

# Increasing Confidence and English Use Outside the ESL/IEP Classroom for Lower-Level Learners

Isaac Gaines, University of Oregon

## Abstract

*Previous research has shown that ESL students' poor integration into their immersion environments can affect their academic success negatively, which called for structured support for such students. The current study investigated the efficacy of an IEP elective course that was designed to a) promote lower-level students' English use outside the classroom and b) improve students' overall confidence toward the target transactional tasks, as well as more open-ended interactions with native speakers in the local community. The specific scaffolding activities mainly involved presentation of new language points, pronunciation practice, role-plays, simulations with in-class tutors, field trips to perform the practiced tasks with native speakers, and reflective activities. The results from diagnostic and exit course surveys showed increases in students' confidence levels and increases in the overall quantity of English use outside the classroom. Considering the results, approaches to promoting ESL students' integration into local communities are discussed.*

**Keywords:** *IEP, ESL, Confidence, Integrate, Community, Study abroad, Scaffolding, Tutor*

## Introduction

Study abroad experiences provide adult, English as a second language (ESL) learners with the potential to attain high levels of language fluency. However, poor integration into the target culture may thwart the success of many learners, especially lower-level learners who may lack the proficiency to take advantage of their immersion environment. Connecting ESL course content with the community outside the classroom may be an effective solution to increase overall language proficiency as well as future academic success abroad. Furthermore, to perpetuate language use and improve quality of life

in the target culture, it is important to boost students' confidence to use English with native speakers.

From my experience teaching ESL, I have found that many study abroad students have fallen into the habit of using their first language while spending time with compatriots. Clearly, this is not a great way to take advantage of an immersion environment. I know from my own experiences studying abroad, however, that making friends in a new country and in a new language is not easy. As an instructor, I wanted to do something to help my students, particularly the lower-level ones, to gain confidence to use English in the

community beyond the classroom. It motivated me to create the course described below.

Through data collected from diagnostic and exit surveys, the current study investigates the efficacy of the intensive English program (IEP) elective course curriculum that was designed to help ESL students build confidence for using English outside the classroom. The results suggest that, by taking extra steps to scaffold the performance of authentic speaking tasks to be performed outside the classroom, lower-level adult IEP students will become more confident and more frequent users of English outside of their English classes.

## **Literature**

A look at studies that focus on study abroad students reveals basic issues and some solutions that may potentially help ESL instructors improve their students' short- and long-term academic success.

### ***Poor integration negatively affects academic success***

Many studies have investigated the notion that connecting with the local community is crucial for successful second language learning study abroad experiences. In particular, not making friends with domestic native speakers has been found to contribute negatively toward second language acquisition and overall academic success (Gareis, Merkin, & Goldman, 2011; Ward & Masgoret, 2004). Unfortunately, as Gareis et al. (2011) found, ESL students around the world admitted having difficulties making friends with native speakers. A more recent study by Gareis (2012) found that nearly 40% of international students (and an even higher percentage for East-Asians) at

American universities had no American friends while many of those who had American friends were dissatisfied with those relationships.

Lower proficiency level ESL learners, in particular, seem to be at a great disadvantage in the study abroad environment. For example, in a qualitative study of a short-term ESL study abroad program for Japanese students in New Zealand, Tanaka (2007) found that low-level learners had very little contact with native speakers outside of their language classrooms and homestay environments. He also discovered that low-level learners had a tendency to spend more time with others from their home country, resulting in poor integration and less-than-expected improvement of English proficiency. He claimed that learners with higher language proficiency, on the other hand, were more likely to be able to take advantage of the immersion environment. Some researchers (e.g. Freed 1998; Wang 2010) have contradicted those claims, suggesting that low-level learners might actually benefit more from study abroad experiences than more advanced learners. However, Freed (1998) also found that study abroad experiences do not necessarily guarantee successful language learning for any level of learner. Infrequent contact with native speakers was among the main causes of this variability.

