

# Enhancing the academic experience of students whose language is not English: A study of the English Language support courses at UOW

Chen Yang, Liangyu Fan, Ziyu Zhu

## Executive Summary

As one of the most international diverse university in the UK (Hotcourses Index, 2016), The University of Westminster is a chosen destination for many students whose first language is not English. Thus, providing a supportive English learning provision is becoming increasingly significant. This study is the first attempt to capture the experiences of international students whose first language is not English as to the English language provision offered by the University. To empirically establish how students get the information about the language support service and what they think about the provision, this study collected 36 questionnaires and interviewed 20 students. The result shows that more than 60% of the students are aware of the existence of the language courses and people who attend the course are generally satisfied with their experiences related to the language support service. An analysis of the results reveals that there are many inspiring content lessons that students found useful and interesting. They also recommended that the listening related training, especially how TED talk is used in class, should be considered more carefully as some students found it is very difficult to understand with their current level of English. Also, many students mentioned that it would be better to separate them based on their disciplines rather than their name and they would like to learn more subject related academic English in the pre-sessional course.

## Background and Aims

The UK is one of the most popular student destinations around the globe. In 2017 there were half a million international students in the UK (UKCISA, 2019). As a university located in central London, the University of Westminster (UoW) welcomes students from over 150 countries and it has been considered one of the most international diverse university in the UK (Hotcourses Index, 2016). The diversity of our university is enhanced by international students, and research in 2001 has proven how diverse population could enrich the transition experiences for international students compared to experiencing a more homogenised host environment (McInne, 2001). However, recent studies have also shown that the academic performance of students whose first language is not English, particularly Chinese students at the undergraduate level (Iannelli and Huang, 2013), is not as successful as that of other student groups. Recent studies (e.g. Li et al, 2010) have proven that one key reason for their weak academic performance is their English language use, especially in academic writing. Students from non-English speaking backgrounds are required to obtain certain scores in standardized international tests such as IELTS (International English Language Testing System). However, the extent to which these tests can predict students' ability to use language in academic contexts has been questioned (Coffin, 2004; Moore and Morton, 2005:63; Breeze 2012:7). Thus, the English language

support courses offered by the receiving universities play an important role in helping the students succeed in the new environment and education system in the UK.

This research aims to explore to what extent the English language support courses offered at UoW help international students improve their academic performance and experience in key aspects of their student life. Firstly, the research will examine how well the course information has been promoted and how it will directly influence the attendance of the students as a whole. Then, students' academic performance and their daily life experiences will be investigated and analysed in order to determine the extent to which the language courses in the university could support students in different aspects of their academic life. The research questions are as follows: 1) How do students know which courses are available? 2) How does accessing these sources enhance students' academic performance? 3) How does attending these courses help their transition and progression into university in terms of communication and cross-cultural experiences?

The results will explore the relationship between students and the English language support courses and also offer suggestions on how to help students reach their full academic potential.

## **Methodology**

This research uses mixed-methods, a questionnaire and twenty semi-structured interviews with international students as its key methodologies to ensure the broad width and depth of data. Interview aim at capturing the subjective experience of interviewees and the questionnaire regards the English language support service at the University of Westminster as a whole, which include all the different language services it provides.

We obtained a list of international students from the University which has more than two hundred people and emailed the questionnaire to them. There are 36 pieces of valid response. The questionnaire aimed at gaining a general understanding of how well the course information has been promoted and how students think whether their English ability has improved in four aspects: Listening, speaking, reading, and writing. We then interviewed students both face-to-face and on-line. We asked six questions to the participants and based on their answers we managed to explore the research questions in more depth. The interview questions aimed at exploring how the students felt about the academic and cultural experience at the University and how they felt the courses could be improved.

We analysed the data we collected and categorised the information provided by the participants into different sections, including university life, academic skills, teaching style and course design.

## **Result**

### Profile of the responders

We collected data from 36 participants. Survey questions 1 and 2 aimed at collecting the demographics of the participants. As shown in Fig. 1, more than half of the participants speak English as a foreign language and approximately 30 percent of them speak English as their second language. Fig. 2 shows that the participants represent the spectrum of academic courses offered at the University from Foundation to doctoral degrees. This seems to suggest that the English language support services are

used by students of different academic degrees and levels, with Master's students representing the biggest users of the English language support services.

