

Building an Extended Learning Community of Intensive English Learners

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This study attempts to capture the development of a supplementary program for intensive English students through an extended learning community that includes students and staff. This Conversation Partners program relies on student volunteers to provide a learning space to help their peers learn English. In addition, it requires committed staff to guide and train the student volunteers to use probing skills as well as design activities that may help the intensive English students use the language. The voices of the student volunteers, intensive English students, and the staff provide an insight into the complicated and demanding nature of such a program. The chain that links these groups includes the benefits of learning about other cultures as well as building friendships. The kinks in this chain that may deter the development of this program include the passive responses of the intensive English students, scheduling conflict, and bouts of disappointment among student volunteers when their peers could not proceed to their next level of study. The sustainability of this program depends on: 1) the availability of student volunteers and their development as leaders; 2) the commitment and patience of the intensive English students to participate in the program and 3) the availability of committed staff to guide the student volunteers.

Introduction

English is often known as a global language or the language of science and technology. It is estimated that one in four people in the world speaks English (Crystal, 2000). The pursuit of the mastery of this language is precipitated by the notion that the ability to communicate in this language as well as armed with a degree from an English speaking country may provide the foundation for a form of social mobility. Hence, intensive English programs (IEP) have been a significant feature of universities in the United States, Australia and the United Kingdom for several decades (Andrade, 2011).

Students from non-English speaking countries who would like to study abroad in the countries mentioned will need to provide proof of one's English language proficiency. The magnitude of meeting the English language requirements can be observed by the types of English language proficiency tests that are available worldwide, which are Testing of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), International English Language Testing System (IELTS) and the Cambridge English Placement Tests (CEPT). Students who do not meet the English language requirements determined by a particular university may have the opportunity to enroll in an IEP as a pathway to prepare for their anticipated academic program. For example, the United States as a receiving country of international student mobility has a long history of offering IEP. The consortium of University and College Intensive English Programs of the United States (UCIEP) was formed in 1967 to ensure that these programs are taught by qualified professionals (UCIEP, 2014). The Institute of International Education (IIE) reported that in 2012 a total number of 110,870 students were enrolled in IEP with Saudi Arabia as the leading country that contributed 30% or 33,000 students to this

population (Institute of International Education, 2013) as compared to 72, 711 students in 2011 with Saudi Arabia contributing 19,200 students (Institute of International Education, 2012).

Currently, IEP programs are offered not only by English speaking countries as a result of globalization. Higher education is one of the sectors that have been greatly impacted by it (Torres and Morrow, 2000). One of the changes includes offering more English medium programs. Kirkpatrick (2011) pointed out that the move towards offering more of such programs can be observed through the Bologna process, which aimed at creating staff and student mobility through the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). This phenomenon has extended beyond the European shores of higher education. The wave of change on the Asian shores of higher education has resulted in nations attempting to be global powerhouses of international education. Internationalization of the campus and or the curriculum has become the “buzz” word of both public and private higher education providers. Hence, IEP are now a common feature of a university in Asian countries such as Singapore and Malaysia because these countries are eager to be a regional hub of education for international students. Similar to the purpose of IEP in the United States, Australia, and the United Kingdom, these programs are offered to international students who do not meet the English language requirements for further studies.

The research on IEP students, especially on international students in the United States, Australia and the United Kingdom include areas such as learning styles and motivation to learn the language are well documented. However, the investigation about IEP students in an Asian context and taught by non-native speakers is difficult to find at this point of this research. Hence, the purpose of this study is to provide insights into the evolving nature of a supplementary program for intensive English learners called “Conversation Partners” through the voices of the learners, the mentors as well as the staff that builds an extended learning community at a private university in Malaysia. Specifically, this research attempts to construct meaning through the experiences of the learners and staff through these questions:

1. What are the experiences of the participants in this extended learning community?
2. How can a conversation partner program be sustained?

The importance of understanding the issues related to IEP in Malaysia may help to provide a platform for understanding the needs of learners, the needs of English lecturers, and the supplementary help needed to ensure that international students attempting to learn English to pursue their academic studies in Malaysia will have a good experience staying and studying in this country.

