Are You Speaking Comfortably?

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A b s t r a c t

A survey of students attending the Hong Kong Polytechnic University (PolyU) (Sweeney and Farmer, 1994) revealed that they believe English is important for their future careers; however, they feel few opportunities exist either inside or outside the classroom for genuine spoken communication. The main factor constraining students appears to be the fear of losing face. Students said they would welcome opportunities of a less threatening nature. A further study examined one such opportunity-an English-language pantomime. This revealed a number of factors which legitimised the use of spoken English. These included a genuine reason to communicate, group solidarity and a positive attitude to error. We have since set up further opportunities which include these features. This paper investigates more closely the factors limiting and encouraging students' use of spoken English in the PolyU. It also evaluates a further opportunity — an Independent Learning Scheme (ILS) — to assess how far this encourages spoken English. There will be a discussion of data gathered from ILS students by means of questionnaires and in-depth interviews. Discussion will also focus on suggestions made by the students themselves for additional opportunities they would like to have and implications this may have for the PolyU.

Introduction

> The hindering factors most often cited relate to opportunities for using the language. All groups (students, teachers and principals) agreed that there are few opportunities to use English after class, and all educators agreed that there are few opportunities to speak English in class. (Education Commission Report No. 6 Consultation Document Part 1:40)

It is findings such as these which triggered our interest in investigating what students perceive as opportunities for speaking English inside and outside class. This led to a survey of students attending Hong Kong Polytechnic University (HKPU) (Sweeney and Farmer, 1994), revealing that they believe English is important; however, few opportunities exist for genuine spoken communication. The main factor constraining students appears to be the fear of losing face.

The aim of the present study is threefold:

- to examine in greater depth the factors constraining student use of spoken English in HKPU;

- to evaluate the Independent Learning Scheme (ILS) offered by the English Language Study Centre (ELSC) as an opportunity for practising speaking skills; and

- to assess the extent to which further opportunities are needed.

The report begins with a survey of previous research investigating opportunities and the factors which encourage and inhibit the use of spoken English. It then focuses on the results of the current study, examining the lack of opportunities in HKPU as perceived by students and considers the reasons for this. Suggestions for further opportunities are also discussed. The ILS is then

introduced and evaluated. Finally, there is a discussion of implications for the ELSC and for HKPU as a whole.

Literature Review

Opportunities for Speaking in English

In Class

The quote from the sixth Education Commission Report (ECR) Consultation Document in the introduction implies that an essential factor in successful language learning is the provision of a wide range of opportunities for meaningful communication in English in the classroom. However, research conducted in the secondary English language classroom suggests that one of the major reasons for the learners' widespread lack of confidence in using English is that opportunities for real communication are extremely limited (Lai, 1993, p.36). This is also alluded to in the same Consultation Document, which states, 'in Hong Kong classrooms students tend to be passive in their interaction with teachers, limiting themselves to Yes/No or single word responses'. Even in Anglo-Chinese schools, where almost all subjects are purported to be in English (So, cited in Pierson, 1993,p.10), teachers tend to use mixed code or Cantonese in spoken communication. English lessons are no exception (Johnson and Lee, 1987; Lai, 1993, p.13).

At tertiary level, research findings are similar. Studies undertaken at HKPU reveal that, inside the classroom, students feel very few opportunities exist where they are comfortable speaking in English (Sweeney and Farmer, 1994, p.1; Sweeney and Farmer, 1995b, p.6)

Out of Class

Outside class, at both secondary and tertiary level, students and teachers perceive opportunities are even fewer (ECR No 6 Consultation Document Part 1, p.40; Sweeney and Farmer, 1994, p.1,9). This concurs with Gibbons' research finding that English is rarely used outside formal contexts (cited in Kember and Gow,1991, p.123).

Motivation and the Need for More Opportunities

Research at both secondary and tertiary levels into Hong Kong learners' attitudes to using spoken English reveals something of a paradox: despite the constraints students feel in speaking the language, they are motivated to improve and do desire more opportunities to practise. Although, at a social level, English is seen as 'something very removed from the daily lives of youngsters' (Lai, 1993, p.5), it is viewed as a key factor in educational and career advancement (Fu, 1987, p.31) and the language of international communication (Bond, 1991, p.111; Lord, 1987, p.11).

