

**An Evidence-Based Evaluation of the Development, Implementation, and Effectiveness  
of the Pilot EC Program at Asia University**

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Abstract

This program review provides an evidence-based evaluation of the development, implementation, and effectiveness of the pilot English Café program at Asia University. The study used a mixed-methods methodology incorporating both qualitative and quantitative methods. The results of structured interviews with stakeholders were transcribed and compiled into a corpus that was then investigated for frequency and emerging themes. An overview of the use of space and its relation to language learning was introduced and a qualitative thematic analysis was conducted in order to ascertain if staff and student goals had been achieved and objectives met. A quantitative statistical analysis investigated the attendance over the duration of the program. The results showed that the program was reasonably well-attended, that design objectives were met, and that student needs were realised. The study concluded by noting that students expressed overall satisfaction with the program and recommendations for the continuation of the program were made.

## Introduction

The purpose of conducting a review of the nascent English Café (EC) at Asia University (AU) was to evaluate the effectiveness and progress of the program in its inaugural semester. The review presents an overview of the needs analysis conducted, the strategic planning involved, and the allocation of resources in the setting up and running of the café. Semi-structured, informal interviews were conducted with staff to investigate the design and rationale of the program. Students participating in the program were also interviewed for their opinions on the delivery of the program. A quantitative data analysis using descriptive statistics summarized the individual variables and found patterns. It is suggested that this data-driven feedback can provide first impressions and insights regarding the decision-making process for future sessions.

Spaces such as the aforementioned EC have existed in various forms for centuries and in a variety of settings as spaces for learning, exchange and practice. Jansson (2021) observed how these spaces have been used as laboratories for applied linguistic studies such as studying interaction through culture-related topics, conversation analysis, and membership categorisation analysis. As places of authentic learning, they provide an opportunity to authentically engage in using English (Riley & Douglas, 2016). Furthermore, language cafés have proven a successful medium in which to improve English language skills in an informal and relaxed setting (Faris, 2014; Ruffli, 2014). Cafés as places of informal gathering have facilitated the integration process within local communities (Kunitz & Jansson, 2021), and in more academic settings, schools have benefitted (Taylor, 2014). Conversations-for-practice (Barraja-Rohan, 2015), or storytelling activities, have been shown to benefit from decidedly non-academic settings, and Kasper and Kim (2015, p. 391) outline five key characteristics associated with documented conversations-for-learning:

1. They are held on multiple occasions over an extended period of time.
2. The purpose is to talk in the target language, with the expectation that the talk will be beneficial for L2 learning and that repeated participation will result in L2 development.
3. There is no other agenda than to 'just talk.'
4. The L2 participants' performance is not assessed. The talk has no institutional consequences.
5. Turn-taking is locally managed by the participants. When asymmetrical participation frameworks emerge, they do so contingently.

### Program Context

The idea for an EC was proposed by the university leadership. A central idea was to create a social space for learning (Murray & Fujishima, 2016). A review team drew up an action plan and site visits were conducted at two universities in the Greater Tokyo Area. A key consideration was to ascertain how resources could be best used to reduce teaching load on existing instructors at AU's Center for English Language Education (CELE). CELE is a department focusing on internationalization (*kokusaika*) (Goodman, 2007) and tasked with expanding the university's ideals of international education via communicative language ability.

At the first university site visit, it was noted that the instructors were outsourced from one of the larger dispatch teaching companies. Dispatch companies send English teachers to teach lessons at client businesses, schools, and universities. The business model is common in Japan where English language education is sometimes outsourced to private companies. A plan was approved at the Directors' Meeting on March 24, 2022, and it was decided to save the valuable workforce of highly qualified CELE instructors for classes requiring credits. To this end, EC sessions were outsourced to a dispatch company. Prior to the final meeting of board directors, there was consultation with the English Tutorial Committee. The Tutorial Committee at AU is responsible for promoting the use of English outside of the classroom in more informal and authentic learning environments. It is generally focused on speaking practice through weekly sessions where students, regardless of faculty, level, or year, can practice and develop their English communication skills with the help of different committee members. Typically, attendees are high level speakers, returnees from study abroad programs (*kikokusei*), and low-level speakers looking to improve their speaking ability. Students expressing an interest in future overseas study also attend.

