



NAME

AHMED ALQAHTANI

LENGTH

TWO YEARS

PROGRAM

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN,  
ESL SERVICES



## Finding New Paths in Special Education through ESL

Set goals to turn your dreams into reality, and then complete them one step at a time. Two years ago, Ahmed Alqahtani, a legally blind student from Saudi Arabia, did just that. He wanted to become proficient in English as a Second Language (ESL), meet new people, and complete academic graduate studies in the United States. At the time, those goals might have seemed quite ambitious.

To be honest with you I didn't imagine that I could speak English like this. Because it's not my native language and I would hear the radio two years ago and I couldn't understand anything.

After studying ESL at the University of Texas in Austin, he can converse with friends and professors, he has nearly completed an undergraduate degree, and he is applying to graduate school. In other words, it took him slightly less than two years to complete all three of his goals.

Ahmed's desire to learn English came from a larger interest in achieving a graduate degree in Special Education. During his undergraduate days in Saudi Arabia, he would visit mainstream schools and meet children with disabilities who were going through the education system just like he did, without receiving reasonable accommodations or supports. He wanted to have a chance to learn how education of students with disabilities is done in the United States to see what he could bring back to his country.

His opportunity ultimately came when, after working as a special education teaching assistant, he received an almost fully funded scholarship from his government that enabled him to take the leap.

In the beginning it was very challenging, because issues would come up due to differences in lifestyles between him and his three roommates. He began to feel homesick and thought about giving up multiple times.

Things improved after moving to a host family. He began to meet friends in his community of international students. And, he could express himself better in English.

Like many other international students with disabilities, Ahmed began his studies without extra support or accommodations, because he did not know what was available to him. After his first semester of studies and suggestion of a friend, he reached out to the ESL office for help. They worked with publishers to request PDF copies of his textbooks, notified his instructors that he should be allowed extra time on exams, and helped him to submit accommodation requests for standardized exams such as TOEFL, IELTS, and GRE.

Since then his ability to focus and study has improved significantly. Now, he does not have to take breaks every 10 minutes from his readings because he has his textbooks in an accessible format. He also is able to pace himself more with extra time available on tests and options for breaks.

Ahmed has found plenty of opportunities to practice his language skills outside of class. He has made friends with English speakers from all over the world, and his English continues to improve through daily interactions with friends and host family, the readings that he does for school, and the movies that he enjoys.

“I don’t speak English very well but I can express my ideas. Also I passed English language test and I’m working to be able to study in academic English.”

After going to graduate school, Ahmed hopes to return to Saudi Arabia where he will either teach and research at a university or open a school for students with disabilities.

