

Perceptions of Saudi Preparatory Year Students about the University Intensive English Program

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Abstract

This study investigates the perceptions of the Intensive English Program (IEP) among Preparatory Year (PY) students at King Saud University. Specifically, the study explores the following aspects of the program: student perceptions of the IEP; differences among student perceptions based on their college and proficiency level; student perceptions of the IEP's strengths and weaknesses; and student evaluations of their English language skills. The study employs a quantitative survey method. The results of the study revealed that the students had an overall positive perception where approximately 70% of students perceive the program as effective, beneficial, and useful. In particular, various aspects of teacher performance were evaluated more positively by students than other aspects of the program, such as the effectiveness of the teaching material and academic advising.

أراء طلاب السنة التحضيرية السعوديين نحو البرنامج الجامعي المكثف للغة الإنجليزية

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ملخص

بحثت هذه الدراسة أراء الطلاب نحو برنامج اللغة الإنجليزية المكثف في السنة التحضيرية بجامعة الملك سعود. وبشكل خاص، فإن الدراسة تستكشف الجوانب الآتية في البرنامج: آرائهم حول البرنامج، الاختلافات في آرائهم باختلاف الكلية المنتمى إليها والمستوى اللغوي، نقاط القوة والضعف في البرنامج، وتقييم الطلاب لمهاراتهم في اللغة الإنجليزية. اتبعت الدراسة المنهج المسحي الكمي. وكشفت النتائج أن الطلاب لديهم اتجاه إيجابي بشكل عام حيث ما يقرب 70% من الطلاب يرون أن البرنامج كان فعالاً ومفيداً. وعلى نحو خاص فقد تم تقييم أداء المعلمين بنحو إيجابي أكثر من غيره من الجوانب في البرنامج كالمواد التدريسية والإرشاد الأكاديمي.

Introduction

In an era of globalization, English is emerging as the language for international communication. It is the official language of air traffic control and shipping as well as the leading language of science, technology, the internet, international business and diplomacy. In many parts of the world, where English is not the native language, it is widely spoken and integrated in the curricula of schools and universities. In countries, such as India and Malaysia, where there are different ethnic groups each with their own language, English is used as a common language of communication. Learning the English language has become imperative in order to succeed in education and in the global workplace.

In Saudi Arabia, English is spoken as a foreign language, and is essentially a performance variety. Recognizing English as the medium of higher education, the government of Saudi Arabia introduced the English language as a compulsory subject from grade six through the secondary and tertiary level (Alshumaimeri, 2010). King Saud University (KSU), the biggest higher education institution in Saudi Arabia, has recognized the need to provide newly enrolled students with a preparatory program in which English courses represent 70% of coursework. The rationale in introducing the program was based on research which showed that 96% of universities and colleges in the United States provide preparatory or foundation programs for newly enrolled university students (Upcraft *et al.*, 2005). The results showed that these programs were successful in decreasing the dropout rate, increasing students' personal skills and abilities, and increasing their scientific achievements. These programs also contributed to reducing students' fear of the university environment. Another study conducted at KSU showed that among the reasons for a high dropout rate and late graduation is the lack of students' study skills and poor academic advising (Alqarni, 1994). Employers have indicated that recent engineering graduates lack desirable levels of certain competencies required to compete in the marketplace. Thus, they send new engineering appointees for training in order to overcome their weaknesses (Al-Harkan, 2007). The competencies

emphasized were time-management, communication skills (oral and written) in English, knowledge acquisition from different resources, and teamwork attitudes (Al-Anazi, 2001; Al-Hanai, 2001; Al-Harkan, 2007; Eleiche, 2001).

In the 2007/08 study year, KSU introduced the Preparatory Year Deanship (PYD) in order to overcome the difficulties that new students face and to reduce the dropout rate. The PYD at KSU seeks to offer a high quality program that cultivates students' morality and equips them with the skills needed for success in academic and professional lives, while emphasizing self-development and creativity. With relevance to the study at hand, the PYD aims to fulfill the following goals: develop skills in English, IT, and math, as well as communication, learning, thinking, and research skills; encourage innovation and independence; and improve the learning outcomes of university graduates so as to be competitive in the job market and thereby contribute to national development.

