

# State of the Art Student Support Services in an IEP Learning Center

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## **Abstract**

*Intensive English language programs (IEPs) at American universities have the task of recruiting, retaining, and preparing international students for mainstream classes. In order to achieve these tasks, many programs have explored using supplemental instruction (SI) in the form of learning centers (LCs) to support their students. In this study, we investigate how and why students make use of an LC and its resources at Portland State University's Intensive English Language Program (IELP). Multiple strands of data were used, including observations of the LC in use, surveys of students and staff, and interviews with students to investigate student use of resources and their reasons for using those resources. While a majority of the students use computer resources, many of the students noted they use a variety of the resources offered each time they visit. We also examined student motivations for using the resources and noted five themes in the responses: the variety of resources, the LC's accessibility, the physical space, personal contact, and community. We conclude our research with recommendations for promoting, maintaining, and building community in an IEP LC.*

**Key Words:** *intensive English language programs; learning center; language center; supplemental instruction*

## **Introduction**

Priyanka, Ahmad, and Yaqoub, three intermediate-level ESL students, have been studying in the learning center. They have been fully engaged in completing a grammar assignment. Occasionally, they compare answers, ask questions, and share explanations to the problems. As they reach the end of the assignment, Yaqoub decides to leave. Priyanka and Ahmad have a TOEFL test coming soon, so they stay for additional TOEFL practice. As the learning center staff prepares to close the facility, Priyanka and Ahmad pack, say goodbye,

and arrange to meet the following day to continue their “journey” with English language studies.

This scenario shows a typical afternoon for international students at many intensive English programs (IEPs) in the United States. Every year, a number of international students arrive in the US to first master English and ultimately enroll in mainstream classes and graduate with a degree from an American university. Since international students play a critical role in American universities' internalization processes and bring valuable contributions both to

their learning communities and to the overall financial state of their universities, most institutions in the US have been actively engaged in their recruitment. Many of these institutions have also begun to recognize that international students face a unique set of challenges when moving to the US and transitioning into the American university system (Andrade, 2006; Collis-Burgess, 2014; Fisher, 2014). Their success depends on many factors, including access to appropriate, specialized support services. Frequently, it is learning centers or writing centers that fulfill this role. With supplemental instruction ranging from tutors to language learning software, these centers provide the specialized support that international students need.

In this paper, we examine the specific resources and aspects of one learning center in an IEP that attract students like Priyanka, Ahmad, and Yaqoub and support their language acquisition. To do this, we first provide further insight into types of supplemental instruction and then describe the types of supplemental instruction in our learning center. We then describe our methodology and discuss the results. Although this study examines one particular learning center, we finish our paper with recommendations and guiding principles that may aid in the development of other successful supplementary learning services.

## **Literature Review**

Supplemental instruction (SI) is defined as a voluntary academic assistance resource in which students in “high-risk courses,” or courses with high dropout rates or intensive workloads,

learn study skills that guide them through coursework (University of Missouri Kansas City, 2013). SI has existed in the US in varying forms since the first university was established (Arendale, 2002). While early forms focused on using tutors to improve the understanding of course content, SI gradually became a means to “encourage students to become more actively involved in their own learning” (Arendale, 1994, p. 18).

At the Intensive English Language Program (IELP) at Portland State University (PSU), students are certainly in “high-risk courses”. The IELP is an intensive, five-level, university academic preparation program. Most students arrive on F1 visas and are required to take a full load of classes each term, which includes four core classes (grammar, writing, reading, and listening and speaking) and one elective class of their choice. In a typical 10-week term, they spend, on average, 18 hours per week in class, with an expected additional 20 hours per week for studying and completing assignments. Many students also face external pressures such as the requirements of a scholarship organization, the challenges of achieving university admittance, or the demands of caring for children and families. Thus, many IELP students juggle both academic and personal responsibilities.

The IELP has addressed these challenges, and has also attempted to engage active learners, by offering its own supplementary instruction in the IELP Learning Center (LC). The center’s services include a unique blend of tutoring in all language skill areas, access to computers, specialized language learning software, a broad range of books and other materials, and

study spaces, all of which are specifically targeted towards English as a Second Language (ESL) learners.

