meeting americans!
Ok. So you've searched long and hard to find the appropriate school at which to study ESL. Now you have arrived and settled into your ESL classes. But where are all the American students? You know that your Intensive English language program is located on or near a university or college campus that is home to thousands of students. But where are they? How do you access that network of personal tutors? How come no American students are knocking on your door asking to chat with you so you can practice your English?

If you are feeling this way, you are not alone. A common concern that I hear from students is that they came to the US to study English with Americans, but they feel as if they are still isolated from the "native speakers."

One misperception that many international students have is that if they come to an English-speaking country to study English, native speakers will search them out to help them with their language studies. You have to remember that the local students are busily involved in their studies, social life, and family responsibilities. They are not going to go out of their way to talk to an international student who is too shy to begin a conversation. However, if the foreign student makes the effort to make the initial contact, then more often than not, the local student is happy to chat and make your acquaintance.

So how does an international student make that initial contact? Below are some ways to go about breaking out of this isolated state and getting involved on campus, including some points to consider when choosing the program in which you will study.

First, choose a language program that is located on a university or college campus. When searching for a language program, make sure to ask where the program is located and if they are not only affiliated with a university, but located on or next to the campus. A language program that is located on campus offers infinitely more opportunities for you to use your English than one that is not.

Next, get involved with campus activities and events. A university is not only a place of study. It is a social Mecca. Every week throughout the school year you can find numerous events to keep you involved and using your English. Examples of the types of events you will find include free movies, lectures, sporting events, discussions, cultural events, service opportunities, etc. If you are not someone who easily strikes up a conversation with strangers, you might try the following. Before the event you plan on attending, write or memorize 2-3 questions you will ask someone at the event. Even if you know the answer, just going through the process of asking the question and listening to the response is useful for your language development. It is amazing how one simple question can result in a new friendship.

One problem can be finding out about what events are offered on campus. Most universities publish a newspaper or newsletter. Make it a habit to pick up the school paper once a week to check for interesting events. Another suggestion is to look for a language program that has a fully staffed activities department that keeps students informed about what is happening on campus. Not all language programs offer this service. However, if you can find a program that does, they will be able to help ensure that you are informed about what activities and events are happening on campus.

Another suggestion for getting involved on campus is to check into what clubs are available on campus. Most universities have hundreds of clubs available to students. Available clubs may include not only academic and athletic clubs, but also social clubs. Joining a club is an ideal way to practice your English and make local friends. By joining a club, you immediately have access to students with similar interests as you, which also gives you an easy way to begin a conversation. Ask the activities department at your language program to see what clubs are available on campus for you to join. When choosing a language program,

"...get involved with campus activities and events. A university is not only a place of study; it is a social mecca..."
these classes is another wonderful way of meeting local students. Although you may not think that you will improve your English much by taking a swimming class, you will meet local students and make connections that will open the door to making friends and having more opportunities to practice your language skills.

For students who are planning on attending a university after their language studies, and in order to facilitate campus involvement even more fully, look for a program that has an international undergraduate or graduate preparation program. These programs usually not only prepare international students for university-level work, but also prepare them for social life on campus, which is a major part of the overall university experience. Advisors in these programs are available to counsel students on how to get involved more fully on campus.

The areas discussed above are just a few of the ways you can improve your English by getting involved on campus. Many of these things you can do once you arrive at the school of your choosing. However, one key element to having many opportunities available to you is choosing the right school. Therefore, advanced planning and research when choosing a language program are critical.

In summary, in order to take advantage of the wonderful opportunities available to international students, you should remember the following when looking for an English language program:

- Find a program located on a university campus
- Find a program that has a social support network, such as an activities department
- Find out what clubs are available at the associated university (make sure to ask if language program students are welcome to join the clubs)
- Find out what recreational classes are available
- Ask if the program has an international undergraduate or graduate preparation course

By doing a little research before you choose a language program, you will have more opportunities to improve your English after you arrive. However, once you arrive at the language program, you still need to get involved. Remember to ask for help finding appropriate events to attend and be brave and force yourself to ask questions at the event.

By following these few guidelines, not only will your English improve more rapidly, but you will have a much more culturally fulfilling experience while studying abroad.

 Bradley Gilpin is the Assistant Director of English Language Programs at the University of California, Irvine Extension’s English & Certificates for Internationals, a CEA accredited program

...by doing a little research before you choose a language program, you will have more opportunities to improve your English after you arrive...