At secondary level, the motivation to learn and use English can clearly be seen in the findings of a survey by Pennington and Yue (1993) into the language attitudes of Hong Kong students. Respondents reported that they would welcome English as a medium of instruction and that they would like to be able to speak English fluently.

Research amongst students at tertiary-level in Hong Kong indicates continued motivation to improve speaking skills in English. This interest is reflected in the results of a study into the motivation of business students at the Hang Seng School of Commerce (Poon, 1989) and amongst students attending the ELSC at PolyU (Sweeney and Farmer, 1994, p.13). A further investigation into the needs and preferences of students attending the ELSC was made in 1996. This was based on student responses to needs questionnaires and on the materials which they had used during the previous three years. Results indicated that 82% wanted to focus on speaking skills for at least 70%

of their programmes. There was little variation in response from students in different faculties. The majority of these students said that spoken English would be of importance to them in their future careers.

The students' perception that they will need spoken English in the Hong Kong workplace is reinforced in research by Boswood into employers' requirements as regards the English proficiency of graduates they employ. Three-quarters of those questionnaired stressed the importance of a high ability in English oral communication. Boswood concludes that, "... employers clearly assigned paramount importance to ability in English, with oral and written skills equally valued" (Boswood, 1992, p.23).

Another piece of research which suggests that spoken English is of great importance in the workplace concerns the self-perceived language needs of accountants and company administrators in Hong Kong. The findings showed that the area in which these professionals would most like further language training was spoken English (Poon, 1992, p.1)

In light, then, of the importance that students and employers attach to spoken English, the key issue to consider is how we, as language teachers, can resolve the paradox between the learners' underlying motivation to improve their oral communication skills and the constraints which hold them back.

Factors Constraining the Use of Spoken English

Surveys have suggested that there are a number of factors leading students in most situations to feel uncomfortable using spoken English and limiting their readiness to speak English.

Affective Factors

A key constraining factor is the anxiety of losing face in front of classmates and teachers. Students are concerned about their lack of proficiency and are fearful of making mistakes (Lai, 1993, p.36; Sweeney and Farmer, 1994, pp.9-10). This leads to a lack of confidence in their ability and discourages them from interacting orally:

> Students who feel inadequate in their language abilities tend to protect their self-image by not participating in class communication. (Lai: op cit).

Bond (1991, p.36) comments that Chinese are more 'socially anxious' than Westerners, and this is confirmed by comments from students. For example:

> ... how we behave in class does have something to do with our traditional culture. For example, there is a Chinese saying 'The leading bird is always shot first', i.e. soon or later the first will get into trouble for his boldness. This is true in class. Those who answer the teacher's question really need great courage. I realise the importance of oral practice yet I find it difficult for me to be active in class. Our culture has dominated our minds for a long time. (Sweeney and Farmer, 1995a, p.1)

Wong (1984, p.15) suggests that, in English-medium secondary schools, there are socio-cultural rules controlling the use of spoken English. For example:

> If you want to be accepted by your peers, you must not voluntarily and enthusiastically respond to the teacher in English.

Surveys of students at HKPU suggest that they continue to feel inhibited at tertiary level. For example, students have commented that, where the teacher is a non-native speaker, it is unnatural to speak English in class. (Sweeney and Farmer, 1994, p.10). The same study indicated students also fear making mistakes and so losing face (op cit). The investigation in 1996 into the preferences

of ELSC students identified confidence-raising and fluency practice as the over-riding needs which students associated with speaking skills.

Pedagogic Factors

Approaches at secondary level have been described as teacher-centred (Ho, 1992, p.100). This derives in part from traditional beliefs that the teacher is an authority and is the dispenser of knowledge (Bond, 1991, p.13). Teachers are also under pressure to cover the heavy content load in syllabuses in preparation for examinations (Ho: op cit), and there tends in examinations to be an emphasis on factual knowledge which leaves little room for the development of communication skills (Johnson, 1994). In order to complete the syllabus, there is a substantial use of mixed code by teachers throughout secondary level (ECR 4, 1989) and, in some cases, English is used minimally (Lai, 1993, p.13). Thus, the indication is that there is little time or opportunity for students to practise and develop their speaking skills. However, whether the greater focus on oral communication skills in the Use of English Examination has had any impact on the situation is a subject for further study.