## 1. Is English your

36 responses

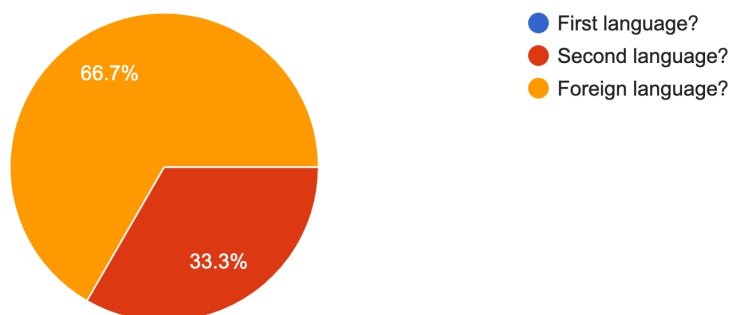


Figure 1. Participants' relation to English

## 2. What is your academic year?

36 responses

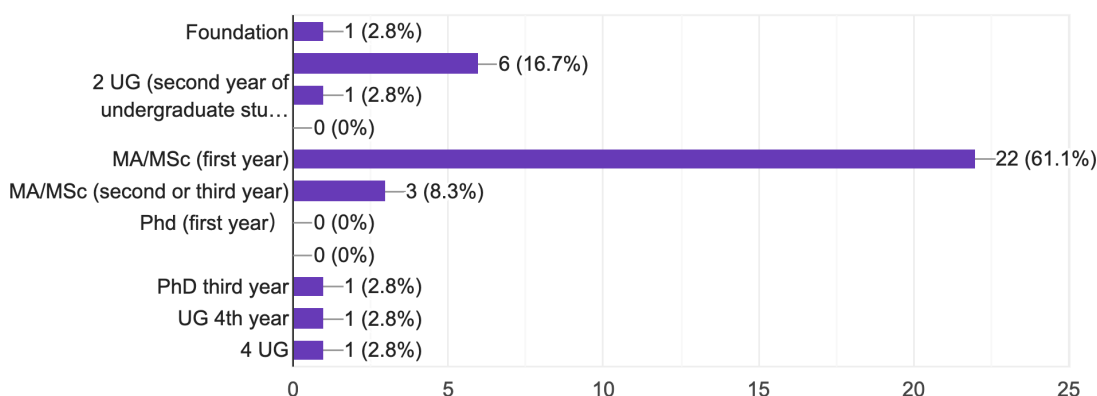


Figure 2. Participants' academic courses and level

### Promotion of the English language support service

Questions 3 and 4 aimed at collecting data about the promotion of the English language support service. From the answers to question 3 we found that around 60% of the participants had heard about the English language services provided by the University and also there are about 40% of participants who reported never heard about the services, as shown in Fig. 3. We listed the possible ways or channels in which the students could get information about the English language course in our university and the data shows that peer networking, academic staff and websites are the most common ways for students to find out about the English language support service in our university (Please see Fig. 4.). The social media platform and physical materials such as posters and flyers seem to be less effective to deliver information about this. Two interview participants heard about this service because the information about it was included in their abroad exchange program.

### Course attendance

On question 5 and 6 we further investigated that turnover rate of the received information of English language course, in other words, we wanted to find out whether students attend the service after they have learned about the information. More than 70 percent of participants attended the course as shown in Fig. 5. And when the remaining participants were asked why they had not attended they explained that most of them were not aware of its existence (Please see Fig. 6.)

