

# A Study of the Use of English by International Students at NgeeAnn Polytechnic

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This study was carried out at NgeeAnn Polytechnic (NP) in the July 2003 semester. Its purpose was to determine the degree to which the current final-year international students at that time had improved their command of English while at NP. Most of these students were from China, with a smaller number coming chiefly from Burma and elsewhere in Southeast or South Asia. A survey was carried out and discussion groups were held to determine the extent to which the students perceived that they had improved in their command of English. It turned out that the majority of students did indeed perceive that their English had improved during their three-year course of studies at NgeeAnn, though some voiced their frustrations with the English-speaking environment not just at NgeeAnn, but in the greater Singapore context. A study of relevant academic results was also undertaken to determine the accuracy of the students' perceptions in respect of their progress with English. These results generally indicated that students often went down by one letter grade from that obtained in their foundational, first-year EFL (English as a Foreign Language) English module to their second and third year modules common to all NP students. This by no means suggested a drop in their performance, however, but rather a general consistency in performance, given the vastly different nature of the modules involved.

## ■ Introduction

This study was carried out on the instructions of the Director of the School of Interdisciplinary Studies (IS) of NgeeAnn Polytechnic (NP), one of the five polytechnics in Singapore, for the purpose of determining the degree to which the then current final year international students at NP had improved their use of English. It was agreed that the study would, therefore, focus almost exclusively on the cohort of students who had entered NP in the July 2001 semester, which coincided with the inception of IS as a new school at NP.

To ensure that a valid evaluation of the existing situation obtained, it was critical to bear in mind the interests of the various parties concerned, and therefore it was important to identify and target those parties right at the outset. In this connection, it is useful to note that Fowle (1999) describes how a model of English Language Teaching evaluation was developed that 'fully incorporates the key stakeholders involved in the programme'. Its aim was to 'involve the stakeholders in the evaluation process at the stages of planning, data collection and reporting, in an attempt to enable [them] to have an input into the development of the programme'. In the same paper, Fowle points out his realisation that 'a lack of consultation can lead to significant mismatches between the expectations of those involved in the programme and the realities of the programme itself, feeling that this is 'largely due to a lack of channels of communication between the various parties involved in

the programmes'. It was, therefore, my own intention that these channels should be fully exploited in respect of all the relevant parties, or stakeholders, impacted by our English language programme for international students here at NgeeAnn.

The importance of evaluation, particularly in language programmes, is also explained in the context of the 'Programme Evaluation for quality management purposes' undertaken as an FDTL (Fund for the Development of Teaching and Learning) project under the auspices of the School of Education at Kings College in London. Three issues are identified in support of the need for such evaluation: 1) the need for 'teachers to understand students' learning base, needs and wants, and base the substance and style of teaching on these'; 2) the 'increasingly common tendency to ... define teaching quality as client satisfaction'; and 3) the need for 'accountability, both to students, and other clients, and language programme managers who need to demonstrate ... that certain benchmarks are achieved in the processes of teaching' (Weir & Roberts, 1994; Blue & Grundy, 1997).

## ■ Methodology

The study was carried out between August and November 2003, and the following procedure was used for the collection of data:

1. an electronic survey encompassing the then current final year students was carried out with the help of the Teaching & Learning Centre;
2. focus groups were conducted among these students

- by IS lecturers teaching modules which fell under the categories of both Communication and Life Skills (Life Skills modules were appropriate to include because of the need for good communication skills on the part of students taking these modules.) Informal discussions were also held among IS staff (whether they were conducting focus groups or not) and even with then current first-year international students, to gather additional information on the problems faced by international students and their progress (or lack of it) with the English language;
3. results for all IS Communication modules taken by these students in Levels 1 & 2, as well as the first semester of Level 3, were obtained in tabulated form from Academic Affairs;
  4. a discussion was held with the Manager for International Admissions in Academic Affairs, to gain greater insight into NP's actual recruitment procedure, particularly in China, where the great bulk of the international students came from at that time.