### ***The need to bridge the gap between course content and the real world***

Many researchers agree that classwork alone is insufficient for successful second language learning (e.g., Chisman & Crandall, 2007; Chisman, 2008; Dudley, 2007; Rossiter, Derwing, Manimtim, & Thomson, 2010;

Taylor, 1983). Chisman and Crandall (2007), for example, argue for the need for ESL instructors and institutions to help students take control of their own learning by bridging the gap between the classroom and English use in the real world. According to the researchers, there is only so much that can be accomplished in the ESL classroom. They say that one of the most important achievements of successful language instructors is the ability to foster autonomous learning by empowering students to use English outside the classroom in meaningful ways. Similarly, Buckingham (2009) argues for using the classroom as a stepping stone to facilitate out-of-class experiences in a comfortable atmosphere to practice the target language, and build students' confidence and motivation.

### ***Activities for facilitating language use beyond the classroom***

Many researchers and instructors have suggested teaching approaches, activities, and even curricular designs to promote students' target language use outside the classroom. Rossiter et al. (2010) suggest that ESL teachers need to include more structured instruction of pronunciation, formulaic expressions and circumlocution strategies to promote oral fluency and language use outside the classroom. They also claim that repetitive activities such as having students conduct surveys in and outside the classroom can boost learners' fluency and confidence in speaking. Murphy (1990) argues that various receptive and productive pronunciation activities, both controlled pronunciation drills and practice in freer situations, should be integrated into instruction to foster oral and communicative fluency. For lower-level learners, pair or small

group pronunciation exercises may be more comfortable.

Another well-documented activity for improving real-world communication is simulation. Sam (1990) claims that simulation activities are useful in that they mimic real-life situations, and promote fluency, communicative competencies, motivation, and active participation in class. Gaines (2014) goes a step further by suggesting that simulations utilizing teaching assistants in the classroom can be even more effective for preparing students to carry out specific speaking tasks outside. He describes an activity in which students practice approaching tutors (teaching assistants or volunteers) as if they were strangers and attempting to engage them in appropriate ways to perform the given speech tasks. Tutors are instructed to adopt various roles and respond to the students as native speakers are likely to respond in real life (e.g. being helpful, not being sympathetic listeners, or even ignoring them altogether). In this activity, students can attempt the same task multiple times in semi-authentic situations and get valuable feedback from the tutors. Also, as the author explains, "exposure to rejection and communication breakdowns in the classroom prepares students for those negative experiences that would otherwise be counterproductive by lowering students' confidence and motivation to use English outside" (p. 48).

Chisman and Crandall (2007) also described activities that were developed for low-level learners to improve their English use outside the classroom and enhance language-learning success in a community college immersion program. The program connected out-of-class homework with in-class activities and

course content. In the out-of-class activities, members of the college and surrounding community helped students engage in tasks such as checking out books from the library, consulting with the school's guidance counselor, and shopping with coupons. Finally, students were asked to take notes about their interactions, keep track of new vocabulary, and write reflections about their experiences afterwards. Though the authors didn't provide any data to quantify the program's success, they said that instructors and administrators were so impressed by the results that they were seeking funding to expand the program.

Finally, as Myers (1990) asserts, reflective activities such as keeping a language journal or sharing experiences with others help learners become more autonomous. Having learners reflect about what they did or did not do well for a given activity, for example, will help them realize their own strengths and weaknesses, which can motivate them to take on challenges without the oversight of an instructor.

### **Research Questions**

As shown in the review of literature above, study abroad students' poor integration into their local communities could affect their academic success negatively. For this reason, structured support to help ESL students take advantage of their immersion environment seems to be important. Drawing from the ideas and activities described above, an elective course was created in a university IEP to help facilitate low-level learners' English use outside the classroom. This study is designed to examine the effectiveness of some of the specific components of the

course to determine: (1) if the course improved students' confidence to use English outside the classroom, and (2) if the course increased the actual amount of English that the students used outside the classroom. To investigate these questions, a diagnostic survey was administered to participants at the beginning of the course, and the results were compared to an exit survey administered at the end of the course. Also, student participants and the tutors who participated in some class activities each week were asked to comment.

