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State of the Profession: Intensive English Programs

This article focuses on the current state of the ESL profession for teachers in Intensive English Programs (IEPs). Because the IEP context may be unfamiliar to some readers, the author first gives an overview of the characteristics and goals of these types of programs. Second, an examination of how administrators and programs are striving to ensure the integrity of language instruction in this setting is presented. Finally, the results of an online survey of more than 100 ESL professionals are shared. While many respondents expressed frustration with their current situation, one institution's efforts to promote equity for IEP teachers offers a model to other programs.

In looking at the status of our profession, the TESOL position statement strives for "professional equity." To determine whether or not teachers in Intensive English Programs (IEPs) have professional equity, one must compare their status to that of colleagues in similar roles. However, unlike other levels, Intensive English Programs are typically lone entities that may or may not sit on a college or university campus. Therefore, before delving into an examination of the state of the profession in IEPs, we will take a look at exactly what we mean by Intensive English. After introducing the defining characteristics of an IEP, we can consider the status of IEP professionals from two perspectives: the adherence to program standards and the working conditions of teachers.

Defining Intensive English

What makes Intensive English Programs unique? Language instruction takes on many forms around the world and can vary from a few hours each week to total immersion. The IEP falls somewhere between and is typically defined by the F-1 immigration status regulation for language training. According to Title 8 of the Code of Federal Regulations (CFR), a full course of study for language students is "at least eighteen clock hours of attendance a week" (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2010). Therefore, unlike in many other ESL settings, IEP students study English exclusively and full time.

If we want to understand the purpose of the IEP, we should also examine the goals of its students. Many students in an IEP are international students

seeking admission into a degree-bearing, academic program. In fact, in some instances, students may be conditionally admitted into their degree program with the requirement that they complete a prescribed course of study in the IEP before full admission will be granted. Yet the audience of the IEP is made up of a diverse student population that may also include international students who are interested in a short-term study-abroad experience, as well as international students and permanent residents who are hoping to improve their English for professional reasons.

In our discussion, it is also necessary to look at the various environments in which an IEP may operate. Typically, programs fall into two categories: those that are affiliated with a college or university, and those that operate privately and independently. Students at university-affiliated programs are likely to matriculate into a degree program at that institution, while students in private programs may simply be interested in a study-abroad experience. Increasingly, we see a trend for private companies to take up residence on university campuses to provide the services of an IEP, freeing the university from the costs of operating such a program.

Now that we understand more about how IEPs function, we can turn to our examination of the current state of the profession. Our discussion will look at two levels, focusing first on programs and second on teachers. We will consider how administrators of IEPs are working to ensure the professionalism and integrity of their programs through accreditation, association membership, and advocacy. Then we will look at the current status of teachers in this level. Additionally, the results of an online survey of 124 teachers in the field convey a snapshot of their current workload, benefits, release time, and professional development opportunities.

Programmatic Efforts

As teachers and administrators, we can ensure the quality and integrity of our programs through adherence to a set of industrywide standards. The most formal method by which an IEP can indicate its adherence to such standards is through the rigorous accreditation process. There is one accrediting agency that focuses solely on English programs, The Commission on English Language Program Accreditation (CEA), which was established in 1999. Seventy-four programs are accredited under this agency, six of which are in the state of California (CEA, 2009). Before the creation of CEA, programs could seek accreditation by the Accrediting Council for Continuing Education and Training (ACCET), which was created in 1974. ACCET continues to offer guidelines specifically for ESL programs, and there are 38 English programs in the US that have earned ACCET accreditation, 10 of which are in California (ACCET, n.d.). (See Figure 1). There are no English programs in the state of Nevada with CEA or ACCET accreditation.

We should note that university-based IEPs are accredited via their host institution, and therefore, they may not wish to pursue IEP accreditation. The process can be long and labor intensive. Programs must undergo a self-appraisal process as well as site visits by third-party reviewers. CEA estimates that

Figure 1
Accredited IEPs

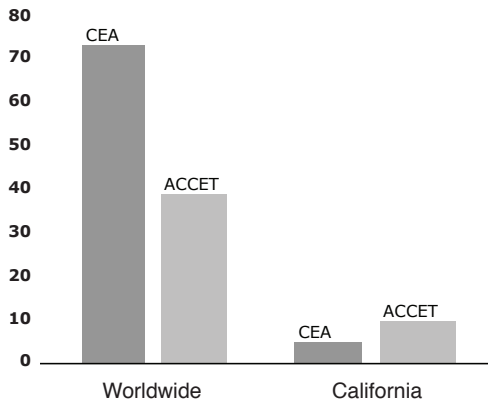
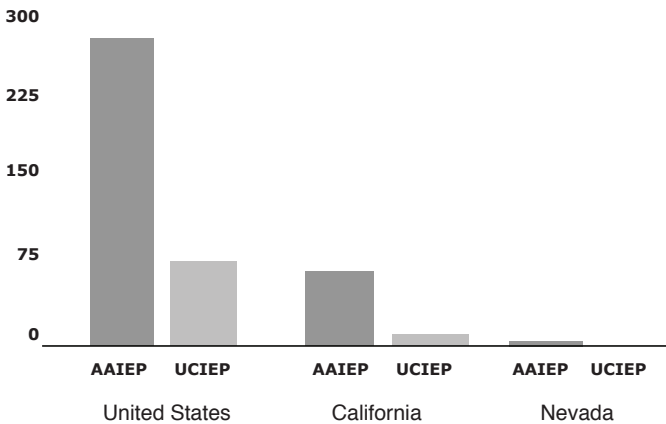