As part of the PYD, the Intensive English Program (IEP) is a skill-based, 20 contact hour, weekly, two-semester program of intensive English language training that aims to develop students' English language proficiency and equip them with essential language skills needed for academic study and future professional life.

Although the focus of the program is on general English (i.e., using English for effective communication in various social contexts and for different purposes), there is an academic English module designed for advanced-level students. This module focuses on certain academic skills that students can utilize in their study, such as academic reading and writing. In addition, the students take an International English Language Testing System (IELTS) preparation module prior to the standardized examination.

Of the teaching staff, 80% are native speakers of English and citizens of the following countries: U.K., U.S.A., Canada, Australia, New Zealand and Ireland.

At the end of the Preparatory Year Intensive English Program students should be able to: reach an advanced level of English

language proficiency; communicate effectively in English in various situations and for different purposes; acquire essential academic skills and study habits necessary for academic success; and prepare for and take an IELTS with a minimum score attainment.

Statement of the Problem

Program evaluation is often difficult to carry out and therefore few programs are re-designed in order to reflect the needs of the students (Elisha-Primo, Sandler, Goldfrad, Ferenz, & Perpignan, 2010). Research regarding the perceptions of IEP learners in the PY of KSU is necessary for enhancing student motivation for learning and ensuring success in future professional and educational endeavors.

Significance of the Study

Few evaluations have been conducted to determine Saudi university students' needs and expectations for English language instruction. When used to inform curriculum reform, evaluation results not only help improve services provided to students, but also aid in improving the knowledge and skills of teachers (Brown, 1995). Consideration of the self-perceived needs of IEP students will aid in re-designing the English language instruction program for PY students at KSU to better meet their needs. Additionally, the evaluation offers a model of comparison to other schools considering implementing similar programs.

Research Questions

The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do Saudi Preparatory Year students perceive the Intensive English Program at King Saud University (KSU)?
2. What differences exist among KSU students' perceptions of the IEP based on the following characteristics:
 - a. College?
 - b. Proficiency Level?
3. What are the IEP's perceived strengths, weaknesses, and difficulties?

4. How do students evaluate their progress in English language skills?

Literature Review

Increasing numbers of universities around the world are introducing Intensive English Language Programs (IELP) in order to help bilingual as well as foreign students improve their English language skills. The IELP seeks to improve an individual's vocabulary and grammar as well as listening, reading, speaking and writing skills (Admiraal, Westhoff, & de Bot, 2006).

Student opinions about the program vary. Thompson (2011) found that students taking an IELP in Thailand held a generally positive opinion about the program and were motivated to work towards attaining greater English language skills. Al-Braik's (2009) study revealed that Saudi students associated learning the English language with better educational as well as occupational opportunities. Finch (2000), finding the same results in reference to Korean students, reported that student's complaints were primarily related to ways in which the program could be made more efficient. According to a study conducted by Peacock (2009), students felt that the strengths of the IELP included: utility, practicality, and professionalism. The program's well designed curriculum was, in their opinion, not the only factor that enabled them to pick up the language faster in class. Cooperative, available staff, along with an adequate theory-practice balance, also aided the learning process.

A well-designed evaluation should also identify issues that impede the successful implementation of a language program (Llosa & Slayton, 2009). Reviews collected in a study by Weir and Roberts (1994) suggested that IELP students were not satisfied with the teaching modes or the curriculum of the program. More than half of the respondent students were skeptical about how updated the program was. Students also reported feeling as if the courses did not proceed in a coherent manner, and hence impeded learning. In addition, Bartels (2005) found that students felt that there was no balance between teacher and student centered learning. Students in

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Bartels (2005) study found the program insufficient in preparing them to function satisfactorily in socio-cultural contexts. Byrnes (2006) also suggests that the learning process should involve a more student, rather than teacher centered approach.

Furthermore, research conducted by Jing (2005) found that many students felt that a greater variety of more interesting teaching modes and assessment procedures could facilitate the learning process and alleviate the monotony of the program. Students with a lower level of linguistic ability felt that the speed of the listening materials was too fast for them to understand, which leads to negative opinions about the program (Jing, 2005). It should also be noted that even though the students resented these practice materials, they did benefit from them. Wallace (1991) highlights that during his research students stated that the program did not make use of the provided Foreign Language Teacher (FLT) materials, class size was inappropriate, and access to libraries was limited. The findings of another experiment conducted by Robinson (2003) emphasized that students felt there was a lack of educational technology in the IELP.

