

# Business English Programs Are New and Improved!

BY KIM FERNANDEZ

**As the market for international students tightens, intensive business English programs revamp the way they do everything from market themselves all the way to the curricula they teach.**

**D**ESPITE A GLOBAL RECESSION, or perhaps because of it, European and Asian companies are demanding that more of their employees speak fluent English. This is for a number of reasons, including that it's the dominant language of worldwide business, and that more U.S. companies are sending jobs overseas for expatriates and foreign workers. Where once only high-level executives and their immediate subordinates needed excellent English skills, now even young professionals and front-line workers are expected to speak the language.

That's a good thing for U.S. universities and private programs that offer intensive business English programs, which are designed to give students the specific fluency they need in the corporate arena in a minimum amount of time away from home. Of course, the flip side of the trend during the recession is that while more young professionals want to learn to speak English in the United States, fewer of them have the money to pay for several weeks or months overseas. And that applies to their employers as well; where once many companies contracted with universities and schools for such programs, they're not quite as willing to foot the bill for tuition, travel, and living expenses as they once were.

The result of that has been a revamping of business English programs, to make them quicker for students and more relevant to the real world. By and large, textbooks and prerecorded drills have been dumped in favor of the *Wall Street Journal* and live conversation with teachers and classmates about current events—the stock market, business trends,

and which big companies are making headlines for their decisions.

Marketing, too, has changed. Like their more traditional bachelor's and master's degree program counterparts, intensive business English programs have turned online to attract more students, both offering more work online, and using social networking sites to reach out to prospective students and their employers with whatever spark makes that program unique.

As a result, program directors say that while enrollment may be down slightly from what it was five years ago, they're still going strong, attracting students, and giving them the language skills they need to be competitive and help their companies thrive. And that's helping business English programs themselves to thrive.

## Curriculum Changes

The International Language Institute (ILI) of Massachusetts has so many internationally based students



### International students studying business English at the International Language Institute prepare for presentations.

wanting U.S. English educations that a new program launches every four weeks.

“Everybody hops on the Internet,” says Director of Programs Carolyn Gear. “We cater to business, so we have a lot of dates people can start. They can pick a date several weeks away and have time to plan their schedules. Having that flexibility is very valuable.”

ILI is going into its second year of membership with the International Association of Language Centers, which allows it to work with about 104 different language schools around the world to identify prospective students and tailor its program to its target audience. It’s also a member of several other associations and formal groups of language schools.

“We get a variety of students in our program,” says Gear. Students range in age from 18 to about 60; some are full-time students hoping to gain fluency before entering a university setting, and some are long-established professionals hoping to reduce their native accents or improve their presentation skills.

Students at ILI are enrolled both in group classes and in one-on-one tutoring sessions to get the most out of their time in the program. Students also have the benefit of at-home software they can work with during non-school hours, and they live with host families to converse in English during their free time. Additionally, they’re encouraged to network with U.S. business people in the community through a variety of trips and programs.

“We often bring students to Rotary International Club meetings and we work with the Chamber of Commerce to help them meet people here,” says Gear. “We go out into the community and have them talk about their culture and their companies. We have them present and videotape them so they can see themselves, and then everybody else gives feedback as well. Our focus is getting them speaking English in a business setting.”

Most students stay at ILI for four weeks, but some are there for up to 12 depending on their incoming level of English and what they hope to accomplish during their stay.

Other institutions feature longer programs. Georgetown University’s Center for Language Education and Development asks its enrollees to commit to two full semesters, but will accept students for just one depending on their needs and timeframe.

“Our students leave here with a Business and Professional English Certificate, and they’re really advanced level students,” says Christa Hansen, director of special programs and program development. “They come in with a score of 500 [out of a possible

677] on the paper-based TOEFL for advanced English instruction, and they also take some business management courses while they're here."

Students at Georgetown learn spoken and written business English in classes of about 10 to 15 students that work on language 20 hours per week. "They're working on everything from oral presentations to PowerPoint to interviewing to resume skills," says Hansen. "They learn all the kinds of things that will make them more effective."

Drexel University also caters to advanced-level students with its pre-MBA English program that attracts students who already hold their bachelor's degrees and have tested into high-intermediate levels in reading and speaking. Students enroll into an 11-week program and can opt to join the class at the five and -a-half week point depending on how they test.

"We're seeing a change that's going on in all English programs, and that is a lot fewer sponsored students," says Associate Director of Special Programs Mara Blake-Ward. "We're seeing fewer students from Japan, for example. With the economy, it's a lot tougher, and students are a lot savvier and trying to see where they can get more bang for their buck. So it's a lot more competitive."

## Facing Competition

One way Drexel has upped the ante for its programs is by leaving behind traditional ESL textbooks and teaching largely from real-world case studies, giving intensive business English a whole new, more relevant meaning to students.

"We don't use case studies exclusively, but we are using them a lot more than we used to," says Blake-Ward. "They're often used in actual business schools, and they're authentic materials. Our students want to be exposed to that."

