Athlete, Spirit of the Lionettes, The Lionettes Coach's Award, The Spanish Award, and the Rose Lyn Zanville Leadership and Character Award. She was hired in January 2013 as the Assistant Director of the English as a Second Language and English Preparedness Programs at Lindenwood University, and she continues to serve in that position along with instructing, advising, and participating in campus organizations and the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Task Force.