The public and private higher education sectors in Malaysia have experienced the impact of globalization, especially through world events and nation building strategies of this country. The Asian Financial crisis of 1997 resulted in a drastic decrease of Malaysian students studying overseas. Inadvertently this situation resulted in an increase in private higher education enrolment. The government of Malaysia is keen to develop this country to become a regional hub of educational excellence that attracts more international students to study in both public and private higher education institutions. Research has documented that Malaysia became a destination for international students, especially after the unfortunate tragedy of September 11 (Sirat, 2008).

International Students in Malaysia

Malaysia has been a receiving country for higher education over the past two decades and its share of the international students' population was approximately 2% in 2006 (Verbik and Lasanowski's, 2007). The government aims to attract 200,000 international students to Malaysia by 2020 (Ministry of Higher Education, 2007). The international student population has steadily increased. In 2002, there were approximately 27,872 international students in Malaysia (Ministry of Higher Education, 2007). Almost a decade later the number has increased to 62,705 in 2010 (Ministry of Higher Education, 2011).

The cited reasons for international students to pursue their tertiary education in Malaysia include the variety of programs and the comparatively lower tuition fee and cost of living. Students can choose from foreign branch campuses such as the University of Nottingham, Monash University, and Curtin University among the few who were established in the early 2000s. The recent additions include the University of Newcastle and Herriot-Watt among many others. Franchise programs from Australia and the United Kingdom are a common feature in Malaysian colleges. These programs allow students to complete their degree without leaving Malaysia. Dual-degree programs that allow students to obtain certificates from the local as well as the foreign institution are another feature that is highly promoted.

International Students and Learning English

Malaysia as a former colony of the British government has benefited from the development and usage of English as a subject for study as well as a medium of instruction at all levels of education. The growth of this country resulted in several language policy developments and changes. The swing of the language pendulum in education can be represented from an all English medium instruction system to a bilingual system followed by a national language system to Math and Science being taught in English and the reverse in Malay. Nevertheless, the importance of communicating well in English has not been minimized as Malaysia becomes a destination for leading global companies that are interested in investing in this country.

Intensive English Programs

University-based and independent English language programs are commonly available in Malaysia. Public and private higher education institutions in Malaysia offer English language programs to local and international students. The focus of the latter is to meet the English language proficiency requirements in order for them to pursue their academic degree. These programs support the university to achieve its objective of recruiting international students to the respective institution. English language proficiency requirements for Malaysian institutions are based on the universally accepted scores such as TOEFL and IELTS. International students in Malaysian institutions will most likely be taught by Malaysian English lecturers.

Independent English language centers such as ELS Language Centers offer intensive English and certification in teaching English programs. It originated in the United States approximately 50 years and is has several locations around the world. It started in Malaysia in 1990 and currently it has five training centers (ELS, 2014). International students may choose to enroll in independent centers to learn English or they may decide to enroll in a university-based IEP.

Learning English and Learning Communities

Tinto (2003) pointed out that learning used to be an isolated activity in higher education where there seem to be no coherence in learning through content and with peers. As a result, the need for engaging students to be active learners in the learning process became the foci for changes in educational practice. One of the ways to engage students to learn is through learning communities, which generally means learning together by taking classes together for a specific time period. Similarly, Chickering and Gamson (1987) advocated for seven best practices for undergraduate teaching and among them includes cooperation among students and active learning, which implies that engaging learners to apply what they learn and to learn collaboratively benefits their learning and social development.

Learning languages typically include the development of a few basic skills such as speaking, listening, reading and writing in the language. The frequency of using the language either in or outside the classroom may help to expedite one's proficiency. Opportunities to use the language with fellow learners and other peers may be helpful as such situations as informal as it may be can facilitate learning. Hence, learning English in a community of learners and peers may benefit international students who would like to practice using what they have learned in the classroom.

Context of the Study

This study captures the supplementary help provided through a unit in the Student Experience Division that was tasked to help promote diversity and inclusion for a group of international students in an IEP in a private higher education institution in Malaysia. This university actively recruits international students from different parts of the world. The types of programs offered at this institution include IEP, pre-university, diploma, degree, masters, and doctoral studies. Initial discussions between the staff at the center that offers the IEP and the staff of the unit in the Student Experience Division were held to ascertain the objectives of the Conversation Partner Program (CPP), which included helping the international students to learn English outside the classroom through peers and to build friendships with both Malaysian and international students. It is almost a year since the initiation of this program in August 2013 and it has evolved to become an extended learning community that includes the international students learning English also known as interactees, the peers who volunteer their time to help the international students also known as interactors, and the advisor that leads the program. These terms will be used interchangeably.

