

Shared Adventures: How International Students from Four Continents Learn English Together

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Abstract

This paper will introduce the feature of the Intensive English Program (IEP) at Indiana Institute of Technology (Indiana Tech) at Fort Wayne, Indiana, USA. Two government-sponsored special programs, BSMP and SACM, which send most language learners to the program are introduced first. The paper then lays out the teaching methods and learning strategies that the author and her colleagues developed to help the students from four continents learn English, followed by explanation of the theories applied in the program and evaluation of the effectiveness of the theories and the methods. This paper ends with a video clip produced by students of IEP at Indiana Tech, along with more research questions for interested language teachers, students, and administrators.

Key words: Intensive English Program, intercultural, multilingual

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Introduction

This study is conducted in the context of Intensive English Program (IEP) at Indiana Institute of Technology (Indiana Tech), Fort Wayne, Indiana, USA, with a total of 166 international/intercultural students over the time between January 2012 and May 2015. The students are from four continents (North and South America, Africa, and Asia) and are studying English as a new language at Indiana Tech. The Intensive English Program serves full-time post-secondary students ranging in proficiency from elementary to advanced levels. Students receive 20 hours of face-to-face instruction per week addressing a complete range of language skills, including reading and vocabulary development, writing and grammar, listening and speaking, and college skills, along with language labs and a weekly comprehensive test.

Classes are offered with three levels: Elementary, Intermediate, and Advanced. Each level is 16 weeks long, following the academic schedule of Indiana Tech. The program aims to create opportunities for engagement between international and domestic students, students who graduate from high schools in the US and are currently attending Indiana Tech as undergraduate or graduate students, to promote both language and cultural development. In addition to the classes, the students are offered opportunities for conversations with native English speakers, including domestic students, Indiana Tech faculty and staff, and host families, and are encouraged to participate in events on campus and in the city of Fort Wayne. They also prepare to enroll or are already enrolled in the college courses.

Purpose and Research Questions

The main purpose of this paper is to practice, observe, analyze, and evaluate the situations in English learning in the intercultural and multilingual learning environment. This study aims to find answers to the following questions:

1. How does English learning among multicultural students take place in and outside of the classrooms?
2. How do language and cultural differences and similarities among teachers and students influence the teaching and learning of English?
3. What strategies can be used to effectively and efficiently facilitate the teaching and learning of English?

Practices and Observations

The time of data collecting is between January 2012 and May 2015. The international students who have learned English in Indiana Tech are from the following countries: China (18 students), Brazil (107 students), Venezuela (1 student), Peru (1 student), Morocco (1 student), Yemen (2 students), and Saudi Arabia (36 students). Two large groups of students from Brazil and Saudi Arabia are sponsored by their own governments: The Brazil Scientific Mobility Program (BSMP) is a one-year, non-degree program for Brazilian students to study in colleges in the United States and many other countries. The Saudi Arabian Cultural Mission (SACM) supports students academically and financially and also disseminate information that reflects Saudi culture, tradition, and heritage in the institutes in the US. Based on their English levels, the students may participate in an Intensive English Program for one to three

semesters before enrolling in the academic studies, or directly enroll in full-time academic studies.

The IEP at Indiana Tech has used a combination of methods, including lecturing, discussion, interviews, formative and summative assessments, and video recordings to enhance the teaching and learning. The following activities are the highlight of the program:

1. **Lecturing:** According to Barbara Gross Davis (2009), “lecturing is not simply a matter of standing in front of a class and reciting what you know. The classroom lecture is a special form of communication in which voice, gesture, movement, facial expression, and eye contact can either complement or detract from the content. No matter what your topic, your delivery and manner of speaking immeasurably influence your students’ attentiveness and learning.” The lectures are preceded by students’ preparation and followed by quizzes or Q&A sessions so students can have a comprehensive understanding of the materials they learn.
2. **Writing Workshop:** According to Lucy Calkins (2006), this method of instruction is based upon four principles: students will write about their own lives, they will use a consistent writing process, they will work in authentic ways, and it will foster independence. Writing workshop can take place in any classes, not limited to the Writing class, and is a good method to check students understanding of the learning materials and to build working relationships. If possible, the instructors write with the students, which is a good opportunity to model the learning and participation.
3. **Video Production:** the instructors help the student make mini documents, short films, and roleplaying practice. Students are divided to groups of four to five. After reading a story together, they are each assigned a role, e.g., script writer, director, videographer, etc. each also plays a role in the video/film. The following is a link of one of the videos the students have produced, Catch Me if You Can: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BA35TH_Rjhc.
4. **Games:** By playing fun educational games, students learn English vocabulary, sentence structures, grammar, listening, pronunciation and phonics. The games can be board games, video/computer games, or physical activities.
5. **Host Families:** Local families provide conversation and activities opportunities to the international students. Indiana Tech is fortunate to be able to recruit a good number of host families from the community. The families voluntarily and unselfishly take the international students to their homes for weekends or holidays, and take them to places for cultural exploration. Many students have built close bound with these families.
6. **Peer Mentor system:** We encourage domestic students to volunteer as peer mentors to frequently meet for conversations. Either the mentors or the language learners can initiate topics for discussion. The mentors can feel free to correct the learners’ errors in pronunciation, grammar, word usage, or cultural awareness. The learners can also contribute to their working

relationship by sharing their cultural, language, and even their understanding of certain content areas, such as mathematics or sciences, to their mentors (many international students have better grasp of math and science than domestic students, even though they have limited English). To encourage these interactions, the instructors agree to grant both mentors and mentees, extra points for each documented meeting hour as an incentive.