Arkin (2010) conducted an evaluation study of the skill-based approach in an English Preparatory School. Collecting student perceptions of learning resources, curriculum development and organization, teaching delivery, content materials and assessment, the evaluation found that a skill-based program helps students to develop strategies in each language skill. According to Arkin (2010), problems with such programs are rooted in financial constraints and can be countered with additional funding.

The pitfalls of the IELP program have been well documented in research conducted in many different scholastic settings (Bartels, 2005; Peacock, 2009; Richards, 1990; Robinson, 2003; Wallace, 1991; Weir and Roberts, 1994). Various studies collecting student evaluations of the program did not only highlight the weaknesses of the program, but also offered interesting solutions to counter them. The most common weakness reported was that the program did not offer a post graduate diploma (Peacock, 2009; Robinson, 2003). Another weakness reported by the students was the length of the

practice period (Peacock, 2009). Students felt that it was insufficient to fulfil the learning requirements.

Elisha-Primo et al. (2010) found that male students often did better than female students, perhaps because they reported feeling that the language was essential for their professional growth. The same was found for students on the thesis track, as they often out-performed those on the non-thesis track (Elisha-Primo et al., 2010).

Innovation is needed in order to develop new and effective ways to evaluate students and improve the efficiency of any program. Alghamdi (2009) suggests that the IELP curriculum, teaching modes and faculty should be assessed. Jacobs (2000) introduced a ten step evaluation program called Learning in English for Academic Purpose (LEAP). The results of the LEAP program suggested that the greater institutional and administrative context needs to be taken into account during curriculum development. In order to address such variables, the IELP is designed for different levels of ability, each level with its own curriculum (Nam, 2005).

Finch (2000) proposes that although student's opinions and recommendations are rarely taken into account, they could be used to make IELP programs more effective. Student feedback has helped teachers change their teaching strategies (Peacock, 2009; Elisha-Primo et al., 2010). Evaluation, although a strategy for better understanding a given program, also engages with social, cultural, and historical identities (Kiely, 2009). Teachers who are cognizant of student backgrounds may be better able to tailor effective modes of communicating learning materials.

The skills of the teacher are also a point of concern among students in research conducted by Todd et al(2009). These students reported a preference for teachers who are native speakers. Poor management skills among teachers have also been found to hinder learning in the IELP classroom (Richards, 1990). However, it should be noted that in research conducted by Byrnes et al. (2006), 86% of students gave teachers a rating of 'very good' or 'excellent'. To achieve better results and satisfy students, a series of

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recommendations by Fareh (2010), who studied English language programs in Arab World countries, suggest that only eligible teachers, that fit the requirements of such a course, should be hired for the job. Fareh (2010) also found that inadequate teacher preparation, poor student motivation, teacher-centered methods, and poor assessment techniques also contributed to under-performing EFL programs.

The research discussed above suggests that most students value the IELP course. As found by Peacock (2009), many students who perform poorly in written English do exceptionally well in spoken English. The concept that writing skills are more difficult to acquire than spoken skills is supported by the research of Akunal (1992) who found that students learn more effectively when they are engaged in English communicative activities rather than learning from a textbook. University administrators must be made aware of such challenges so that programs are revised and updated as needed (Jacobs, 2000).

Study Design

The survey undertaken was intended to provide a descriptive analysis of the perceptions of the Preparatory Year students at King Saud University in Saudi Arabia. A descriptive research design such as this can provide useful information about the distribution of a wide range of characteristics and of relationships between such characteristics. According to Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2007), “surveys are useful for gathering factual information, data on attitudes and preferences, beliefs and predictions, behavior and experiences...the attractions of a survey lie in its appeal to generalizability or universality within given parameter” (p. 207).

Participants

The participants of this study were 735 students in the Preparatory Year (PY) in KSU in the natural science and engineering track. The total student population in the PY was 1,376 students. As there is little variability in the student population and less than 100% returns were expected for the questionnaire, a total of 800 students

were originally targeted for the study sample. The percentage of returned questionnaires is sufficient at 91.9%. The number of students that participated exceeds the confidence level of 95% (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007).