The IEP at this institution was developed with three partners and Cambridge University Press is one of them. The overall objective is to develop students English language proficiency and other skills such as cross-cultural communication ability, leadership as well as problem-solving and critical thinking skills. The program consists of four levels of study and each level is taught over an eight week period. Each international student is given a placement test upon their arrival at the university and they will be placed at the respective level of the IEP based on their test score.

This CPP has gone through four seasons or cycles (Please see Figure 1 for more details). This means the program has gone through 32 weeks or eight months of development with the advisor closely monitoring the progress of the interactees and designing learning experiences together with the interactors, which resulted in an extended learning community being

formed as all who participated in the CPP are either learning a language or learning to develop language-based activities.

The Conversation Partners Program

The IEP students in the CPP are primarily from the first level of the program. It is perceived that this group will need the most help because they are beginners in the program. The duration of the mentoring follows the duration of the IEP, which is eight weeks. The mentors volunteer their time to help the IEP students learn English because they understand the struggles international students go through studying in Malaysia as some of them are themselves international students.



Figure 1: The Evolution of the Conversation Partners program

Season One

The first season started with an introductory session where the staff and students came together to emphasize the importance of the CPP. Mentors were assigned to the IEP students randomly. Mobile phone numbers were exchanged at this meeting and subsequently meetings were arranged to meet at least once a week for casual conversations in English. An on-campus movie night was held to bring all the mentors and the IEP students together for a big group bonding session. A movie called “English Vingling” was intentionally chosen to highlight the challenges of learning English.

Season Two

In Season Two, all the IEP students in the beginner’s level participated in the CPP. Most of the mentors from Season One continued with Season Two. The mentors designed a series of interactive English games and activities such as Spelling Bee, Dictation, Building the Alphabets, Passing the Message as ice-breaker games on the first gathering night to build the IEP students’ vocabulary and grammar. IEP students chose their own mentors right after the ice-breaker games. Thereafter, mentors were required to meet up with the interactees once a week. The games and activities were conducted by the mentors fortnightly. Movie night was an additional activity and it was a planned entertainment night out of the campus for the mentors and the IEP students. Films in English (with subtitles) were chosen. This event was well received by the IEP students and it allowed both groups to have meaningful discussions after the screening of the movie.

Season Three

In this season, the IEP students included students from the second level of the IEP. The reason to encourage the students from the second level to participate in the CPP is to encourage the continuity of learning the language outside the classroom. The activities were the same as Season Two because the mentors and the advisor found it beneficial for the IEP students. During this season IEP students were highly encouraged to attend the CPP as compared to Season Two where the IEP Unit mandated the requirement. Both the mentors and the advisor monitored their attendance by explaining to the IEP students the consequence of missing classes. International students' attendance is tightly monitored by the immigration authorities of Malaysia. The attrition of the some of the IEP students was due to absenteeism.

Season Four

New mentors joined Season Four. IEP students who did not succeed in moving on to the next level of the program were highly encouraged to join the CPP. Throughout the duration of this season mentors focused on the IEP students' usage and application of the language. The importance of attendance was reemphasized. The activities for Season Four are similar to Season Three as the IEP students seem to enjoy these social learning events.

The number of IEP students and mentors varied from season to season. There were 12 interactors and 21 interectees for Season One, 10 interactors and 18 interectees for Season Two, 10 interactors and 12 interectees for Season Three and eight interactors and 11 interectees for Season Four respectively (Please see Table 1).

Season	Interactors	Interectees
One	12	21
Two	10	18
Three	10	12
Four	8	11

Table 1: Number of Interactors (Mentors) and Interectees (IEP students) from Season One to Four.

The ages of the IEP students ranged from 18 to 36, with the majority being in their twenties. The international students came from various countries such as China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uganda, Korea, Syria, Yemen and Bangladesh. The mentors were a mixed group of both local and international students mainly from Malaysia, Mauritius, Tunisia, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Myanmar who were in various levels of their studies.