"I hate to say it, but many ESL textbooks for the American market are dumbed-down. They're babyish and almost insulting to adults," she says. "I can't use them. I don't want to use them."

Instead, she turns to the business world and the media to provide English instruction that's extremely relevant to young professionals and MBA hopefuls.

"I use a lot of materials—the *Wall Street Journal*, cases from Harvard Business School. Students really enjoy them. They're authentic and they're challenging. But you have to find the appropriate ones. You have to know your students' interests. They like things that are very current."

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**“I would call our curriculum ever-evolving,” says Hansen. “We deal with many different population groups, and we find that each one has its own strengths and weaknesses.”**

Other schools take a similar approach. Jeff Malik, Intensive American English Institute, Austin, Texas, says his intensive English program doesn't use a textbook.

“We use a lot of online components. We might start a day by reading a passage from a business journal and having a discussion about that,” he says. “And then the next group might give a presentation.”

This approach both keeps the courses fresh and interesting to students, and also helps minimize cost, which has let the institute keep tuition stable for several semesters.

“The Austin market is somewhat flooded for ESL schools,” Malik says. “Textbook prices don't ever go down, and students don't ever get more pleased to pay for them. We keep that in mind, and we give our teachers the flexibility to propose materials they'd like to teach.” These include newspapers, online sources, and plain old conversation during the day.

“We also feature an ‘English for Recreation’ component,” he says, which proves very popular with students. “They learn how to function in the English-speaking society. We might ask students to reserve a lane at a bowling alley.” The students have fun bowling, but also practice their idioms and American slang while making the reservation and inviting others to join them.

“They don't want to be out on the street saying things like, ‘How is it going,’” says Malik. “They want to sound a bit more like native speakers so people aren't pointing them out as being international students.”

Blake-Ward says her students visit local companies and are encouraged to ask questions and converse about the businesses in that kind of real-world setting to improve their conversational skills and get a look at how U.S. businesses operate.

Others say they adjust what's taught and how the classes learn by the skills and interests of each individual group.

“I would call our curriculum ever-evolving,” says Hansen. “We deal with many different population groups, and we find that each one has its own strengths and weaknesses. We constantly refresh our materials, but we try to take a communicative approach to learning. We do a lot of project- and task-based learning here.”

## Marketing

Along with changes to the curricula, intensive business English programs are finding that traditional marketing just doesn't work anymore, and they're having to go out and find students in new places, with new messages.

One way is by doing a bit more hand-holding for students who want to enter their programs. “Students from certain countries have been having difficulties getting visas to come here,” says Malik. “We still continue to get applications from those countries—Vietnam is one that leaps to mind—and for whatever reason, the students aren't able to pass their visa interviews. So we try and stay in constant contact with those students as they go through the process, and we offer our help and our support and try to get them that visa if we can.”

His program has also found great value in mixing up its schedule to offer students more flexibility in their classes, letting them schedule around other jobs or activities, or their own schedules.

“We've taken a step towards what a junior college might be,” says Malik. “Students can choose their classes and choose their times—they can choose classes that are more interesting than ‘grammar three.’ They can then create their schedule, taking classes that start at noon and go through evening if they want to. We offer enough class times to let them keep their student visas and give them the schedules they want.”

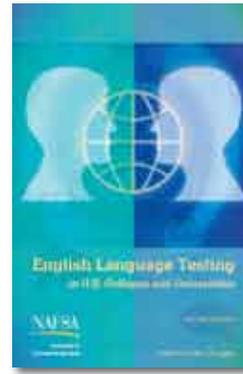
That's been very helpful in basic word-of-mouth marketing, he says. “We're seeing that start to trickle out, and we're anticipating great returns on those schedule changes,” he says. “We've had a few students register who told us they've heard about it already.”

Others say they've stepped up their own networking efforts. “We've marketed through joining different associations and groups,” says Gear. “We also have a Facebook page, and we're constantly looking at ways to upgrade our Web site.” Her school is also networking with other universities—both locally and internationally—to bring students in before they start their MBA programs.



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“With the help of the Department of Commerce, we’re trying to create a nonprofit organization that will promote our work with area colleges to create one Web site,” she says. “We’re hoping to create this Web site so our name gets out there more.” That way, she says, students looking for a U.S. education in anything from business to pharmacy to aviation would find her program through their research in those areas.

“I really feel strongly about collaboration,” she says. “The group has met three or four times so far. Trying to get everybody in one room is always a challenge, but we’re hopeful that we’ll see this in 2010.”

Focusing on the time needed to complete the program and the relevance to business is critical, program directors say, particularly as the market becomes more competitive and dollars more scarce.

“Most of our students who self-fund themselves have received sabbatical time from their companies,” says Hansen. “They’re usually planning to return to their home countries to work in a more international position than they had previously.”

**KIM FERNANDEZ** is a freelance writer in Bethesda, Maryland. Her article, “Facilitating Fluency,” appeared in International Educator’s 2009 intensive languages supplement (March/April).



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