### 3. Have you heard about the English language support service of UoW?

36 responses

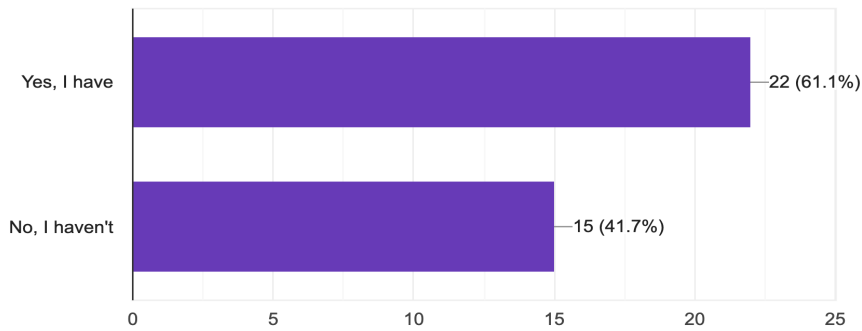


Figure 3. Information about the service received by the participants

### 4. How did you hear about the English language courses?

36 responses

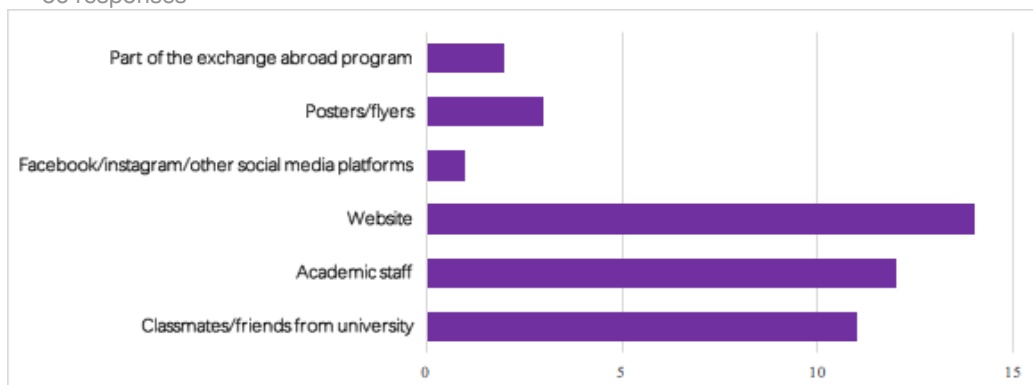


Figure 4. Promotion channels

### 5. Have you attended any of the English language courses of UoW?

36 responses

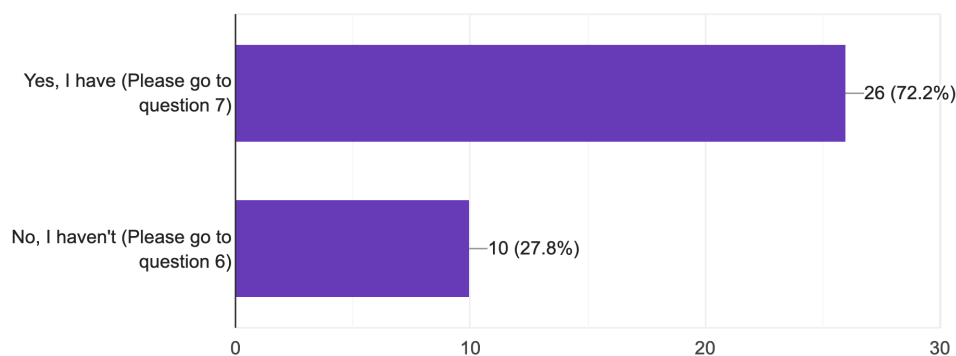


Figure 5. Attendance rate

## 6. Why you haven't attended any English language courses?

10 responses

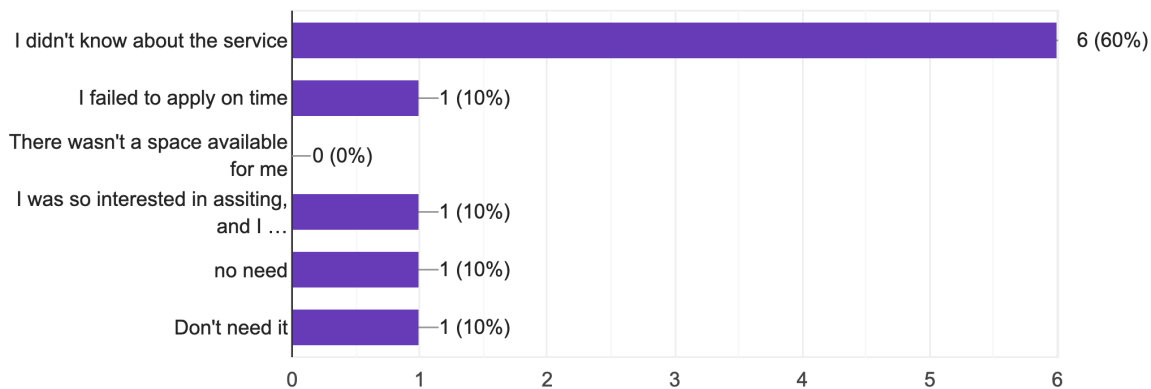


Figure 6. Reasons why participants haven't attended any English language courses

As Figure 7 shows, we can see that the University of Westminster provides diverse English language courses to meet different students' academic ability. Most of participants attended the pre-sessional language course and about a quarter of them also participated in the postgraduate academic English modules. Meanwhile, from the chart it can be seen that undergraduate students also had a great demand for the academic English module. While Phd students did not attend English language course.

