

## **Developing an ESL Tutoring Lab on a Shoestring Budget**

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This paper presents a summary and analysis of a year-long project to develop an ESL tutoring lab at California State Dominguez Hills. The project, funded by Title III, had as its main goal the establishment of a tutoring lab specifically targeting the burgeoning population of nonnative speakers of English on campus. In the report, we describe how the project was carried out (e.g., tutor recruitment, training, set up) and provide a description of the major problems which arose during the program and how they were overcome. The report also includes a detailed plan for training tutors of composition based on a systematic approach to academic essay writing. The systematic approach enables tutors to more easily scaffold tutees in L2 composition.

This paper is presented not as a model of how to develop an ESL tutoring lab, but as one response to the needs of an institution with limited resources (i.e., funding, time, materials) for helping L2 students with their language needs. We hope that this discussion of our experience including successes and difficulties will help others needing to design tutoring programs under constraints as ours. The paper includes sample schematics, forms, notices, tutor testimonials, other material generated from the study.

We would like to be clear that we do not believe we are providing a blueprint for the establishment of all ESL tutoring labs. We are aware that many institutions already have well-developed tutoring labs that serve the needs of ESL students. We do think, however, that many teachers and administrators seeking to develop their own ESL tutoring labs with limited resources will find this report useful since it describes the requisites and process of establishing such a lab on campus. Others may gain insights from the descriptions of the difficulties and successes encountered during the year-long project.

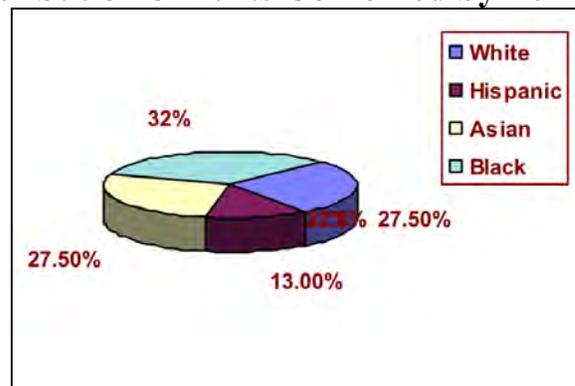
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It may be of use to know our motivations for developing an ESL tutoring lab on campus. One reason was the need to establish a place where ESL students in particular could receive help with their language difficulties in academic English. Other tutoring centers on campus did not specifically target this population. Another motivation was the challenge to establish on very limited funds a tutoring center that would be viable and potentially become an established and recognized institution on campus. We also had become increasingly aware that as our institution's minority enrollment was growing, the number of nonnative speakers of English was correspondingly burgeoning. We had to quickly begin to meet the academic language needs of these nonnative speakers of English.

The particular population which we served is not unlike that of other institutions found in urban areas of the United States. California State University, Dominguez Hills (CSUDH) is located in the greater Los Angeles area. As such, its students reflect the spectrum of ethnicities currently found in large cities. During the 1994-1995 academic year, 73% of students receiving their B.A. degrees were minorities. As Diagram 1 indicates, the demographics on campus were the following: 32% Black, 13% Asian, 27.5% Hispanic, 27.5% White.

**Diagram 1:**  
**Distribution of B.A.s Conferred by Ethnicity**



### Lab Set-up

To set up an ESL lab, several critical elements had to be considered. Central to operation would be key personnel trained in ESL methods and composition to supervise the running of the lab. In this case, two faculty members (a professor in Graduate Education and a professor in TESL) became faculty supervisors. Apart from these supervisors, a location for the tutoring lab and a group of student tutors were all that would be required to

begin this operation. In our case, a very modest amount of funds was available to hire tutors in hopes that the institution would assume financial responsibility after the first year of operation.

In terms of location, we needed a classroom in a readily accessible area on campus containing a blackboard, bulletin board, telephone, and tables and chairs. Desks with drawers, bookshelves, file cabinets, and mail boxes for tutors would also have been useful (but not absolutely necessary) equipment. Central to the functioning of the lab was an appointment book and various forms (discussed in “Daily Operation”).

From the very onset of this project we realized that we were lacking one critical element: a needs analysis of our future tutees. However, such an endeavor was an impossibility given the fact that the lab had to be set up and running in the same semester in which it was established. This is an important point to make since we are certain that others like ourselves are working under similar pressing conditions. We solved this problem, however, by having our tutors survey tutees’ needs during the course of the semester.