Many of these constraints continue to operate at tertiary level. A wide range of HKPU course reviews suggest that too heavy a load is placed on students. This, and the perceived low level of students' English, may help to explain the claim by students that, in many departments, English is used minimally in class (Sweeney and Farmer, 1994, p.10)

Reducing the Threat: Factors Encouraging Students to Speak in English

In an attempt to reduce the threat of speaking in English, a pantomime — 'Cinderella' — was staged by the ELSC in both 1993 and 1994. In-depth interviews and questionnaires conducted during rehearsals and after the performances revealed a number of factors which made students feel more comfortable and confident speaking in English. These included the following:

1   A genuine reason to communicate. Findings suggest that participants felt there were many opportunities to interact naturally in English with both their peers and instructors. These included negotiating roles, advising others and arranging the performance (Sweeney and Farmer, 1995, p.7).

2   A lack of formal assessment. Students commented that the atmosphere was relaxed and friendly, and that they felt more comfortable speaking in English because there was no formal assessment of their proficiency. Lack of formal assessment may also account for the increased activation of language. In fact, 56% of participants commented on their improved fluency and the growth of confidence in dealing with the unpredictable in oral interaction (Sweeney and Farmer, op cit, p.11).

3   A positive attitude to error. One of the causes discussed earlier for learner's unwillingness to speak in English was the fear of making mistakes and appearing foolish. A major reason for choosing a pantomime was to reduce this threat as, in this dramatic form, mistakes can easily be disguised as intentional and add to the humour. In-depth interviews conducted after the performances revealed that many participants had developed 'the courage to be imperfect' (Diana Gaylord: counselling workshop), over two-thirds reporting that they were less anxious about making errors.

4   Group solidarity. One benefit of the pantomime reported by over 50% of participants was that they had made new friends who, like themselves, were keen to practise speaking in English. This helped them to develop a greater group identity, evidenced by their desire, after the drama, to continue meeting and practising together (Sweeney and Farmer, 1995b, p.12). It would appear, then, that the group solidarity and friendship which developed during the pantomime lessened the threat of standing out and losing face.

Methodology

Self-Reporting Questionnaire

A questionnaire was completed by 53 full-time undergraduate students attending a voluntary summer programme at the English Language Study-Centre. Students had completed a minimum of five hours but were otherwise chosen at random.

The questionnaire consisted of 23 statements (see Table 1) relating to how comfortable students felt using spoken English and the available opportunities in the Study-Centre, in their own departments and socially within HKPU. Students responded using a four-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. There were also two open-ended questions regarding student preference for group or individual attendance, and opportunities for spoken English which students would favour.

The questionnaire was piloted with eight students and the final version was administered by Centre staff to students in their groups.

In-Depth Interview

Six groups totalling 20 students were interviewed after completing the questionnaire. Interview questions probed questionnaire responses. Interviews were 30-40 minutes in length and were recorded with students' permission.

Results

Table 1 shows the breakdown by percentage of student responses to statements in the questionnaire. These results are discussed in the following section.

Table 1: Questionnaire responses by percentage

	Statement	Subjects	SD %	D %	A %	SA %
1.	There are opportunities to speak English in class.	53	17.6	17.6	51.0	13.7
2.	There are opportunities to speak English socially in HKPU.	53	26.4	47.2	24.5	1.9
3.	I feel confident speaking English in class.	53	22.6	50.9	24.5	1.9
4.	I feel worried about making mistakes when speaking English in the ELSC.	53	11.3	41.5	37.7	9.4
5.	I feel relaxed speaking English in class.	53	11.8	54.9	31.4	2.0
6.	I feel motivated to speak English in class.	53	13.7	58.8	27.5	-
7.	I feel confident speaking English in the ELSC.	53	34.0	58.5	-	7.5
8.	If I join the Summer Programme next year, I would like to attend individually.	53	15.1	56.6	28.3	-