Figure 2
IEP Association Membership



the process takes about 2 years to complete (<http://www.cea-accredit.org/faqs.php>). Programs that may not have the resources to pursue full accreditation, or those who deem it unnecessary, may still decide to join a professional association. Two associations have been working to establish programmatic best practices for IEPs: the American Association of Intensive English Programs (AAIIEP) and University and College Intensive English Programs (UCIEP). AAIIEP boasts a membership of 270 programs, 57 in California and 3 in Nevada (AAIIEP, n.d.). UCIEP has 57 members, 6 of which are in California (UCIEP, n.d.). (See Figure 2).

To join either organization, programs must also perform a self-appraisal showing adherence to the association's standards or guidelines. Similar to CEA and ACCET's standards, these guidelines cover the range of programmatic is-

sues from teacher qualifications to marketing strategies and student services. AAIEP and UCIEP also see advocacy as a central part of their mission, and this role becomes especially important when we compare the numbers of programs who participate in accreditation or association membership to those who do not. In 2006, the Department of Homeland Security reported that there were 1,287 English-language programs operating in the US with the ability to offer students I-20s to procure F-1 visa status, and in 2010, it reported that there are 72,659 students in the US who are studying language training (U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement). Even with the AAIEP's large membership, it represents just more than one-fifth of programs. This reality poses a very serious threat to the integrity, professionalism, and effectiveness of Intensive English Programs. We hear many anecdotes about English programs that serve as "I-20 mills" and may be more interested in the money students bring in than in the effectiveness of instruction. These programs exploit teachers with poor working conditions and low wages, and they often hire teachers with no teaching qualifications or experience.

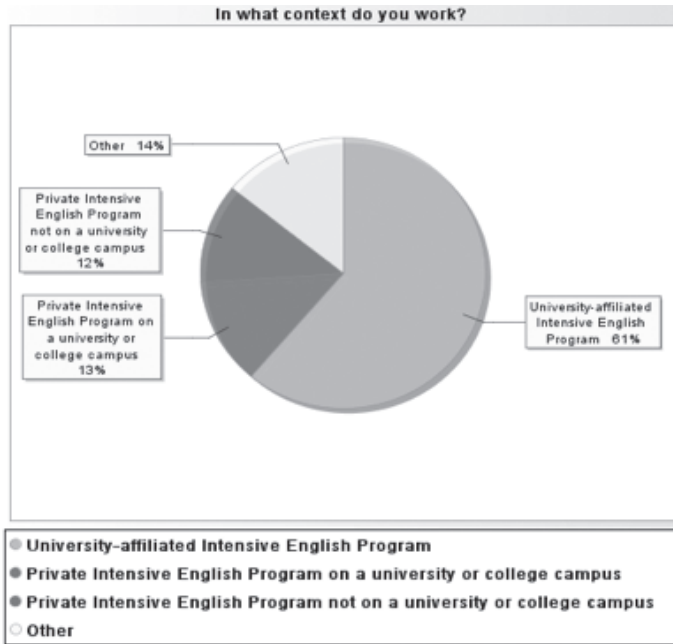
It is these uncharted programs that pose one of the biggest threats to the status of our professionalism in Intensive English Programs because it is difficult for us to know what they are doing or how many are out there. AAIEP and UCIEP take this situation seriously and are pushing legislation in both the U.S. House of Representatives and the Senate to ensure that all Intensive English Programs must be "accredited by an accrediting agency recognized by the Secretary of Education" before they are allowed to issue I-20s to international students seeking F-1 visa status (H.R. 2361, 2009, p. 2; S. 1338, 2009, p. 2). If passed, these bills would be another mechanism to ensure the quality and professionalism of Intensive English Programs and to protect the status of the teachers within those programs.

Current Status of Teachers

The question remains: "Do IEP instructors have professional equity?" This question is not an easy one to answer for the reasons mentioned previously. To whom can we compare IEP instructors? Is it fair to measure their workload against that of instructors in higher education? I answer this question with a qualified "yes." Looking at my own program, I would argue that the level of work students are doing (i.e., learning research skills, applying language-learning strategies, writing academic papers, and giving formal and informal presentations) is as sophisticated, if not more so, than that of students taking required Spanish, French, and Japanese foreign-language courses on university campuses. If we use this argument, then the teachers who prepare those students likewise have similar responsibilities in terms of lesson planning, grading, and assessment.