## ■ Findings

### Results of Electronic Survey

A total of 149 students, representing 41% of the total cohort of 360 final year international students in the July 2003 semester, responded to the electronic survey, a copy of which can be found in Appendix 1. It is interesting and perhaps somewhat disheartening to note that many of these students responded only after repeated e-mail reminders were sent out by IS. SMS messages were sent to their hand phones by the Computer Centre, and students were approached repeatedly by their IS lecturers and encouraged to complete the survey, the emphasis being that it was in their own interests to do this so that if necessary, changes could be made to better meet their needs. That notwithstanding, only 41% responded, as indicated above. Nonetheless, the response rate was felt to be statistically significant, and therefore the results of the survey have been included in this study.

The results of the survey clearly show that it was the perception of the overwhelming majority of students surveyed that they had indeed improved in their knowledge of English during their three years at the Polytechnic, although their perceived degree of that improvement varied. Over half the students surveyed (57%) felt their English had improved moderately and over 10% indicated their English had improved to a great degree. Almost one-third (32%), however, felt that their English had improved only a bit.

It would be useful at this juncture to note that at the point at which the survey was conducted, all students would have done a minimum of three Communication modules at NP. All would have done the prescribed (compulsory) two modules in their first-year, designed specifically for international students: General English Training 1A (GET1A), focussing on oral English; and General English Training 1B (GET1B), focussing on written English. Both modules were pitched at a fairly basic, almost EFL level. All students would also have taken

a Communication module in their second year, though this module would have been one of many options open to them as well as to all local students. Such modules could have included oral ones (such as Enhanced Spoken English) and written ones (such as Report Writing). Some would also have been in the process of taking another Communication Module in their final year, generally one focusing on English for occupational skills and therefore more relevant to meeting language needs in the workplace after graduation. All students would also have taken the Individual & the Community (IAC) Lifeskills module offered in the first year, and some would have been taking the World Issues from a Singapore Perspective (WISP) Lifeskills module offered in the final year. Lifeskills modules, by their very nature, required a certain degree of communicative competence, and were thus felt to lie very much within the scope of this study. This was because they entailed the need for good oral communication skills both for frequent group discussions in class and for the effective delivery of required oral presentations.

In terms of specific skills, 94% indicated they were better able to express their needs in both face-to-face situations and over the telephone, than they could have done before joining NP in July 2001. Ninety percent felt they could now better carry on conversations and write simple messages in any situations requiring the use of English—which were key areas of emphasis in both the GET1A and GET1B first-year Communication modules. More than 85% indicated they could handle written assignments more confidently, and 95% felt they could better understand academic reading material. It was heartening to learn that 85% indicated that the fact that they were required to give oral presentations in all their IS Communication and Life Skills modules enabled them to speak better before a group of people.

Three out of four (or 75%) of the students surveyed indicated that the IS Communication modules they had taken had been very important in improving their command of English. While this percentage is indeed respectable, it also happened to be the lowest among the 13 questions posed. While the reason for this slightly lower figure is unknown, some anecdotal evidence suggested that at least some among the other one-quarter felt that their knowledge of English was already satisfactory, or that perhaps 'real-life' situations (for example, working at part-time jobs off campus) could have been a more important attributing factor.

The areas in which students felt they had improved were numerous, as can be seen by the comments they were encouraged to make at the end of the questionnaire. These areas ranged from an improved ability to converse with others and make presentations to the ability to read English newspapers or write letters and reports. At the same time, however, nearly 10% of the 149 students surveyed commented that they had not actually made improvement. Reasons were generally not forthcoming, though one student attributed this lack of progress to the fact that although he took IS Communication modules, he felt he had not improved simply because

the only person who spoke English with him/her was the lecturer, while the other students were speaking in local languages with each other (this point will be covered further in the next section).

### Results of Focus Group Discussions

A total of nine IS lecturers teaching either Level 3 Communication or Life-skills modules were involved in formal focus group discussions with their third-year students (for the set of questions asked at the focus group discussions, see Appendices 2 & 3). A total of 37 students, representing 10% of the total cohort of 360, took part in these discussions. Of the 37, there were 27 Chinese nationals, 8 Burmese, 1 Taiwanese and 1 Indonesian.