Unlike most forms of SI in IEPs, the LC is a more extensive resource for students. Most IEPs offer a writing center or a language lab, not a combination of both. Writing centers typically offer tutoring, print, and computer resources, while language labs cover multiple skill areas using computer-based resources. The combination of both these elements is unusual and rarely discussed in the literature.

Murphy (1992) referred to such comprehensive facilities as “Language Acquisition Resource Centers” (LARCs). With a broad range of resources, LARCs attract students for various reasons. Understanding what draws students can help LARC administrators to improve services to fit learners’ needs. As Murphy (1992) observed, student feedback for LARC staff is essential to providing relevant and useful resources and services. Unfortunately, there is little research on LARCs and their relation to students; however, the literature regarding writing centers and language laboratories provides a comparable background.

A common theme in studies on writing centers and language labs is the need for student input in resource development. Indeed, numerous researchers have called for the inclusion of students in developmental processes (Barkhuizen, 1998; Kumaravadivelu, 2003; Littlejohn, 1985; Spratt, 1999; Yang, 1999). Several research studies on supplementary support services (Conard-Salvo & Spartz, 2012; Jarvis & Szymczyk, 2010; Ross, 2003) also

recognized the need for including students in the process of supplementary resource development. Without student input, supplementary instruction may not adequately meet students’ needs and support learning in ways that help to develop autonomous learners. Thus, in this study, we approached students directly to discover what resources prove most useful and what continually draws them in to the LC.

This study aimed to include students and provide information about their use of a LARC through two research questions:

1. How do students make use of the IELP LC?
2. Why do students make use of particular resources in the LC?

## **Methodology**

Kalikoff (2001) suggested that multiple strands of data are the most effective for writing center assessment in order to obtain rich, detailed information and identify common themes. As such, this study gathered data from both students and staff in a multi-pronged, qualitative approach, resulting in a clear picture of the LC offerings and how and why students make use of them.

Participants in this study consisted of three groups: students, assistants, and tutors. All student participants had utilized the LC services at least once. 150 survey participants represented each of the IELP levels as well as the diversity of linguistic backgrounds within the IELP, including speakers of Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Portuguese, and Thai. Nine students representing Brazil, Iraq, Kuwait, Libya, and Saudi Arabia also participated in an interview with one of

the researchers. For a well-rounded perspective, six front desk assistants and ten tutors were also surveyed. With their training and experience, both assistants and tutors provide valuable insight into the LC environment.

Surveys were used to obtain information from students and staff. All surveys included a mix of closed- and open-response items (Appendix). For students, the survey and interview questions focused on how they use the LC and their reasons for favoring certain resources. Questions for tutors focused on the resources that tutors believe students are using and the resources that tutors see as valuable. Assistants related their experiences using the LC as former IELP students, gave recommendations for current students, and made observations of student activity in the LC.

Data collection began in January 2014 with the surveys and interviews, followed by the observations and gathering of tutoring logs. A total of 203 students were invited to participate in the survey, with 150 responding. For interviews, students met with the LC Coordinator for a brief audio-recorded interview. For the tutor and assistant surveys, all invited participants responded.

Observations of LC activity were completed at various times of day over a month-long period. Data in this strand included the number of students in each area of the LC at each point in time and the resources being used. In addition to these observations, all tutors were asked to record a tutoring session log for one week. The tutors recorded the length of the session, the level of the student, and the topics covered during the session.

Completed survey responses were received electronically, with closed responses being automatically tallied. Open responses were analyzed and coded for themes. All survey responses were then compared with the interview data. For the interviews, detailed notes of the recording were coded for themes. Finally, the observation notes and tutoring session logs were analyzed and compared with the other data.

