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Short-Term Programs: Design and Implementation With a Focus on Content

- Intensive English program (IEP) administrators and faculty are often asked to submit proposals and to design programs for special short-term groups. Some groups have specific requests for certain content whereas others may have no specific requests. Content is an ideal organizing principle for short-term programs regardless of the group's request. Using two extended examples of short-term programs, this paper systematically outlines the methods of drafting proposals and then describes the design and successful implementation of these programs. Attention is given to factors such as (a) setting up the overall structure and goals of a short-term program, (b) choosing content, (c) designing classroom lessons, (d) evaluating the program, (e) assessing student progress, and (f) dealing with unknown issues. Short-term programs for groups are increasingly important to IEPs today and provide benefits to the IEP, its students, its faculty and administrators, and to the larger institution and local community.

Over the years the roles of intensive English programs (IEPs) have evolved in response to changes in the numbers and types of students served by IEPs and to changes in what students, sponsoring agencies, and host institutions want IEPs to provide. No longer do university-based IEPs simply provide English as a second language (ESL) courses for matriculated students or for individuals wishing to enroll in post-secondary institutions in the United States. Rather, IEPs today serve a variety of individuals and groups. Often they are encouraged by their host institutions to bring in special groups to generate revenue, or the IEPs themselves wish to attract special groups in order to increase their budgets, thus providing more financial support and services for their programs. In addition, on university and college campuses, departments often approach IEPs with requests to provide special classes or programs. For example, the College of Business may ask the campus IEP to provide ESL courses for a group of international business executives who want a two-week business seminar. In

fact, the College of Business and the IEP may actively recruit together to attract special groups.

Thus, IEP administrators and faculty are often asked to draft proposals for special short-term programs for groups. Some groups have specific requests for content—such as business, law, or nursing—whereas others may have no specific requests but ask for general or conversational English combined with U.S. culture. Content is an excellent organizing principle for a variety of language learning situations (Benesch, 1988; Brinton, Snow & Wesche, 1989; Grabe & Stoller, 1997; Mohan, 1986; Snow & Brinton, 1997; Stoller & Grabe, 1997). Content seems ideal for short-term programs regardless of the group's request.

In this paper, I outline principles for designing and implementing a unified content-based program, with brief attention given to drafting proposals. I limit the paper to curricular and programmatic issues, with no discussion of budgetary concerns. My insights and treatment of the process may be of particular interest to those new to IEP administration and program design. However, I hope that experienced IEP administrators, program designers, and faculty will also find the overview and examples useful in reflecting on and improving program development and delivery.

Definitions

First, I offer the following definitions. By “short-term programs” I mean those that run an average of two to four weeks. The number of hours of instruction per week varies, typically from 10 to 25 hours. Educational field trips may also be included as well as recreational trips after classes and on weekends. A definition of content-based instruction (CBI) is less straightforward, as CBI is incorporated into a variety of approaches, each with different theoretical and practical orientations (Grabe & Stoller, 1997). There are, however, common characteristics found among approaches to CBI: (a) Language is the medium for learning content, (b) content is used as a resource or vehicle for learning language, (c) the content is of interest to the students, and (d) there is an endorsement of communicative language use and experiential learning (Grabe & Stoller, 1997). Eskey (1997) states that “a basic premise of CBI is that people do not learn languages and then use them, but that people learn languages by using them” (p. 133).

Drafting a successful proposal

In most cases, an IEP administrator receives a request for a written proposal from a group leader. Even when an on-campus office or department requests an ESL course or program, the IEP administrator has a professional responsibility to provide a written proposal. The contents of the proposal should contain (a) the overall structure of the program (e.g., dates, days, hours of instruction, number of students per class); (b) the goals and objectives of the program; (c) the services and facilities offered by the IEP and by the institution (e.g., placement tests, course grades, certificates of completion, use

of such facilities as the language laboratory, computer laboratory, health and recreational center, and library); (d) any U.S. or institutional requirements (e.g., completed application for each participant that includes emergency contact information, application fee, visa requirements, health insurance specifics, immunization record); and (e) a detailed list of the costs, dates for payment, and methods of payment. This final component is crucial, but one I do not discuss in this paper.

Later in the paper, I discuss considerations in determining the overall structure and defining the goals of a program (see “a” and “b” above). Here I comment briefly on other information that is important in making a proposal attractive and complete (see “c” and “d” above).