The program was rolled out as an interdisciplinary and extracurricular space straddling all departments and offered across all departments. Availability to all students was a core feature of the design and fundamental to meeting the learning objectives. One of these key objectives was to realize the pedagogical possibilities of furthering communicative ability in an informal academic setting. Posters were drawn up and distributed digitally to all students and pinned to the university Learning Management System, Manaba. Also, in the student café on campus, a large screen displayed the poster. The café was to run biweekly for twelve weeks on Tuesdays and Thursdays from 16:00 to 18:00. It was to consist of 10 sessions which in turn consisted of 4 x 30 minute slots. Participants were divided using a

binary system of having previously less or more than 500 on the TOEIC test. It was to be delivered by three instructors and with a student capacity of fifteen, with five students the maximum number for each of the three instructors' sessions. Students were invited to express interest using a QR code that permitted access to the sign-up sheet. The location was on the third floor of the popular Asia Plaza, a multi-story, cafeteria-style establishment that offers reduced rate meals and snacks to students throughout the day. It was predicted that the 16:00 start time might comfortably avoid much of the lunchtime and post-lecture footfall.

### **Data, Method, and Participants**

Previous correspondence with various administrative bodies at the university had involved outlines of the English Tutorial's program design, receipt of attendance figures, and an overview of desired learning outcomes. To investigate the pilot program, a qualitative case study research design was used (Kvale, 1996, p. 88). Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews (Appendix A) with participants (n=3), and attendance statistics. Excerpts from these interviews are included in Appendix A. Confidentiality was assured.

In order to understand the design of the program more thoroughly, the interviews were conducted according to Kitwood's (1977) conception of an interview as information transfer. A key objective was to ascertain the quality of the experience for participating students. Also of interest were the attitudes of students towards the programs and their assessment of the Spring semester pilot program. Two participants were known to the author, while the author met the third for the first time. However, there was no pressure to give socially desirable responses. The interviews were semi-structured (Kerlinger, 1970) and of the informal conversation type (Patton, 1980), where questions and comments were drawn from the immediate context, and while thematically similar, the questions were open-ended. The interviews were recorded and transcribed using MS Word software, checked for distortion, and edited for clarity. Codes were applied to chunks of the interviews and different codes were minimised and merged until gradually a thematic framework emerged.

## **Discussion**

### **Thematic Framework**

A corpus of the interview was compiled, and both a qualitative and quantitative analysis was carried out. Content analysis of emerging themes from the student interviews

implied that the overall satisfaction rate was high. These qualitative, open-ended, word-based interviews were coded and analyzed thematically, with emerging themes presented below.

Decoding the frequency of the interview corpus (Figure 1) presents a visual representation that highlights key word frequency suggesting positive attitude and engagement such as *yeah, yes, like* (both as a verb and preposition), *think, talk, and good*.

**Figure 1**

*List of Highest Frequency Words from the Interview Corpus*

Word	Length	Count	Weighted Percentage	Similar Words
speaker	7	532	11.57%	speaker
yeah	4	220	4.78%	yeah
yes	3	80	1.74%	yes
like	4	66	1.44%	like
english	7	50	1.09%	english
teachers	8	46	1.00%	teacher, teachers
think	5	42	0.91%	think
talk	4	40	0.87%	talk, talked, talking
people	6	34	0.74%	people, peoples
now	3	32	0.70%	now
cafe	4	32	0.70%	cafe, cafes
good	4	26	0.57%	good