Perhaps the most salient, although hardly surprising, finding was the students' frequent complaints that the environment in Singapore generally was not conducive to learning English. This was especially true in the case of almost all the Chinese students, who said that almost all their ethnic Chinese Singaporean counterparts communicated with them in Mandarin, even in cases where the Chinese students made a valiant effort to speak English. Both the students in the formal focus groups and others in informal dialogues sessions indicated that they were unable to understand the local English or Singlish used by Singaporean students and people generally, and that, similarly, Singaporeans appeared unable to understand their (the students') English. Indeed, this represented the single most frustrating experience on the part of the Chinese international students in particular when trying to use their English anywhere in Singapore, either on or off campus.

The Burmese students, on the other hand, did not encounter this problem as they were forced to communicate with all non-Burmese persons, whether fellow students, or in Singapore generally, by using English. On the other hand, even the Burmese students were not always successful in improving their English as they, like many of the Chinese students, tended to be cliquish, sharing housing together and therefore lapsing into their native language for all day-to-day communication purposes. Again, all students, whether Chinese or Burmese, expressed almost constant frustration at their inability to understand local Singapore English, recognising it as being non-standard and in search of language 'role models'—something they had expected to find more of generally in Singapore, but in many cases simply did not. In two or three cases, students made the observation that while recognising the great importance of the environment in terms of language learning, they also realised that self-motivation was an equally important factor, perhaps implying that many of their peers were somewhat lacking in this area. This of course raises the issue of why foreign students have come to study at NP—or elsewhere in Singapore for that matter—in the first place, and whether their motive lies in purely academic areas, or in others.

Most of the students indicated that both IS Communication and Life-skills modules had helped them improve in English and given them greater

confidence in speaking, especially as oral presentations constitute a staple of all these modules. It was encouraging to note that the Level 1 foundational GET modules were cited by a number of students as having been useful to them during their first year of study at NP.

### Academic Results

The results for the students' IS Communication modules were obtained for Levels 1, 2 and 3.1 (i.e., all that were available at the time the study was made), and by program. Levels 1.1 & 1.2 refer to the first and second semesters of the first year respectively, while Levels 2.1 & 2.2 refer to the first and second semesters of the second year respectively. The term *program* at NP refers to course of study, such as Mechanical Engineering, Electrical Engineering, and Business Studies.

In almost every instance the results both by program and by level revealed standard bell-shaped curves with bunching generally in the 'B' and 'C' grade ranges, which would be expected for students in nearly any module, international or otherwise. What was perhaps more revealing was that generally from Level 1 (GET1A and GET1B) to the Level 2 Communication modules, the results either remained within the same range or went down by one letter grade—which, however, does not necessarily reveal a downturn because the Level 1 modules are basically EFL in nature while the Level 2 and 3 modules are ESL (English as a Second Language) in type, in which international students are therefore placed on a par with local students.

For example, in the combined Civil & Environmental Engineering (CEE), Building Services Engineering (BSE), and Biomedical Technology (BME) programs, the bell-shaped curve was skewed to the right in the case of the Level 1 modules (GET1A and GET1B), but to the left in the case of the Level 2 & 3 Communication modules, as can be seen in Table 1 below:

A similar pattern applied to the Electronic and Computer Engineering (ECE) and Electrical Engineering (EE) programs, and to some extent with Mechanical Engineering (ME) and Quality Assurance Engineering (QAE). Only the results for the small Marine & Offshore

**Table 1** Communication module results among international students from Level 1 to Level 3 in the combined CEE, BSE, and BME programs

|                                   | GET1A | GET1B | Level 2 | Level 3 |
|-----------------------------------|-------|-------|---------|---------|
| <b>AD</b>                         |       |       |         |         |
| <b>A+</b>                         | 15.6% | 29.9% | 10.5%   | 6.0%    |
| <b>A</b>                          |       |       |         |         |
| <b>B+</b>                         |       |       |         |         |
| <b>B</b>                          | 44.3% | 51.4% | 14.1%   | 38.6%   |
| <b>C+</b>                         |       |       |         |         |
| <b>C</b>                          | 32.8% | 15.7% | 51.0%   | 29.4%   |
| <b>D+</b>                         |       |       |         |         |
| <b>D</b>                          | 7.1%  | 0     | 22.8%   | 20.8%   |
| <b>Failures &amp; Withdrawals</b> | 0     | 1.6%  | 3.0%    | 5.2 %   |

Technology (MOT) program differed in that they were rather consistent across the board.