9.	The classroom provides a natural environment in which to speak English with other students.	53	15.1	35.8	39.6	9.4
10.	The Summer Programme provides opportunities to speak English.	53	-	1.9	60.4	37.7
11.	I am worried about what opinion other students might have of me when I speak English in class.	53	11.8	41.2	45.1	2.0
12.	I feel worried about making mistakes when speaking English in class.	53	3.9	41.2	45.1	9.8
13.	I feel confident speaking English socially in HKPU.	53	19.2	57.7	19.2	3.8
14.	I feel relaxed speaking English when attending the Summer Programme.	53	1.9	15.4	67.3	15.4
15.	I am worried about what opinion other students might have of me when I speak English in the ELSC.	53	7.8	63.5	26.9	1.9
16.	The ELSC provides a natural environment in which to speak English with other students.	53	3.8	3.8	73.6	18.9
17.	The main courses which I attend at HKPU have helped me develop the confidence to speak English.	53	15.1	45.3	34	5.7
18.	I have a need to speak in English as a student at HKPU.	53	9.4	24.5	52.8	13.2
19.	The Summer Programme has helped me to practise speaking English without the help of a teacher.	53	3.8	22.6	66.0	7.5
20.	I decided to join the Summer Programme because I wanted to practise my spoken English.	53	-	1.9	39.6	58.5
21.	The Summer Programme has helped me develop the confidence to speak English.	53	-	11.3	67.9	20.8
22.	If I join the Summer Programme next year, I would like to attend as part of a group.	53	1.9	7.5	58.5	32.1
23.	I feel motivated to speak English in the ELSC.	53	-	3.8	73.6	22.6

Key: SA – Strongly   A – Agree   D – Disagree   SD – Strongly
                 Agree   Disagree

Discussion

Opportunities and Motivation to Speak in English

In Class

Overall, two-thirds of questionnaire respondents agreed with the statement, 'I have a need to speak in English as a student at HKPU', and 98.1% indicated (58.5% agreeing strongly) that they joined the Summer Programme to practise speaking.

As to the extent of this need, in-depth interviews confirmed earlier findings: although students recognised the value of spoken English for their future careers, they felt their need was very limited in their parent departments unless they had foreign lecturers/guest speakers or had to give oral presentations. Then it assumed greater importance. However, one group said that oral presentations were rare in their course, and another remarked that they had no foreign lecturers. A further comment was that, even when a foreign guest speaker visited the class, the regular lecturer would translate the students' questions into English. Although one group said they did have the opportunity to listen to English, estimating that 70% of their lecturers used it, they felt they had little chance themselves to practise their oral skills, just taking notes and listening.

The general picture presented was that the majority of students (72%) felt unmotivated to speak English in class because opportunities were very limited. This is not to say that they did not want more chances; as one learner commented, 'In class, I think if there's opportunities I will speak in English.' The basic issue here seems to be that students would be more motivated to speak in English if the conditions were right.

On the subject of classroom opportunities, there appears to be a mismatch between interview and questionnaire responses. 65% of questionnaire respondents agreed that there were opportunities, whereas all interviewees commented on the lack of them. This apparent mismatch may relate to the phrasing of the questionnaire item, which referred only to 'opportunities' rather than to opportunities with which students felt comfortable and thus could exploit.

Outside Class

Student interview responses confirmed the earlier finding that opportunities to use spoken English are rare outside the classroom. In response to the questionnaire, 74% of respondents disagreed with the statement, 'There are opportunities to speak English socially in HKPU', and 68.6% felt they lacked the confidence to do so. One group explained that, as there were very few foreign students on campus, and some courses had no foreign lecturers, there was no need to use English. 'It's not natural', was a major reason given by interviewees. 'People will look you as a stranger in a pool of Chinese because you are a native Chinese'.

Factors Constraining the Use of Spoken English

Questionnaire and interview responses focused on two major fears: making mistakes and peer attitudes to speaking in English.

In Class

In response to the questionnaire, 54.9% of subjects claimed they were worried about making mistakes in class and 47.1% agreed they were worried about what opinion other students might have when they spoke English in class. It should be noted that, although higher figures were expected, the data here are already making a significant statement. This is supported by the reaction to the statement, 'I feel relaxed speaking English in class', which showed a clear

disagreement (66.7%). Furthermore, 73.6% disagreed with the statement, 'I feel confident speaking English in class'.