The CPP was closely monitored by the advisor of this program to ensure that the program has continuity. The mentors and the advisor identified the challenges for every season and brainstormed for new ideas for the following seasons. The advisor held follow-up sessions with the mentors and the latter were encouraged to write reflective essays about their experiences. In addition the advisor followed up with the head and staff of the IEP to update them on the progress of the program as well as to obtain feedback about the students' academic performance. Figure 2 captures the ongoing cycle of work that is required to sustain the CPP.

Study Design

The approach used to understand the learning phenomenon that is unfolding in this extended learning community is based on the lived experiences or the essence of the experience of the different individuals in this group, which is phenomenology (Merriam, 2009). The attempt is to construct meaning through the voices of the individuals in this community to further discover the collective experiences in order to build possible emergent themes that will shed some light into the possible learning experiences that evolved through the seasons.

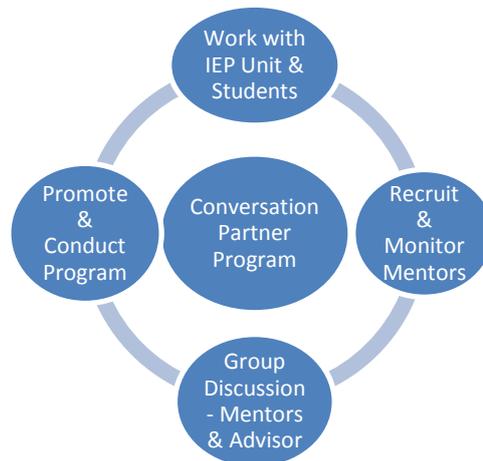


Figure 2: The Work Cycle of the Conversation Partners Program

Participants

A total of eight IEP students, 11 mentors, and the advisor responded to this study. Six students from China, one from Kyrgyzstan and one from Kazakhstan participated in the study. They were into their second and third semester of being in the IEP. The mentors who responded to this study have participated in at least two of the seasons. The advisor for the CPP is one of the counselors.

Data Collection and Analysis Procedure

The IEP students, the mentors, and the advisor were asked to share their experiences in writing by responding to a series of questions. The questions for the IEP students were translated into Mandarin as it was perceived that more information can be obtained if the students were answering in their first language. Two of the authors for this paper are Mandarin speakers and they checked the accuracy of the translation together. An earlier attempt was made to obtain feedback through a focus group but the IEP students found it difficult to provide the answers in English. The mentors and the advisor responded in English. The responses of all the participants were read through thoroughly and initial codes were formed. This was followed by further analysis where a series of codes and categories were built from the responses. Further classification attempts resulted in several emergent themes gleaned from the experiences of the IEP students, mentors, and advisor.

Results and Discussions

The experiences of the IEP students, mentors and the advisor reflect the difficulties that international students face in their preparation to go through a program taught in English and

the extensive support needed through peers and dedicated staff to sustain a program of this nature. The IEP students indicated that learning English through the CPP was facilitated by a more comfortable environment where they can speak and ask questions more comfortably. There are two main themes that emerged from the experiences of the IEP students and they are:

A Comfortable and Active Learning Environment

The IEP students felt more comfortable asking questions because they could practice their English with their peers whose role was dedicated to helping them. They appreciated the opportunities to practice speaking in English and learning in a fun way through the different activities developed by the mentors. One of the IEP students said, “In the Conversation Partner program, I get to learn usage of right words to express, practice hearing, to learn more vocabulary. Most importantly, I learn to use the appropriate ways/words to express different situations.”

Another student said, “The different kinds of activities organized in the Conversation Partners Program have enabled us to familiarize and further understand English. They never give up on us attitude has helped us to build our confidence towards English.” Learning in a fun way facilitated their language development. One of the students commented, “I like the games that helped me like spelling and the naming of things.”

The comfortable learning environment enabled the IEP students to speak up. A student commented, “Conversation Partners Program has arranged the seniors to have one to one interaction with us. This has enabled new students like us who are not used to the all English speaking environment not to fear and shy to speak up.”

Peer Relationship Development

The opportunity to be with mentors from Malaysia as well as other countries provided a platform for the IEP students to learn about different cultures. Most of the students in the IPE program are from China. Hence there is a natural tendency for them to be together most of the time. Being in the CPP may help to build rapport among peers, especially in getting to know Malaysian as well as international students from other countries. One of them said, “I get to practice what I’ve learnt, make new friends from other countries and know their culture.” Another IEP student commented, “I liked that my partner is very friendly.” The student mentors described the reasons and benefits of participating in the program. Most of them described personal motivation as one of the reason to participate in the CPP. They wanted to help the IEP students because they have experienced living in other countries. Through the program they discovered that their ability to communicate had improved.