### **Participants**

Though at least 15 students were involved with the course throughout the academic term, there were nine participants who attended the class regularly and participated in all parts of the study (n=9). They took the course voluntarily in addition to their 18 hours of weekly, required core courses in the IEP. Five participants were Saudi Arabian and four were Japanese. Of the nine participants, five were male and four were female. All of the Saudi Arabian participants had been studying in the U.S. for at least two months, with an average stay of at least six months. On the other hand, all of the Japanese participants had arrived in the U.S. only a few weeks prior to the start of the course. Though they are called "lower-level," actual proficiency levels varied widely from high-beginner to intermediate levels of oral and writing skills.

### **Course Description**

The course was an elective course within a university IEP program. The main objective of this course was to raise students' confidence and

motivation to use English outside the classroom. By helping students engage more with the community, the hope was that they would become more likely to make American friends, get more satisfaction and enjoyment from their student lives in the U.S., and be more successful in their future ESL (and beyond) academic endeavors.

The course content mainly involved preparing students to practice and perform simple speech tasks such as ordering coffee and asking for street directions. The format was arranged using a task-based approach to introduce, practice, perform, and reflect on the various tasks. The topics covered during the course were: greetings and introductions, asking for directions, gathering information from university offices, using circumlocution techniques to ask for help in a store, ordering at a coffee shop, and conducting a survey.

The duration of the course was eight weeks, meeting four days a week for 50 minutes each day. One target speech task or topic was addressed each week, culminating in weekly field trips to perform those speech tasks outside in mostly authentic situations.

In the first lesson for each new topic, relevant new language and expressions were introduced and practiced through video, written dialogues, pair and group discussions, role-plays, pronunciation practice, and other speaking and listening activities.

In the second lesson, four native-speaking tutors visited the class. These were university student workers who had been trained to assist in oral communication skills courses in the IEP. Each tutor led discussions and practice activities with groups of two or three participants about the current topic each

week. Then, participants engaged in simulated interactions with the tutors (as described by Gaines (2014) above) to prepare for doing the task in authentic situations outside the classroom.

In the third lesson, participants went outside on campus to perform the target speech task. The instructor followed along to assist them whenever necessary, but mostly just observed from a distance. The instructor reserved the last 15 minutes of class for leading discussions about what happened, addressing concerns and problems, and pointing out how the experience could apply to other situations, participants' lives and language learning in general.

In the final lesson for each topic, the class met in a computer lab. Participants were asked to write blog posts to share their experiences with each other about using English in and out of the class, and to reflect on their own strengths and weaknesses. They were also asked to read and comment on their classmates' blog posts. I assisted them with technical issues and grammar, spelling and word choices.

One other ongoing component in the course was the introduction and promotion of the plethora of opportunities available to students on and off campus to get involved in the community. These included events, organized activities, intramural sports, volunteer opportunities, and student groups. The addition of the tutors was particularly useful in suggesting and explaining these. Though it was not a course requirement, many of the participants took part in various events voluntarily.

