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## The U.S. System of Education

The education system in the United States is unlike that in many other countries. There is neither a national education system nor a national curriculum. The federal government does not operate public schools, though it contributes about 10% to the national education budget (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). Public schools also receive funding from the individual state and from local property taxes. Education is a state and local responsibility.

The United States has a federal system of government that has historically valued local governance on an individual state-by-state basis. Each of the 50 U.S. states has its own Department of Education that sets guidelines for the public schools in that state. Much of the control of U.S. public schools lies in the hands of each local school district. Each school district is governed by a school board, which is a small committee of people who are elected by the local community or are appointed. The school board sets general policies for local schools. School districts may be small, setting the curriculum for a rural county or small town, or they may be big, covering a large, heavily populated city. Depending on where the school is located, be it a small town or large city, there is huge variation among schools in the United States regarding course offerings, extracurricular activities, graduation rates, and so on.

The United States has always placed a high priority on education and on the importance of children attending school. All children in the United States have access to a free public school education from primary school (starting in Grade 1) through high school, ending with the 12th grade. Most but not all public elementary schools also offer free kindergarten education. Students in Grades 1–12 in public school do not pay tuition. Formal schooling lasts until a student is 17 or 18 years old, although compulsory school ends at 16 years old in most states. If parents wish to send their children to private school, then they must pay tuition and fees for that schooling. Postsecondary education (i.e., higher education) is not free, and students pay for college and university education. Public colleges and universities receive some funding from the states where they are located,

but students attending colleges and universities pay tuition fees, which vary among colleges and universities in the United States.

Although the federal government plays an important role in education, it does not license schools or govern educational institutions at any level. Nevertheless, the federal government plays a limited but important role in shaping education policy and practice at all levels and throughout the nation. On a national level, the division of the education system is consistent with three levels: elementary/primary education, secondary (high school) education, and postsecondary education (college or university).

## English Language Education in Primary and Secondary Schools in the United States

In 1966, TESOL, a professional organization, was established in response to the original demand for English as a second language (ESL) materials and methodologies due to the influx of immigrants, refugees, and international students to the United States (Teaching as Leadership, n.d.). The office of the TESOL International Association is just outside Washington, DC.

In 1974, in *Lau v. Nichols*, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that Lau and other Chinese students in San Francisco were being denied access to equal educational opportunities because they could not sufficiently understand the language of instruction. This set the precedent that school systems must address the needs of non-English-speaking students, but the courts did not dictate a specific model (Teaching as Leadership, n.d.). The Supreme Court held that school districts must take affirmative steps to help students overcome language barriers so that they can participate meaningfully in each school district's education programs (Crawford, n.d.).

Presently, ESL programs and/or bilingual education programs are provided as state and local requirements in U.S. public schools from kindergarten through Grade 12. Sometimes referred to as English language learners (ELLs), "students who qualify for ESL programs are between three and 21 years of age, are enrolled in elementary or secondary schools . . . and do not speak English as their native tongue" (Cerbasi, 2012, para. 4). When foreign-born students first enter the local school system, they are assessed to determine their level of English language ability in reading, writing, listening, and speaking. English language learners in U.S. public schools are provided with English classes and services to ensure success in learning to read, write, and speak in English. They are taught by certified ESL teachers.

## The Role and Status of English in the United States

Although it is a major English-speaking country, there is no official language in the United States. Despite this fact, English is the only language used by the federal government. English is the dominant language, with native English speakers making up 82% of the population, and 96% of U.S. citizens speak English fluently (*The United States Does Not Have*, 2012). Knowing how to speak English in the United States is associated with improving one's education and one's opportunities in life. English is spoken as a mother tongue or as a second language by the vast majority of the U.S. population, and learning English is seen as crucial for those who wish to get ahead. Knowing English enables easier access to social, political, and educational institutions. However, there are ethnic neighborhoods in certain parts of the United States where people have not learned English, where they can still shop, receive medical care, and do business without speaking English. Their children will learn English in school, but the parents of those children may or may not learn to speak English.

In regard to those living in the United States who speak little or no English, Subtirelu (2013) writes,

All or most of these people are at a major disadvantage (relative to English speakers) when reading street signs or participating in occupational or educational activities. The power associated with English means that most of these groups for their own advancement and sometimes survival will learn English. (para. 14)

The subject of whether English is the dominant language in the world of business or whether it is on its way to becoming that is still being debated and brings with it much controversy and discussion. "Ready or not, English is now the global language of business," writes Tsedal Neeley (2012, para. 1) in the *Harvard Business Review*. She goes on to note that "more and more multinational companies are mandating English as the common corporate language" (para. 1). In terms of who and why, David Crystal (2003) writes, "Why a language becomes a global language has little to do with the number of people who speak it. It is much more to do with those who speak it" (p. 7). In relation to power, Crystal adds, "There is the closest of links between language dominance and economic, technological, and cultural power, too" (p. 7).