Research Tools

Dörnyei (2001) indicated that questionnaire data is the most common type of data collected in attitudes studies. Questionnaires are simple to administer and provide researchers with quantitative data. Much of the research conducted to assess attitudes and perceptions has made use of questionnaires composed of primarily closed items (these are designed to elicit information that is directly relevant to the research topic) with a Likert scale format. A Likert scale asks individuals to indicate (usually with a tick) their level of agreement with various statements.

For this study, statements were composed concerning the Foundation Year students' perceptions of the Intensive English Program in which they were enrolled. Containing three parts, the questionnaire elicited firstly biographical data and secondly students' perceptions of the IEP. Ten items were used to assess the students' perceptions of different aspects of the IEP including teachers, teaching methods, materials, self-learning activities and administration. The questionnaire was piloted among a group of students, and the pilot results helped in modifying the wording of some items of the questionnaire. The questionnaire was evaluated by four academic professors specialized in EFL for content and face validity. An internal validity was conducted by using Pearson correlation coefficients between the items and the total of the scale for the study. The results revealed that all the correlation coefficients were statistically significant at level 0.01. Therefore, this result indicates a high degree of internal consistency of the items and confirms the internal correlation between all items of the scale. A reliability analysis was computed for the questionnaire. The reliability results were (Cronbach's alpha) 0.794 for all the questionnaire items and 0.830 for the perceptions items. Thereby, the high degree of reliability of the questionnaire indicates that it is possible to proof the obtained results.

Data Collection

Data collection was conducted in the college setting, employing normal procedures, and on a regular college day at the end of the second semester of 2008. Data analysis was conducted in accordance with the research questions, all of which were concerned with the students' perceptions of the IEP and their perceived strengths and weaknesses of the program. The skills they felt were improved and those that need more attention were identified. The difficulties they faced during the program were also identified.

Frequency, descriptive analysis tests, mean scores, and standard deviation were used to measure the students' perceptions and to provide a picture of the population under study. Analysis of variance (ANOVA), with a post hoc test, was used to test the differences between the participants according to their college and level of proficiency. The study results are reported below.

Results

To achieve the goals of this research, the data was coded and processed on IBM compatible computers, using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software (version 13). Descriptive analysis, using standard statistical methods, was performed. Relational statistics were used to answer some questions of the study. Tables 1, 2, 3, and 4 present biographical and personal characteristics data for the study sample.

Table 1 shows the frequency distribution of the study sample according to college. As indicated, 33.3% of study participants were in Business Administration, followed by those in Engineering (32.9%), Computer Sciences (23.4%), and Architecture and Planning (8.7%). The inferential statistics revealed no significant difference in perception according to college ($P>0.05$).

Table 1. Frequency distribution of the study sample according to college

Student college	No	%
Business Administration	245	33.3

Architecture and Planning	64	8.7
Engineering	242	32.9
Computer Sciences	172	23.4
Not indicated	12	1.6
Total	735	100

Table 2 shows the frequency distribution of the study sample according to GPA in semester 1. For 31.3% of participants, their GPA in semester 1 ranged from 3.0-3.74 with 29.5% ranging from 4.0-4.49 and 21% ranging from 4.5-5. Those students with a GPA ranging from 3.75 to 3.99 represented 11.4% and those with a GPA ranging from 2.5 to 2.49 represented 6.8%.

Table 2. Frequency distribution of the study sample according to GPA in semester 1

GPA in semester 1	No	%
4.5-5	154	21.0
4.0-4.49	217	29.5
3.75-3.99	84	11.4
3.0-3.74	230	31.3
2.5-2.99	44	6.0
2.0-2.49	6	0.8
Total	735	100

Table 3 shows the frequency distribution of the study sample according to English grades in term 1. The results revealed that 23.5% of the study sample earned a grade C in term 1, 17% earned a grade B, 16.6% a grade B+, 15.9% a grade A, and 5.2% a grade A+. Those participants with grades D and D+ represented 6.8%.