Interview responses indicated even more clearly the inhibitions which students have with regard to speaking English in class. All groups, predictably, were self-conscious about their levels of English and concerned that other students would not understand them. One group commented that, if they did use English in class, they would worry about pronunciation and grammar. One quote typifies the anxiety here: 'I'm worried about when making mistakes, my classmates will laugh at me.' Another student commented that 'you don't know if others have a negative or positive attitude — they may think I'm stupid'. Particularly worrying in terms of confidence and self-esteem is the self-perception of one student that undergraduates should be proficient in English; that since she feels she does not match this level, she 'dare not' use spoken English in class.

However, students stressed that their reluctance to use English was not merely a matter of low proficiency. They were also concerned about how their peers would react, mentioning again the inhibiting effect of the negative feelings which some students have towards speaking English. To quote one, 'It seems strange to me to ask the question in English and the classmates will think I'm trying to make me more outstanding'. Students felt this particularly strongly where there was no expectation that English should be used: '...there is no atmosphere in our class to speak in English...because all the students are speak in Chinese so if I answer in English, it is very strange'. Some students felt that the only context in which they could legitimately speak in English was in the very formal one of giving oral presentations.

Outside Class

Not surprisingly, this reticence also extends to most out-of-class practice. One student recounted the problems that he and a classmate had experienced when wanting to practise spoken English: first the difficulty in finding an empty classroom, and second the embarrassment at being 'caught' speaking English by other students. Another student, referring to the suitability of public places in HKPU, commented, 'We are Chinese people and in that area there's not only us, there's other persons; they are Chinese...I think in that area English is inappropriate.'

Reducing the Threat: Students' Suggestions for Further Opportunities

An open-ended question in the questionnaire asked students what opportunities for practising spoken English they would like HKPU to provide, that is what opportunities they would feel comfortable with. Many suggestions were made. What is of particular interest here, and also from interview responses, is the general feeling that more opportunities were needed and that 'to catch the scarcely chance is the road to be successful'. Suggestions from students as to what these further opportunities might be are as follows:

In Class

1 *Additional formal instruction (5)*. For example, more lessons; compulsory conversation lessons each week with a teacher; more oral presentations; short courses for English learning; and more opportunities to speak in English in service English lessons. In fact, there has been a recent Senate decision to increase significantly the amount of formal instruction in English.

2 *The lecturer should set an expectation that English be used in class.* Although only three students commented on this in their questionnaire responses, interviewees were almost unanimous that if all students were to use English in class, there would be less to fear. To quote one student, 'I think if most people use English in class, then the atmosphere will be better'. Some mentioned that, in their regular service-English classes, they felt an expectation was set since this was an English communication course; it was therefore more acceptable to speak in English. All agreed

that, to encourage students to use English in their own departments, an expectation would similarly need to be established. Interestingly, half of those interviewed believed that the expectation should be set by the lecturer. Two maintained that, since they spend up to seven hours a day in class, lecturers should 'force' them to speak English. One student felt that this would be acceptable even to unwilling classmates, 'because it is the right of the lecturer … they (students) will think it is good for them'.

Although, generally, students made little comment on whether the setting of expectations in a larger class environment would help reduce the fear of making mistakes, it is clear they feel their fear of appearing superior would be markedly reduced. The expectation would create a common purpose and, in so doing, would legitimise the use of spoken English.

However, it should be noted that there are factors militating against an English-medium policy. For example, from a lecturer's perspective, they may already be under pressure to complete what is often a fairly dense syllabus. They may therefore feel there is insufficient time to monitor the extent to which students use English in class and to encourage those who have genuine difficulty communicating in the language. From a student perspective, imposing such an expectation may have limited effectiveness. To quote one student, 'we must follow him when we are in class, but when the lecturer goes out, then we speak Chinese.'

3   *More involvement with native-speakers of English.* Two groups mentioned that expectations would be even more achievable if there were non-native speaker students in the class. Students felt this would provide a more natural environment in which to use English. Furthermore, more foreign students in class would encourage the use of English. 'If our school can arrange some exchange student from other country come our class, I think it may be the chance to using English and communicate to them.' One, commenting on the strategy he would employ if he had difficulty in expressing himself, said, 'I think when I cannot ask a question in English I will ask help from my classmates if he or she can speak out my question in English.'

