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AMERICA 101

Dotting i’s and crossing borders

BY VARAD DIMATE  DESIGN RYAN EIFFERT  PHOTO CHARLIE COFFEY

A class of international students dedicated to learning English give presentations about why they declared their specific major.
About 12 students are gathered in a small room in the old Landscape Architecture building. One of the students steps up to make a presentation on his intended major and resulting opportunities. Others take notes and make comments about the presenter on a rubric sheet. This might seem like any other English class one is required to take before graduation. However, these students haven’t yet started with for-credit classes.

They are enrolled in the Intensive English and Orientation Program (IEOP) to prepare themselves for university-level classes. International students have to pass an English proficiency test before starting with their degree program at Iowa State.

At the beginning of the program, students are divided into levels based on their English proficiency. They typically stay anywhere from six months to a year in the program before enrolling in a degree program at Iowa State or elsewhere. They are allowed to take one regular university class while participating in IEOP.

The program also serves as a bridge to American academic and social culture.

“Orientation is part of our mission. Students in IEOP are enrolled in a cultural class that meets six to eight times in a semester to assist with the matriculation in American culture,” says Susan Burkett, a lecturer in the program. “Also, teachers include cultural information and materials in their classes.”

In a class dedicated to American academic and social culture, students learn how to interact in different social settings. This includes topics like how to interact with your professors or how to respond to police when you get a ticket.

“These things are not as simple as they seem to be. Every person, every locality has its own cultural nuance,” says Gulbahar Beckett, director of the program.

Full-time students in the program take several pass-fail classes to prepare themselves to efficiently communicate with others in an academic setting. Whenever they feel prepared, they can take the Test of English as a Foreign Language.

“The teachers are very patient. We had other activities outside the classroom such as going to a park, having a potluck and going to a coffee shop. All these were helpful,” says Fugang Sheng, a masters student in civil engineering from China. As a transfer student, he was in the program before he started with classes in his major.

He agrees that the language barrier could have been a bigger challenge. However, his roommate and involvement with a local church helped him overcome this barrier.

“There was not as much pressure in the program. It was a high point of my time in the US.”

One of the biggest adjustments for him was using email for everyday communication as opposed to texting. He remembers missing a class presentation at a location that was emailed to him.

“There was not as much pressure in the program. It was a high point of my time in the US. I spent a lot of time going to church, concerts, movies and hanging out with friends,” Sheng adds.

The instructors who teach in this program need to have at least a Master’s degree in Teaching English as a Second Language (TESOL). Many lecturers have prior experience teaching English abroad as well. Last fall, the program hosted about 140 students, and there are half as many enrolled in the spring semester. There are just between 15 to 25 students in each class to allow for individual attention.

The challenges faced by students in this program are not any different than those in for-credit classes. Attendance in early morning classes is part of it.

“That actually is our biggest challenge. It is required that they attend classes to keep up with their visa status,” Beckett says. “By being late for class, they miss the attendance grade. We are still brainstorming strategies to deal with this challenge.”

In skills-based classes, the program focuses on four aspects of the English language: grammar, reading, writing and listening/speaking. A number of interactive activities including presentations, group activities and games encourage students to practice these skills.

With the content-based approach, students take classes like business that aim to increase knowledge of specific topics along with practicing English. In a few other classes, students go to content-based classes with their language teacher.

“By being in an exit class, students can also get to know authentic academic culture. They get to know what it is like to be in a real non-ESL university course. After passing this class, students do not need to take the standard TOEFL test,” Beckett says.

She added that for students who aren’t strong test-takers, this option allows them to showcase their skills and get used to learning in an authentic, academic setting.

English language teachers from other countries also come to Iowa State to learn effective teaching skills. Fulbright scholars and graduate students have also been part of the program.

“I have not visited other countries to teach, but teaching in IEOP has given me a worldview that I would not otherwise have,” Burkett says. “Students share their experiences and culture readily, and I appreciate every minute of it. I learn as much as they do!”