Personal Motivation to Help

Some of the mentors indicated that their own experiences living abroad made them realized that living in a foreign country can be challenging and hence the personal motivation to help. One of the mentors said, “Because I have studied in China and Australia before as an international student, so I know what it is like to be in a foreign country with people of cultural and values different from mine.” Other mentors decided to broaden their own learning horizons by participating in the CPP. A mentor commented, “Joining the Conversation Partner program would have allowed me to meet new people and learn progressively how to interact with them as they have difficulty to speak in English, a

language other than their mother tongue.” Another mentor said, “One of the reasons I have decided to participate is to meet many people from different countries.”

Improved Communication Skills

A few mentors indicated that their ability to communicate improved by participating in the program. A mentor described the experience as, “I have been able to improve my communication skills; prior to the program, I could be cold when I would explain something to my classmates. This is one change that I have seen in me.” Another mentor said, “Lastly, I viewed the program as an opportunity for me to improve my communication skills and nurturing the way I interact with others.”

Most of the mentors have to arrange for one-on-one sessions after class to keep in touch with the IEP students. These mentors face the challenge of ensuring that their interectees can communicate with them in English. Inadvertently, the communication is restructured to a level that is understood and this resulted in the improved ability of the mentors to communicate at a level that is understood by the IEP students.

Challenges and Recommendations

Implementing and maintaining a CPP program requires commitment and dedication from the IEP students, the mentors, and staff. The sustainability of this program is dependent on the strategic focus of ensuring that student experience at this university remains as its core value. One of the major challenges will be the availability of the mentors. One of them said, “We can continue supporting this program by being committed and finding more interactors so that we won’t have to do everything by ourselves. With more people we can make this project bigger and more stable. With more people we can have backups if anything happen and can do 2-3 activities simultaneously at different rooms to make it more exciting and more fun.” Another mentor recommended training current IEP students to be future mentors. The student said, “Train current interectees to be the future interactors; they would be the best placed to understand the struggle of future interectees.”

Another challenge is the commitment from all involved in the program and this includes the IEP Unit, the IEP students, the mentors, and the advisor of the CPP program. She said, “It is important to get the right people in the team. Commitment is essential. The engagement between the interectees and with the interactors through the activities and creatively design new ideas for the program is important. The team and I believed that a language can be learned through fun activities and outdoor games.” This implies that the mentors understand that language learning can be creatively designed to be actively fun-filled events. Further commitment from the advisor is established when she realized that she grew as an individual as well. She pointed out, “This program started with the intention to benefit the IEP students - to help them speak English confidently, to be able to adapt to a new learning environment. However, as a coordinator for this program, I benefited too. I get to engage with students from different background, culture and beliefs.”

Passivity does exist among the IEP students. Some of the students did not show up for their appointments with their mentors. The challenge to communicate at the starting point between IEP students and mentors requires adjustment from both parties. One of the mentors said, “The only challenge was when the interectees do not turn up for meetings or group activities. Sometimes it was difficult to get them involved and interested in activities.” Other challenges

faced include time management among the mentors. A mentor pointed out, “A challenge that I faced was when I had to balance my studies with the activities. Although it’s fun to join in with the interactors I have to control myself to study beforehand or after the activities.” Some mentors are encouraged when their assigned interactees are able to converse in English but some feel disappointed when they fail their exams.

The IEP students continue to face challenges of their own, especially their English language development. They desire to have more opportunities to utilize the language. One of them said, “The most challenging issue for me is I wish I could be able to speak in English either in or out of the classroom.” Their struggles with the development will continue because they are full aware that their academic success is highly dependent on their ability in English. A student said, “The greatest challenge for now is English. Once my English is fine, everything would be fine.”

The university’s strategic focus on ensuring that students have a good learning experience has to be translated to all levels of operation. The commitment to this can be realized through time when university staff and students are well-informed about the struggles that international students go through when they decide to study in Malaysia.

Conclusion

Developing, implementing, and sustaining the support for an IEP requires teamwork among the IEP students themselves, the mentors, and the advisor. More importantly, creative learning activities in a safe and relaxed learning environment may help to remove the fear of learning English.

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