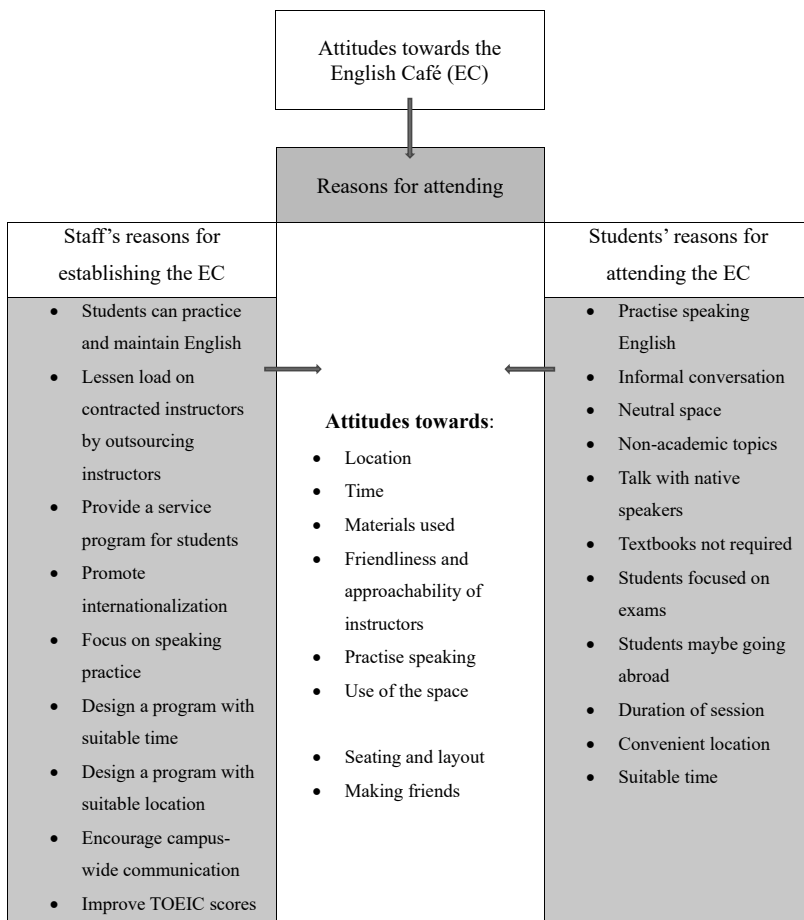
From the thematic framework for interview responses (Figure 2), it can be seen that students' needs were met with positive feedback on course attendance. Among some of the more noticeable features of staff concerns were students being able to practice English in an informal setting, lessening the load on contracted instructors by outsourcing to instructors from a dispatch company, improving TOEIC scores, promoting internationalization, encouraging campus-wide communication, and addressing concerns about time and location.

The overall impression of the EC was *really good, and enjoyable*. Students could *practice talking and make conversation*. The topics such as *food culture, just normal lifestyle, famous places you want to go in the future, and where is the country you want to go in the future* were all engaging for students. The teachers were *prepared, really friendly, kind and interesting*. Students were also content with using non-digital materials as conversation prompts: *the laptop is heavy, so everybody has their smartphone, but it's difficult to do all the work on the smart phone*. Regarding the type of student who might be interested in the EC, one student commented: *students who are focused on exams, or maybe are going abroad, or maybe [those] who want to maintain [their English]*, while another offered that *they liked traveling* and implied that speaking practice would be beneficial in this context. The

advertising had been successful, and one student opined that, going forward, *the university culture festival* could be a good place to advertise the EC in future.

**Figure 2**

*Thematic Framework for Interview Responses*



Two unprompted areas of interest emerged, one inherent in the design, and another that came up organically in the interviews. The first is that the students interviewed did not seem to make new lasting friendships outside of the sessions:

*Interviewer: Could you make friends from different faculties?*

*Student 1: I did not make a friend, just talk.*

The second is that one student commented on the seating arrangements and the seats themselves.

*Interviewer: Are there any other thoughts on the English Café that we have not covered?*

*Student 2: You know, maybe you think, oh, the seats weren't so comfortable, or maybe the seating, or maybe the layout, for example.*

While it is a subjective opinion from one student, it seems that layout and optimal use of space could be a salient feature to consider in future program design.

### **Statistical Analysis**

To look at the numerical data over the 12-week, 10-session program, attendance figures were tabulated, figures (Table 1) and a quantitative data analysis using descriptive statistics summarized the individual variables. Heuristically, the patterns suggest consistency, although there is slight variation when considering the weekly mean attendance.