## 7. Which English language course did you attend ?

33 responses

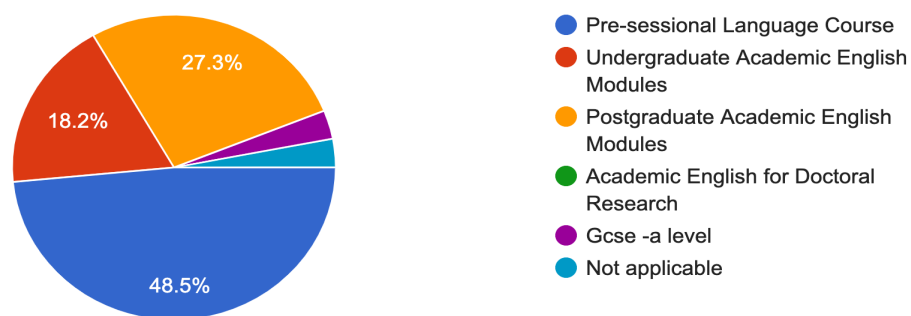


Figure 7. The English language course participants attended

## 8. After attending the English language courses, I find it easier to understand lecturers and students in the class

36 responses

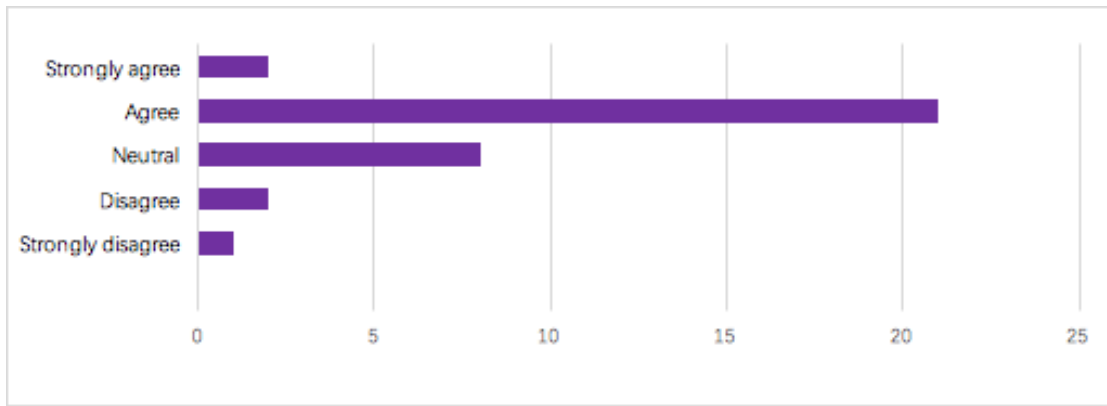


Figure 8. Performance in comprehension ability

**9. After attending the English language courses, I find it easier to express my opinions accurately in class.**

33 responses

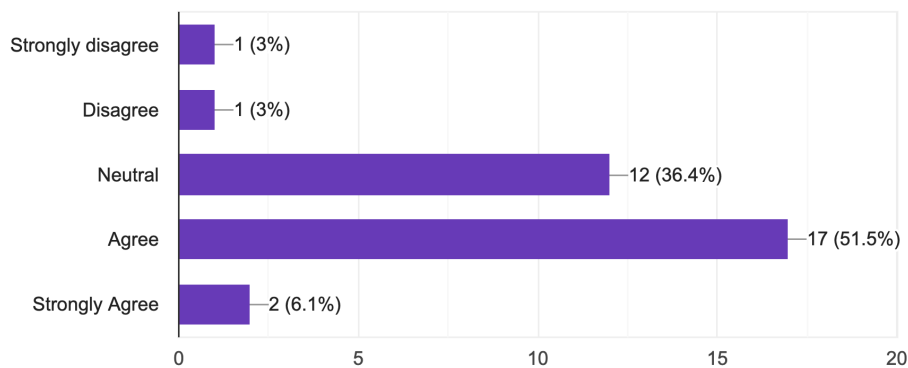


Figure 9. Performance in expression ability

Students' experiences

By means of questions 8 to 11, we intended to evaluate the efficiency of the English language courses in strengthening the overall academic ability of students. Most of participants agreed that they feel it is easier to understand others in the class while 8 of them have demonstrated a neutral attitude, 3 of them do not feel their comprehension ability has improved (Please see Figure 8). Figure 9 shows the participants' experience in relation to speaking, which seems to be less positive than their experience with listening as nearly half of participants do not feel it is easier for them to express themselves after taking the course. A similar picture emerges in relation to reading and writing. There are five participants do not think academic articles are no longer difficult for them to read and three participants struggle to write in academic way (Please see Figure 10 and 11). Generally, most of participants think the English language courses are helpful in improving their English academic ability.

### 10. After attending the English language courses, I find it easier to read academic articles.

33 responses

