

English Camp Activities:

A Strategy to Enhance Students' English Proficiency

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Abstract: Indoor or outdoor activities are part of the learning and teaching process. Activities can be of value added to students especially if they perceived positively and appreciate their contents. The purpose of this paper is to evaluate the effectiveness of the English camp activities organised by the Faculty of Languages and Communication, University Sultan Zainal Abidin, Terengganu, Malaysia. The evaluations of the activities are based on the course objectives, activities covered and facilitators. In addition, the study also examines the benefits, types of improvement to be considered and the satisfaction level. The study was carried out in May to June 2010. Of 114 students taking TESL (Teaching English as a Second Language) from Semester Two and Four, 73 students participated in the survey giving a response rate of 64 percent.

Key words: Teaching And Learning; TESL; Effectiveness; English Camp Activities

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INTRODUCTION

The year 2001 marked the beginning of the program "English Camp" in University Sultan Zainal Abidin (formerly known as University Darul Iman Malaysia). The program is held every year as a compulsory paper for every student doing Diploma in Teaching of English as a Second Language (TESL). There are two stages of the camp, to be taken by the students in semester two and four. Each participation of the camp is graded into a two-credit paper, namely English Camp 1 BTS 1042 (second semester) and English Camp 2 BTS 1092 (fourth semester).

The initial duration for the English Camp was initially a month, however, due to administrative reasons, it was shortened into two weeks beginning the year 2007. According to the syllabus, the camp aims at training the students with necessary skills in order to be able to:

communicate in English effectively;

cooperate among themselves and develop leadership qualities;

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assume responsibilities;

develop a sense of belongings; and

develop creative and critical thinking skills.

To further explain, below is the excerpt taken from the course pro forma:

“The course, comprising controlled and partially controlled activities, exposes the students to good communicational skills, which can be used to achieve success in their command of the English language. It also provides opportunities for students to develop their natural inborn skills further in the context of the English language. The students will be immersed in English-speaking environments. The course is also designed to be enjoyable and intellectually stimulating. It will encourage cooperative work that leads the students to assuming responsibilities for their own progress”. (Diploma in TESL Syllabus, 2009)

It is clear from both the course objectives and course description that the skills obtained from the English Camp program is in accordance with the incorporation of soft skills, namely communication, critical thinking and problem solving, teamwork, continuous skills and information management, entrepreneurial skills, ethics and professionalism, and leadership (MOHE, 2006).

Holding on to this principle, the English Camp program is designed so as to allow TESL students to master English language learning in an authentic natural learning environment which they are not able to gain during the normal study duration. The camp program is filled with language enhancing activities through the use of arts, music and adventure. For the duration of between 2 to 4 weeks, students are actively improving not only their language skills, but other skills needed for life after university. It is during this camp that the students’ language competencies are polished, improved and enhanced. All activities are group-based and task-based, thus well-display its soft skill properties.

Thus, it is crucial to know whether such programme or course has proven to have assist students in their English language proficiency as data gathered on its impact can be a guide for further plans of the camp. Questions will be answered: whether the course is effective? And has it benefitted the students as a whole towards preparing them as future teachers and educators? By answering these questions, it is hoped that the future planning for the camp would be better infused with the important elements such as soft skills as to make sure the TESL students graduated from University Sultan Zainal Abidin have high employability factors.

The activities carried out are carefully designed that suits the diploma TESL students of semester 2 and 4. The activities are divided into two that are indoor and outdoor activities. Indoor activities are planned out for 8 days where activities focus more on the four skills that are listening, speaking, reading and writing. Examples of the indoor activities are ‘Headline Poem’, ‘Nice to Know You; Meeting with Native Speakers’, ‘The Power of Proverb’ and many more. All activities are assigned in group work. Meanwhile the students are also exposed to a more challenging natural setting for English learning such as on an island for their outdoor activities. Examples of outdoor activities are ‘Educational Race’ and ‘Shakespearean Night’. The assessment method is 100% based on competition, attendance and students’ participation.

Efforts were made to evaluate activities for two main reasons: (1) to assess the existing activities; and (2) to see how future activities can be improved. Kirkpatrick method (KP Method) or model has been popularly used in different settings particularly in industrial settings since this model focuses on the quantifiable results rather than unquantifiable results. Later the model has been used in training organisations to understand the impact of the training programs.

Thus, this study is carried out with the following objectives:

to evaluate the effectiveness of the English camp (EC) activities based on the following:

course objectives

activities covered

facilitators

to assess the benefits of the EC activities

to study improvements needed

to measure the overall satisfaction level

The paper is divided into five sections. The second section deals with the relevant literature, the third section discusses the methodology and final section is the conclusion.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

The alarming poor command of English among Malaysian students in the local institutions of higher learning today is due to many factors. One of the factors is that many do not interact in the language. To overcome the problem, the Malaysian Ministry of Education has implemented several recommendations on strategies to improve performance in English and to enhance English use. One of the strategies is English-In-Camp (EIC), initiated by the Johore State Education Department in 1995 for primary and secondary schools. It was introduced as an enrichment programme. Reports on the EIC mentioned that EIC is seen as an effective strategy of proactive learning. EIC was said to have successfully enhanced participants' speaking, reading, writing and listening, even though there is no empirical data to support this claim. English Camp is regarded as a unique strategy. It provides a wealth of language learning input outside classroom situations, which emphasizes the elements of fun and enjoyment in learning English amid nature. It incorporates the method of understanding promoted in British education and the local method of reinforcing knowledge.