### **Tutor Recruitment**

The pool from which we recruited student-tutors consisted of undergraduate students in the TESOL certificate program and graduates in the TESOL M.A. program. These students, most of whom are new to ESL teaching, were interested in gaining hands-on experience with ESL students. Still other student-tutors were drawn from the School of Education’s M.A. in Multicultural Education program. These Education students, most of them K-12 teachers, wanted experience in teaching adult ESL students and in teaching composition. They believed this experience would improve their ability to teach writing to their K-12 students.

Both faculty supervisors in these programs encouraged students to apply for tutor positions. Then, once a pool of tutor applicants was obtained, tutors were screened in terms of their writing ability. This was done by having tutors submit samples of extended expository prose. Students were to be compensated in several ways: monetarily through hourly wages and/or through credit earned toward a practicum in the TESL programs.

Tutors were to receive a variety of benefits in working as an ESL tutor: (1) students would gain valuable experience which could be noted on

their resumes; (2) students would receive letters of recommendation from faculty supervisors; (3) students would benefit monetarily and/or earn academic credit; and (4) students would improve their own writing skills and teaching ability. As we identified these benefits, we used these as ways to entice additional tutors to participate in the project

### **Tutee Recruitment**

In order to recruit ESL students as tutees, two basic strategies were used. First, faculty were enlisted in recruiting new student tutees. This was done by notifying faculty across campus through flyers and e-mail. Second, students needed to be alerted. This was accomplished by placing ads in the campus newspaper and personally contacting individuals who could refer students to the lab (e.g., professors in ethnic studies, financial aid and student advising offices). Furthermore, flyers were posted in various strategic places throughout the university.

### **Tutor Training**

Tutors were trained throughout the academic year. However, there were two major sessions for newly-recruited tutors. The first session was given to a select group of students recruited in the early fall. The second session was given to a larger population of tutors recruited in early winter for the spring term. The following describes the outlines of each training session. Following that, the paper describes the approach to the instruction of writing which was used over the course of the year: the Systematic Approach to Academic Essay Writing (SAAEW) (Medina, 1994).

#### ***First Semester Tutor Training for Newly-Recruited Tutors.***

During the first semester of operation, the newly-recruited tutors were trained by a faculty supervisor during six one-and-a-half-hour sessions. All of these sessions were held and videotaped in a television studio on campus. Videotaping allowed students whose schedules did not allow them to attend the meetings to acquire the material on their own in the campus videotape library. Even more importantly, the videotapes were developed to facilitate the process of training tutors in subsequent semesters.

Tutor training sessions generally consisted of two parts. During the first fifteen minutes, business items were covered including announcements, reminders regarding hiring procedures, forms, and deadlines. As the semester progressed, general announcements were made and tutor's schedules and

time sheets were distributed and collected. During the remainder of the time, tutors were trained in writing instruction, using the “Systematic Approach to Academic Essay Writing (See section on Systematic Approach to Academic Essay Writing).

### ***Second Semester Tutor Training for Continuing Tutors.***

During this period, tutors were further instructed in approaches to dealing with ESL writing. Students learned how to prioritize errors by examining sample ESL essays. They also worked on fine-tuning their interactions with tutees by doing role-plays of tutoring sessions. Further, tutors were required to read published articles on the art of essay commenting (e.g., Brinton et al 1989, Fathman & Whalley 1990, Leki 1990, and Sommers 1980), then asked to comment on ESL students’ essays based on what they had learned from the readings.

### **Systematic Approach to Academic Essay Writing (SAAEW).**

It was critical that we identify an instructional approach to academic writing which was appropriate for our students and tutors alike. Given that our student-tutors were coming to us with a variety of orientations regarding composition instruction, we carefully considered how best to train students in teaching the writing process. We felt that traditional methods for teaching process writing through an inductive approach would be too time-consuming for our students to use with their ESL tutees. Rather, time-efficient, structuring techniques that would provide *visual* formats on which tutor and tutee could center the writing conference offered the best alternative. As a caveat, we realize that many excellent ESL texts for teaching academic writing already exist (e.g., Oshima & Hogue 1991; Reid 1988 and Reid 1994 among others); however, we felt that SAAEW would provide tutees with methods and materials readily adaptable to a variety of assignments and flexible enough to allow tutors to focus in on any problem area in the tutee’s writing process (e.g., brainstorming, paragraph development).