7. Conversation Table: Students, including native English speakers and language learners, take turns leading the conversations during lunch time at the campus cafeteria. This activity is on voluntary basis. No credits will be granted, so students feel relaxed and free to make conversations and learn both formal and informal expressions. The interactive mode is similar to the Peer Mentor mode, which means no strict forms or corrections are required. Although the topics vary, English is the only language the students use. Students feel included in the “inner circle” because they are speaking the “everyday English,” including slangs and even non-standard English, rather than the “academic English.” Students will discuss the differences between “everyday English” and “academic English” and learn to use them in different settings with instructors and their mentors.
8. Multicultural Club: The IEP students, along with many domestic students and other international students who are studying the college courses, for a Multicultural Club to promote inclusiveness, diversity, and equitability among students in Indiana Tech. The club members holds a formal “Culture Night” and give cultural presentation, such as music, dances, martial arts, special ceremonies, etc., every year, and offers occasional non-credit language classes to interested students, staff and faculty members.

Theories Applicable to the Program

Learning the same language, English in this program, with different first language and different cultural background is different from learning the same language with the same first language and culture. The IEP students in Indiana Tech come from four continents with sometimes extremely different cultures. In order to create a positive, harmonious, and productive learning environment, several theories have been practiced and proved applicable. The following are some theories that are particularly applicable to the program:

1. Michael Byram, Bella Gribkova, and Hugh Starkey (2002) point out that learners need not just knowledge and skill in the grammar of a language, also the ability to use the language in social and culturally appropriate way. The learners in the program are in their late teen and early twenties and are getting ready to college in the US. They are eager to know the society as well as their peers. Knowing the correct form and grammar of English might help them to gain high scores in the TOEFL or IELTS tests, but they need and are more interested in using the language to serve their social needs. We use Conversation Tables during lunch hours and Host Families during weekends to help students use the language in social and cultural setting. During the socially interactive time, we do not emphasize on correcting students errors,

unless they ask to be corrected. Instead, we treat the learners as equal conversation partners. By being treated as a valuable social and cultural partner, the learners take the ownership of the language they have learned and used.

2. Aleidine J. Moeller and Kristen Nugent (2014) claim that language learners who become intercultural speakers will be successful not only in communicating information but also in developing a human relationship with people of other languages and cultures.

The language learners should not be treated as receivers only. Instead of addressing the IEP students as visitors or even minorities, we encourage students to introduce what they know to the entire Indiana Tech community. With other international students as well as many interested domestic students, they founded a Multicultural Club, which offers cultural presentation and language classes every semester. By introducing their own cultures and languages, the English learners not only are better able to use English properly, they have developed good relationship with fellow students as well as faculty on campus. They have truly become “part of the tapestry” of the campus life, as stated in the Introduction, and many stereotypes and misunderstanding/misperception about the cultures other than typical American cultures have been reduced.

3. Correction of errors in learner language: Since the IEP students come from four continents, with extremely different language backgrounds, such as Spanish, Portuguese, Chinese, and Arabic, their approaches to the target language, English, are also by far different. When students use their “learner languages,” or ‘interlanguage,’ to communicate with one another, they produce some patterns that are non-standard but work in the learners’ group. They use these patterns to negotiate for meaning and arrive at mutual understanding; meanwhile they also learn to request for clarification or confirmation and seek to acquire the standard forms and get their ideas crossed. When students are using “learner languages,” errors or awkward sentence patterns are inevitable; however, students need these for real-life communication. Teachers are often challenged to discern which errors should be corrected, when and how to correct the errors in order to prevent persistent errors while maintaining the pride of the learners and the function of the learners’ interlanguages. Usually we wait till the learners’ interlanguage has served their purposes before making corrections, as James A. Oladejo (1993) suggests, the correction must be flexible enough to incorporate the preferences and needs of the language learners. Eventually, they make adjustments in pronunciation and sentence structures to nearly native in order to be understood. The negotiation process also makes the students patient enough to try to understand the language they hear.
4. Combining levels: Although we divide the IEP students into three levels, and each level has certain learning materials, learning objectives, and learning methods, we sometimes combine two or three levels to create real-life learning and communicative situations. In these situations, “think-pair-share” serves as an effective technique that allows learners time to process their thoughts and

skills. As Naomi Kurata (2007) suggests, when pair work functions collaboratively and learners are in an expert-novice relationship, they can successfully engage in the co-construction of knowledge. We do not overstretch the roles of “experts” and “novices”; however, the elementary level students are excited that they are able to work with more advanced level students, and the more advanced level students find they learn more by offering help or mentoring the lower level students, and are reminded that there is much more for them to learn in terms of the new language. To apply George Yule and Doris Macdonald’s theory (1990)--when teachers place more advanced students in less dominant roles in paired activities with lower-level learners, both sides learn well. we often give students projects to create and perform skits and dramas. By doing so, students can choose the work and roles to fit their individual level and preference, as mentioned in the third section of this paper: “Video Production.”

Conclusion

Students from four continents learn English together has developed an intercultural and multilingual dimension in the Intensive English Program at Indiana Tech, as well as in many other U.S. institutions. We as language teachers and learners find that hosting students from all over the world in the Intensive English Program enriches diversity on campus and enhances international exposure and broadens cultural perspectives. The following link is a video made by one of the students who voluntarily expresses his positive response to our practices: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NOtO16jnFh4>. This paper will end with some questions for those who are interested in develop programs for multicultural and multilingual English learning:

1. How do students evaluate the theories and practices laid out in this paper?
2. How to enrich a language class with instant information students retrieve from their smartphones and strike a balance?
3. How to develop accurate assessment tools to make sure learners’ are well served to meet their individual need?

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