Taking students outdoors is definitely a new and interesting learning experience and it should be one of the ways to motivate students to increase their enthusiasm for learning English. This strategy is based on the concept of learning English at ease which helps to break down a lot of barriers against learning the language. It is therefore appropriate that empirical studies in evaluating the effectiveness of EC activities be carried out. EC has gained increasing prominence with its particular concern in providing students with a variety of approaches to create 'Learning is Fun' to the teaching and learning process of English, so as to raise their interest to use the language naturally. Its main emphasis has always been revolving around the psychological factors of the students in helping them to be more confident and efficient to use English as a media of thinking and communication to speak and write.

Many educationists believe that participation in verbal interaction offers language learners the opportunity to follow-up on new words and structures to which they have been exposed during language lessons and to practice them in context. As such, if small group and pair work, role plays, and discussions are emphasized in the curriculum, that is in broader scope and context, then learners will be able to experience greater verbal contact with each other than their teachers for much of the class time.

White (1989) stated that it is very important to consider a habitual learning style which focuses more on communicative approach as to promote students to learn English that encourage among students. Such less formal teaching English can be gained through English Camp or other enrichment programmes.

Pérez (2004) claimed that the opportunity for communication in authentic situations and settings is a major factor for second-language acquisition by adults. Another important determinant of language learning achievement is motivation (Dornyei, 1994). Chang and Shu (2000) also claimed that there is a positive relationship between the learning environment and student motivation, stating that a good learning environment helps to improve the learning outcomes, and inspires and boosts the learning spirit.

Cohen, (1998); Cai, (2005) stated that immersion teaching methodology development was based on the theory that the target language is best acquired if the learner is placed in the target language environment. This placement can be further divided into two types of immersion: complete and partial. The former refers to immersions in all aspects of one's life while the latter is immersion in aspects concerning classroom teaching and learning, such as textbooks, teaching media, classroom discussion, assignments and tests, etc. The purpose of immersion is to immerse the language learners in the target language environment as much as possible so as to improve the language learning efficiency.

Another study by Zhou (2008) on immersion, English immersion teaching adopted by English Department for International Finance (EDIF) is effective and successful in cultivating students' proficiency in English as well as in business knowledge.

Teachers of EFL might wonder how immersion language teaching techniques can be relevant to their context in which they are not focused on teaching content. EFL teachers are, nevertheless, increasingly using more communicative approaches to second language teaching (Manghubai, 2005). Others view language linguistic processes as interacting with cognition but nevertheless maintaining a separate identity that justifies investigation independent from cognitive process (Wong-Fillmore and Swain, 1984).

In a review paper by Long and Porter (1985) as quoted by Pica, Lincoln-Porter, Paninos and Linnell (1996) on the analysis of consistent findings across studies that compared interaction among learners outside classrooms situations with that among learners in teacher-fronted lesson revealed that learners working together in groups, i.e. in informal settings were found to display greater motivation, more initiative, and less anxiety regarding their learning. They were also found to produce more language, and their language was characterized by a broader range of sociolinguistic functions. It also contained a greater number of features believed to assist message comprehensibility and thereby to serve as input for second language learning.

As such, the findings reported and reviewed by Long and Porter (1985) reflect a theoretical perspective on the role of interaction as portrayed in Language Camp activities is believed to facilitate and promote opportunities for second language learning.

Bialystok (1978) in her model of second language learning defines learning strategies as alternative ways of "exploiting available information to improve competence in a second language" (p. 80). Four categories of learning strategies are included in her model, namely, inferencing, monitoring, formal practicing and functional practicing. According to her, there are three types of knowledge: explicit knowledge, implicit knowledge and general knowledge of the world. She also states that the type of strategy used by the learner will depend on the type of knowledge required for a given task. She hypothesises that inferencing may be used with implicit linguistic knowledge and knowledge of the world and that monitoring, formal practicing and functional practicing contribute both to explicit and implicit knowledge. In other words, strategies introduced explicitly in a formal setting can contribute to implicit linguistic knowledge and this will enable the students to understand and produce spontaneous language.

