

Incorporation of Invited Lectures in the English Development and Engagement course: A Review of Students' Readiness and Acceptance

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Abstract: It was compulsory for Year 1 Engineering Technology students to undertake the English Development & Engagement course, designated to hone the students' language skills in both written and oral forms. For enhancing the international outreach of the course, invited lectures were incorporated with the participation of a couple of English lecturers from Indonesia for the topics of presentation skills and vlogging. A brief survey was next conducted to gauge the students' readiness and acceptance of the new practice. From the general feedback, with over 95% of positive response for learning impact and way forward inputs, students apparently enjoyed the cross-national learning experience with an effective exploration of the language skills, styles and expressions. The sessions were also found to raise students' awareness and skills in using English as a tool for work organization and communication in a teamwork environment, i.e. with 40-60% High Impact rating in terms of language expression, writing styles and expressions. Furthermore, an average 45% of the respondents considered the session to greatly boost their assignment and project skills, as well as confidence in English communications. Indeed students requested to have more such sessions with interactive activities, learning games as well as instant reviews to enable higher order of relevant knowledge and skills retention.

Keywords: English Course, Invited Lectures, International, Writing, Speaking

1. Introduction

As English is the official medium of teaching and learning at the university, junior students embarking on their bachelor's degree studies were to undertake the English Development & Engagement course to strengthen their command of the language. The course also served as an introductory platform for Year 1 students to gain exposure to participative learning in group settings.

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The 2-credit course entailed a 2-hour session per week of guided learning, where students were divided into small groups to carry out a semester-long project on selected topics of global issues. The outcome of the project encompassed a written report, an oral presentation as well as a short videolog (vlog).

With English being universally accepted as the language of knowledge and learning, acquiring strong competence in the language as a second language would certainly give an edge to university graduates, either for personal development or career advancement [1]. As reported by Macaro et al. [2], the internationalisation of higher education has seen the inevitable growth of English usage as the primary medium of instruction. Prevalence of the practice is often associated with institutional aspiration or global visibility, as well as students' career advancement even before graduation, e.g. internship and gap year programmes [3].

Mastery of the language is often assumed to be the natural outcome of delivery of the academic courses in English [4 & 5], but Soruc [6] pointed out that the success in English language learning is very much affected by other factors, such as students' cultural background, prior educational attainment and current learning motivation. Interestingly, as Hu et. al [7] observed almost a decade ago, the academic English proficiency of students may not necessarily be aided by the learning of academic courses via the English medium. This seems to indicate the need for specific English courses tailored for the students in developing their language command, which in turn serves to facilitate more effective learning of the academic courses and application of the acquired skills as well as knowledge.

To this end, the English Development and Engagement course was introduced to 77 Engineering Technology students at Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia, with the aim of cultivating both written and oral skills for organization, presentation and communication in group settings. Invited lectures from a partner university in Indonesia, Universitas Nahdlatul Ulama Yogyakarta, were incorporated into the course delivery to make learning more exciting with the international collaboration. As this was an inaugural practice, a post-session survey was conducted to gauge students' readiness and acceptance of the invited lectures. The responses were essential for continuous improvement of the course design and delivery, to ensure optimised learning outcomes for the students in using English as a communication tool for their selected profession.

2. Post-session Survey

The survey was divided into 4 sections, namely the Basics, Feedback, Details and Way Forward (Table 1). The Basics captured information on the respondent's gender, academic background and current enrolled bachelor's programme, while the Feedback section gauged the student's perception of the invited lectures. The Details examined students' views on the impact level of the lectures on their English engagement skills development. Finally, students carried out a self-review of specific skill enhancement and shared their ideas for improvement of the course delivery in the Way Forward section of the survey.

Table 1: The survey- Divisions and elements

Section A: The Basics		Section C: The Details	
A1	Gender: M/ F	C1	Enhancement of my language expression skills, e.g. implicit message, and embedded emotions.
A2	Last academic qualification: STPM (High School)/ Matriculation/ Diploma/ Others	C2	Strengthening of my English writing style, e.g. formal or casual, story-telling.
A3	Registered programme: BNA/ BNB/ BNC/ (Civil Engineering Technology programmes with specialization in 'A'- environment, 'B' building services and 'C'- construction)/ BNG (Mechanical Engineering Technology)	C3	Exploration of verbal and non-verbal expressions, e.g. narrations, videos and animations.