Listing all the services, facilities, and requirements in a proposal minimizes misunderstandings and allows for negotiations about these issues to take place *before* the proposal is accepted. Being specific also highlights what the program and institution have to offer and makes clear what is expected from the group leader and participants. For example, the proposal should outline the testing and placement procedures, the type of grades students will receive (e.g., pass/fail or letter grades), and any certificate of completion or grade reports students will be given at the end of the program. These seemingly small details are important in attracting groups and ensuring that they are satisfied with their experience. Group leaders and participants seem to particularly enjoy an end-of-program ceremony in which students receive grades, overall evaluations of their English ability, and certificates of completion. Participants, regardless of their age, appreciate individualized certificates and often frame them and show them to prospective employers or schools. In addition, participants seem to like the personal recognition of publicly receiving the certificates. Such an end-of-program ceremony provides closure and an opportunity for taking pictures and for celebration.

Two Example Programs

Throughout this paper, I will refer to two very different extended examples: an English and law program for Cambodian professionals and an English and U.S. culture program for European teenagers. Both programs serve to illustrate points and emphasize the relevance of using content-based instruction as the organizing principle.

Example 1: English and Law for Cambodian Professionals

This short-term program was typical of academic preparation programs for adults in specific disciplines. In this case, individuals were intermediate-level Cambodians, ranging in age from their early 30s to their late 40s. They came to the university law school to study in a special eight-month law program. The coordinator of the program at the law school asked the university IEP to develop a one-week intensive program of 25 hours of instruction to prepare the participants for the law program. The participants were professionals in Cambodia and had never been to the United States. They shared

university apartments on campus and, thus, did their own shopping and cooking. The coordinator of the law program helped them with personal as well as academic matters throughout their stay at the university.

In preparing for the group, the IEP administrator, the IEP faculty, and the coordinator of the law program met several times and agreed upon the goals and the objectives of the course. For example, the IEP administrator clearly stated that it was unrealistic to think that in one week the participants could perfect their English and learn to read and write legal English. However, they could be introduced to legal concepts (such as the ideas of law and justice, the Bill of Rights, and the U.S. court system) and be taught basic legal vocabulary and fundamental English skills. Another goal of the program was to help the participants become oriented to the city and the university where they would be living and studying law. The administrators agreed that the program would have two content components: a legal component and an acculturation or survival component. Daily homework would build on class work with students keeping a journal and reading selections on legal issues.

Example 2: English and U.S. Culture for European Teenagers

This program was typical of many short-term “vacation English” programs for young people that combine language learning with a variety of activities and excursions. Indeed, the group organizer’s concern was that the participants have a good experience; he seemed unconcerned about the specifics of curriculum design. The European teenagers, ranging in age from 15 to 19, had a low-intermediate to advanced-level English proficiency. Participants had 12 hours of English instruction for three weeks, lived with American families, and participated in field trips and other activities during the afternoons, weekends, and most evenings.

The IEP administrator and faculty decided that the objectives would be to increase confidence and fluency in using English in daily situations and to provide an introduction to the local area and to selected aspects of U.S. culture. Each week the program would focus on a specific content component and include a field trip. During the course of study there would be two or three group or individual projects or both—for example, a report on a survey of Americans about a particular topic, an oral presentation, or a role-play production. Students would have little homework, perhaps only keeping a journal in English, but in the classes the students would be expected to work hard and take their studies seriously.

Setting up the Overall Structure and Goals of Short-Term Programs

When drafting a proposal and negotiating for a program, several interconnected considerations are basic: (a) the length of the program and the number of hours of instruction per week, (b) the resources available, (c) the age of the participants, (d) the English proficiency of the participants, (e) the motivation and interest of the participants, and (f) realistic expectations.

Program Characteristics

When setting up a program with clear goals and objectives, the first consideration is to determine the length of the program and the number of hours of instruction per week. These characteristics determine what can and cannot be done. For example, in a 15-week semester with 20 hours of instruction per week much more can be accomplished than in a two- or three-week program. The total number of hours is important, but of equal importance will be the number of weeks and the number of days per week for the program. The total number of hours for the two example programs differed by only 11 hours (25 hours for the English and Law program and 36 hours for the English and U.S. Culture program). However, the English and Law program was one-week long, and the English and U.S. Culture program lasted three weeks. Therefore, students in the English and U.S. Culture group had more time to practice and improve their English, and instructors had more time to recycle language and cultural teaching points.

Initially, group leaders usually request specific dates, course length, number of hours of instruction, and even class times. With the European teenagers, the leader asked for a three-week program to occur during specific dates, including 12 hours of instruction per week with no classes on Wednesdays. He further requested that classes run from 9:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. On the other hand, the coordinator for the law program requested a specific week with 25 hours of instruction from 9:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. Often the specific dates, length of program, and hours of instruction are not negotiable, but specific class hours may be.

