Backpacking, hiking, kayaking while learning English

By Cathy Zimmer : April 10th, 2012

UT’s American Language Institute students recently experienced on an outdoor learning adventure to the Grand Canyon, one of five trips planned this academic year.

UT students in the English Outdoors class posed for a photo at the Grand Canyon during their recent trip.

American Language Institute’s international students participate in outdoor adventures as part of English Outdoors, an experiential education course. Only advanced level English as second language students
are eligible to sign up for this intensive English reading and writing class.

Students in this class research, plan, execute and review a new trip every seven weeks. Students are responsible for covering their own cost of each trip.

“This type of outdoor learning program is the only one in the United States of its kind,” said Alex Wrege, English as a second language specialist in the American Language Institute and trip guide. “The students research, book and organize the trips. This was definitely a point of pride for the group and showed the students that research can be fun.”

He added, “Outdoor learning is a broad term that includes environmental education, recreational and adventure activities, personal and social development programs, expeditions, team building, leadership training, management development, education for sustainability, and adventure therapy. Outdoor learning provides direct active learning in the outdoors, readily developing learning skills of inquiry, experiment, feedback, reflection, review and cooperative learning.

“Not only does outdoor learning happen in the natural environments where participants can see, hear, touch and smell the real thing, it also happens in an arena where actions have real results and consequences,” Wrege said. “In addition, these experiences help our students strengthen their English speaking and writing skills.”

There is no limit to the experiences and curiosities that outdoor environments and activities can awaken, according to Wrege. Participants frequently discover potential, abilities and interests that surprise them and others.

Safety codes provide clear boundaries, learning goals give clear direction, and outdoor learning draws in energy and inspiration from all around. Broadening horizons is a common outcome.

“The program exists because research shows that being invested in learning is crucial in achieving results,” Wrege said. “Students in the outdoors program score higher in test scores, are more active readers, and learn vital leadership skills along the way.”

English Outdoors has conducted trips to Michigan Pictured Rocks and the Everglades, and will travel to the Smoky Mountains in May and Rocky Mountains in July.

English Outdoors is open to other UT students as well, and the group is eager to travel with more native speakers of English to help the students accomplish their language goals.

For more information, email Wrege at alexander.wrege@utoledo.edu.

The American Language Institute offers intensive English language instruction to those non-native speakers of English from around the world and in the community who wish to begin academic study or who need to learn English for personal or professional reasons.

The institute is part of the Center for International Studies and Programs, which supports internationalization efforts at The University of Toledo by creating links among students, faculty, staff, visiting scholars and the community that foster cross-cultural understanding and appreciation. The center encourages global citizenship through innovative educational, cultural and service-learning.
programming, and through student and scholar exchanges.