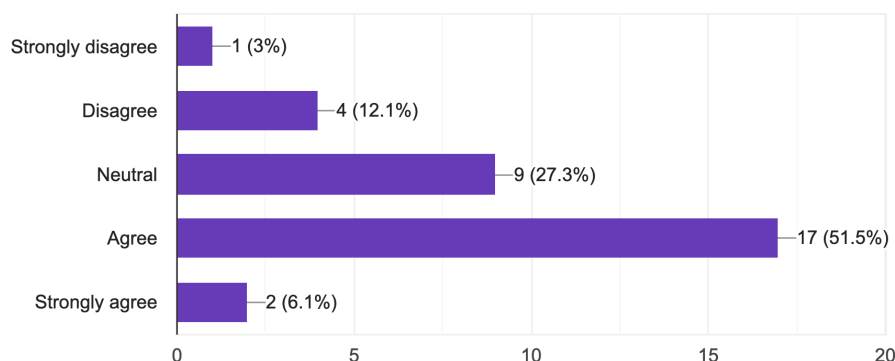


Figure 10. Performance in academic reading

### 11. After attending the English language courses, I find it easier to write in an academic way.

33 responses

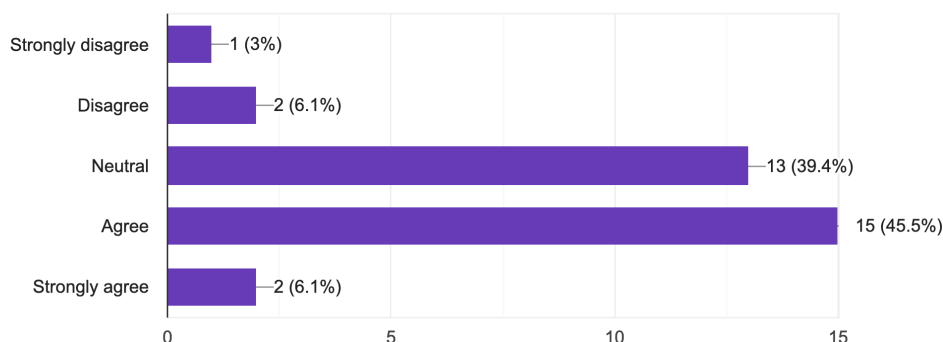


Figure 11. Performance in academic writing

In our interview, we got 20 students who are undertaking and have finished their pre-sessional English course to further understand their experience with the course.

In relation to academic writing, 13 interviewees provided positive feedback in that they learned the structure, logics and requirements of English academic writing, which helped them to get used to different academic writing styles compared with what they had learnt in their own countries and it would be useful for their future study. Also, one participant said that the teacher has a systemic method of academic writing which is very useful while she made a suggestion that the course could teach students to write different styles and types of essays as some students can tell the difference between report and pitch. Sometimes students also suggested that it would be great if the course also taught them basic writing knowledge such as grammar and they prefer to have less intense practice. Most students said the teachers are professional and considerate, but it would be better if they could give more

feedback and inspection on writing. And one student suggested that the writing practice tends to rely on self-study after class as in the class they don't have enough time to practice. Although reciting academic words and expressions is vital for writing, the students think it would be better to learn it in other way.

