



by Emma Mafi (Microbiology '25)
 BYU's English Language Center has helped thousands of students learn English, setting the stage for a myriad of careers worldwide.

For those who study at BYU's English Language Center (ELC), learning English opens doors for the future—and in many ways, it changes lives. Ben McMurry, the ELC's director, explains that the ELC provides students with enhanced language skills and ample opportunities for professional development: "We are helping them learn English, and we're very successful with that; but, we're also helping nourish the entire individual so that they can benefit the world."

The Inner Workings of the ELC

Since its establishment in 1980, the ELC has offered an intensive English program for international students who aspire to attend college in the US but lack the language proficiency to do so. ELC curriculum is designed to offer support at every English level, strengthening students' language skills regardless of their initial English proficiency. Enrolled full- or part-time ELC students are placed in one of seven proficiency levels, four of which focus on foundational English (foundations prep, foundations A,

foundations B, and foundations C) and three others centered on academic language (academic A, academic B, and university prep).

Once placed, students spend 18 hours each week developing their language abilities in four main areas: listening and speaking, grammar, reading, and writing. Computerized Language Acquisition Tests (LATs) evaluate students' progress in these categories, and, if sufficient progress is detected, students can move up to a higher proficiency level the next semester.

BYU students studying TESOL play a large role in this process as ELC teachers. Thus, the ELC supports both international and BYU students simultaneously: "We're trying to be a positive institution," McMurry says, "where all students feel like they can learn and grow."

One Institution, Thousands of Stories

"The things that ELC students learn," McMurry says, "and the experiences they get, they take back to their country or use while staying here." Many ELC students go on to attend college, including Ensign College or BYU, settle down in the US, or return home with a marketable skill. By interacting with students who study at the ELC, McMurry has come to believe that no matter where they go after, "they share the light that they felt" with the communities they join. This is true for all students, many of whom are not members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

For Mahonry Soto (Global Supply Chain Management '27), a former ELC student from Chihuahua, Mexico, the center was an

influential source of light. "Growing up," he says, "I tried to prioritize having God with me in my studies, but where I'm from, it's not common to talk about religion in education. When I came to the ELC, I experienced a completely different and better way to learn. The ELC gave me the tools I needed to open myself to a new world—new cultures, ideas, perspectives, and knowledge."

Soto's time at the ELC taught him the importance of including Christ in his studies, and as he invited the Spirit into the classroom through intentional prayer and Christ-centered study, he saw a palpable change in his

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own abilities: "The ELC helped me become more confident and competitive in my education and future career. It gave me the ability to handle complex conversations and express my skills in a new language and environment."

Beatriz Santelo (Pre-Business '29), who finished at the ELC in August 2023, also found studying English to be an integral part of her education for a similar reason. She first felt prompted to learn English while serving a mission and enrolled at the ELC shortly after receiving an associate degree in financial management. "I started with just the basics of English," she recalls. "Even though my English still isn't perfect, the ELC helped me grow until I was truly ready to move on to the next level: academics."

Santelo's time at the ELC opened countless doors for her and helped her accomplish her lifelong dream of attending BYU. "Studying English allowed me to study abroad at my dream university," she says. "Because of it, I can now pursue a degree in one of the best accounting programs in the country."

Like Santelo, Daniela Ortega (Linguistics MA '24) was accepted into BYU



shortly after completing her studies at the ELC. Making it into BYU was a big accomplishment for Ortega, but she recalls that the community and the experiences she had while learning English were instrumental to her success as a master's student. "Thinking about all the memories I made at the ELC helped me get through the difficult times." Ortega explains that the ELC influences students' lives even after they move on; in fact, in many ways leaving the ELC is just the beginning.

46 Years of the ELC

For 46 years, the ELC has helped students like Soto, Santelo, and Ortega learn English and integrate into American culture. So far, the center has offered 10 thousand hours of experiential learning to BYU undergrads each year and has welcomed international students from a total of 90 different countries.

Though learning English may feel daunting at times, it never seems impossible to the students who join the ELC and its supportive community: "There are no words to express my gratitude for this program and those who make it possible," Soto says. "It's more than just a training place—it transforms lives when there is a willingness to learn and grow." ❏



Photos by Faith Redden (Photography and Lens-Based Design '27)




Watch this Beacons of Light video to see how Daniela Ortega's life was changed by the ELC.
 (bit.ly/BYUELCL)