The Systematic Approach to Academic Essay Writing (SAAEW) originally evolved as a result of instructing essay writing to foreign undergraduate and graduate students at the American Language Institute at the University of Southern California. While instructing academic essay writing to foreign students, it became clear that teaching process writing through inductive methods was neither time efficient nor palpably clear. Thus, to resolve this problem, the author performed a task analysis of the academic essay writing process from beginning to end (Medina 1994). The task analysis

showed that expert writers progressed through six basic steps when writing an academic paper. These steps were then visually represented in the form of a model so that students could emulate the expert's behavior. (See Diagram 2).

**Diagram 2**  
**Six Step Model of Academic Essay Writing Steps**

PLAN					Write	Revise
		CONTENT	PLAN	FORM PLAN		
P r o c e s s e s s	STEP 1 Understand Question/Directive	STEP 2 Identify Ideas	STEP 3 Organize Ideas	STEP 4 Structure Essay	STEP 5 Transform Essay Struc- ture	STEP 6 Revise Draft
		Brainstorm Sheet	Outline of Ideas	Essay Structure Outline	Draft	Revised Draft
P r o d u c t s						

The task analysis also revealed that each step in the process produced a *product* of some kind. For example, during Step 2 in which ideas are identified, the expert produced a series of disassociated ideas. Thus when instructing students on how to come up with ideas for essay writing, students are asked to produce ideas on a brainstorm sheet--thereby creating a product of sorts. Of course, expert writers do not always record much of what they do each step of the way toward a final product; nonetheless, they do generate products along the way even if those are mental

To further assist students with each step of the process, Medina developed a series of forms which had two functions: (1) to provide a *scaffold to support students* through each step of the essay writing process; and (2) to require students to *generate a product* for each stage of the writing process. These forms, i.e., "written products" had the further benefit of allowing the instructor to evaluate students' progress at each stage. Without such

a concrete visual, the instructor had no way of knowing whether the students had understood and were correctly carrying out each step.

### ***Instructing Tutors to Use the Systematic Approach to Essay Writing.***

Prior to the training session, all tutors were supplied with copies of a handbook which described the approach (Medina 1994). After the students were familiarized with the background (e.g., rationale, history) of the SAAEW, they were provided an overview of the six-step model. The entire training procedure involved acquainting students with the activities and products associated with each step of the process. An overhead projector was used to display authentic ESL student papers as they evolved each step of the way.

Training sessions were thus broken into two major phases. The first phase of training involved demonstrating the six-step approach through the use of authentic student samples and group-writing of an essay using the approach. The second phase of training, which followed several weeks later, came after the student tutors had been using the model with their tutees. Here, sessions focused on problem areas including dealing with errors in language structure, idioms, and vocabulary.

Although tutors had been given a structuring method, the SAAEW, as a tool with which to help tutees work on weaknesses in their writing, tutors were free to use other strategies that might be useful in conveying lessons and ideas. Most importantly, though, students were advised that their function was not to “doctor up” student papers to make them perfect. Rather, as tutors, their role was to help tutees develop their writing skills.

During the second semester, new student tutors were recruited. As this new group had no prior training in SAAEW and there was little time for extra training sessions, the student-tutors taught themselves the SAAEW by studying the handbook and viewing the videotapes that had been developed during the first semester. After this was done, the faculty supervisor followed-up with group meetings in which questions were answered and special circumstances dealt with. As mentioned previously, the continuing group of tutors, participated in second semester training.

### ***Benefits of Using SAAEW with Tutors***

The scaffolding features of the SAAEW was highly helpful to tutors. Using a writing approach to teaching writing in a tutoring lab always pre-

sents challenges for tutors. The SAAEW provided a unique way for tutors to go about their business with little guesswork. Tutors learned what behaviors were expected of them. Also, they had concrete visual tools with which to work including copies of the SAAEW writing model and forms for each step. As a result, tutors were more confident about what they were doing and felt the quality of their instruction improved.