Teachers are major stakeholders in helping their students who are learning English to gain knowledge and command of the English language, in order to attain success in school and future success as productive members of society. Teachers often have some freedom in the design and delivery of the ESL curriculum. Students hope to attain personal and educational success while learning English. Learning to speak, read, and write in English will bode well for the students' future success and for their own advancement in education.

School administrators need to be accountable to their school districts for what happens in their classrooms and in their schools. They need to envision ways to meet emerging challenges within their own particular school district. Parents have a vested interest in seeing that their children learn to communicate in English. In the United States, so many more opportunities for education and future employment are available to their children if they know English.

## English Language Teaching in an Intensive English Program at a U.S. University

After that brief overview of English language learning at the primary and secondary levels in the United States, the focus now shifts to postsecondary/higher education. For international students entering the United States for the purpose of studying at a university or college, the process is more complicated since the students are not yet living in the United States. Foreign students must apply for a student visa and complete the proper paperwork and documentation necessary for study in the United States. Prior to admission to a degree program at most U.S. universities, international students must demonstrate proficiency in English and obtain a passing score on the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) or on the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) test. If a student has not attained a high enough level of English proficiency and does not have a passing score on either the TOEFL or the IELTS test, then, although the student may be conditionally admitted to a particular university, he or she must first study in an intensive English program (IEP) housed at the university.

An IEP is where international students study academic English in an intense, immersion-style environment as preparation for gaining admittance to a full-time degree program at a U.S. college or university. Most IEPs provide English language classes at various levels of difficulty to help international students meet the language requirements for admission to U.S. colleges and universities.

According to the Institute of International Education's 2014 *Open Doors* publication, in the 2013–2014 academic year, there were 886,052 international students studying at U.S. colleges and universities. And approximately 37,754 international students were enrolled in non-degree intensive English programs in the United States in the 2013–2014 academic year.

IEPs in U.S. colleges and universities are facing more competition than ever before in an ever-increasing global marketplace as international students continue to travel to the United States to study at institutions of higher learning. The alternative experience of online learning while remaining in-country has not stopped the flow of learners who yearn for the opportunity to study abroad in a face-to-face format in the United States. The IEP is where international students study academic English for a relatively short time before entering full-time undergraduate or graduate study. Of all IEPs in the United States, 65% are affiliated with

an institution of higher education. Of those, 42% are governed by a college or university and 23% are independent providers of English affiliated with a higher education institution (Institute of International Education, 2014).

English language teaching (ELT) in the context of an IEP is not the same as teaching courses in a university major, as there is a need for a more personalized approach to teaching and learning in the IEP. Dimmitt and Dantas-Whitney (2002) suggest that “collaborative and task-based communicative approaches are particularly suitable” for IEP settings (p. 2). Having international students in classes and on campuses challenges faculty and the greater university community to rethink the way they design, teach, and assess their courses. It is necessary to help international students adjust to a North American university setting in order to prepare them to compete with domestic students in and out of the classroom. The idea of working cooperatively in groups or with a partner is new for some students and can be intimidating culturally and linguistically. International students often hesitate to take part in class discussions, fearing that they will not be understood or that they will make grammar mistakes when speaking (Cheng, Myles, & Curtis, 2004).

## **Stakeholders in English Language Teaching in a University IEP in the United States**

### **Students**

Generally speaking, most university IEP classes have students from different countries who are studying academic English for one or two terms who have not yet been admitted as full-time students in a degree program. As they are usually anxious to finish their time in the IEP and continue with their studies as fully matriculating students, they want and need to learn as much as possible in a short amount of time. Many students arrive thinking they may need only 4 months of additional English language instruction before they can fully matriculate, and they budget for that, when in fact they may need a full academic year. The Saudi Arabian government, which provides scholarships for the majority of Saudi students, puts an 18-month time limit on studying English in an IEP. Also, many parents are waiting for their children to finish their undergraduate or graduate degrees so they can return home to work in the family business. Learners studying in an IEP context have varying degrees of proficiency in the four skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. There is often pressure from their families, from themselves, and from other stakeholders to do well and to acclimate themselves to life in their new, albeit temporary living situation. In addition to their academic classes, they are often offered cultural opportunities to learn more about North American cultures, and they often want to experience both personal and professional success in and out of the classroom.

## Instructors/Professors

Often, the faculty of an IEP consists of a combination of part-time and full-time instructors. All of the instructors are qualified to teach ESL and already have or are working toward a master's degree in TEFL, TESL, applied linguistics, or a related field. The majority have at least a few years of teaching experience in an IEP or similar education setting. Many have also taught English outside the United States. It is common for adjunct instructors to be juggling more than one teaching position at a time, and they may struggle to provide the additional support that is needed by international students in the IEP. In addition to their classroom teaching responsibilities, they may be required to help students with the day-to-day concerns of living in a new culture. The teachers most likely wish to experience job satisfaction, but may feel overwhelmed at times trying to help students from different cultures adjust to a North American context. Perhaps the teachers cannot personally relate to such an adjustment and may not know how to help with that.