## Data Collection

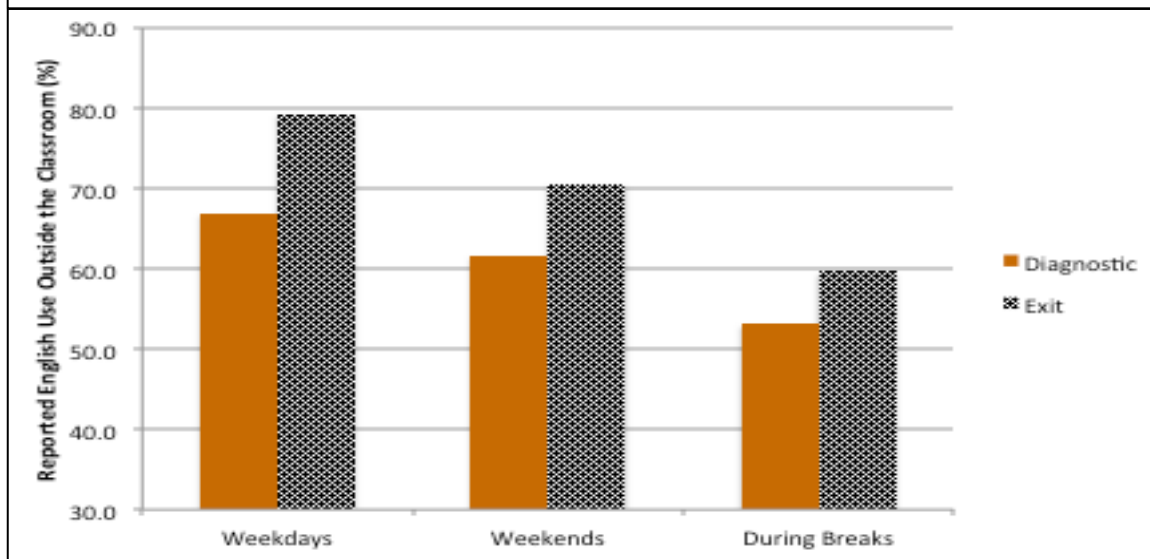
The data collection instruments were: (1) an online diagnostic survey consisting of 10 multiple-choice questions, administered in the first week of the course, (2) a similar online exit survey, administered seven weeks later at the end of the course, and (3) brief interviews with tutors at the end of the course. The surveys were completed in a

## Results

### *Findings from the Surveys*

In Item 1 in both the diagnostic and exit surveys, participants were asked what percentage of English (rather than their first language) they used outside of class on a scale of 0 to 100% a) on weekdays, b) on weekends, and c) during breaks between academic terms. Figure 1 below illustrates the results,

Figure 1: *Reported English Use Outside the Classroom (n=9)*



computer lab during normal class time with the instructor available to make sure participants understood the prompts. The questions were mostly multiple choice, but some allowed for more qualitative responses. Though the diagnostic survey asked some extra background questions, many of the questions were the same as or similar to those in the exit survey. This allowed for a comparison between the responses to see whether or not there had been any improvement in participants' perception about their own English use, confidence, and ability.

which highlight the differences in percentages between the two surveys. The average reported English usage outside of class for all participants on weekdays increased from 66.9% in the diagnostic to 79.3% in the exit survey, which is an improvement of over 12%. Similarly, English use outside of class increased for “weekends” and “during breaks” by 9% and 6.5%<sup>1</sup> respectively.

<sup>1</sup> The last figure was quite interesting in that participants reported an increase in use (or projected use) of English during breaks between academic terms, despite the fact that there had not been a break since the diagnostic survey had been administered. As with other items, it is difficult to argue that these numbers accurately reflect students' actual English use. However, perhaps they indicate an increase in motivation or resolve.

For Item 2, participants were asked slightly different questions in the diagnostic and exit surveys to draw conclusions about their overall English use. Results, as shown in Table 1 below, showed clear increases in reported English use with all nine participants reporting more English use in the exit survey.

Item 3 also posed slightly different questions in the diagnostic and exit surveys to ask about learning speed. Results, as shown in Table 2 below, showed that participants perceived an increase in how fast they were learning English. Of the nine participants, six reported learning faster than they had been before taking the course.

Item 4 was the same in the diagnostic and exit surveys. It asked participants to rank their levels of confidence (from 0 to 100%) using English with native speakers outside the classroom in nine different situations. The results showed increases in confidence for all situations, including some that were not specifically addressed in the course (c, d, h, and i below)<sup>2</sup>. Results were calculated by comparing responses from the diagnostic and exit surveys. In Table 3 below, it can be seen that the averages of the reported changes in confidence for all nine situations were all positive. They are as follows:

By looking more closely at individual responses, it seems that length

of stay (time the participants had lived in the U.S. at the beginning of the course) was an important factor. The six participants who had stayed in the U.S. 0-6 months prior to the start of this course reported the biggest increase in confidence (average for all situations was +32%). On the other hand, the three participants who had stayed 6-8 months, 8-10 months, and 10+ months reported changes of +13%, +4%, and -27% respectively. By contrasting the latter three participants with those who had stayed 0-6 months, it was found that having stayed six months or less predicted greater increases in confidence, while confidence declined for participants who had stayed six months or more.