## Results and Discussion

The student surveys revealed that the vast majority of students (82%) use some area of the LC at least once a week, with 40% reporting use two to three times a week (Figure 1). Among the ranking of the four LC areas (Figure 2), the Computer Classroom ranked

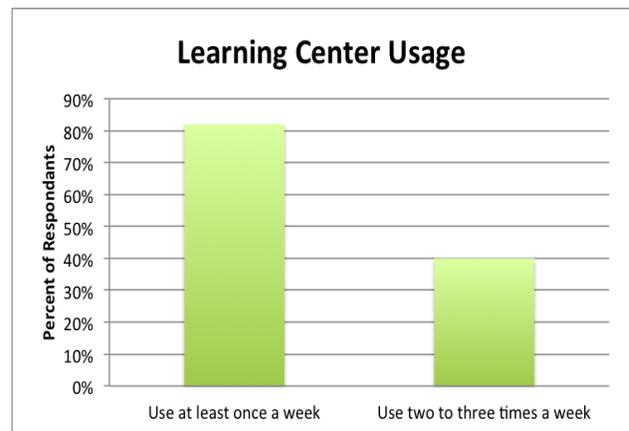
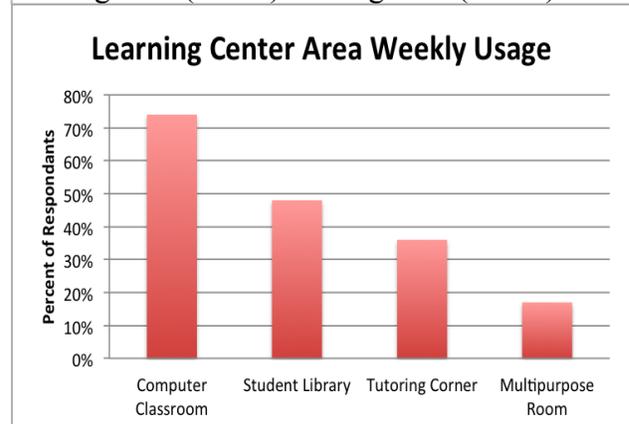


Figure 1 (above) and Figure 2 (below)



highest in usage, followed by the Student Library, the Tutoring Corner, and, finally, the Multipurpose Room.

When using the various parts of the LC, students utilized a wide variety of resources. In the Computer Classroom, Internet, printing, Microsoft Office, and class websites were the most popular resources. A total of 80 students also used at least one type of specialized language learning software, with the listening and reading software being the most widely used, followed closely by test prep and grammar software. In addition, nearly a quarter of the students reported participation in a tutor-led workshop. Interestingly enough, these workshops ranked relatively high considering their recent introduction.

The students used a variety of resources in the Student Library, with computer resources (i.e. printing, Internet, class web sites, Microsoft Office, and scanning) being the most widely used. Students also reported using a variety of library books. Testing guides (for TOEFL, TOEIC, IELTS, GMAT and GRE) were the most popular category of books, followed by graded readers, novels and stories, and finally textbooks and class books. A number of students reported using the library space for practicing English and studying at tables.

Regarding tutoring services, 119 out of 150 students indicated that they had worked with a tutor. In the Tutoring Corner, the most popular areas to practice were grammar, speaking skills, writing, test preparation, homework, and reading.

Student usage of the Multipurpose Room was quite different than the other areas of the LC. For example, just over half the students reported never having

used it. Of those who did use the Multipurpose Room at least once a term, group study was the most frequent activity, followed closely by taking TOEFL practice tests, practicing presentations, and, finally, watching videos or DVDs. It is worth noting that the Multipurpose Room is also used for drop-in tutoring hours at various points throughout the term, so this may have limited availability to a degree.

Students also reported the skills they most frequently practice in the LC as a whole, as well as their favorite resources. While most students came in to practice writing, we were surprised to find that reading was the second most popular reason for visiting the LC. This contrasted with our observations, wherein we noted a majority of students working on writing or grammar during observations. Listening also ranked quite highly, again unexpectedly surpassing grammar as a skill to practice. Finally, many students mentioned a combination of skills. In other words, students practice multiple skill areas during visits to the LC rather than isolating one particular skill area.

Students also tend to practice using a combination of resources. While exact combinations varied from student to student, it was clear that the diversity of resources was valuable to many students. In examining individual resources, we found that 43% of students mentioned the computers, 25% mentioned tutoring, and 15% mentioned the student library.

### **Themes**

Several themes emerged from the open-ended responses. The four key themes were: the variety of resources, the LC's accessibility, the physical space, and personal

contact. Additionally, the overarching theme of the need for community was strongly voiced in the responses. These themes and representative student quotes are discussed in further detail in the following sections.

