
English as a second language: helping international students get ready for college in the U.S.

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ABSTRACT. Describes the English as a Second Language (ESL) program at Southern Arkansas University and its success in aiding international students in improving their English language skills and facilitating a smooth transition to the university's degree programs. The paper looks at all the components of the program mainly focusing on its curriculum and methods of instruction that address all of the major language skills (listening comprehension, speaking, reading, and writing) and competences (grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation).

Keywords: English, Language, Learning.

Inglés como segunda lengua: ayuda a estudiantes extranjeros a prepararse para la universidad en los Estados Unidos de América

RESUMEN. Describe el programa de Inglés Como Segunda Lengua (ESL) en *Southern Arkansas University* y su éxito al ayudar a los estudiantes extranjeros a mejorar sus habilidades en el idioma inglés y facilitar una transición suave a los programas de pregrado y posgrado de la universidad. Analiza todos los componentes del programa, centrándose principalmente en su plan de estudios y métodos de instrucción que abordan todas las principales habilidades lingüísticas (comprensión auditiva, conversación, lectura y escritura) y competencias (gramática, vocabulario y pronunciación).

Palabras clave: Inglés, Lenguaje, Aprendizaje.

Inglês como segunda língua: ajuda a estudantes estrangeiros a se prepararem para a universidade nos Estados Unidos

RESUMO. Descreve o programa de inglês como segunda língua (ESL) na *Southern Arkansas University* e seu sucesso em ajudar estudantes estrangeiros a aprimorar suas habilidades na língua inglesa e facilitar uma transição suave para os programas de graduação e pós-graduação da universidade. O artigo analisa todos os componentes do programa, concentrando-se principalmente em seu currículo e métodos instrucionais que abordam todas as principais habilidades linguísticas (ouvir, falar, ler e escrever) e outras habilidades relacionadas à gramática, vocabulário e pronúncia.

Palavras-chave: Inglês, Linguagem, Aprendizagem.

Introduction

The English as a Second Language (ESL) program at Southern Arkansas University (SAU) was established in 2012. Its role is to help international students improve their knowledge of English and prepare them for matriculation into the university's degree programs (undergraduate and graduate). All international applicants seeking admission to SAU's degree programs must provide proof of English proficiency (in the majority of cases, it is a sufficient score in either TOEFL or IELTS – internationally recognized English proficiency examinations with centers all over the world). In the case when international applicants do not have the required TOEFL or IELTS scores, they have the option of going through SAU's ESL program. Upon completion of this program, they are eligible for undergraduate or graduate admission at SAU without having to provide

TOEFL or IELTS scores. The ESL program also welcomes students who may be interested in simply improving their command of English, even if they do not plan to apply for undergraduate or graduate admission (such students are mostly represented by local immigrant community members). Over the five years of its existence, the ESL program has helped dozens of students from all over the world (Benin, Brazil, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, China, Colombia, El Salvador, India, Japan, Jordan, Mexico, Saudi Arabia, Russia, Venezuela, and Vietnam) to improve their English language skills and successfully enroll in SAU's degree programs.

Levels

The ESL program offers five levels of instruction: beginner, elementary, pre-intermediate, intermediate, and upper-intermediate. Upon arrival, ESL

students are given a placement test, which helps to determine their level and place them in the most appropriate ESL classes. The duration of each level is one academic semester (16 weeks). The ESL program also offers an intensive summer course, which lasts for 5 weeks.

Curriculum

The ESL program offers five different classes in each level, which amounts to 15 credit hours of instruction. The ESL classes address all major language skills and competences and are as follows: Grammar, Vocabulary, Writing, Conversation, and Lab. Detailed descriptions for each class follow below.

Grammar

The major language skills addressed by the program's Grammar class are writing and reading. The major language competence addressed is grammar,

although some vocabulary is acquired and trained through this class as well. It is common knowledge that language mastery is achieved through improving two major language aspects: fluency and accuracy. While both are equally important in achieving language mastery, the Grammar class mostly focuses on improving students' accuracy in using English. Instructors use a variety of methods and materials including but not limited to the following:

1. Graded non-fiction texts containing target grammar structures (inductive grammar acquisition)
2. Grammar rule explanations and examples (deductive grammar acquisition)
3. Grammar exercises (filling in blanks, multiple choice, etc.)
4. Grammar games
5. Role-play exercises

Grammar topics covered in class include but are not limited to tenses, moods, articles, conjunctions and prepositions, phrasal verbs, irregular verbs, modal verbs, passive

voice, reported speech, “-ing” and infinitive constructions, pronouns and determiners, relative clauses, adjective and adverbs, etc.

Vocabulary

The major language skills addressed by the program’s Vocabulary class are reading, speaking, and writing (to a lesser extent). The major language competence addressed is vocabulary.