Section B: The Feedback	Section D: The Way Forward
B1 I enjoyed the integrated lectures.	D1 The lectures helped me to apply English more effectively as a TOOL: Y/N
B2 These lectures are beneficial for my learning of the Course.	With the NEW skills acquired (Part C), I can do better in the following tasks: a. Understanding and reviewing various English references. b. Writing up assignments with precision and clarity. c. Organising projects for effective presentation. d. Communicating in English with confidence, verbally and non-verbally.
B3 I look forward to more of such invited lectures, especially from an international background.	D3 Give ONE (1) suggestion to make the Course more fun and effective for you.

3. Survey Outcomes: Results and Discussions

The survey results are presented in the following discourse in the respective sections, followed by a cross-correlation of the elements examined to obtain a comprehensive view of the students' readiness and acceptance for the international lecture incorporation exercise.

3.1 The Basics

The respondents comprised 77 students, where 53% were females and the rest were males. This is indeed an interesting phenomenon of recent freshmen in the Engineering Technology programmes, where the female students slightly outnumbered that of the males. Tracing the entry academic qualification of the students (Figure 1), almost half of them underwent technical Diploma programmes prior to entering university, of which received secondary school leavers with advanced science and mathematics background. This clearly suggests the increased ratio of female-to-male students in the traditionally male-dominant science stream, so to speak. Note too from Figure 1 that a quarter of the respondents had Matriculation certificates, while 20% held the Malaysian High School qualification of STPM. As the medium of teaching and learning in Malaysian secondary schools and higher education institutions is primarily English, the students understandably had a basic grasp of the language for daily usage. Differences in the proficiency levels would have been due to the frequency of application, individual efforts and living environment, for instance.

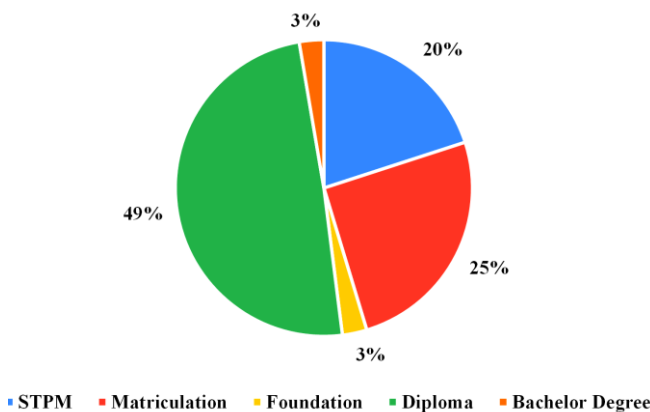
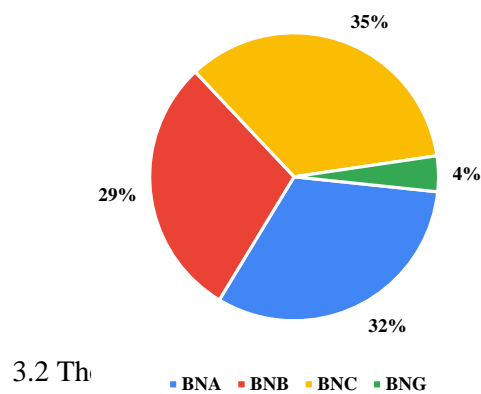


Figure 1. Entry academic qualifications



3.2 Th

Figure 2. Registered programme of study

A heart-warming 99% of the class enjoyed the invited lectures, with only 3% claiming the lectures to be of no significant benefit to their learning. In addition, an encouraging 96% of the respondents looked forward to similar international lectures in future, suggesting the students’ preparedness for global learning in the classroom via online platforms. This is arguably a positive outcome of the past years’ pandemic lockdown resulting in widespread virtual learning, which effectively broke down national boundaries and narrowed geographical distances for academia. The numbers also shed light on the students’ openness for cross-border learning experiences, albeit the possible challenges arising from differences in culture, language, accent and content. With the world fast moving towards globalisation in true meaning, junior students demonstrating such eagerness for diverse learning experiences sure promises the maturing of global citizens for the job market of the near future.

3.3 The Details

Figure 3 presents the responses on the enhancement of language expression skills via the invited lectures, where aside from the negligible 2.6% low ratings, just over 60% of the students considered the sessions to greatly helped them in that area, such as interweaving implicit messages in a text and embedding emotions or atmosphere to their presentations. The remaining 36% were fence sitters who thought the lessons of moderate impact on their language expression aptitudes.