Table 3. Frequency distribution of the study sample according to English grade in term 1

English grade in term 1	No	%
A+	38	5.2
A	117	15.9
B+	122	16.6
B	125	17.0
C+	110	15.0
C	173	23.5
D+	30	4.1
D	20	2.7
Total	735	100

Table 4 shows the frequency distribution of the study sample according to proficiency level codes. The results revealed that 32.1% of the study sample have intermediate proficiency, 26.5% upper intermediate proficiency, 24.8% lower intermediate proficiency, 11.3% have elementary proficiency, and 4.9% have advanced proficiency. The beginners represent only 0.4%.

Table 4. Frequency distribution of the study sample according to proficiency level codes

Proficiency level codes	No	%
Beginner	3	.4
Elementary	83	11.3
Lower Intermediate	182	24.8
Intermediate	236	32.1
Upper Intermediate	195	26.5
Advanced	36	4.9
Total	735	100

To answer the first research question, (How do Saudi

Preparatory Year students perceive the Intensive English Program at King Saud University (KSU?), frequencies, percentages, means and standard deviations were produced for each item of the scale which represents the overall perception of the IEP. Additionally, statistics for total perceptions are shown in Table 5.

Table 5. Frequencies, percentages, means and standard deviations of the study sample responses towards the scale items

SN	Items	Mean	SD
1	The benefit you got from the IEP in developing your English language skills.	4.94	1.04
2	Your teachers' performance and role in developing your English language skills.	4.86	1.11
3	Your teachers' ability to motivate and encourage you to learn English.	4.52	1.26
4	Your teachers' encouragement of questions from you (and other students) and their appropriate response to them.	5.01	1.15
5	Your teachers' understanding and respect of local culture and of our society's values.	4.79	1.36
6	The appropriateness of the teaching materials (books and CDs) and their educational value.	4.12	1.48
7	The clarity and transparency of the assessment and testing process.	3.64	1.60
8	The effectiveness of academic advising in the IEP.	3.51	1.52

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9	The benefit you got from the self-learning activities.	2.63	1.63
10	The ease and effectiveness of communication with Admin staff about IEP-related matters (timetables, assessment, teachers, rules and regulations, announcements etc.)	3.62	1.69
Total mean		4.17	0.88

The second part of the questionnaire included questions related to IEP perceptions. The Likert scale, with equal weight given to the six degrees sorted in adescending order (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6), was provided to enable the respondents to rank their perceptions. Percentages and frequencies, means and standard deviations were produced.

The results, as seen in Table 5, indicate study participants held “very good” perceptions with regard to: statement 4 (Your teachers’ encouragement of questions from you (and other students) and their appropriate response to them); statement 1 (The benefit you got from the IEP in developing your English language skills); statement 2 (Your teachers’ performance and role in developing your English language skills); statement 5 (Your teachers’ understanding and respect of local culture and of our society’s values); and statement 3 (Your teachers’ ability to motivate and encourage you to learn English).

Students held “good” perceptions with regard to: statement 6 (The appropriateness of the teaching materials (books and CDs) and their educational value); statement 7 (The clarity and transparency of the assessment and testing process); statement 10 (The ease and effectiveness of communication with Admin staff about IEP-related matters); and statement 8 (The effectiveness of academic advising in the IEP). Students held a poor perception with regard to statement 9 (The benefit you got from the self-learning activities).

The results above revealed that the average means of this scale ranged from 2.66 to 5.01 which lie between a “poor” perception and a

“very good” perception to the items. The total overall perception for this scale was 4.17 out of 6.00 which represents a “good” perception.

However, regarding the research question as to whether the students’ perceptions differ in relation to college and proficiency level, a one-way ANOVA with post hoc Least Significant Difference (LSD) multiple analysis test was conducted. Tables 6, 7, and 8 report the results.

Table 6. One-way ANOVA for differences according college

Source	Sum of Squares	DF	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	185.542	4	46.385	0.597	0.665
Within Groups	56722.989	730	77.703		
Total	56908.531	734			

The results in Table 6 reveal no significant differences among the study sample’s perceptions according to college, where the (F) value reached 0.597 (significant level more than 0.05 ($P>0.05$)).

Table 7. One-way ANOVA for differences according to proficiency level codes

Source	Sum of Squares	DF	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	1924.342	5	384.868	5.103	0.000**
Within Groups	54984.189	729	75.424		
Total	56908.531	734			

** significant at level 0.01

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The results in Table 7 reveal that there is a significant difference among the study sample's perceptions according to proficiency level codes, where the (F) value reached 5.103 (significant level at 0.01). To locate the differences, a multiple comparison (LSD) test was conducted to show the levels at which the significant differences occurred between them.