Once the hours and length of program are determined, in order to accommodate the logistical requests of group leaders, the administrators must determine which resources are available (point *b* above). Are there classrooms, qualified faculty, and other requested services (e.g., language laboratory, computer facilities) available at the desired dates and time? Resources are not only a consideration in determining the overall structure of the program but are also important in determining specific content. For example, are guest speakers, resources for developing materials, multi-media equipment, and facilities all available and, if so, at what cost?

With both example programs, a variety of resources were available. We also discovered, after brainstorming, that we had more resources than we had first realized. For example, the coordinator of the law program suggested law resource material and helped with legal questions. She attended certain classes and joined in discussions, serving as the legal expert. For the U.S. culture component, the campus radio station manager gave a short lecture on popular music in the U.S. and hosted a tour of the campus radio station. An IEP faculty member not teaching in the program was very knowledgeable about the local music scene and also spoke to the class, suggesting opportunities to hear live music.

Participant Characteristics

Once agreement has been reached on the specific logistics of the program, the IEP administrator and faculty must examine characteristics of the participants in order to refine the overall structure and goals of the program. Four crucial characteristics are age, English proficiency, motivation, and interests of the participants (points *c*, *d*, and *e* above). The maturity, attention span, motivation, and interests of the participants often differ more according to age than according to English ability, as our two examples show. We learned that even among the European teenagers, there were big differences in interest and attention span between those teenagers who were 15 and those teenagers who were 19. However, the class periods for the teenagers were never more than 50-minutes long. The Cambodian adults, however, often wanted to continue a discussion or activity for more than an hour, so their class blocks were largely determined by content and class activities. While the English ability of the European teenagers tended to be better than the ability of the Cambodian adults, the maturity and sophistication of the Cambodians allowed them to tackle material that was more linguistically and conceptually difficult.

The two groups seemed equally interested and motivated to learn how to “survive” in their new culture; however, the Cambodians had a greater stake in acquiring survival English skills and legal English as they were living independently and would be entering an academic program. The teenagers, on the other hand, were more interested in cultural aspects of the United States and wanted to learn what American people were really like while they improved their English language skills.

Information about participants—such as their English proficiency, their backgrounds, and their interests—can sometimes be obtained before they arrive. The law coordinator had scores from the placement tests for the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) for each of the Cambodians as well as resumes listing their work, travel, and educational experience. With the European teenagers it was difficult to get information ahead of time as we were unsure exactly who was coming until a week before their arrival. Thus, we administered a placement test the first day and had students complete interest questionnaires at that time.

If student information is not readily available beforehand, the administrators have several alternatives. They may request that the participants write a letter of introduction to their teachers, complete a self-assessment questionnaire about their English skills, or take a short diagnostic exam. These documents could be written on-line and sent via e-mail or sent by fax or through the postal service. Participants could also complete a questionnaire about their interests, hobbies, education, work experience, and reasons for coming to the U.S. to study English.

Taking logistical considerations (e.g., length of program, available resources) and student characteristics into account, IEP administrators and faculty can define the goals and objectives of the program in broad terms.

Often group leaders have specific requests as to goals and content, which was the case with the English and law program. The law school and the IEP were on the same campus and, therefore, it was easy for the law program coordinator and the IEP administrator to meet and discuss the overall structure and goals of the program. The law program coordinator was actively involved in the planning and implementation of the program. On the other hand, the leader for the European group and the IEP administrator met twice and then communicated by fax.

Setting Realistic Goals

Throughout the negotiation, planning, and implementation of the program, parties must know what is realistic in terms of goals and outcomes (point *f* above). The burden of setting realistic goals falls on the IEP administrator. IEP administrators need to resist pressure from group leaders to promise services that are impossible to deliver or to guarantee achievements that are highly unlikely. Group leaders need to understand what are and are not realistic expectations. For example, if a group leader wants a volunteer native speaker conversation partner for each participant outside of class and this is not possible to provide, the IEP administrator needs to make this clear. Alternatives may be possible, such as a volunteer native speaker who could meet two hours a week with small groups.