What the results also revealed was that there was, as had been expected, a very mixed language ability among all international students at all levels, regardless of school or country of origin.

### **Discussion with Manager of International Admissions**

A discussion was also held with the Manager of International Admissions on 12 November 2003. She pointed out that the performance level differed considerably among Chinese students, depending on which provinces they came from. For example, students who came from Shanghai and other coastal areas tended to perform better in English as these places were more cosmopolitan and they would therefore have been exposed to better English language programmes. Those from far less cosmopolitan areas in the interior (such as Xi'an or Sichuan), on the other hand, were distinctly disadvantaged in this respect.

The Manager of International Admissions also pointed out that the learning didactic particularly in China was somewhat different from that of Singapore. Parents tended to push their children a great deal and consequently students did not always take full responsibility for their own learning, blaming external factors for their lack of success. They doubtless found it difficult to adapt to the NP and Singapore situation generally, in which far less pushing and 'spoon-feeding' are practised, and students are expected to be more independent and take fuller responsibility for their own learning.

When queried about recruitment procedures, the Manager of International Admissions pointed out that there was at present a three-part examination for English: a written paper chiefly in the form of multiple choice questions and cloze passages; a section on reading comprehension; and an oral examination consisting of free-style conversation. She stressed that Chinese students in particular were extremely exam-orientated and as such were used to 'mugging' for examinations of any kind, i.e., they would invariably do their utmost to prepare for absolutely anything wherever possible, and resort to tactics such as memorisation and rote learning.

The Manager was also aware of the fact that a 'bridging' Intensive English Course had been offered to international students in the past, but that it had been eventually discontinued in part due to the fact that it had not proved cost-effective.

### **Conclusion**

It is true that a full two-thirds of the students surveyed indicated that they felt they had improved in their use of English either moderately or 'to a great extent'. And indeed there were individual cases of students in all programs who either scored consistent grades in their IS Communication modules throughout their three years, or even improved by as much as two letter grades (e.g., going from a 'C' to an 'A'). On the other hand, however, one-third of the students felt they had improved 'just a

bit' and in a few cases 'not at all'; informal discussions with IS colleagues bore this out time and time again. In that connection, it is obvious that the chief impediment to these international students' mastery of English can be summed up in two words: environment and motivation. Chinese students, in particular, find themselves functioning in Mandarin both on campus and off, either because others perceive them to be weak in English, or because they simply feel they should be speaking Mandarin for reasons of ethnic identity and outright peer pressure—a situation not entirely unlike that involving our own Singaporean Chinese students.

The less motivated students, in particular, are not necessarily unhappy over this state of affairs: they use Mandarin as a 'crutch' whenever necessary and do manage to get by, both for academic and day-to-day needs. Unfortunately, however, the more motivated students who genuinely want to use English and try doing so end up thwarted in their attempts time and time again. If this situation does not change, then it is doubtful that a great number of students will see substantial improvement in their English over the course of their three years here, except for those whose language ability is distinctly good.

IS staff members alone cannot be made fully responsible for the students' success in their mastery of English. This responsibility must be shared not only with the students themselves, but with all staff in all disciplines. The Manager of International Admissions, for example, mentioned that if a Chinese student approaches her or any of her colleagues with queries in Mandarin, the staff will advise such students first to sit down and think of how the queries should be phrased in English, rather than reply in Mandarin. This automatically removes the 'crutch' to which so many of these students are accustomed, thereby compelling them to use English rather than relying on their mother tongue and assuming others will understand.

It is also clear that the use of non-standard English or Singlish in situations where English is absolutely required is not helping international students at all. It is, in fact, discouraging, and even hindering them. Although many may be weak in English, it is Standard English (e.g., the British or American standard) to which they have already been exposed in their countries of origin, and to which they are to some extent accustomed. The introduction of Singapore English in this context only makes a difficult matter even worse.

The overseas recruitment process obviously takes into account the need to screen foreign students to determine their eligibility in terms of language competence. This process might be further enhanced by the introduction of a short free-writing exam, which would in all likelihood preclude the students' ability to get through simply by using rote memorisation techniques in an attempt to 'spot' the types of questions that tend to come up on objective tests. In this way, their true level of language competence would be more fully revealed.