In Item 5, participants were asked to rate the effectiveness of the following course activities: a) simulations with tutors, b) role-plays with classmates, c) field trips to use English outside, d) group discussions, and e) practicing pronunciation (by choosing “It helped a lot,” “It helped a little,” “I don’t know,” or “It didn’t help”). The highest rated activities were tutor simulations and pronunciation practice. Eight of the nine participants reported that both activities “helped a lot,” and one reported that they “helped a little.”

### ***Comments from Participants***

Participants were also asked two open-ended questions in Item 6 in the exit survey. They were asked, “What did you like about this class?” and “What activities helped you improve your English?” Most respondents reported positively about doing activities outside, tutor activities, and pronunciation practice, such as in the following responses:

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<sup>2</sup> The average change in confidence for situations (tasks) that were practiced and performed in class was +21.7%, while the average change for the situations that were not addressed was +18.6%. Since the two numbers are similar, it did not seem to matter whether or not the tasks were addressed in the course. Rather, there is the possibility that improving at specific tasks positively influenced students’ level of confidence for using English with native speakers in general

	More	Same	Less
Diagnostic Survey - "Are you using English more, the same or less than you had imagined before coming to the US."	3	2	4
Exit Survey - "Are you using English more, the same or less than before you took this course."	9	0	0

	Faster	Same	Slower
Diagnostic Survey - "Are you learning English faster, the same, or slower than you had imagined before coming to the US."	2	2	5
Exit Survey - "Are you learning English faster, the same, or slower than before you took this course."	6	2	1

a) Asking for directions = +23.8%	f) Meeting new people = +18.4%
b) Ordering food = +19.8%	g) Asking for help at a store = +30.2%
c) Talking to an American at a party = +25.2%	h) Talking to your English teacher in their office = +7.6%
d) Asking a police officer for help = +28.3%	i) Talking on the phone = +13.3%
e) Asking for information at an office = +16.3%	

*"I like learning how we can use English outside, and I like the activities with tutors, and I like learning about pronunciation."*

*"It [the course] helped me many things. I could learn how do I ask for [talk to] stranger. It is so helpful for me."*

*"I think that it's helpful for me to take this class because I could use English in coffee shop, [the student union] etc. In addition I could practice talking with tutors."*

*"The tutor activity helped the people in the class. I like that activity. It was good for talking, for asking something, for hearing, and for asking for the word"*

Also, the participant who had stayed in the U.S. the longest commented that

the tutor simulations were probably more useful for participants who had just arrived. For that participant, using English outside was the most useful part of the course.

### **Comments from tutors**

Since tutors were able to work with the participants in small groups on a weekly basis, they provided valuable perspectives about the feelings of the participants and the efficacy of the course components, particularly the tutor simulations that they participated in. Noteworthy comments from three of the tutors are as follows:

*"I believe most of the real-life simulation activities were useful for students. Having classroom*



*conversation partners (tutors) pretend to be different desk workers/store owners with various personality traits is a great practice for students in the real world.”*

*“I found the ‘tutor simulation activities’ useful for the international students, especially the [new] incoming students.”*

*“I think the simulations were very interesting, fun, and useful for students! I loved that you had tutors act-out different roles, allowing the IEP students to have an opportunity to practice with various kinds of responses. I also think that going out and using what they learned was very beneficial... ...I would have appreciated something like this when I was studying abroad.”*

*“This (tutor simulations) is a great activity! I think it is incredibly useful, and fun as well for both tutors and students.”*

## **Discussion**

This term-long study examined the effectiveness of an IEP elective course which was designed to promote lower-level students’ confidence and English use outside the classroom. The survey data were collected from the beginning and end-of-course surveys, and from interviews with in-class tutors. In the results, participants reported using English more frequently outside the classroom and learning English faster than before taking the course. They also reported increases in confidence levels using English outside the classroom.

