EXPECTED OUTCOMES: ESL Obj 1

“Students will acquire English language skills through a curriculum that provides instruction at graduated levels of English proficiency and that is based on observable performance objectives.”

ASSESSMENT METHODS:

a. Students are evaluated for proficiency when they enter the program; again during the first week of classes in a term; and then at the end of each term with in-house proficiency tests as well as with standardized testing in the form of an authentic, paper-based TOEFL (provided through ETS’s Institutional Testing Program). With this information, student progress in the program is tracked.

b. At the end of each term, students complete anonymous evaluations of the instructors, teaching materials, and other aspects of the program.

FINDINGS:

a. The Intensive English Program (IEP) is divided into five levels of English proficiency. It is expected that a student needs two 8-week sessions to acquire the skills for a given level. In May 2014, we examined the academic progress/history of the 69 students enrolled in the IEP who had been in the program more than two terms. This included part-time as well as full-time students. We wanted to know how many of them spent more than two terms in any of the three skill areas: grammar/writing, reading/vocabulary, and listening/speaking. (A student may, for example, be placed in level 3 for grammar/writing and reading/vocabulary, but in level 2 for listening/speaking.) Some students in the study had attended the IEP for as many as 9 terms. (According to Terry Simon, Director of the Texas IEP, it generally takes a student entering at the beginner level four semesters – or, in our case, 8 terms – to complete an IEP sequence.) The time spent in the IEP by the 69 students in the sample is as follows:

Chart 1

# who attended the IEP for 4 terms: 36
# who attended the IEP for 5 terms (1 calendar year): 17
# who attended the IEP for 6 terms: 9
# who attended the IEP for 7 terms: 20 (of these 20, 11 took summer vacation, which results in only 9 students above, which was a summer term)
# who attended the IEP for 8 terms: 7
# who attended 9 terms: 5
Of these 69 students, 29 continued in at least one skill area three and even four times. All of these students were from Saudi Arabia, except as otherwise noted.

Chart 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th># of terms</th>
<th># of skill areas involved</th>
<th># of students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>15 (4 Koreans, 1 Taiwanese)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5 (1 Jordanian)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2 (1 Korean, 1 Kuwaiti)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It can be concluded that, in claiming that two 8-week terms is sufficient to complete a level in any skill area, the curriculum is extremely successful except in the case of Saudi (and possibly other Arabic-speaking) students. Also, when a student needed to study at a level for more than two terms, it was usually (52%) in only one skill area.

Although we administer an Institutional TOEFL at the end of each 8-week term, TOEFL scores have proven to be unreliable in assessing the curriculum. Students are not required to take the Institutional TOEFL, and those who take the test do so irregularly. Also, TOEFL progress is only evident over long periods of study. For example, it has been estimated that a student in an IEP can raise his/her score on the paper-based TOEFL (pBT) by 75 points in nine months. This is certainly a meaningful improvement. But a 16-point increase after eight weeks – the proportional amount of 75 points accumulated in two months – may not be meaningful, because the pBT has a margin of error of 14 points. There are other difficulties as well. It takes fewer hours of study to raise one’s score from 400 to 450 than to raise it from 500 to 550. (The 75 point increase mentioned above concerned intermediate-level students.) Only 12 students in the current survey had a TOEFL history extending nine months, nine of whom were Saudi and whose improvement (with two exceptions) was minimal, consistent with the findings in Chart 2 above. The other three students were Brazilian, who improved on average by 65 points over nine months. We concluded that the TOEFL sample size was insufficient to generalize about the program.

b. Program evaluations completed by students have reported satisfaction with the IEP. Two items in the Program Evaluation are especially instructive. One question asks, “Would you recommend this program to other students?” Here are the results for both the Spring II, 2014 term (March – May) and the Summer, 2014 term (May – July):

Yes: Spring II – 90%
Summer – 91%
No: Spring II – 3.7% (one respondent said, “not all teachers good, two much homework, all classes should be in the same building”)
Summer: 4% (two respondents said it was because there is not enough TOEFL study, but that they otherwise liked the program)
Mixed: Spring II – 6.25% (comments were that the program is too expensive and there is not enough TOEFL study)
Summer – 4.5%

Another question asks students to respond to the prompt, “Overall, this program is good for me.” Students are to respond according to the following scale:

5 – Strongly agree
4 – Agree
3 - Neither agree nor disagree
2 – Disagree
1 – Strongly disagree

The responses were as follows:

4 – 5: Spring II – 93%
      Summer – 94%
3: Spring II – 6%
    Summer – 2.9%
1 – 2: Spring II – 1%
      Summer – 3%

HOW FINDINGS WERE USED FOR IMPROVEMENT:

a. We are researching how Saudi students, especially, learn English differently from students of other nationalities in the program. This is not a situation unique to Auburn. I am in contact with IEP directors at other campuses through two listservs (American Association of Intensive English Programs and the Program Administration Interest Section of TESOL), and the experience is nation-wide. It was the topic of several sessions of the May, 2013 national NAFSA convention. Saudi students often have attendance problems, which is partly cultural. As Stefani Stauber at Boise State University says, “What we’re seeing is oftentimes family takes precedence over academics and students will oftentimes miss class to speak to their parents due to the time difference or leave the country for a brother’s marriage and miss weeks of coursework.” They often have difficulty adjusting to Western writing conventions, perhaps due to interference from an acquired Koranic style. All students in the IEP are provided with tutoring at no charge through our International Scholar English Center.
Students who attend the IEP’s optional TOEFL Preparation class performed better on the TOEFL than those who did not. However, TOEFL progress was variable even among those attending the class. We regularly make changes to the TOEFL Preparation curriculum, and have included more TOEFL-skill exercises in the classroom lessons taught at the upper proficiency levels.