When asked if there was any difference between having a foreign student in class and being forced to speak in English by their lecturer, one group emphasised that it was '… very different because we must contact the new student or try my best to communicate with him for everything.' With the lecturer, 'we just see him in the class.'

It would seem, then, that when there is no external factor legitimising the use of spoken English, having a foreign student in class may overcome the learners' fear of speaking.

Outside Class

1   *More social opportunities (10).* For example, an English-medium shop; English-medium orientation camps; informal social gatherings, dinner talks, and an English corner on campus. Once again, it is interesting to note that students are requesting more opportunities for social English — in fact, it is the most requested skill in the ELSC — when they claim they rarely, if ever, use it in their social lives. Perhaps their interest lies in the future need for it in their careers, or possibly it represents something novel.

2   *Setting of expectations.* One student felt that HKPU should 'force us (students) to speak in English in HKPU'. Two of the groups interviewed also emphasised the importance of a 'legitimising' factor if students are to feel comfortable using English on campus. If everyone had to use it, then it would not be seen as 'showing off' or being 'unnatural'.

3   *Expansion of facilities for informal instruction (10).* For example, video showings for social English; expansion of ELSC facilities and wider publicising of its programmes; more activities, such as games, in the monthly English Club; an English section in the library; and more equipment in the Centre for Independent Language Learning.

It should be stressed here that one major constraint expressed by 62% of students during interview was that of insufficient time because of their work load.

Student Response to ILS

We would like to turn now to discussing how far the Independent Learning Scheme has provided opportunities in which students attending feel comfortable using spoken English.

As mentioned earlier, the ILS was set up to allow further opportunities for students to practise spoken English. The aim was to develop an environment in which students believe they can legitimately speak English and therefore feel comfortable and natural doing so. There is provision for students to attend in small friendship groups or individually, if they prefer.

The ILS operates throughout the academic year and from June to August as the Summer Programme. It is optional and is open to all HKPU students. During the first two hours, students have 100% counsellor contact and are given assistance with determining and planning what they would like to learn. Thereafter, they are expected to share a counsellor with up to four other groups.

Questionnaire results suggest that, compared with other environments in HKPU, the ILS is effective in providing for the practice of spoken English. Students agree that there are opportunities (98.1%), that they feel motivated (96.2%), confident (66%) and relaxed (82.7%), that the Centre provides a natural environment (92.5%) and helps develop confidence (88.7%). Few (28.8%) are worried about the opinions other students may have of them. Unexpectedly, a relatively large number agreed with the statements, 'I feel worried about making mistakes' (47.1%). However, this may well relate to a concern which some mentioned about correcting their mistakes, an issue which is discussed later.

Interview responses confirm that students participating in the ILS appear to have little anxiety with regard to speaking English. Despite the questionnaire results, all those interviewed claimed they had no fear of making mistakes. Typical of the remarks which students made is the comment, 'If my English is good, I don't need to come, so you must accept my English is not good.' There is similarly little fear of student attitudes to speaking English. Students commented that, unlike the classroom situation, there is no negative attitude from other group members: 'they come here just like me; they want to speak well in English'. Another student added, 'I just worry about that if I speak in English so loud, I will interrupt other groups.' In other words, students attend with a common purpose in mind. This common purpose generates an atmosphere conducive to speaking English: 'the environment give me confidence...I can speak English; I can concentrate on English.'

Here, rather than having expectations imposed on them, students are creating their own: 'I think if someone comes here, they want to learn English, so they will try more effort to use in English.' Thus, they are legitimising the speaking of English for themselves and in so doing are creating a natural environment for its use. This may be why groups felt they were able to use English even when the counsellor was not present. Most claimed they spoke English 70-80% of the time, using Chinese to help explain points they had difficulty with in English. Furthermore, 73.5% agreed in the questionnaire that the Summer Programme had helped them speak English without the need for a teacher's presence. However, three groups implied that further guidance was needed in terms of self-assessment: 'We don't know whether we are speaking in appropriate way or not...we don't know if the counsellor is not here.' It may well be this concern which prompted students to agree with the questionnaire statement, 'I feel worried about making mistakes.'

Commenting on mode of attendance, 90.6% of those students questionnaired said they chose to attend the ILS as part of a group, rather than on an individual basis. Over 90% said they would like to continue attending in group mode if they rejoined the programme in the new academic year.