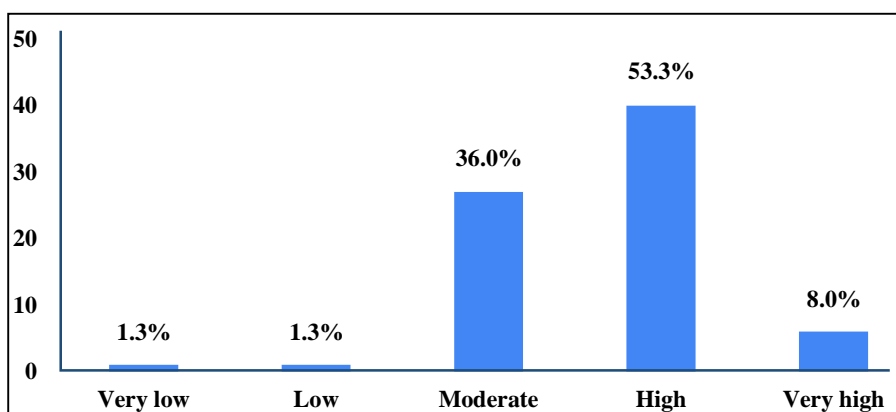


Figure 3. Enhancement of language expression skills

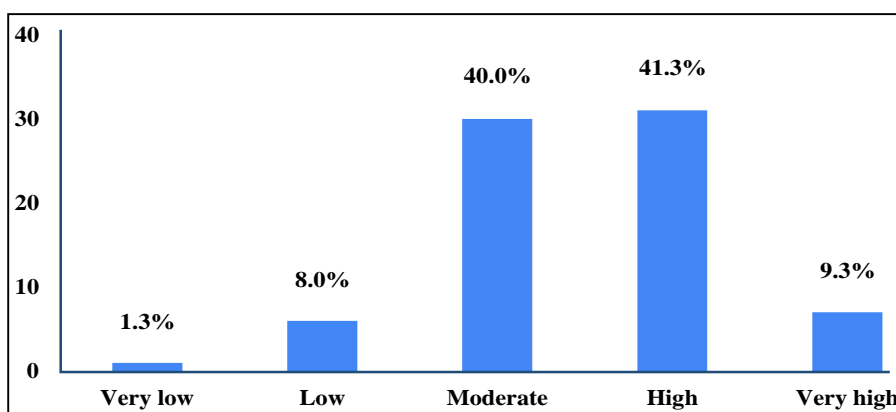


Figure 4. Strengthening of writing styles

On the other hand, about half the class reckoned the lectures strengthened their English writing styles, followed by 40% of respondents who considered the impact moderately significant (Figure 4). Students were exposed to various writing styles, including formal or casual compositions and storytelling, to enliven their English expression capacity. Corroborating responses can be seen with over 90% of the class who found the lessons to be at least moderately motivating them towards the active exploration of verbal and non-verbal English expressions in organising their work (Figure 5). A

breakdown of the numbers showed 57% of the students rated the impact to be High and Very High, clearly suggesting the advantages of the shared lectures in creating a more dynamic and adventurous learning environment. The lesson contents and activities revolved around crafting interesting narrations as well as engaging videos and animations.

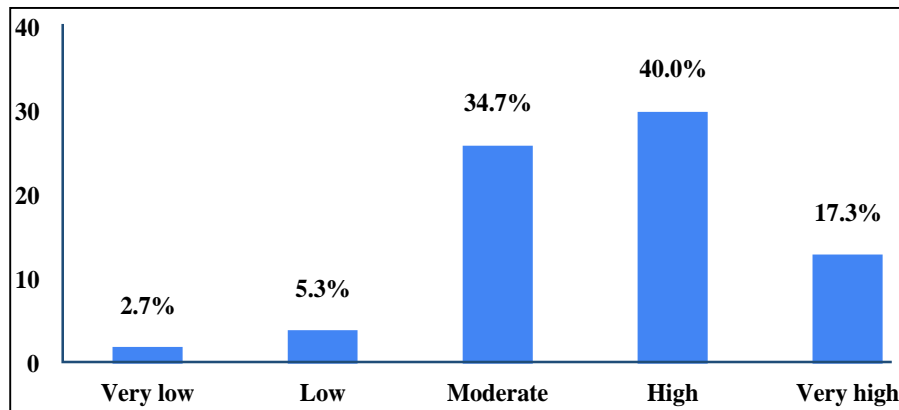


Figure 5. Exploration of verbal and non-verbal expressions

3.4 The Way Forward

96% of the class affirmed that the invited lectures helped to boost their ability to apply English as a tool in their respective academic works, implying a general link between the novelty of the lecturers and delivery approach with students’ heightened enthusiasm for mastering the language engagement skills. As searching and reviewing technical literature for completion of assignments or projects were not uncommon in the Engineering Technology programmes, it is indeed elating to see over 90% of the students rated the sessions to help them in the aspect (Figure 6), especially when the references are primarily in English.