Table 8. Multiple Comparisons (LSD)

Level	N	Mean	Beginner	Elementary	Lower Intermediate	Intermediate	Upper Intermediate	Advanced
Beginner	3	43.67	-	-	-	-	-	-
Elementary	83	41.25	-	-	-	-	-	-
Lower Intermediate	182	39.46	-	-	-	-	-	-
Intermediate	236	42.02	-	-	-	-	-	-
Upper Intermediate	195	42.49	-	-	3.03**	-	-	-
Advanced	36	46.53	-	5.27**	7.07**	4.51**	4.04*	-

** significant at 0.01

* significant at 0.05

In Table 8 we conducted a multiple comparison test using LSD and found that the differences in perceptions were between: students having upper intermediate proficiency and those having lower intermediate in favor of those having upper intermediate proficiency; students having advanced proficiency and those having elementary in favor of those with advanced proficiency; students having advanced proficiency and those having lower intermediate in favor of those with advanced proficiency; students having advanced proficiency and those having intermediate in favor of those with advanced proficiency; and students having advanced proficiency and those having upper intermediate in favor of those with advanced proficiency.

To answer the third research question regarding the strengths, weaknesses and difficulties of the IEP program as perceived by the students, frequencies and percentages of the students' answers to the open ended questions were coded and reported in Tables 9, 10, and 11.

Table 9. Strengths of the course as perceived by the students

No	Term	Frequency	Percentage
1	Use of Language	34	14.9%
2	Native Speakers	31	13.6%
3	Teaching methods	28	12.3%
4	Teaching Speaking	25	10.9%
5	Teaching Vocabulary	20	8.8%
6	Many Contact Hours	18	7.9%
7	Teaching Grammar	18	7.9%
8	Experienced teachers	15	6.6%
9	Syllabus	14	6.4%
10	Teaching listening	10	4.4%
11	None	5	2.1%
12	Teaching All skills	5	2.1%
13	IELTS exam	5	2.1%
Total		228	100

Table 9 indicates that the students value most highly the use of the target language (ranked first with 14.9%) and then specific qualities and abilities of their teachers: the number of native speakers (13.6%), teaching methods (12.3%), teaching speaking (10.9%) and teaching vocabulary (8.8%). Of the remaining eight responses, four relate to other qualities of the teaching staff: their experience (6.6%), ability to teach grammar (7.9%), listening (4.4%) and all skills (2.1%). The term many contact hours was ranked sixth in frequency by 7.9%, the syllabus ninth with 6.4%, and the IELTS exam eleventh with 2.1%. Only 2.1% of students felt that the IEP had no strengths and answered "None".

Table 10. The most salient weaknesses as perceived by the students

No	Term	Frequency	Percentage
1	None	27	16.4%
2	Teaching Writing	23	13.9%
3	Many Contact Hours	17	10.4%
4	Teaching Reading	15	9.1%
5	Textbooks	15	9.1%
6	Syllabus Organization	12	6.4%
7	Teaching Speaking	9	5.5%
8	Non-Native Speakers	8	4.8%
9	Timetable	8	4.8%
10	Tests	8	4.8%
11	Teaching Listening	7	4.2%
12	Teaching Grammar	6	3.6%
13	Teaching methods	5	3 %
14	Teaching All skills	5	3 %
Total		165	100

Of all tables, Table 10, recording students' perceptions of "most salient weaknesses", has the smallest number of returns with 165, compared to 228 for Table 9 and 356 for Table 11. This result might imply a largely positive attitude towards the IEP. Certainly the response of "None" recorded as the answer with the highest frequency (16.4%) supports that view.

Table 11. The most important difficulties that you faced in learning English at the PY?