A more difficult situation for IEP administrators occurs when group leaders, and sometimes the participants, have unrealistic goals for how much English they can acquire in a limited time. For example, a group leader may think that intermediate-level students studying in a two-week program of 25 hours a week will be able to improve their TOEFL scores by 20 or more points. This degree of improvement may be possible for some individuals but is not realistic for the group as a whole, especially when critical variables are unknown. A more realistic goal would be that students learn something about U.S. culture and develop some fluency and accuracy using English in daily situations. With the Cambodian group, the IEP administrator and the coordinator of the law program had numerous discussions and negotiations about what were realistic goals and what the components of the program should be. With the European group, the IEP administrator and the group leader seldom discussed the goals of the program. The IEP administrator communicated the goals and objectives she and her faculty had laid out for the group. She indicated that faculty expected the participants to be serious and hard working in class but would assign little if any homework. The group leader voiced no objections. Misunderstandings can be avoided if IEP administrators are firm from the beginning about what services can and cannot be provided and what participants can be expected to accomplish.

Criteria for Choosing Content and Designing Short-Term Programs

Having set up the overall structure, goals and objectives of the program, IEP administrators and faculty are faced with the task of designing lessons.

Research from a variety of fields (e.g., second language acquisition, cognitive psychology, and educational psychology) suggest that CBI is effective in helping students master second language and foreign language skills, and CBI seems especially appropriate for short-term programs (Grabe and Stoller, 1997). Designing content-based lessons does not mean that language skills are neglected or unimportant. Language-skill instruction and content instruction are equally important.

When setting up the curriculum, the following guidelines can help IEP administrators build a successful CBI short-term program:

1. Provide language experiences participants cannot get in typical English courses in their home countries.
2. Tie classroom activities to out-of-class living experiences and activities.
3. Tie the content into the local area, its history, its people, and attractions.
4. Have high interest material and activities that engage students with important concepts.
5. Use authentic material whenever possible.
6. Incorporate student choice into the courses.
7. Provide material for multi-level groups and courses.

Some familiarity with the English education of the participants can assist administrators and faculty in designing lessons (point 1 above). Administrators can easily obtain information from the group leader by asking a few simple questions. Or the administrators can directly question the group participants using a pre- or post-arrival questionnaire (e.g., On average how many years of English study have you had? How easy is it for you to read, hear, and practice English outside of class? Do you typically have native English speakers as teachers?). With even a little information, program designers can get a sense of what types of activities may be appropriate for the participants. With this information, they can incorporate unique and appropriate activities that are likely to engage the students.

For example, our two groups had very different experiences learning English in their native countries. Most of the Cambodian adults had had little opportunity to practice English or study English in their country and were largely self-taught. On the other hand, the European teenagers typically had had several years of formal English instruction and opportunities to hear, if not practice, English outside of class. Neither group, however, had experience using English in daily situations or conversing with native English speakers.

Most groups are interested in learning about the area where they are studying. They want to explore on their own, learn about local history, and discover who the local people are and what their habits are. Thus, most short-term programs have components that tie the classroom to the outside experiences of the participants and introduce them to the history and culture of the area (points 2 & 3 above). With both example groups, the administrators also included a survival component integrating discussions of safety with more specific lessons on getting around (e.g., map reading, using local public transit maps, and role playing asking for and giving directions).

Focus on specific language skills easily followed from the content. The

first week, the content focus for the teenagers was adjustment to living with an American family and acculturation to the area. Topics included expectations of host families and teachers, conversational styles, nonverbal communication, getting around in the community, and safety tips. As the Cambodian adults were sharing apartments and preparing for academic work, their survival component dealt with different practical issues such as grocery shopping, making and keeping appointments, using the phone (e.g., understanding taped messages on answering machines), and using the library. Safety issues were covered with both groups but dealt with slightly differently. For example, a campus police officer spoke to both groups giving practical advice about how to improve personal safety in the U.S. With the Cambodian group, however, the campus police officer also touched on individual rights and the legal concept of privacy in the United States (e.g., whether the police can search your apartment or car without a warrant).

Due to the short duration of the program, students in the English and Law Program spent little time on the history or attractions of the area, whereas the English and U.S. Culture group spent time in class learning about places they would be visiting and discussing their observations afterwards. Also the teenagers had assigned projects that involved interviewing native English speakers. The program for the future law students did not include the interview activities since they had very specific goals and limited time.

By using materials that focus on the local area and tie in with participants' lives and activities outside of class, faculty can increase the interest and involvement of students. Using authentic material such as maps, local newspaper articles, and local television and radio clips also tends to increase student interest and motivation (points 4 and 5 above). Authentic and interesting material can present important concepts as well as help students practice English in daily situations. As noted previously, for the Cambodians a discussion of important legal cases in the U.S. dealing with privacy and individual rights issues naturally followed the lesson on personal safety. For students in the English and U.S. Culture Program, a lesson on families in the United States began with a survey of their concepts about the typical U.S. family and a discussion of what contributed to these concepts. This led to readings and discussions on stereotypes, on comparisons of *typical* families in students' countries, and on the meaning of *family*. Practical tips on living with a U.S. family, of course, were included. Speaking, listening, and grammar skills can be practiced through role playing family situations that students may encounter.