**Variety of Resources.** Students repeatedly emphasized the value in utilizing multiple resources. As one student put it:

*If I want practice with a computer with activities, I can. If I want to practice with a story or novels, I can. If I want maybe talk with the tutors about something I don't understand, I use it maybe computer classes, if like PowerPoint, something like IELTS or TOEFL, yeah, it's very helpful.*

Clearly, this student and many others who voiced similar ideas value the diverse resources at their fingertips. Our observations corroborated this finding. As we noted, students would often study in the library, work with a tutor, and use the computer classroom in one visit. It was evident that access to a variety of resources played an important role in students' decision-making processes. As becomes evident in the next section, these centrally located resources also contributed to the creation of an accessible space.

**Accessibility.** The variety of resources in the LC would not be as appealing if the LC were not easily accessible to students. Indeed, with classes located all over campus, students stated that they liked the LC being located in a relatively central location near the main IELP office. They appreciated that dropping in before or after classes was easy due to location and hours. The LC is generally open from 8 a.m. to 7 p.m. on weekdays. The students also mentioned

always being able to find a place to study. This contrasted sharply with comments about other university resources, which will be discussed in further detail in the next section.

**Physical Space.** The theme of physical space was reflected in comments on two main areas: usability and comfort. Students mentioned that finding resources was simple and straightforward, making it easy to alternate between tasks. One student compared the LC with the main library on campus: "*I recommend the library because it's quite easy to find the related English books as compared to the giant infrastructure of 'Millar Library.'*" For students who are already juggling the demands of life and studies in a new country, this ease of access is crucial, enabling them to begin to navigate the American university system independently.

It was surprising to see that many students used words like "comfy" and "cozy" to describe the LC. One student wrote, "*My favorite resource is the student library because I feel comfortable there; it is a small and cozy.*" This student was not alone in these sentiments. It was evident that students are drawn to the LC in part because of the comfortable study environment.

**Personal Contact.** Finally, many students stressed the importance of connections and the personal contact made in the LC. During visits, many students connect and collaborate. It is important that students have this space to meet with others who might help in their learning process. In addition, the LC staff provides an important service and links students with resources and information that ease their transition into

American academic life. For many students, it was very significant that the staff is friendly and welcoming: *“The best about the Learning Center is people working here. Office staff and tutors are so nice and kind that I feel like they are my family and want to visit again.”* Another student stated, *“I like the reception desk of the people. I think the people are friendly and helpful to see what our problems or questions and how help us to solve them* These students appreciated having knowledgeable people who made them feel welcome, worked to answer their questions, and responded to their needs. Students repeatedly commented that the staff was friendly, helpful, and well trained.

This personal contact was further highlighted in comments regarding tutors. The distinction between technological resources and human resources was sharply contrasted in several survey responses. One student wrote, *“I think tutor, it’s a good one because connection with another person it’s very nice and if I don’t understand something I just say it. But with a computer, I can’t.”* This statement clearly shows that students need human connection. This is especially pertinent when seeking answers. For students who are already motivated, autonomous learners, a tutor can provide valuable insight when other means of finding information have not yielded answers.

This valuable human connection would not work if the people that provide help were not welcoming and supportive. Another student clarified a key aspect of effective human contact, stating *“...the tutors here are very welcoming and have this personal relationship with us. They are not just interacting with the paper in front of them, that is most of them they are*

*interacting with you as a person.”* To this student, it was clearly important that there was a relationship between student and tutor and that their interaction was personal and tailored to individual needs. As we discuss in the next section, this personal contact and connections with staff and other students are integral in building a sense of community that furthers learning.

**Community.** The idea of community stood out in responses both in terms of the space and the people involved in the LC. The LC was described as both a space with resources tailored to meet the needs of a diverse population and as a community of people who support and respect them. Through this tailoring, support, and respect, students developed a sense of ownership towards the LC.

While our observations gave us a sense that the LC created a community, the students expressed the same idea in their responses. One student explained the link between community and the ability to transition to American academic life: *“[I]t’s perhaps good to have this kind of community in which we work and we see people from our own culture ... It makes you feel safe at the initial stages before you immerse into the American culture.”* In this environment, students are interacting in a multicultural setting that supports and encourages them as they transition into mainstream classes. Student interaction also plays a key role in creating community: *“Last term I had like three friends, we use to go there... to get our HW done together, and you know, support each other all the time, so I didn’t want to leave there.”* This group made a clear choice to work together to build skills in a place that welcomed them and facilitated learning. The next section discusses how this and the other

themes interacted to create a vibrant learning community.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

This study has provided a detailed picture of how IELP students use the LC and why they make use of particular resources. The results clearly indicate that there are three critical factors that have contributed to the success of the IELP Learning Center: the personal contact and community, the wide range of relevant resources, including knowledgeable personnel, and the accessibility and comfort of the physical space.