No	Term	Frequency	Percentage
1	None	102	28.7%
2	Too many contact hours	58	16.3%
3	Speaking Skill	31	8.7%
4	Writing Skill	30	8.4%
5	Vocabulary	18	5.1%
6	Timetable changes	14	3.9%
7	Teacher changes	14	3.9%
8	Placement	11	3.1%
9	Tests	11	3.1%
10	Deanship management	10	2.8%
11	Listening Skill	10	2.8%
12	Other skills	10	2.8%
13	Reading Skill	10	2.8%
14	Teachers	9	2.5%
15	Non-native teachers	8	2.3%
16	Attendance	5	1.4%
17	All	5	1.4%
Total		356	100

While different aspects of the teaching are cited as weaknesses, four of these are by less than 5% of the respondents. The highest area of teaching cited is the teaching of writing, coming

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second in order of frequency (13.9%) with reading coming fourth (9.1%).the term Many contact hours appears third in order of frequency with 10.4% (as a weakness).

In delivering their responses to the question relating to the “most important difficulties” in learning English at the PY, over a quarter of the respondents (28.7%) answered “None” – the response with by far the highest frequency from any of the previous three tables.

The number of contact hours features as a difficulty that ranked second in order of frequency with 16.3%. In terms of difficulties related to the subject itself, speaking (8.7%), writing (8.4%) and vocabulary (5.4%) are ranked third, fourth and fifth respectively.

The students’ perceptions as shown in answer to research question three largely support the view that their attitudes to the IEP are positive. The responses in Table 9 indicate that the students regard the use made of the target language and the quality of teaching in certain key areas as strengths. The number of native speakers also features as a strength. In Tables 10 and 11, the fact that in answer to the question regarding weaknesses and difficulties the response with the highest frequency was “None” (16.4% for weaknesses and a substantial 28.7% for difficulties) provided further evidence of a largely positive attitude towards the IEP. In contrast, only 2.1% of the responses answered “None” in Table 1.

The data, however, also suggests some areas that might be worthy of review. The first is the number of contact hours. While it was ranked sixth with a percentage of 7.9% in Table 9 and perceived as a strength, it was cited third in Table 10, with a percentage of 10.4%, and perhaps more significantly, second in Table 11, where 16.3% saw this issue as a difficulty. It could be that 20 hours per week is too time-consuming given the students’ other studies.

The data also reveals something about the way the different skills in English are taught, as there seems to be significantly different attitudes reflected in the tables between speaking, listening, reading

and writing. In Table 9 teaching speaking is ranked fourth in terms of frequency with a percentage of 10.9%; teaching listening is ranked tenth with 4.4%, but writing and reading do not feature in Table 9 at all. Conversely, teaching, as well as writing and reading, both appear in Table 10, ranked second and fourth respectively, and writing skill is cited fourth in Table 11, regarded by 8.4% as a difficulty in learning English.

As the research questions of this study are additionally concerned with the students' evaluation of their progress in English language skills, Tables 12 and 13 report the perceived development of students' language skills and the skills that need more attention, respectively.

Table 12 indicates that while 83% of students believe that they have developed their English language skills significantly in one of the four core skills of speaking, listening, writing and reading, well over half of that 83% (44.3%) cited speaking. This does not preclude the likelihood that a significant proportion of these students made good progress in some or all of the other skills as well, although only 7.5% of the respondents believed that they had developed all skills significantly. The fact that "None" was the least frequent answer with only 1.1% of respondents indicates a largely positive attitude towards the course.

Table 12. The most developed English Skills as perceived by the students

No	Term	Frequency	Percentage
1	Speaking	340	44.3%
2	Listening	125	16.3%
3	Writing	102	13.3%
4	Reading	70	9.1%
5	All Skills	58	7.5%
6	Grammar	37	4.8%
7	Vocabulary	28	3.6%
8	None	8	1.1%
Total		769	100

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The responses in Table 13 are consistent with those expressed in previous tables. Writing is cited by 45.1% of students as the skill in which they have not developed significantly, whereas only 10.1% felt that their speaking was the weakest of the four core skills. The order of core skills in terms of frequency was writing, reading, listening and speaking. Writing and reading combined represented 66%, and listening and speaking combined was 23.7%. Only 1.1% believed that none of their English language skills had developed significantly.