To get a snapshot of the working conditions in IEPs, I surveyed 124 current TESOL professionals in November 2009, 59.7% of whom identified themselves as classroom teachers and 41.1% as language-program administrators. The respondents were contacted through listservs for AAIEP, TESOL's IEP interest section, and the CATESOL IEP level. Respondents represented 27 states and

Figure 3
Survey Respondents' Teaching Contexts



the District of Columbia. Three were working outside the US, 43% of respondents were in California, and only 1 respondent was from Nevada. When asked how long they had been working in the field, responses ranged from 5 months to more than 40 years, with an average of 18.13 years; 63.7% of respondents hold an MA in TESOL or applied linguistics, and 71% were teaching at the time of the survey. The majority of respondents (66.1%) were working in a university-affiliated Intensive English Program (see Figure 3 for a breakdown of teaching contexts).

Although 69.4% of respondents classified themselves as full-time instructors, the definition of part-time employment was an area of great concern to many in their qualitative feedback. More than 1 respondent indicated that she or he taught 20-25 hours per week and was classified as an adjunct and received no benefits. One Bay Area instructor likened IEP teachers to “agricultural workers in the pre-Chavez era” and yearned for unionization. Another respondent simply stated: “I’m ashamed of my profession.” However, an administrator working with a strapped budget commented: “... unionization would simply kill us.” It should be noted that only 12.2% of those surveyed are members of a teachers’ union. Many respondents also lamented the fact that they are paid only for contact hours, even though they spend significant hours outside of the classroom preparing lessons and grading assignments. Of those who classified themselves as part time, 76.5% indicated that they would prefer to have full-time employment.

Turning to the benefits and workload of full-time teachers, an encouraging

74.2% reported that they do receive fringe benefits, and 78.2% stated that they receive funding to attend conferences. Only 41.1% indicated that they could receive release time for research or professional development activities.

In an effort to compare IEP instructors to their university counterparts, one section of the survey was reserved for those respondents who were affiliated with a university. The majority (55.1%) of teachers working at university-affiliated programs thought their fringe benefits were “equivalent to instructors with comparable credentials in other departments.” Not surprisingly, however, full-time IEP instructors reported that they teach more hours and earned lower wages than colleagues in other departments. Some also reported that they were classified as staff, rather than faculty, on their campus, which means that they were not governed by the same workload and release time as instructors in other departments. As one California State University teacher stated: “We are categorized the same as bookstore employees who work a 40-hour week.” Consequently, when asked if IEP teachers were able to participate in faculty organizations, such as a faculty senate, a resounding 70.8% reported that they were either not eligible or unsure.

However, the news is not all bad. I spoke with Ann Roemer, who is an associate professor and director of the Intensive English Language Institute at Utah State University. Roemer has been with the program for 12 years and was the first of her colleagues to go through the tenure process. During the 1980s, Utah State started allowing IEP course work to count toward students’ eventual degrees, and Roemer believes this change led the way for the university to consider IEP teachers equal to their degree-program colleagues. The Utah State IEP has seven full-time teachers, six of whom are tenured. The seventh is undergoing the tenure review process. Full-time instructors teach about 12 credits per semester during the academic year, and tenure-track instructors can receive release time for research or administrative work. Roemer suggests that other university-based IEPs can use the potential revenue brought in by international students as a selling point in their efforts to get equal status on campus. International students contribute an estimated \$17.8 billion annually to the U.S. economy, according to the Institute of International Education Open Doors 2009 report. Roemer advises that programs need to persuade upper administration to improve their status.

Conclusion

As we consider the above facts and figures against TESOL’s position statement on professional equity, there are two main threats to that equity. At the programmatic level, there are a large number of unaccredited English programs throughout the US that hire teachers with little to no qualifications and pay them minimal wages. It is important to support the initiatives of AAIEP and UCIEP in their fight to push through legislation that will shut these types of programs down. For teachers, the increased reliance on part-time adjuncts is cause for serious concern. It is up to us, both individually and collectively, to continue to push for equal status. As Cesar Chavez said: “When you have people together who believe in something very strongly—whether it’s religion or

politics or unions—things happen.” And so, let us all commit in our own way, be it large or small, to make things happen.

Acknowledgments

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Appendix

IEP Information Sources

Accrediting Council for Continuing Education and Training (ACCET)
1722 N Street, NW
Washington, DC 20036 USA
202-955-1113
<http://www.accet.org>

American Association of Intensive English Programs (AAIEP)
229 North 33rd Street
Philadelphia, PA 19014-2709 USA
215-895-5856
<http://www.aaiep.org>

Commission on English Language Program Accreditation (CEA)
801 North Fairfax Street
Alexandria, VA 22314-3457 USA
703-519-2070
<http://www.cea-accredit.org>

University and College Intensive English Programs (UCIEP)
c/o Language Institute
151 Sixth St. NW
O'Keefe Building, South Wing
Georgia Institute of Technology
Atlanta, GA 30332-0374 USA
<http://www.uciep.org>