In returning to our research questions: how IELP students use the LC and why they make use of particular resources in the LC, we conclude with the following recommendations.

We cannot emphasize enough that it is critical to make a constant effort to promote supplementary services among ESL students. Reaching out through different channels, such as email, Facebook, flyers, and face-to-face conversations has proven to be effective.

It is also essential to promote these services among instructors. Teachers can be very powerful in influencing students' learning decisions. Teachers are frequently your best partners when it comes to encouraging your students to use the supplementary services available.

It is also highly recommended that a certain amount of attention be given to maintenance. It is crucial not only to ensure that your space is clean and that the equipment is working properly, but also to ensure that your staff is provided with ongoing training and support to provide international students with high-quality service.

On the other hand, it is ultimately still the students that need to make their own decision to come and use the resources, hence the importance of building a sense of community that will draw them in. Our findings clearly indicate that this is what has made our learning center "*a cozy place, ... a home for people who are away from home*" and what really makes students like Pryanka, Ahmad, and Yaqoub come back daily.

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## APPENDIX: Survey and Interview Questions

(Editor's note: Line spacing condensed)

### Student Survey

#### General Information

1. What IELP level are you in?
2. How many terms have you been an IELP student?
3. How did you find out about the Learning Center?  
Friends Teachers ACAL tour IELP Office Academic Advisors  
Tutors Welcome Party Website Flyer Conversation Partners  
Other \_\_\_\_\_
4. How would you describe your computer skills?  
Excellent/Good/Not Good/Poor
5. How often do you use the Learning Center?  
\_\_\_\_\_ 1-2 times a term \_\_\_\_\_ 1-2 times a month  
\_\_\_\_\_ once a week \_\_\_\_\_ 2-3 times a week  
\_\_\_\_\_ 4 or more times a week
6. When do you use the Learning Center?  
\_\_\_\_\_ 8am-11am \_\_\_\_\_ 2pm-5pm  
\_\_\_\_\_ 11am-2pm \_\_\_\_\_ 5pm-7pm

#### Specific Learning Center Areas

7. Which part of the Learning Center do you use most often?  
Computer Classroom/Tutoring Corner/Multipurpose Room/Student Library (rate them)
8. How often do you use the COMPUTER CLASSROOM?  
\_\_\_\_\_ 4 or more times a week \_\_\_\_\_ 2-3 times a week  
\_\_\_\_\_ once a week \_\_\_\_\_ 1-2 times a month  
\_\_\_\_\_ 1-2 times a term \_\_\_\_\_ never
9. Please check all the resources you have used in the COMPUTER CLASSROOM.  
Internet Printing Microsoft Office (Word, Excel, PowerPoint, etc.)  
Class Websites/Pages/Wikis  
Language Learning Software:  
Listening Grammar Reading  
Writing Pronunciation TOEFL  
Spelling Typing  
Other: \_\_\_\_\_
10. How often do you use the MULTIPURPOSE ROOM?  
\_\_\_\_\_ 4 or more times a week \_\_\_\_\_ 2-3 times a week  
\_\_\_\_\_ once a week \_\_\_\_\_ 1-2 times a month  
\_\_\_\_\_ 1-2 times a term \_\_\_\_\_ never
11. Please check all the resources you have used in the MULTIPURPOSE ROOM.  
\_\_\_\_\_ Group study \_\_\_\_\_ Practicing presentations/speeches  
\_\_\_\_\_ Taking TOEFL practice tests \_\_\_\_\_ Watching videos or DVDs  
Other: \_\_\_\_\_
12. How often do you use the STUDENT LIBRARY?  
\_\_\_\_\_ 4 or more times a week \_\_\_\_\_ 2-3 times a week  
\_\_\_\_\_ once a week \_\_\_\_\_ 1-2 times a month