**Table 1***Attendance during Weeks 1 to 12 on Tuesday and Thursday*

<b>Weeks 1-12</b>	<b>Tuesday</b>	<b>Thursday</b>	<b>Weekly Total</b>	<b>Monthly Total</b>
<b>April</b>				
Week 1 (21 <sup>st</sup> )	–	46	46	
Week 2 (26 <sup>th</sup> , 28 <sup>th</sup> )	43	45	88	
<b>Total</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>91</b>		<b>134</b>
<b>May</b>				
Week 3 (3 <sup>rd</sup> )	15	–	15	
Week 4 (10 <sup>th</sup> , 12 <sup>th</sup> )	28	38	66	
Week 5 (17 <sup>th</sup> , 19 <sup>th</sup> )	28	33	61	
Week 6 (24 <sup>th</sup> , 26 <sup>th</sup> )	28	25	53	
Week 7 (31 <sup>st</sup> )	34	–	34	
<b>Total</b>	<b>133</b>	<b>96</b>		<b>229</b>
<b>June</b>				
Week 8 (2 <sup>nd</sup> )	–	20	20	
Week 9 (7 <sup>th</sup> , 9 <sup>th</sup> )	14	35	49	
Week 10 (14 <sup>th</sup> , 16 <sup>th</sup> )	30	26	56	
Week 11 (21 <sup>st</sup> , 23 <sup>rd</sup> )	30	24	54	
Week 12 (28 <sup>th</sup> , 30 <sup>th</sup> )	21	25	46	
<b>Total</b>	<b>95</b>	<b>130</b>		<b>225</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>271</b>	<b>317</b>		<b>588</b>

At a glance, the figures in Table 2 reveal that the mean, which in this case is not disadvantaged by the impact of extreme values, is 27.1 for Tuesdays and 31.7 for Thursdays. Even accounting for weeks with one session, the high standard deviation suggests an



unpredictability of attendance. Going forward, we cannot be certain of how many students will show up on any one day.

**Table 2**

*Statistical Analysis of Attendance during Weeks 1 to 12 on Tuesday and Thursday*

<b>Statistics</b>	<b>Tuesday</b>	<b>Thursday</b>	<b>Population</b>
Sum, $\Sigma x$	271	317	588
Count, N	10	10	20
Mean, $\mu$	27.1	31.7	29.4
Variance, $\sigma^2$	74.98	83.56	76.64
Standard Deviation, $\sigma$	8.65	9.14	8.75

**Table 3**

*Coefficient of Variation Suggesting Less Variability around the Mean*

<b>Statistics</b>	<b>Tuesday</b>	<b>Thursday</b>	<b>Population</b>
Standard Deviation, $\sigma$	8.65	9.14	8.75
Mean, $\mu$	27.1	31.7	29.4
<b>Coefficient of Variation (CV)</b>	<b>0.319</b>	<b>0.288</b>	<b>0.297</b>

In addition, we can also use the coefficient of variation (CV) (Table 3), which is the standard deviation divided by the mean. Normalizing the standard deviation in order to compare it across the mean scales, we find values lower than 1 showing that the spread of data values is low relative to the mean, suggesting there is less variability. Relative to the standard deviation, the lower coefficient of variation shows us that there is less variation on Thursdays than on Tuesdays.

## Conclusion

Observing the trajectory of the pilot program, it is feasible to recommend that the program continue into the next academic year. Statistically, with more data points, an inferential analysis using correlation, analysis of variance, and regression could be used to investigate confidence and prediction intervals for subsequent semesters. Software programs that aid in data analysis would be useful for this purpose, and in-vivo coding to make use of the students' own words rather than the interviewer's interpretation might yield more accurate results. A thematic analysis according to Braun and Clarke's (2006) phases could be conducted on transcribed interviews combined into a corpus. These themes, once defined and named, could lead to a report looking at the topics and materials used in the EC sessions. This could be extended to investigating how the space is used (Blommaert, 2012) and how the relationship between space and language is negotiated. Depending on the rapports generated, an action plan for extension into the wider community could be drawn up. This would draw on Sigmon's (1979) service-learning typology where both providers and recipients can derive mutually beneficial experiences when learning goals and service outcomes are finely balanced. Sigmon (1979) notes that these services could include community service, field education, volunteerism, and internships. One salient point that will require further investigation in the following academic year is that the English Cafe built upon the English Tutorial blueprint and, for all intents and purposes, changed only the location and time. As both are optional, campus wide, not-for-credit extracurricular activities for all students, it is useful to consider the future of the English Tutorial going forward. While it was able to successfully navigate the COVID-19 pandemic by conducting an extensive asynchronous project-based learning activity (Savage et al., 2022), with the English Cafe offering the same program in a university-sponsored capacity, the future direction of the English Tutorial program must now be re-assessed.