Instructors use a variety of materials including but not limited to:

1. Graded non-fiction tests focusing on certain vocabulary topics
2. Flashcards
3. Vocabulary worksheets
4. PowerPoint presentations
5. Guided dialogues
6. Role-play
7. Vocabulary exercises (filling in blanks, multiple choice, filling in missing letters, using words in sentences, essays)

Vocabulary topics covered in this class include but are not limited to food, clothes, weather, travel, daily routines, family, free time and leisure, nationalities and countries, parts of the body, physical description and appearance, professions, health and medicine, feelings and emotions, shopping, animals, sports, etc., as well as culturally important topics such as Christmas, Halloween, etc.

Writing

The major language skills addressed by the program’s Writing class are writing and reading (to a lesser extent). The major language competences addressed are grammar and vocabulary.

Instructors use a variety of methods and materials including but not limited to:

1. Introduction of important writing terms (e.g. conjunction, subject, verb, tense, sentence, paragraph, etc.)

2. Writing and grammar rule explanations, sample texts, and examples

3. Writing exercises (free writing, outline, summary, paragraph writing, essay writing)

4. Error correction and revision

Topics covered by this class include but are not limited to simple sentences, mechanics, paragraphing, compound sentences, writing process, complex sentences, multiple paragraphs, essay writing, research writing.

Conversation

The major language skills addressed by the program's Conversation class are speaking and listening comprehension, although vocabulary is also addressed (to a lesser extent). The major language competences addressed are vocabulary and pronunciation, although grammar is also addressed to a lesser extent.

Instructors use a variety of methods and materials including but not limited to:

1. Guided dialogues

2. Role-play

3. Oral summary

4. Oral detailed retelling

5. Discussions (pair and group)

Conversation topics covered in this class include but are not limited animals, appearance, art, books, cars and driving, computers and technology, dating, eating habits, environment, family, fashion, food and cooking, jobs, health and medicine, holidays, marriage, music, personality, shopping, sports, television, travel and tourism, etc. Also addressed are U.S.-related cultural topics (e.g. traditional and national holidays, history, customs, etc.)

Lab

The ESL Lab class is a face-to-face class characterized by an autonomous aspect implying that students are expected to work both

with instructors and independently, under or without supervision. The ESL Lab class includes the following components:

1. Extensive Reading (or “Home Reading”): students are assigned a book to read (at home). Each week they are assigned a certain amount of reading and are given worksheets containing useful vocabulary and questions on the content. In class, they discuss what they read with the instructor and perform various exercises (role-play, retelling, summarizing, doing vocabulary exercises, and taking tests). Major language skills addressed by this component are reading and speaking; language competences – vocabulary and grammar.

2. Movies: students gather once a week to watch authentic American movies. Each time, they are given worksheets with pre-watching, while-watching, and post-watching exercises, containing useful and/or difficult vocabulary and questions on the content. Before and after

watching, they discuss what they watch with the instructor and perform various exercises (role-play, retelling, summarizing, doing vocabulary exercises, and taking tests). Major language skills addressed by this component are listening comprehension and speaking; language competences – vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation.

3. ESL games: students get together once a week to play language games. Examples of language games are “Mafia”, “Family Feud”, “Trivial Pursuit”, etc. Language games are excellent at developing students’ language skills and competences and are liked by learners of all ages.

4. ESL Vocabulary software: students must purchase membership on special vocabulary websites (e.g. “WordEngine”, or “Ultimate Vocabulary”) and perform online exercises. Weekly goals are set that students must meet, while instructors monitor students’ progress through their admin profile. Sometimes,

written tests are given over the acquired vocabulary. Major language skill addressed by this component is reading; language competence – vocabulary.

5. ESL podcasts: students must purchase membership on a special podcast website (“OpenLanguage”) where they will listen to podcasts online and perform interactive exercises. Weekly goals are set that students must meet, while instructors monitor students’ progress through their admin profile. Major language skill addressed by this component is listening comprehension; language competences – vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation.

Instructors

ESL classes are taught by professionally trained ESL instructors, most of whom hold master’s or doctorate degrees. All the instructors also have a command of one of more foreign languages, including Spanish, French, Arabic,

Mandarin Chinese, Japanese, Russian, and German.

Conclusion

Over the years, the ESL program at Southern Arkansas University has proved to be an effective tool in aiding international students from all over the world in their preparation for the university’s degree programs. Thanks to its solid and well-developed curriculum that addresses all of the major skills and competences, the program helps its students boost their English language skills and facilitates their smooth transition to both undergraduate and graduate programs at Southern Arkansas University while exempting such students from the requirement to provide any other proof of English proficiency.

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