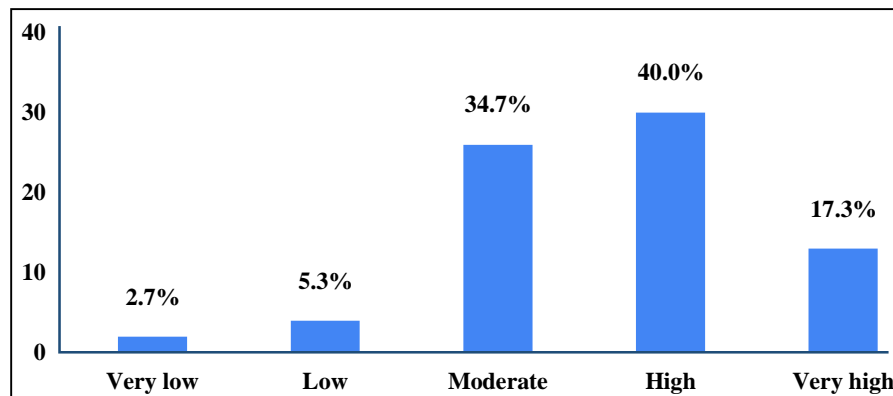


Figure 6. Understanding and reviewing English references

In Figure 7, a good 56% of the students perceived the sessions to have decidedly enabled them to write up assignments and reports with precision and clarity, though 37% thought that the impact in this area was moderate. This slight disparity could be attributed to the participative levels in class, where the more actively engaged students could have carried out more practice on their own beyond the lecture hours to sharpen their skills. In terms of organising projects for effective presentation, about a quarter of the class considered the impact moderate, while approximately 67% of the respondents rated it as high and very high (Figure 8). As one of the objectives of the Course was to develop students’ project organization skills, this positive feedback certainly points to the fulfilment of the learning outcomes in this aspect.

Finally, asked if the lectures helped to boost their confidence in their English communication skills, 96% of the students concurred, with the impact levels encompassing 40% moderate, 44% high and 12% very high respectively (Figure 9). It is important to note that having foreign speakers in class provided an invaluable opportunity for students to communicate in a common language for all, i.e. English in this case. Exposure to such a unique setting served to prepare students for the very much assimilated and multinational job market upon graduation, besides giving them the edge of having had first-hand experience in these invited lecture sessions.