Although this is a review of the English Cafe, it outlines the design and the rationale behind some of the administrative choices of the program and the initial phase of its delivery. When discussing the impact of the English Café using an in-depth research methodology, it would be useful to build upon the anecdotal, authentic experiences of the students and further the project in order to continue to enhance students' positive identity as proactive and engaged language learners. Nonetheless, there were limitations with the current study owing to various factors. As the program was newly implemented, there was a lack of previous research on which to build. Due to time constraints on both students and instructors, there

was limited access to interviewees. While the qualitative analysis may seem slightly skewed due to the small sample size, the quantitative data provides evidence of consistent attendance, which in itself is an important predictor of the program's success going forward.

Overall, it is reasonable to conclude that the English Café program should continue to be delivered for the foreseeable future.

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## Appendix

### *Interview Excerpts*

What was your overall impression of the English Café?

Speaker 1: Really good time to make conversation like mostly Asian university class.

Speaker 2: Plaza was quite noisy because after class there are so many people and they're playing games and making conversation.

What was different to your regular Freshman classes?

Speaker 1: In class we make conversation, but not a lot in class and we can't talk like our life side, their [instructors] lifestyle. We understand how to do grammar, but we can't speak every time. In there [English Café] so we can practice talking.

Speaker 2: Oh yes, at it's convenient to hold after the class.

And do you have to book the session in advance?

Speaker 1: Actually not. If there are so many people, we have to write that a name from the paper and then they call the name from the app.

How are the groups decided? By level or by topic interest?

Speaker 1: Everyone has a different topic. In one day they do the same topic in but another way.

Could you make friends from different faculties?

Speaker 1: I did not make a friend, just talk.

Speaker 2: The first point of it is the best point of English cafes, to meet the partner to get habit.

What were some of the topics that you talked about so?

Speaker 1: Like we talked about food culture. Just normal lifestyle.

Speaker 2: Famous places you want to go in the future and where is the country you want to go in the future.

What was your impression of the teachers?

Speaker 1: They are really friendly. First of all, I was a little bit nervous. But they're so kind and interesting.

Speaker 2: So, it's it's it's fun to talk with foreign people.

Do you know what other faculties some of the other students were from?

Speaker 1: No.

Did you use books or handouts/prints/photocopies or did you have?

Speaker 1: Paper.

Speaker 2: Oh yes, every time teachers are prepared for one print.

Do you ever have work that's digital?

Speaker 2: Oh, no, it's just conversation.

Which do you think is more convenient?

Speaker 1: Zoom and half the students were at home, but now we're not doing zoom and the laptop is heavy, so everybody has their smartphone, but it's difficult to do all the work on the smart phone.

English Tutorial meetings were held during lunchtime. Do you think the time is important for students when they are considering attending a meeting?

Speaker 1: They want to enjoy their lunch time. They don't want to go to some more classes.

What students were interested in the English Café?

Speaker 1: Students who are focused on exams, or maybe are going abroad, or maybe [those] who want to maintain [their English].

Speaker 2: I like traveling and other students too.

Where did you see the advertisement for the English Café?

Speaker 1: I saw in the cafeteria. And they had on the monitor they were advertising.

Where is a good place to advertise do you think?

Speaker 1: At the university culture festival.

The duration is 25 minutes. Do you think that's okay or would you like a longer or shorter session?

Speaker 2: 25 minutes is good, I think. And I think it's better to three times in a week. On Monday, Wednesday, Friday.

Are there any other thoughts on the English Café that we have not covered?

Student 2: You know, maybe you think, oh, the seats weren't so comfortable, or maybe the seating, or maybe the layout, for example.