It also seems worthwhile questioning the motives of some of these students for coming to Singapore to study

in the first place. If they are here for genuinely academic purposes, then it can be assumed that their motivational level would be sufficiently high to enable them to acquire a reasonable grasp of the English language, if not actual mastery of it. If they are not here for genuinely academic reasons, then the question *why* they are here in the first place must be raised, as this may well have a deleterious effect upon their motivation, and seems unfair if as a result they end up denying a place to other students whose motives for joining the Polytechnic (or any other educational institution) are more genuine. Such a situation is unacceptable.

Undoubtedly, IS is responsible for providing modules catering for both the communication and life skills needs of NgeeAnn students as a whole, and will continue to monitor closely all modules and make improvements as and when necessary. It was heartening to note that most students indicated, both in the electronic survey and in the focus groups, that IS modules had, on the whole, been very useful for them in respect of language acquisition and improvement. It can therefore be concluded that in that respect we have been generally on the right track, especially through our extensive use of oral presentations and other interactive classroom activities, which students clearly found beneficial.

### ■ Recommendations

Ideally, learners of a language should spend time in the target country (or countries) where use of that language is absolutely required. It is, however, most unlikely that these students are going to be sent abroad to the UK, the USA, or any other English-speaking countries for any kind of intensive immersion programme, where necessity would indeed compel them to improve their English, and to do so in a hurry. Short of such idealistic solutions, the following measures are recommended in an effort to mitigate, if not eliminate, the problem altogether:

- Ideally the problem should at least be minimised by identifying it at source. In other words, it is recommended that a free-writing test and more stringent oral examination be conducted in the students' country of origin at the time of recruitment. The nature of each free-writing test and oral exam can also be varied, and a working committee can be formed to generate a large bank of original questions or scenarios to be used for these purposes. This would certainly minimise, if not eliminate, the problem of candidates anticipating standard types of questions, and memorising & regurgitating 'fixed' answers. A band marking scheme could also be applied and a 'cut-off' point determined, below which no candidate would be considered for admission to NgeeAnn Polytechnic.

- At present, the vast majority of students are recruited from China. If feasible, it would be ideal if more students could be recruited from countries such as Burma, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia and India, to bring about an even greater mix of international students so that no single group (and hence no single language) would predominate<sup>1</sup>. As far as possible, students should then be mixed into the various programs and classes such that the composition becomes so heterogeneous that students would literally have no choice but to use English to communicate among themselves.
- While IS has been pursuing the right course of action generally, there remains room for improvement. Some students have indicated in focus groups that the class size should be reduced, to enable greater individual attention by the lecturer<sup>2</sup>. Others have suggested that the Level 1 GET modules be increased from 2 to 4 hours per week, if timetabling and other constraints do not prohibit this.
- While in the past short intensive courses in English were offered prior to the start of the academic year, they were not made compulsory, and attendance was therefore sporadic. They were also apparently found to be less than cost-effective as a result. That notwithstanding, it might well be worth exploring the idea of resurrecting such a course, on the condition that it be made compulsory for all but the best international students. Despite the launch of the current economy drive, it might be worthwhile for the Polytechnic to subsidise this course in the interest of helping this somewhat disadvantaged group of students.
- All incoming international students must be made aware that the use of English at all public educational institutions in Singapore is a non-negotiable must, a matter of government policy, which must be followed for sound social, economic and political reasons. Chinese students, in particular, must be made to understand that English must be used as a language common to all in a multi-racial society such as Singapore. This message should be incorporated into all orientation programmes, indeed to all incoming freshmen, both local and international. Only in this way can an environment conducive to using English be created on any campus<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> As of the June 2004 semester, more students from these countries have been admitted to NgeeAnn than at any time in the past. Students from different countries can now be seated together in English classes, and this automatically means they have to rely on English to communicate with each other.

<sup>2</sup> As of the June 2004 semester, there are more classes of some 10-15 students and fewer containing 20 or more.