Finally, they reported positively about the weekly field trips, activities with the in-class tutors, and pronunciation practice.

From my observations and a closer examination of the data, I have made a few other useful findings. First, it was apparent that the pre-task scaffolding benefitted the participants. In particular, I found that tutor simulations provided multiple chances to engage in somewhat

***[T]utor simulations provided multiple chances to engage in somewhat realistic exchanges, ensured participation, pressured participants to learn the new language (and pronunciation), and provided them with immediate feedback.***

realistic exchanges, ensured participation, pressured participants to learn the new language (and pronunciation), and provided them with immediate feedback. Also, I observed that many participants’ communicative failures using English

in and out of the classroom could be partly attributed to poor pronunciation. Pronunciation practice and tutor simulations seemed to help them improve and build confidence.

Second, though I found that blogging (as a reflection activity) helped to create a sense of community in the classroom, participants’ feelings about it were mixed. While the use of blogging needs to be further developed in the course, I saw its potential to improve learner autonomy, awareness, and motivation.

Third, the shyest and lowest proficiency level participants (generally high-beginner to low-intermediate) in my course seemed to benefit the most, though course content generally seemed to help all of them. Also, as was corroborated in the findings from Items 4 and 6, this course content might be most appropriate for those who have

come to the U.S. within the past six months. I suspect that some of the speech tasks addressed in the course were too common or easy for participants who had been studying in the U.S. longer than six months.

Finally, though the surveys might not be a reliable measure, perhaps the participants' perceived improvements and increases in English use demonstrate their motivation to embrace challenges and to not be overwhelmed by language limitations or increasingly difficult coursework. According to Gardner (2007), higher motivation would likely result in improved academic effort and achievement.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

Despite my best efforts to elicit honest responses, the self-reported nature of the survey and the low number of participants are obvious limitations. For future purposes, better methods for measuring changes in confidence, motivation and frequency of English use outside should be considered. One possible way is to ask students to keep a journal to log all of their English use outside the classroom (perhaps even as a listening task too) for a day or two at a time, once at the beginning and once at the end of the term. For instructional purposes, this could also be exploited for student reflection and awareness activities.

Also, for IEP instructors who are considering creating elective courses, I suggest providing more fun and less homework, grades, and tests. More than 16 hours of coursework per week in an IEP program might not positively affect academic achievement and could even potentially be counterproductive

(Alibrandi, 2014). For this reason, I argue for an entertaining course curriculum that does not add to students' already significant workload.

### **Conclusion and Pedagogical Implications**

In conclusion, study abroad ESL students need to find ways to access and integrate into the communities outside their classrooms. They can benefit from in-class scaffolding and activities designed to facilitate English use outside in their communities. To boost lower-level oral skills students' quantity and confidence of English use outside, the following may be helpful:

1. Facilitating speech tasks outside the classroom that are practical, familiar, and relatively easy (but not too easy) for the target students will help them become confident performing those tasks, which may increase their overall confidence toward using English in and out of the classroom.

2. Pre-task: Providing extensive scaffolding in the classroom to prepare for the speech tasks is important. A) Periodically employing tutors (teaching assistants or volunteers) to engage students in various activities may be an effective use of time in oral skills classes. In particular, simulations of practical speaking tasks with tutors can give students multiple attempts at target speech tasks, more individualized feedback, and exposure to language and variables that are not always covered in textbooks. B) Also, more extensive pronunciation practice will help students become more intelligible and more successful speakers and listeners in and out of the classroom.

3. Post-task: Drawing students' attention to their successes, however small, can help to boost their confidence. Also, student reflection about strengths and weaknesses may be useful for facilitating learner autonomy.

4. Finding other ways to help students connect with the outside world

will likely perpetuate language learning and reinforce what they are learning in their other ESL courses. After all, the opportunity to use English frequently outside the classroom is one of the main reasons to study English abroad.

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*Isaac Gaines has over 10 years of experience teaching ESL/EFL, including over seven years in Japan. Currently, he is teaching in the IEP at the University of Oregon where he has been actively involved in improving international student integration into the local community.*