### ***Benefits of Using SAAEW with Tutees***

Student tutees also greatly benefited from the highly structured approach of the SAAEW. Tutees' needs were met in several ways. First, because of the deductive instructional orientation of the 6-step approach, instruction was *rapid and explicit*. Second, the approach provided much support for students who required it. This included students whose foreign language training in writing had included rhetorical styles different from those of academic English. On the other hand, it also helped students whose background in composition had never included formal instruction on academic essay format. This support was now provided through the SAAEW's (1) visual model which outlines the steps in the writing process, and (2) the forms which have been developed to facilitate each step of the writing process

### **Daily Operation**

If students were to be able to make use of the ESL lab with any regularity, then hours of operation would have to be established. The hours deemed most suitable, given students' available hours and funds, were Monday through Thursday 10 A.M. to 6 P.M. Insufficient funds precluded offering tutoring during evening hours.

A schedule of student-tutor hours was developed. On the average, tutors worked from two to four hours per week depending upon their availability. It is important here to emphasize the need to be flexible in modifying the schedule to accommodate to changing tutor schedules.

After a weekly time schedule was developed, were created to facilitate the making of appointments. Students could be referred to the lab in two ways. Students could enter the lab on a walk-in basis or they could be referred by a faculty member. When the faculty referred students to the lab, they had to complete the appropriate referral form (see Appendix 1: Form A). Form A consisted of a two-page duplicate. On this form, professors in-

licated specific areas upon which they wanted the tutor to focus. After the end of the tutoring session, the student-tutor completed the form, keeping a copy for the lab records, and sending one to the referring professor so that s/he would be aware of the content of the tutoring session. This was an important procedure. Faculty needed assurances that ESL tutors were neither functioning as proofreaders nor as “ghost” authors. Form B (see Appendix 1) consisted of a blank appointment card. It was used by the student-tutor to set up the following appointment. Once the appointment form was completed with an appointment date and time (and the appointment logged into the office appointment calendar), it was given to the tutee.

### ***Trouble-Shooting during Daily Operation.***

As the ESL lab continued to develop, the faculty supervisors found that there were innumerable details associated with the lab which required attention and follow-through. However, because the faculty supervisors were both instructing full-time in other departments, they were unable to be present for any extended period of time in the lab. Consequently, the problems and daily operations could not be dealt with by either faculty member on an ongoing process. It was thus determined that a responsible tutor could provide that needed direction by serving as a “tutor supervisor”. A tutor supervisor was then hired to tend to these daily tasks. The student supervisor became critical for identifying and solving daily problems including: (1) dealing with tutee “no-shows,” (2) maintaining a clean, secure and quiet atmosphere, (3) making certain that there were sufficient quantities of forms, (4) collecting time-sheets, (5) alerting faculty supervisors of changes in tutors’ schedules, and (6) dealing with tutor tardiness. It is important to note that the completion of campus payroll time sheets was a recurring problem and therefore required additional attention on the supervisor’s part. The faculty supervisors and tutor supervisor together addressed these issues by developing and distributing a list of guidelines (see Appendix 2). Given the institutional responsibilities of the faculty supervisors, the student supervisor proved invaluable for the daily operation of the lab.

### **Lessons Learned**

Overall, the establishment of the ESL tutoring lab at CSUDH was successful. Since its establishment, the lab has continued to grow each semester and is serving the needs of the targeted linguistic minority students it was created to serve. Thus, during the first semester of operation total of 14 students were served. By the end of the second semester, 50 students had

been served, while in the most recent semester of operation, nearly 100 students have made use of the lab. The experience, however, has also taught us many lessons. The most noteworthy of these involve tutee recruitment, tutor and tutee evaluation, and tutor training.

### ***Recruiting Immigrant Students as Tutees.***

The recruitment of immigrant students, as opposed to foreign students, was one of the primary goals of the project. Yet, during the first semester of operation, we noticed a dearth of immigrant students coming to the lab. Many of the ESL students who had been born in the U.S. did not take advantage of the tutoring services because of a stigma associated with being an ESL student. Therefore, during the second year of operation, the tutoring lab was renamed “Tutoring Lab for ESL and Academic English” After this change in the lab’s title had been made, larger numbers of immigrant students began coming to the lab.