**Assistant Survey**

- 1. How long have you been an IELP Learning Center assistant?
- 2. How long were you a student in the IELP?
- 3. How did you find out about the Learning Center?  
Friends      Teachers      ACAL tour      IELP Office      Academic Advisors  
Tutors      Welcome Party      Website      Flyer      Conversation Partners      Other

- 
- 4. How often did you use the IELP Learning Center when you were an IELP student?  
\_\_\_\_\_ 1-2 times a term                      \_\_\_\_\_ 1-2 times a month  
\_\_\_\_\_ once a week                              \_\_\_\_\_ 2-3 times a week  
\_\_\_\_\_ 4 or more times a week

- 5. Which part of the Learning Center did you use most often when you were an IELP student?  
Computer Classroom/Tutoring Corner/Multipurpose Room/Student Library (rate them)

- 6. Please check all the resources you used as an IELP student in the COMPUTER CLASSROOM.  
Internet      Printing      Microsoft Office (Word, Excel, PowerPoint, etc.)  
Class Websites/Pages/Wikis  
Language Learning Software:  
Listening                      Grammar                      Reading  
Writing                              Pronunciation                      TOEFL  
Spelling                              Typing                              Other: \_\_\_\_\_

- 7. Please check all the resources you used as an IELP student in the MULTIPURPOSE ROOM.  
\_\_\_\_\_ Group study                      \_\_\_\_\_ Practicing presentations/speeches  
\_\_\_\_\_ Taking TOEFL practice tests      \_\_\_\_\_ Watching videos or DVDs  
Other: \_\_\_\_\_

- 8. Please check all the resources you used as an IELP student in the STUDENT LIBRARY.  
\_\_\_\_\_ Books: Testing Guides (TOEFL, TOEIC, IELTS, GMAT, GRE)  
\_\_\_\_\_ Books: Graded Readers/Novels/Stories  
\_\_\_\_\_ Books: Textbooks and Class books  
\_\_\_\_\_ Computers: Class Websites/Pages/Wikis  
\_\_\_\_\_ Computers: Practice English  
\_\_\_\_\_ Computers: Microsoft Office (Word, PowerPoint, Excel, etc.)  
\_\_\_\_\_ Computers: Internet Access  
\_\_\_\_\_ Computers: Printing  
\_\_\_\_\_ Computers: Scanning  
\_\_\_\_\_ Study: Studying at tables  
Other: \_\_\_\_\_

- 9. Please check all the skills you practiced as an IELP student in the TUTORING CORNER.  
\_\_\_\_\_ Study Skills                              \_\_\_\_\_ Homework  
\_\_\_\_\_ Grammar                                      \_\_\_\_\_ Vocabulary  
\_\_\_\_\_ Pronunciation                              \_\_\_\_\_ Presentations  
\_\_\_\_\_ Reading    \_\_\_\_\_ Writing

\_\_\_\_\_ Listening  
\_\_\_\_\_ TOEFL  
\_\_\_\_\_ GRE

\_\_\_\_\_ Speaking  
\_\_\_\_\_ IELTS  
\_\_\_\_\_ Other: \_\_\_\_\_

10. What was your favorite Learning Center resource as an IELP student? Why?
11. What is your favorite Learning Center resource now? Why?
12. What resources at the Learning Center do you recommend that other IELP students use?  
Why?
13. What resources do you think the current IELP students use most often in the Learning Center?
14. What do you think IELP students like best about the Learning Center?

### **Student Interview Questions**

1. How long have you been a student at the IELP?
2. How long have you been using the Learning Center?
3. How did you find out about the Learning Center?
4. How often do you usually visit the Learning Center?
5. What do you usually do when you come to the Learning Center?
6. How often do you use the Tutoring Corner/Computer Lab/Multipurpose Room/Student Library?
7. What do you do when you use the Tutoring Corner/Computer Lab/Multipurpose Room/Student Library?
8. What is your favorite Learning Center resource? Why?
9. What skill areas do you most often practice in the Learning Center? How do you practice?
10. How do you decide what to practice in the Learning Center?
11. Which resources do you think are most useful? Why?
12. Which resources would you recommend to a friend? Why?
13. What do you like best about the Learning Center?