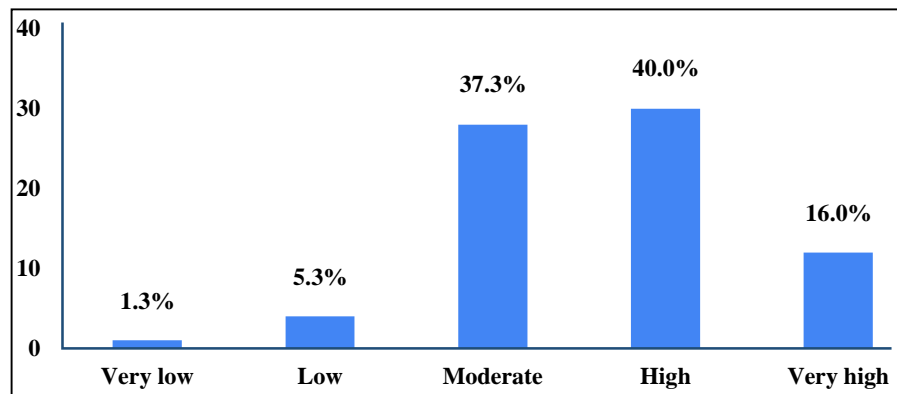


Figure 7. Writing up assignments with precision and clarity

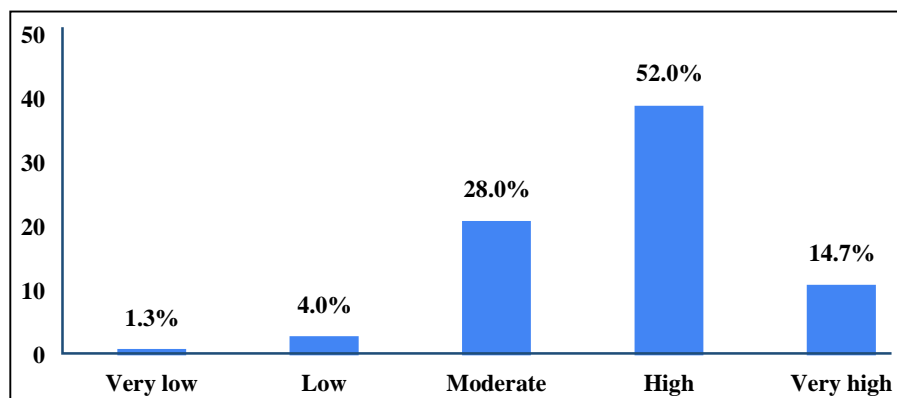


Figure 8. Organising projects for effective presentation

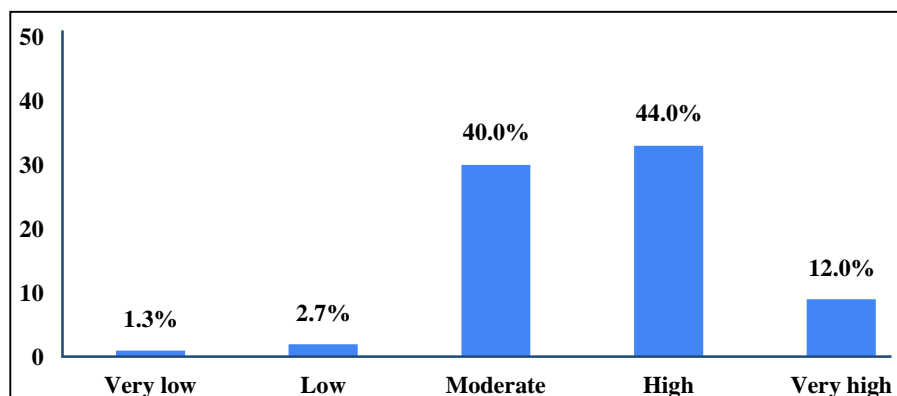


Figure 9. Communicating with confidence, verbally and non-verbally

3.5 Cross-correlation of parameters examined

A summary of the primary elements examined in the survey is depicted in Figure 10. Note that at least 50% of the respondents found the invited lectures to be highly impactful and beneficial for their

learning of the Course. This was especially so for the project organization (67%) and language expression skills (61%), both of which recorded affirmation beyond 60%. In the ballpark of 56-57%, high impact perception by the students included aptitude in verbal and non-verbal expression, reviews of English reference materials, writing up technical work, and an effective uplift of their confidence in the language application. With 6 out of 7 elements recording such positive responses, the survey clearly pointed to students' readiness and acceptance of the incorporated international lecture sessions.

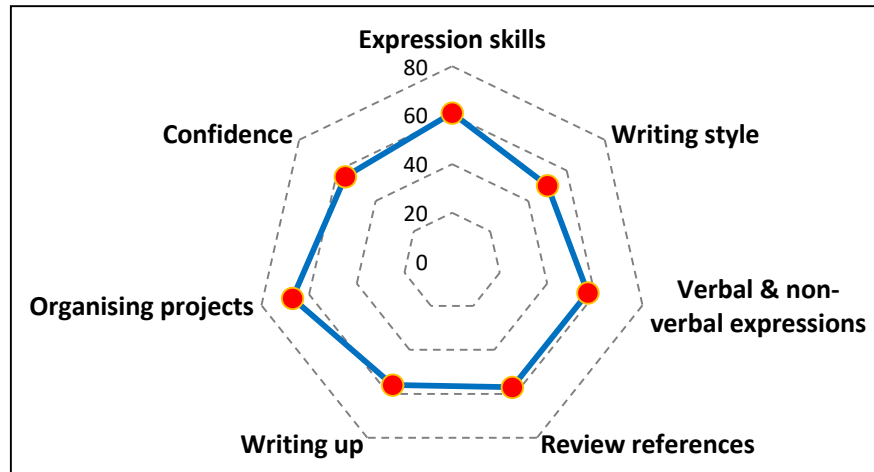


Figure 10. Summary of the Details and Way Forward elemental attainment

4. Conclusions

The incorporation of invited lectures in the English Development & Engagement course clearly was a welcomed exercise for the students. Introducing an international flavour to the Course while remaining in the local classroom certainly created a fun, exciting and non-conventional learning environment. Enhancement of their English engagement skills, as well as the building of confidence, were 2 major outcomes resulting from the collaborative work. It would be beneficial for students to have a similar cross-national lecture exchange in future, which simultaneously covers the syllabus and course contents while enhancing students' learning experience with different teachers at the virtual lectern.

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