Reasons given, both in questionnaires and in interviews, are as follows:

- Students felt that group work provided more opportunities for speaking in English: 'We all want to improve our spoken English, so we group together'.

- 16 students mentioned the value of friendship groups in promoting verbal interaction: 'I believe I can improve English more effectively with interaction with my friends.' Three groups interviewed commented that the threat of speaking English is reduced because friends are non-judgemental. The atmosphere is therefore more relaxing and confidence greater. Other students remarked that friends have similar ideas and are of the same level. Friendship groups thus provide security.

- 15 students believed group work raised motivation. Many felt that group learning was more fun. Others suggested that group members feel a commitment to one another and to the programme they have formulated: 'If I join a group, I will push myself ahead and behave myself. It is because I have a responsibility to perform well in a group.'

- 21 students indicated that group members provide additional learning support, in terms of error correction and discussion of learning difficulties.

To summarise, both questionnaire and interview results clearly suggest that students believe the ILS provides opportunities for speaking English and that they feel relaxed using spoken English in the ELSC. Interview responses further indicate that the Centre provides a non-threatening environment in which the stigma attached to speaking English is very largely removed.

Implications

For Further Research in the ELSC

1   In terms of ILS evaluation, this study focuses on students who had attended the Scheme throughout the summer. Inevitably, there was some attrition in numbers. Future evaluation therefore needs to focus on exactly why these students left the programme.

2   Making mistakes in the classroom context is a fear shared by almost all students and one which clearly inhibits students' use of spoken English. There is therefore a need to help students change their attitude to mistakes: first, to sensitise them to the fact that their peers feel similarly threatened and, second, to encourage students to be more tolerant of each others' mistakes. Students need to reconcile themselves to the fact that mistakes are an inevitable part of language learning.

3   As mentioned in the evaluation of the ILS, a number of students were concerned about how to correct their spoken English in the absence of a counsellor. More guidance is clearly required in terms of strategies for self and peer-monitoring and correcting.

For HKPU as a Whole

The HKPU Senate has emphasised that the University should develop a bi-lingual ethos and enforce the use of English as the medium of formal instruction. Students in this survey have commented on the desirability of enforcing this policy as a way of providing opportunities which they will feel comfortable exploiting. Unless there is such an expectation, they are unlikely to feel motivated. Furthermore, if this policy is to be successful, it needs to have the support of both the general student body and of staff. It is crucial, then, to engage the views of all stakeholders. This merits separate, in-depth research studies.

However, if students are to become competent in their spoken English, we also need to explore the provision of opportunities outside the formal classroom. This view is reinforced by a HKPU

Senate paper on Language Competence and Communication, which states that language proficiency 'is not something that can easily be acquired through a formal academic programme alone.'

The Department of English is now looking at ways of developing further opportunities outside the classroom, reflecting those suggested by students in this study. During a recent departmental discussion examining opportunities for language development beyond the classroom, a number of avenues were explored and initiatives suggested:

- Liaison with existing associations at HKPU. The Student Affairs Office already offers some English-language workshops, and there could be some profitable liaison with the Department of English. There should also be coordination with the Debating Society and the Students' Union.

- Use of media and technology. There is an abundance of resources at the HKPU, which some departments are exploiting for use outside the classroom. For example, one department has encouraged students to create a home page for themselves on the Internet with the eventual aim that each student will have an individual Web page. A number of teachers are also using e-mail to interact with their students. Use of the Internet could be expanded to include a Web 'chat page' for students. However, students do need guidance on how to make use of such facilities to further practise and enhance their English. Considerable liaison would be needed between the Department of English and other HKPU departments.

- Setting up of new initiatives. It was recommended that, given the success of the pantomimes staged in 1993 and 1994, an English-language drama club should be established. This would need considerable input initially from teaching staff, but the long-term aim should be to transfer the organisation of the club to the students themselves. There were also suggestions for the setting up of a film club and and an English-only tea room.

However, it should be stressed that the Department of English and its language centres cannot alone cope with the extent of student requirements. The provision of both formal and informal opportunities, a prerequisite for the development of a truly bilingual environment, should be the shared responsibility of the entire institution.