<sup>3</sup> Before the start of the June 2004 semester, I was asked to conduct a briefing for all incoming first-year international students on their Orientation Day. I impressed upon them why English had to be used in Singapore and at NP, and gave them advice on how they could begin improving their limited command of English. This seemed to be well-received. I have again been asked to do the same prior to the start of the May 2005 semester.

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**APPENDIX 1: Survey on communication abilities of international students**

Now that you are final year students at NgeeAnn, we would like to find out how you feel about your ability to communicate in English. We would therefore like you to answer the following questions truthfully.

Questions 1-12 have four choices:

- A) Strongly Agree
- B) Agree
- C) Disagree
- D) Strongly Disagree

Please use a pencil to shade in the appropriate answers.

- 1) I am better able to express my needs now, both face-to-face and over the phone, than I was before.
- 2) I feel more confident that I can carry on a conversation with someone better than I could before.
- 3) Having to give oral presentations in all my IS communication and life-skills modules has improved my ability to speak before a group.
- 4) I am better able to write a simple message now than I was before.
- 5) I am better able to handle written assignments more confidently.
- 6) I am better able to understand academic reading materials (such as textbooks) now than I was before.
- 7) I can understand other forms of writing (such as newspapers) better now than I could before.
- 8) IS communication modules have been very important in improving my command of English.
- 9) I try to improve my English by interacting with others in English.
- 10) I try to improve my English by watching English TV programmes.
- 11) I try to improve my English by listening to English radio programmes.
- 12) I try to improve my English by reading outside the school-required texts.
- 13) Overall, I have improved my English over the past three years
  - (a) just a bit
  - (b) moderately
  - (c) to a great degree
- 14) What can you do now in English that you couldn't do before?

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**APPENDIX 2: Focus group questions for third-year international students**

1) Do you use English consciously, on a regular basis, to improve your command of the language? Or do you use English only when you have no other choice?

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(Directed to those who use English consciously & regularly): To what degree do you feel you have improved your command of English during your time at NgeeAnn? A bit? Moderately? A lot?

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(Directed to those who use English only when they have no other choice): To what degree do you feel you have improved your command of English during your time at NgeeAnn? A bit? Moderately? A lot?

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2) (Directed at those who have made at least some improvement in their command of English): What factors do you feel helped you improve your command of English?

- the nature of the modules you took? If so, which ones helped you improve the most and why?

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- the lecturers & methods of teaching used? If so, what was it about the lecturers & teaching methods that helped you the most?

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- the environment? If so, what was it about your environment that helped you improve?

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3) (Directed at those who feel they have made very little or no improvement in their English): Could you briefly share with us why you feel you made little or no improvement during your three years here? Was it

- the nature of the modules you took? If so, why do you feel they did not help you improve much?

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- the lecturers & teaching methods used? If so, what do you feel the problem was?

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- the environment? If so, what do you feel it was about the environment that did not help you to improve much?

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4) If you feel you have made some improvement in your language skills at NgeeAnn, which IS modules would you say have helped you improve the most? Give your reasons why.

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5) Is there any way in which the IS modules you took could have helped you improve your command of English even more? What would you like to have seen done differently?

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6) Is there any way in which you feel the environment could have been different to help you improve your command of English?

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**APPENDIX 3: Questions for lecturers teaching third-year international students in IS communication modules**

1) Do you feel your international students have made any progress with their language abilities this semester? If so, in what ways have you observed this? To what would you attribute this progress? (If you had any of these students earlier, in Levels 1 or 2, could you now comment on the degree, if any, to which they have improved over time?)

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If, however, you feel that progress is absent or lacking, why do you think that is so? How do you feel these students could make more progress with their English?

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Do you notice any differences in performance among different ethnic groups of students (e.g., Chinese, Burmese, Vietnamese)? If so, what differences have you observed? To what might you attribute these differences?

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2) What changes, if any, would you make in any of the IS Comm (or, for that matter lifeskills modules, if you have taught any of them) that you feel would help international students make more progress with their language? Would you explore changes in any of the following areas:

- materials & teaching methods?
- overall module structure?
- the environment in which the students study (and function when off campus)?

In short, what might you have done differently in any of the modules that you have taught that might have brought about greater progress in the students' command of the language?

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