Incorporating student choice into the courses also helps keep student interest and motivation high (point 6 above). Giving students choices does not mean that they determine everything that happens in class, but rather that they have limited choices in selecting topics and projects. For example, on the first day the faculty gave the European teenagers a survey to determine which topics on U.S. culture were of interest (e.g., music, sports, friendship and dating, movies, fashion). Faculty also required the students to keep a daily journal in which they could write about any of their observations and experi-

ences. Student groups designed a survey about different topics, administered it to native English speakers, and reported the results back to the class. Instructors gave students basic guidelines for the project but did not dictate specifics. The Cambodian professionals had fewer choices, yet each day some time was allotted to answering questions and discussing issues they brought up, such as how to use an automatic teller machine, how to get from campus to a specific location, or who to call in an emergency. Much can be gained by allowing students to express their preferences with regard to the selection of class topics and other issues of interest.

Finally, administrators always have to consider constraints on the short-term program (point 7 above). Seldom will group participants have the same English abilities, yet they may have to be in the same class. Faculty may need to adjust assignments for individuals. For example, while studying a reading selection, the less proficient students may need a larger glossary of words and fewer or easier questions. When doing a listening exercise on a video clip, faculty can make sure that there are always a few easy questions that everyone will answer correctly and a few harder questions that only the best students will be able to answer.

The Importance of Flexibility in Program Delivery

In the process of designing short-term programs, one quickly realizes that it is difficult to have everything planned because there are so many unknowns: What are the English proficiency levels of the students? What are the students' interests and motivations? How many students are actually coming? For successful short-term programs the faculty must be flexible. Faculty must be willing to live with uncertainty and adapt quickly. Programs evolve as they progress, and faculty must be willing and able to guide this evolution.

Even though faculty must be willing to make changes as needed during the program, preliminary planning before the group arrives is still important. Meetings in which curriculum and resources are discussed and tentatively prepared are essential. Then during the program, constant communication among the faculty is crucial. In reality, faculty are team-teaching the group and need to coordinate their efforts and share their experiences and expertise. With both of these groups, it was not uncommon for faculty to abandon a planned unit or even a day's lesson plan for a more relevant and more effective activity or topic that met the interests or needs of the students.

Evaluation and Assessment

Evaluation and assessment of students and the overall program play an important role in adapting the program as it evolves and in planning future programs. Short performance evaluations throughout the program make students understand that they are accountable for their English studies and will help them assess their improvement. For example, with the European teenagers, faculty gave short quizzes each Friday covering the language skills and material studied during the week. The quiz would be a short essay, a

vocabulary test, or a reading or listening selection followed by comprehension questions. Faculty also assessed participants' improvement in communication skills and gave students regular feedback on how they were doing.

It is important to evaluate the program as well as the students. A pre-arrival or initial questionnaire to determine interests, goals, needs, and motivations of participants can be helpful, as can discussions with group leaders and participants. Communication among faculty and group leaders throughout the program and both formal and informal evaluations by participants and leaders at the middle and end of the program can provide valuable information for adapting the program and designing future programs.

Conclusion

Short term ESL programs for groups are an increasingly important part of IEPs today. CBI, in which content and language instruction are balanced, is an effective organizing principle for such programs. CBI programs are labor intensive for both administrators and faculty, as each group has unique needs and interests; yet such programs are enjoyable and often exhilarating for both faculty and students. CBI short-term programs can be viewed as opportunities for faculty intellectual exploration and growth. Key components in implementing successful programs are faculty and administrative flexibility and realism about what can be accomplished, realism that is clearly communicated to the group leaders and participants.

The benefits of short-term programs are not limited to individuals but extend to the IEP, its institution, and even the local area. Overall, short-term programs raise the visibility of the IEP and its faculty within the larger institution. With such programs, IEPs can forge new partnerships on campus (e.g., the IEP working with the law school), can involve individuals and departments on campus with international students (e.g., the campus radio station and IEP groups), can generate revenue (e.g., tuition and on-campus housing), and can demonstrate the variety of contributions IEPs make. Designing short-term programs may seem daunting at first, but the guidelines outlined in this paper can help faculty and administrators face the challenges involved and, thus, reap the broad rewards that such a program brings.

Author

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