During the interview we asked interviewees whether they think this course had helped them to explore London as a city. Five students also regarded the English language course as an opportunity to explore the city and they also talked about their visit to the British Museum to exemplify the type of activity that the course provides outside the class. They enjoyed the visits but suggested it could be better to let students choose what they are interested in learning instead of looking for the stuff that their teachers had asked, which can enhance the sense of engagement and inspire them to share and present what they explored.

Related to the topics they discussed in class, two interviewees thought they are interesting while nearly half of student suggested that it would be better if the topics are more closely related to their discipline and less general. One student pointed out that she would prefer to share knowledge such as domestic culture with others than discussing their discipline which they have not learnt yet. Although three students thought it is interesting to learn about other disciplines and meet friends with different academic background, some students thought assigning classes by different major could be helpful for them to keep focused on the teaching contents and prepare for their further study. For example, they can learn vocabulary and read articles in their areas, which would help students stay focused. There were also two students who think that the topics discussed in class are too difficult and that they even would not know how to answer in their mother tongue.

Most of interviewees mentioned TED Talk, which they regarded as a good resource for listening practice and learning new knowledge. However, two students felt that TED Talk as a listening material is beyond their current English language ability and three students thought they could listen TED Talk by themselves and prefer to utilise the time in class to do other practices. One student suggested that listening to a real lecture in our university or in other educational institution can be an alternative choice to TED Talk, which would also help them to explore the culture in London. From TED Talk we explore further on the course design and ask specific questions. As the questionnaire shows, most of students have a neutral or positive attitude to their progress in speaking, similar results were revealed in the interview. Some students said they enjoyed the style of small group discussion and felt more comfortable to speak, while one student thought they needed more time to practice speaking. And most of the Chinese students said it is difficult not to speak Chinese as Chinese students compose the majority in their class, which turned out to be another reason why they felt that speaking is less easy to be improved compared to reading and listening. And some students mentioned that presentation is very helpful for them to practice academic speaking, but the time given to the presentations was not as long as they expected and they think it would be better to do formal presentations and receive more feedback. Three students suggested the course could teach more daily expressions while most of students prefer to focus on academic practices on the English language course. On the aspect of reading, three students wish they could have had more practices and gained more reading material after class to further improve reading ability. Teachers' teaching style is another element that can affect students' learning performance. Most students described their teacher as "have sense of responsibility", "helpful" and "easy-going", while they also mentioned that they hope teachers could see the difference of teaching style in the UK and in their own countries, strategically adapted their teaching style such as leaving more notes. Meanwhile, students suggested that listening to teachers carefully is essential to absorb knowledge, but they expected more interactions during class to enhance the sense of engagement.

## **Discussion**

The study offers a clear answer to how students received course information through the survey. Also, how taking English language courses has enhanced students' academic performance which was explored from different perspectives both through questionnaire and semi-structured interview. From



the questionnaire, students generally agree that language courses helped them improve their academic English in speaking, reading, writing and listening. This result was reflected in the semi-structured interviews in which students explained their experiences in more detail (please see the 'Result' section). In terms of how language courses have helped students integration into the life in the UK this was mainly answered through the semi-structured interviews.

According to the information collected by means of the questionnaire, the academic year of people who filled the survey varies, including students at the foundation year (2.8%), undergraduate(25%), postgraduate(69%) and doctoral level (2.8%). However, 90% of participants who joined the semi-structured interview are at MA/MSc level, only two people out of twenty are from undergraduate level, which means certain groups are probably underrepresented or misrepresented in the report. Also, it is reasonable for this research to mainly focus on students' experiences on pre-sessional language course as it is an important section of language support service in the University of Westminster. However, because of the time limitations, this study did not collect enough data about students' opinions on other events or sessions which are also part of the language support services.

Also, there is another limitation in the questionnaire. We collected 36 copies of questionnaires in total. While we found that 10 responders didn't attend the English language course, there were still 33 students who answered the following question which ask the students' experience in the English language course. This problem should have been avoided if the logic among questions had been more carefully set so that people who did not attend the courses could finish the questionnaire directly. Or the term "English language courses" aroused some misunderstanding that confused responders. Although it did not cause big problems for data analysing but the preciseness of the research could have been affected.

