

ENGLISH SKILLS LAB ...

An Individualized Program

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The following paper on the establishment of an English Skills Lab was part of a presentation given at the TESOL Convention in Mexico City, April 1978.

The primary purpose of the English Skills Lab at the BYU-HC is to provide assistance in developing and reinforcing specific and/or general English skills on an individual basis for any student on the BYU-Hawaii Campus who desires or requires it. The rationale for such a program is that many students need or want more basic English than the regular curriculum offers either through the general requirements and/or the English Language Institute.

These students include:

1. Slower learners (late achievers) who take a little more work and time than the average student.
2. Rapid learners (over achievers) who could progress faster on new or more advanced materials as they are ready for them and thus maintain interest in an otherwise boring (deadly) subject.
3. Students who want to study more English or study a specific English skill not covered in their classes. Although some may have passed classes, they feel the need for more help in certain areas.
4. Students who for some reason are not taking any English classes, but have regressed in English. They may want to brush up so as to get into some classes, or they may feel they didn't gain the English skills they now need.

The potential of an English skills lab is limitless if instructors and students know what is offered and how to take advantage of the offerings. Some teachers, especially those who teach beginning to intermediate

ESL students, do not seem to understand the real purpose of the lab and frequently feel that they should be permitted to take lab materials out to use for classwork and/or bring their classes to the lab during the class hour to work on lab materials (which is permitted for any class once or twice as an introduction to the lab).

The first question that everyone seems to ask about an English skills lab is "HOW MUCH WILL IT COST?" usually expecting a dollars and cents figure for the exact amount of materials—both hardware and software. Actually, there are many things that must be considered before this item is discussed.

THE FACILITY

The first of these is the facility itself. Minimal is a room of some sort for some specified hours with security for materials. (It's surprising how many things can simply walk away.)

When we started our lab we had a classroom with movable tables and chairs and a few cupboards that we could lock up. This room was free after 2:30 in the afternoon so lab hours were from 2:30 to 5:00 and from 6:00 until 9:00 p.m. It was a beginning.

Now we have a large room with movable furniture plus partitioned listening booths around three of the walls, with an additional large store room with shelving, a large desk, four files, cupboards, etc. connected to the main room with a dutch door. The main room has an additional file, a reference desk, and a rack with expendable books (mostly paperbacks) that students can borrow. (Incidentally, these books are donated by faculty members—and others—as they leave to return to the mainland. Donations of this kind are an income-tax deduction.) These rooms are reserved exclusively for the language skills lab and although there are

frequent requests to use the room for other purposes, these are always denied. Our lab is now open from 7:30 a.m. to 10:00 p.m. Monday through Thursday; 7:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. Friday; and 9:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. on Saturday. One drawback is that this facility can only be reached through the main library entrance and, unfortunately, the library is closed on many holidays when students have time to come to the lab.

STAFF

Minimal cost for staffing the lab would be donated labor, though this is usually not very satisfactory. To be successful, the lab must have an informed and interested director who orders materials, supervises the assistants, and assists instructors in placement of students. This supervisor also encourages students. (Student assistants may man the lab, but do need some direction.) English and BATESL majors might be assigned as part of their class load to work a certain number of hours in the lab, or they might get credit as inservice teaching. If the money is available, paying the students at least the minimum wage for regular assigned hours seems to be the best procedure. One advantage of this is that students who can not or do not fill their responsibilities may then be more easily replaced. (With one assistant on duty, we pay students for 73½ hours a week @ \$2.90 (minimum wage) for a total of approximately \$215.00 per week. In January 1980, this will rise to \$3.15 per hour).

LAB MATERIALS

Hardware

Usually the first thing people consider is the hardware. I feel that this item should have a low priority on the lab budget. Some programs do require the use of a tape or cassette player (we have six cassette players), others require a slide-cassette combination (we have one) and others require a language master (we have four ten-year-old models). Of course, if one has unlimited funding, the lab could buy extensive hardware and even extend to the use of a computer with programs designed to give students immediate feedback—I understand the cost is down as low as \$600 with \$100 to \$150 for additional terminals. (We could tie into the

university computer, but as yet have no program that warrants this expense and we don't have the budget for expensive toys.)

Software

The software is the backbone of the English Skills Lab, so now I will begin to talk about a minimum price tag. This amount will vary according to the differences in the English language ability of the students who use the lab. At our university, where the majority of the students are second language speakers and/or second dialectical speakers, our materials must range from grade one through beginning college work, with an emphasis on 6th through 12th grade. If the students all possessed 8th or even 6th grade English ability we could dispense with some of our programs. I would suggest that an English Skills Lab would need at least \$1,000 (possibly a little less if the lower levels were eliminated) as a beginning minimum for books and other software—this amount would buy ten copies of at least one basic program for each skill. We use the dyad programs as a requirement for ENG 105 classes—with these, students in the lab can work together to master prepositions, pronouns, determiners and verbs. Ten books of each would amount to \$160.00 (we have 25 copies of each). A set of specific skills for reading improvement is another basic. Complete sets run from \$100.00 (elementary) to \$90.00 (intermediate and secondary). (We now have three different skill-oriented reading programs with several copies of intermediate books, particularly those on "Drawing Conclusions," "Getting the Main Idea," "Using the Context," etc. with at least two copies of each book on each level.)