Table 13. The skills that have not developed as perceived by the students

No	Term	Frequency	Percentage
1	Writing	326	45.1%
2	Reading	151	20.9%
3	Listening	98	13.6%
4	Speaking	73	10.1%
5	Grammar	32	4.4%
6	Vocabulary	25	3.4%
7	None	10	1.4%
8	All Skills	8	1.1%
Total		723	100

Discussion

The results to the first question regarding student' perceptions of the IEP reveal that the study participants believe that they did benefit from the IEP in terms of the development of their English language skills. This was true regardless of the college the student attended. However, with regard to differences between student perceptions according to proficiency level, results indicate that students with advanced or upper intermediate proficiency held a higher opinion of the IEP than those with lower proficiency. These results are not surprising and are similar to the findings of Jing (2005) who found that students with a lower level of linguistic ability had negative opinions regarding the listening materials used in the program. The results of this study indicate that different attitudes towards the IEP in general may affect student motivation to learn as

well as class performance. Curricular changes that directly address the concerns of lower performing students should be implemented.

Students were found to hold a “very good” perception of the teachers with regard to their encouragement of questions, performance and role in developing language skills, understanding and respect of local culture, and ability to motivate and encourage students. Byrnes et al. (2006) reported similar findings among students who gave IEP teachers a rating of ‘very good’ or ‘excellent’. While some aspects of the teaching practices were cited as weaknesses, specifically the teaching of writing and reading, the number of students holding this opinion was less than 5%. Writing and reading ability for academic purposes does pose a greater academic challenge, and student opinions regarding their lack of advancement in these areas has been noted in other studies (Elisha-Primo et al., 2010).

Students in the study reported having a “good” opinion of IEP teaching materials, clarity and transparency of the assessment and testing process, ease and effectiveness of communication with administrative staff, and effectiveness of academic advising. These results indicate that the administrative and material aspects of the IEP are satisfactory. With students only reporting a “poor” opinion of the benefit they gained from the self-learning activities, the overall perception of the program is positive. Greater elucidation on the specific weaknesses of the self-learning activities of the IEP should be studied at a future date.

Results also indicate that the students value most highly the use of the target language as well as specific qualities and abilities of their teachers such as being a native speaker, teaching methods, teaching speaking, and teaching vocabulary. Teaching skills are often a point of concern among students. Todd et al (2009) also found that students held a preference for teachers who are native speakers.

Students’ perceptions of the most salient weaknesses of the IEP had the smallest number of returns indicating a largely positive attitude towards the IEP. Supporting this position, over a quarter of respondents answered “none” in response to the question relating to

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the “most important difficulties” in learning English. However, the results suggest some areas might be of concern for future research. Over 15% of respondents felt the number of contact hours was a difficulty of the IEP suggesting that 20 hours per week is too demanding given the students’ schedules.

Results also reveal significantly different attitudes towards the way speaking, listening, reading and writing skills are taught. Many students reported feeling as if writing and reading pose greater difficulties in learning English. While the vast majority of the students reported feeling as if they had developed their English language skills significantly, speaking ability was the core skill most students felt had been improved the most. This result is not surprising as writing and reading are more difficult skills to master than speaking and listening. Akunal (1992) found similar results suggesting that students learn more effectively when they are engaged in English communicative activities rather than learning from a textbook.

Conclusion

This study, based largely on the students’ perceptions of the IEP course, presents a generally positive picture with the overwhelming majority of the students indicating that the course was beneficial and enabled them to develop their language skills. It is clear from the study that most students value many of the skills, methodology and experience of the teaching staff. Consistently through the responses to the various questions is the ability to communicate in spoken English that students cite as the aspect of the course in which greatest progress was made; the ability to communicate in written English was the area where most felt that they had made the least progress. This may be accounted for by the fact that developing writing skills is intrinsically more difficult, having to master the complexities and irregularities of English grammar and spelling, than developing the ability to speak in English. Alternatively it might be the case that the teaching of writing is not as effective as the teaching of speaking. It could be a combination of these factors.

Recommendations

From the study results, tentative recommendations call for: a review of the IEP against the criteria set out in “Objectives of the program” and the results achieved in the IELTS examination; a review, in cooperation with the program leaders, of the strategies and methods used to teach the core skills of reading and writing with the aim of increasing its effectiveness; a review of the contact hours of the program to establish whether an effective course could be delivered in fewer hours; the provision of more tutorial sessions for students who are lagging behind in class; and teacher evaluations regarding the program.

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