When students express dissatisfaction with a particular course, which can include the materials used, instructional delivery, or building facilities, we address the issues immediately. It should be mentioned that all classes are observed every eight weeks.

EXPECTED OUTCOMES: ESL Obj 2

“Students will have sufficient oral and cultural skills to effectively teach American students and those of other nationalities.”

ASSESSMENT METHODS:

Non-native-English-speaking graduate students who are being considered for a Teaching Assistantship are assessed in oral ability with the Educational Testing Service’s SPEAK Test. Diagnostic measures are provided for pronunciation, grammar, fluency, and overall comprehensibility. Those with inadequate SPEAK scores (below a score of 50) are enrolled in a semester-long course in classroom communication skills (INTL 1820). The course addresses the following areas:

- Language (subdivided into pronunciation skills and strategies for conveying information)
- Teaching strategies/methodologies
- Cultural understanding involving the American classroom

FINDINGS:

In 2012, 32 students took the SPEAK test and the pass rate was 6.25%. In 2013, 18 students took the test and the pass rate was 17%. In the fall of 2014, 18 tests were administered with no passing scores. Despite the different number of tests administered each year, enrollment in INTL 1820 has not diminished. Some departments require all of their current and future TA’s to take the course, because they believe it is valuable. Also, since those departments consider a passing grade in INTL 1820 as the same as passing the SPEAK, they skip the test altogether and register all their TA’s for the course.

HOW FINDINGS WERE USED FOR IMPROVEMENT:

We constantly update and refine INTL 1820 in regard to speaking skills and teaching methods as new materials and technologies become available. We have introduced a cultural component in collaboration with the Psychology Department, which has been developing approaches for assisting
international students with cross-cultural interactions and expectations. In addition, we have
established meetings in which INTL 1820 students and students in the graduate ESOL program
exchange ideas on cross-cultural teaching strategies and language issues. Because some
international TA’s need more preparation than others, we are considering introducing a two-
semester sequence for them.

EXPECTED OUTCOMES: ESL Obj 3

“Students and scholars will develop their English skills to accomplish tasks needed in the specific
program.”

ASSESSMENT METHODS:

a. We operate a tutoring center (ISEC, mentioned earlier) for non-native-English-speaking
undergraduate students, graduate students, and visiting scholars who need improvement in writing
and pronunciation. Most demand is from graduate students, followed by visiting scholars. Between
40 and 70 hours of service are provided each week, to about 50 individuals. Pronunciation is
assessed with sound inventories and scales for pitch and stress. In addition to using traditional
methods, such a minimal pairs and intonation exercises, we include lip and tongue conditioning.
Writing is assessed by eliciting samples and evaluating them for organization, syntax, rhetoric, word
choice (including prepositions), and word forms. Spelling and punctuation, unless they interfere
with comprehensibility, are of secondary importance. We do not edit papers.

b. We organize special, short-term programs for groups of visiting students or scholars in areas of
academic English. Upon arrival, they are assessed with instruments appropriate to the purpose of
the program. To date, the interest has been primarily in speaking skills. We administer oral
interviews, which are evaluated according to FSI and ACTFL scales for accent, pronunciation,
grammar, fluency, vocabulary, and overall comprehensibility. Students complete program
evaluations at the end.

FINDINGS:

a. Pronunciation errors depend on the student’s first language. For some, the l/r sound distinction is
extremely difficult to acquire, while for others the b/v sound distinction is a major challenge; some
languages have equal (“flat”) intonation while others use glides (not found in English); etc. The most
common writing errors involve prepositions, articles, and verb endings. The most serious errors
involve subordinate clauses, verbals (gerunds, participles, and infinitives), missing verbs, and
inadequate use of supporting detail.

b. Students from East Asia (all of our groups to date have been from China, Japan, Korea, and
Taiwan) are focused on accuracy at the expense of fluency. Error production is reduced by the
student saying very little. Because these languages have different sounds from English,
pronunciation errors are frequent. English intonation patterns are also challenging. However, intonation improvement increases comprehensibility much more rapidly, and overall, than pronunciation.

HOW FINDINGS WERE USED FOR IMPROVEMENT:

a. While pronunciation needs to be addressed on an individual basis, one method we have found that is useful in most intonation cases is that developed by David Alan Stern (“Breaking the Accent Barrier”), which involves accent neutralization. That is, it uses techniques designed to block interference from a person’s first language, such as limiting lip movement and lowering the voice register with each syllable in a word (which renders it impossible to insert a glide, e.g.). For writing, we have adopted Iowa State University’s “Error-Gravity” paradigm for classifying and prioritizing student errors for improvement.

b. Because of the short program duration (3-4 weeks), the greatest improvement has been achieved through intonation instruction and placing emphasis on fluency over accuracy.