Interesting, adult, low-level-to-12th grade, reading materials with some kind of interaction workbooks or sheets are also necessary. These may be purchased with or without accompanying tapes (we have both), at a variety of prices, but I would estimate \$500.00 for reading materials as minimal.

For individualized writing, programs such as the *Guided to Free* Dykstra series are also available at one or two dollars per book. (We use these extensively in our lab). If you have typewriters available, there is

also a program and typing book: *Learning to Type in English as a Second Language* (University Press of America) with an emphasis on learning English which students may follow in a self-paced program.

In our oral production programs we use some old texts and tapes that we found were poor for classroom use but give many basic sentences and easy dialogues, with marked intonation that students can follow and repeat.

General Motors has some excellent little *free* books on tools, inventions, motors, etc. on a low intermediate reading level—of course, you will have to write the exercises to accompany them. The Health Department and other government agencies also have low reading level books that can be used or adapted for lab use.

One can also write many programs for the lab and the cost of these is nil—except for one's time (here there is a heavy investment). I have written a number of these and the cost has been only the paper and language master cards used. All vocabulary words in our ENG 105 classes are put on cards so that a student may hear the words (and produce them) as many times as he desires. (The dyad program started with just a program for learning prepositions and was written in daily increments.) At the present time, as a result of a presentation by Hector Nevarez of the Defense Language Institute and Curtis Hayes of the University of Texas at San Antonio at the *Year of Composition* workshop held at BYU-HC and at the TESOL Convention in Mexico City, we are now developing a handwriting program. I have four lessons completed and write something more each week. (They postulate that some ESL students are frightened of composition because they can't write (penmanship).

We have a folder which gives the complete rundown of all the software in our English Skills Lab, separated into sections for each of the skills. We also have suggestions for lab assistants, attendance at our lab by hours and days, etc. available upon request.

LAB ATTENDANCE

I would like to say something about motivation to attend the lab. A few years

ago my son, who was then principal of a high school, asked me if I had any magic formula for getting students interested in individualized learning programs. He said that programs, student ability, and cost were not problems, but that getting students to take advantage of what was offered was. We have found that once we get a serious student into the lab and its programs, he often keeps on coming, but we do have to put a little pressure on almost all students to get them in originally.

We have three approaches to this problem.

1. Assignments by instructors for the whole class to work on a specific program (such as the dyads or a reading assignment from a specific program).
2. Notices from instructors that individual students need help in specific areas and are assigned to work in the lab. We then work out a program with the student in areas such as spelling, punctuation, verb agreement, etc. and report back to the instructor what the student has done to improve (all students have individual folders which instructors are free to look through at any time).
3. Students who fail to achieve the minimal standard on the Freshman English Placement Test have the option of taking ENG 105 (sometimes referred to as bonehead English) or they may work individually in the lab, and, having completed a minimum program, take the placement test once again. Interesting to note is the progress made by many of our students who failed to pass ENG 105—students must pass the Freshman English Placement Essay to pass ENG 105—last Christmas vacation when they were given this option with the chance to have their "X" grade (an "X" grade means they did all the course work and tried, but just couldn't write well enough for Freshman English) replaced with the grade they would have received if they had passed the exam. Some students spent as much

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as eight to ten hours a day in the lab working on the guided to free composition and the English modular courses. Fifty percent of the students who have worked on these programs in the lab have passed the essay examination and gone into Freshman English. When one considers that this eliminates an entire ENG 105 class for the next semester the cost of the lab doesn't seem very high. I might mention that we sometimes have had to move these programs into another room on campus as the library is often closed when the students have the most free time.

In addition to the help students have obtained from the lab, our English and BATESL majors who have acted as our lab assistants have also had some good experiences. They have become acquainted with materials in a depth usually found only in a teaching experience, they have become aware of the various problems students have with English, and they have had the satisfaction that comes from helping others.

Let me emphasize again the reason for the English Skills Lab—it is an aid to the classroom, not a replacement for it. It is successful, at least in part, because there is some interaction with other students and so, though individualized, is not a lonely learning process. Even the presence of other students in the same room as one works alone has some advantages.

Because of rising academic salaries and the dissatisfaction of many students with ELI programs that move too slowly or too rapidly, the concept of individualized learning labs may be even more widely adopted in the future.