### ***Evaluating Tutors and Tutees.***

As mentioned previously, there was little time to do needs analysis before the start of the semester. Thus, in order to deal with this problem, tutors were encouraged from the outset to perform a needs analysis of their tutees’ English needs by conducting oral interviews with them and completing a prepared form. This form included an evaluation of the tutees’ linguistic strengths and weaknesses in the four skill areas. Second, tutors were asked to evaluate their own tutoring at the end of each tutoring session. (see Appendix 3). This evaluation form was to be used during tutor training sessions to encourage the sharing of techniques and insights.

Tutees were also given a voice in the evaluation process. They were asked to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of their student tutors in mid-semester and end-semester cycles. Tutees were given anonymous questionnaires to complete.

### ***Tutor Training.***

Although tutor training sessions were, on the whole, quite effective, the following are a few recommendations. If tutors are to be paid through the school, a model of a completed personnel hiring form should be provided to students to speed up the hiring process. Student-tutors should be docked pay when they fail to attend training sessions. All training sessions should be videotaped and videotapes placed in the library so that they can

be used in subsequent training sessions. More role-playing of tutor-tutee training sessions should be included, and, if possible, a two-way mirror could be used for training

### ***Lab Operations.***

Lab operations would eventually become routine, yet we found that those were greatly helped by the following: (1) Identifying and training a tutor supervisor from the ranks of the tutors as early as possible in the lab development. (2) Facilitating communication among faculty supervisors, the tutor supervisor, and tutors through the use of e-mail, and failing that through the development of a mailbox system in the lab. (3) Development of a file system containing samples of essay questions from classes in the various disciplines, essay guidelines, and models of papers from across the disciplines.

### **Conclusion**

Initially, we thought that it would be impossible to establish a tutoring lab on limited funds. Our experience shows that it was in fact possible to do so. In retrospect, we are thankful that we pursued this project despite the many obstacles before us. With a few material objects and basic human resources, we did in fact create a viable functioning tutoring writing lab which now serves the linguistic needs of hundreds of students each semester. It is our hope that others, with similar aspirations and limited resources will be motivated to create their own ESL tutoring labs. One of our student-tutors best summed up the thoughts of all of those who participated in the program:

We owe it to ourselves and our students to guard this tutoring program well. With all of this positive energy we are confident that we will succeed at providing students with the instruction which they need. (Crain 1994)

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## Appendix 1

**Form A**  
**REFERRAL TO THE ESL WRITING LABORATORY**

NAME OF STUDENT

NAME OF INSTRUCTOR

COURSE & SECTION

SIGNATURE OF TUTOR

DATE OF TUTORING SESSION

**Form B**  
**APPOINTMENT FOR ESL TUTORING**

STUDENT:

TUTOR:

DATE:

TIME:

Please call to cancel or change appointment.

## **APPENDIX 2 GUIDELINES FOR ESL TUTORS**

1. Be prompt and on time to your tutoring session.
  - a. If you are going to be late to your session, please contact tutoring lab.
  - b. If you cannot make it to your appointed session, please contact the tutor supervisor by note or phoning in at least 24 hours in advance in order to reschedule another tutor for your session.
2. Check your file for any incoming messages, new information, and payroll timesheets (to be distributed twice a month).
3. When a student makes an appointment for tutoring either in person or by phone.
  - a. Record appointment in schedule book.
  - b. Verify from tutor schedule sheet that a tutor is available for appointment.
  - c. Fill out student appointment form.
4. Upon completion of tutoring session, fill out referral to writing lab form.
  - a. Body of form should be used to include pertinent information regarding tutoring aspects covered with the student.
  - b. Place completed Referral forms in coordinator's file. (These forms will be forwarded and a copy sent to the faculty supervisor.
5. Once a week after your tutoring sessions are finished, please fill out an Evaluation form.
  - a. This form is for tutors to express his or her opinions, suggestions, and ideas regarding the quality of the tutoring session.
  - b. Place completed Evaluation forms in coordinator's file.
  - c. These forms will be forwarded to the faculty supervisors for review and further discussion in tutoring meetings.

### APPENDIX 3

#### TUTOR SESSION EVALUATION FORM

1. What techniques are effective in your tutoring sessions?
2. Do you have ideas and suggestions to share with others ?
3. What kinds of information/techniques would help you to do your job better?