

# Spoken

People Are Talking about  
the English Language Center Turning 30

# WORDS

by CAROLYN MILLER



In 1978, six Peabody graduate students enrolled in the new Center for Orientation Programs in English—otherwise known as COPE—as the first recorded class of Vanderbilt's English as a Second Language (ESL) program. Housed within then-independent George Peabody College for Teachers, the full-time study program was designed to provide graduate students, student spouses and family, and special groups with quality English instruction. Originally located in the basement of the Peabody Home Economics Building, the first COPE facilities consisted of one small classroom, an audio language lab, and a closet-sized, two-desk staff office.

From this humble beginning, the ESL program at Vanderbilt—now called the English Language Center (ELC)—grew gradually, peaking at 146 in the mid- to late-1990s and now housed in its own building on 18th Avenue South. Throughout the past 30 years of growth and development, there has been one constant figure—Lee Martin.

“At the start, the staff was me,” says Lee Martin, now Assistant Director of the English Language Center. “We hired one more teacher when we had 18 Brazilian students arrive.”

As the original COPE coordinator in 1978, Martin has a unique perspective on the program's history. Coming from more than five years' experience in teaching ESL

in the private sector, Martin was instrumental in the program's initiation. “As COPE coordinator, I was privileged to be in a position to formulate the program right from its inception,” says Martin.

According to Martin, the development of ESL at Vanderbilt may have been a reaction to ongoing developments throughout Nashville in the late 1970s. “At that time, Chancellor Alexander Heard and Nashville Mayor Richard Fulton were overseeing various aspects of a rapidly diversifying city and expanding university. The '70s and '80s saw a significant increase in Nashville's international community, and Vanderbilt played a major role,” says Martin.

As a teacher's college, Peabody seemed the natural setting for an English language instruction program, but one short year later, Peabody officially merged with Vanderbilt University and jurisdiction of the program was transferred to Vanderbilt's Office of International Services. “The merge with Vanderbilt presented an unforeseen opportunity for the COPE program, since Vanderbilt had a larger international community and provided a much more expansive need,” says Martin. COPE's reputation quickly attracted diverse students from all over the world as well as the greater Nashville community.

Throughout three decades, the ELC's mission has not changed greatly, according to Sue Barone, Director of the ELC. “Despite years of restructuring and defining programs, supporting the internationalization efforts of the university and focusing on the specific language needs of international students, scholars, faculty, and staff have



Lee Martin



remained its constant mission,” Barone says. According to Fadh Al-Qurishah, a student from Saudi Arabia studying at the ELC, the program has made a significant impact on his English skills as well as his knowledge about cultures around the world.

“One of the most crucial experiences was that I learned about the diversity of cultures with the ELC community. Additionally, we shared the language experience with staff, faculty, and students from various countries. It is really an amazing place to participate,” says Al-Qurishah.

Martin believes the ELC inherently provides more than just language training.

“Internationals have to learn to interact in a culture, including the academic culture, that may be quite different from what they have previously known. ELC courses not only help students improve their English-language skills, they also facilitate their transition into academic study in the U.S.,” says Martin. For Al-Qurishah, this transition will take place this August, as a full-time undergraduate student at Vanderbilt.

Today, English language instruction in a higher education system is a necessary tool for students who wish to succeed at an English-speaking university. And according to Martin, “the future of internationalization at Vanderbilt promises to ensure the English Language Center's expansion, once again, in order to meet the academic community's needs for the next 30 years.”

For more information on the ELC, visit [www.vanderbilt.edu/ELC](http://www.vanderbilt.edu/ELC)