In sum, the results show that the language support service helps students integration into the education system in UK and help them grasp useful techniques and knowledge for academic study, which achieve the aims of this study. Interestingly, one of our findings suggests that students who had achieved certain scores in standardized international tests such as IELTS does not seem to be an indication of his/her ability to use English in academic settings or meet the requirement in future study, which reflects a series of research done previously (Coffin and Hewings, 2004; Moore and Morton, 2005:63; Breeze 2012:7). For example, as mentioned in the result, students who attended 12 weeks language course said more grammar training would better suit their needs.

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

This study explored international students' experiences about attending the language support courses at the University of Westminster. To achieve the aim of this study, 36 questionnaires and 20 semi-structured interviews were collected. According to the data, students get the information of the language support service mainly from personal connections (friends, academic staff) and the University's website. More than half of the students agree or strongly agree that English language support course helps them improve their English in speaking, listening, writing and reading. Most of the students provided positive feedback about writing related training but they also made some suggestions about the listening related training especially in relation to how they think TED talk is used in the class. Also, many students mentioned that it would be better to separate them based on their disciplines rather than their name and they would like to learn more subject related academic English in the pre-sessional course. In terms of how the courses help them integrate into university

life, most students gave the positive answer as they have activities such as British Museum tour, lectures about London history, etc and spending time in the course also gives them opportunities to make friends.

#### Recommendations for further research

1. Research which contains academic staff's opinions: The questionnaire is still one sided in terms of the range of participants, as we only had limited time and resources to use. If further researchers could also interview some of the teachers and get to know their experiences, challenges when teaching in the language course, this would provide richer data and help understand the course structure from different perspectives

2. Research which focuses on the cultural differences and gaps of educational system between the UK and the countries where international students come from. In this research, some students mentioned that the language course helps them understand UK's education system, but also some of them pointed out that because of the cultural differences, they could not adjust their learning habit as quick as they expected. How well do international students understand the UK education system? To what extent does cultural differences influence their study? This could be a possible direction for future research.

#### **Dissemination**

The purpose of this research was to find out what students think about the language courses that they are currently taking and how they think it should be improved, therefore the stakeholders should be the school as UK is taking more Chinese students per year, hence having the data to improve or change the language course is starting to become critical in order for a school to have better student experiences as Chinese takes a large percentages in terms of the total amount of international students. The data could be used to improve the course in many ways, For example, one of the most mentioned content in the result of the questionnaire is that the TED talk is way too difficult to understand for most of the students and the video was only played once with very few pauses.

This research should also be shared by other universities since almost every university has a large number of International students in UK right now and the results of this one could also help them improve their language courses at the start of each semester.

Also we should send the result to teachers or the department which designed the course and its content, so that they could adjust the course to help international students to achieve their best potential in terms of improving their academic performance and also help them to adapt to university life in London.

#### **Reflection**

Liangyu Fan:

As I'm undertaking my master dissertation right now, taking part in this project enhanced my academic skills which can be metaphorised as bridge filling the gap between me and a higher academic requirement. The methodology that combing quantitative and qualitative ways of data collection together is similar to what I used in my dissertation. I interviewed seven students in this project and our team reflected the interview we did to share ideas and find a ways to improve, from which I had a

better understanding of interview. Not only learning the interview techniques I learned is enjoyable but the connection you build with others and the world is inspiring.

Ziyu Zhu:

The good side about my research would be that it was easy to get 20 interviewees to participate in our project and being able to analyse the time and places to interview them, also most of these auditory recorded was high quality, and all the question was answered well in those records.

The part where it goes wrong is that during some of the record, the auditory went missing due to technical difficulties, hence I tried to interview a participant with my phone and record it at the very same time, therefore we lost the auditory of that part. Personally I think that this part could be done better also the expand of the questionnaire was not enough in some of the auditory as well. But overall it went smoothly as expected.

Chen Yang:

Joining this project gives me an opportunity to try out some research techniques which I never did before and also improve my comprehensive research ability from research design to data collection and analyzing. Also, many supports, both financially and academically, were given to us during every stage of this project.

We also want to take this opportunity to particularly thanks our research partner Dr. Julio Gimenez for his tremendous support, this project would not be possible without his help. Thanks our project assistant Nene Ibokessien for all the useful ideas. Also, thanks you Jennifer Fraser and Moonisah Usman for your kind and immediate response every time we need.

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