## IEP Administration

There are a number of "layers" in administration of an IEP, but the one most directly involved is the chair or director. One of the administrative challenges of being the chair or director of an IEP at a U.S. university is to advocate for the students and to help others understand the nature of an IEP set against the backdrop of the university community. Oftentimes the IEP is frequently misunderstood even on its own campus. Unfortunately, international students can be perceived as being high maintenance when dealing with various campus departments. For example, because international students may need extra time to complete a transaction due to language and/or cultural difficulties, university staff may appear unwelcoming or impatient because of the extra effort involved. Christison and Stoller (1997) explain that effective IEP administrators must act as leaders, promoters, organizers, and visionaries. The role of the director will be discussed further below.

## University Administration

Although the administrators at the higher levels of the university may not have as much interaction with the students in the IEP on a daily basis, they need to be aware of the students' overall satisfaction with their experience and help the international students feel at home on the campus. IEPs that are linked to a university are connected to many different departments on campus, and it is the role of the IEP chair or director to ensure that all factions work together. Although IEP students are not yet paying full matriculating school tuition fees, these students, or their families, are paying for their IEP classes and are not eligible for U.S. financial aid. The administration is aware that the IEP serves as a "feeder" for university undergraduate and graduate programs, so it is in the best

interest of the administration to make sure the students stay at the university to continue their studies and enroll as full-time students after leaving the IEP. This may serve as an incentive to make sure the international students succeed in their classes and continue with their education.

## The Role of the Director of the IEP

English language programs are often segregated from other educational departments or schools on campus. They are seen as serving a group of unique students whose needs are different from the more traditional, domestic university student. As a result, IEP directors are often involved in “turf battles” on campus (Carkin, 1997). For example, the majority of international students who will be studying in the IEP need to be tested upon arrival on the campus to determine their level of English. This cannot be done off site or prior to arrival and therefore class size and ESL student enrollment figures cannot be determined in advance. If heads of other departments do not understand this situation, they may not wish to make allowances for this. Although domestic students need to reserve on-campus housing (i.e., dormitory space) well ahead of time, international students are not able to do that. Their acceptance paperwork and visas often are not fully processed until close to their arrival date. If the campus housing department does not understand this, it may seem like international students are receiving special treatment by reserving dormitory space for them well beyond the domestic student deadlines. According to Carkin (1997), university “administrators are unlikely to have an understanding of the stress resulting from a long-term, intensive-format educational enterprise that deals with students who need special support services” (p. 52).

The role of the IEP director is quite complex and multidimensional. When writing about ESL programs and IEP director responsibilities, Kaplan (1997) explains:

The many-faceted nature of IEPs creates variables that impact on the role of the director. . . . The tasks for which they were responsible grew increasingly complex as program size and diversity increased; in many cases, the scope of work was more comparable to that of a divisional dean than a department chair. . . . The scope of responsibility of the director of an IEP is diverse indeed. Directors are responsible for the academic content of the courses offered (and for the measurement of achievement), the administration of a large unit (often employing dozens of instructors . . . ), cross-institutional linkages with academic and administrative units from the rest of the institution, political linkages in the external world (in terms of recruiting), the fiscal operation of the unit . . . and the intellectual management of the unit. (p. 9)

The justification for a university to have an IEP is for those in charge to design, develop, and successfully deliver a curriculum and overall positive educational experience to help ESL students acquire English language skills necessary for higher education academic success. The faculty in an IEP often have more freedom to develop and deliver the curriculum as needed for a particular group of students. For example, although not all cultures in educational settings encourage students to work together in class, Orlando (2011) discovered that students in an IEP study expressed the support they felt from their international classmates. They also expressed confidence when they could make conversation with a partner in the class. Discussing opinions, making observations, and discussing topics related to each other's cultures were reported as contributing to their fluency when speaking English. One participant in the study remarked how listening in class was useful because he could practice that skill with others outside of class.

The nature and structure of an IEP in U.S. universities is usually thought in terms of being a nontraditional entity and therefore has its own set of challenges. The IEP may be housed under one department under the larger umbrella of a particular school at the university. The IEP administrator, while still being required to report to the dean under whose jurisdiction the IEP is administered, may also have to defend a budget or explain a nontraditional class schedule to university administrators above the level of dean in order to justify the need for the ongoing existence of the IEP. While the international students are studying academic English in the IEP, typically they are enrolled in classes that focus on the skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing as well as English grammar and comparative culture studies. Since they are not yet fully matriculated students following a more traditional curriculum with a declared major, IEP students are often misunderstood in terms of how they fit into the whole academic structure. Not all departments on campus are aware of what happens in the IEP and how students then transition into full-time study. In the following chapters, we will examine more closely the specifics of an IEP. We will highlight the approaches used when working with IEP students and what an IEP needs to do to stay current in the ever-changing world of international education. The changing demographics of students coming to the United States to study also affect the dynamics within and around the IEP in terms of teaching and learning.