In a study in China about the successful development of oral communicative abilities by Huang and Naerssen (1987) which also using Bialystok Model showed that students who were more successful in oral communication reported employing functional practice strategies more frequently than the less successful ones. Examples of functional practice strategies mentioned in the study were speaking with other students, doing presentation and watching films. According to Stern's model, the learning conditions and learner characteristics are influenced by the social context. This will lead to the learning process which can be looked upon as consisting overtly of strategies techniques employed consisting overtly of strategies techniques employed by the learner, and covertly of conscious and unconscious mental operation. Based on the model discussed, therefore, it can be concluded that learning strategies do influence the proficiency of the students in learning a second language in a more natural and less informal learning sessions.

Many theorists and researchers have found that it is important to recognize the construct of motivation not as a single entity but as a multi-factorial one. Oxford and Shearin (1996) analyzed a total of 12 motivational theories or models, including those from socio-psychology, cognitive development, socio-cultural psychology, and identified six factors that impact motivation in language learning:

- attitudes (i.e. sentiments toward the learning community and the target language)
- beliefs about self (i.e. expectancies about one's attitudes to succeed, self-efficacy, and anxiety)
- goals (perceived clarity and relevance of learning goals as reasons for learning)
- involvement (i.e. extent to which the learner actively and consciously participates in the language learning process)

environmental support (i. e. extent of teacher and peer support, and the integration of cultural and outside-of-class support into learning experience)

personal attributes (i.e. aptitude, age, sex, and previous language learning experience)

Based on this brief discussion, it is believed that teachers are able to drive the students to learn the language and to sustain students' interest in language learning if they can provide activities that are:

interrelated between in-class and out-of-class language activities

communicative (game type) integrative (short/small activities from larger activities)

pleasant, safe and non-threatening

enthusiastic

group-based

meaningful or relevant

challenging

These activities help promote:

self-confidence

experiences of success

learning satisfaction

good or positive relationships among learners and between teacher and students.

Research has shown that factors such as positive learner and teacher attitudes, which are interrelated to motivation, must be sustained for successful transfer of language learning (Finocchiaro, 1982). To foster positive attitudes and to motivate learning, in particular, the learning of English as a second language, an environment conducive to learning must be created. Factors that help create such an environment include:

a learning situation that has a "low affective filter" (Krashen, 1987) whereby the learners learn to use the language in a non-threatening and fun environment. Otherwise, learners will feel uncomfortable and insecure which will further induce a 'psychological barrier' to communication and learning (Littlewood, 1995);

providing various types of input which are auditory, visual, sensory, verbal and nonverbal in nature and input which is comprehensible or a little beyond the level of the learner ($i + 1$);

providing a continuous and consistent exposure to the language being learned;

an environment where the teachers and the students are supportive and encouraging; and

having access to situations wherein students are able to use the language as a "natural means of communication" (Littlewood, 1995: 58)

These factors should be present in any language learning programme. The enrichment part of a language curriculum must encompass these factors which encourage successful transfer and learning of the target language. Within the enrichment programme, various activities and tasks are prepared which require active participation of the learners. Some examples of such activities include:

a reading programme with such tasks as writing a synopsis, journal, and compiling vocabulary lists

language immersion projects such as language camps and visits

a specific day or week or month or time and space devoted to the use of the language such as an English zone, spelling bee competition, story-telling corner, read-to-me corner, essay and drama competition, poetry recitation, and choral speaking at the general assembly and much more

a network of people who could provide the constant input of the language such as pen-pals, teacher mentors, conversation partners and so forth.

It should be pointed out here that the main emphasis of the enrichment programme is more on the process of learning rather than the performance of learning. Research studies have shown that language acquisition is the result of interplay between cognitive mechanism and environmental conditions (Spolsky, 1985). In designing learning activities, the language teacher should remember that because language learning focuses on both the accuracy and appropriateness of application in various contexts of use, learners must be given opportunities to participate as language users in multiple contexts. These opportunities will result in learners' heightened motivation and awareness of the intricacies of language use, as quoted by Reeve (1996) that motivation is the trick, the secret, to achieving academic excellence.

2. METHODOLOGY

A primary survey was done using a detailed questionnaire. The respondents were asked to complete survey on these indices:

Objectives of the course/camp (4 items)

Activities covered during the course/camp (7 items)

Perceptions towards facilitators/lecturers (5 items)

Benefits of the course/camp (10 items)

Improvements (11 items)

Satisfaction (10 items)

Items under 1, 2, 3, 4 and 6 were based under a 5-point scale:

Strongly disagree (SD)

Disagree (D)

Neither disagree nor agree (ND/A)

Agree (A)

Strongly agree (SA)

Items under 5 were rated with a

YES or

NO answer

3. SURVEY RESULTS

3.1 Respondents Background

There were altogether 114 students undergoing this EC activity. Out of this, 73 students answered the questions giving us a response rate of 64%.

Of the students who answered the survey, 10 % were male and 90 % were female students. 56 % of these students were in semester two and the remainder were in semester four of their study. Finally, 48 % came from urban area and 52 % from the rural area. Figure 1 illustrates the respondents under gender, semester and whether they come from urban or rural areas.

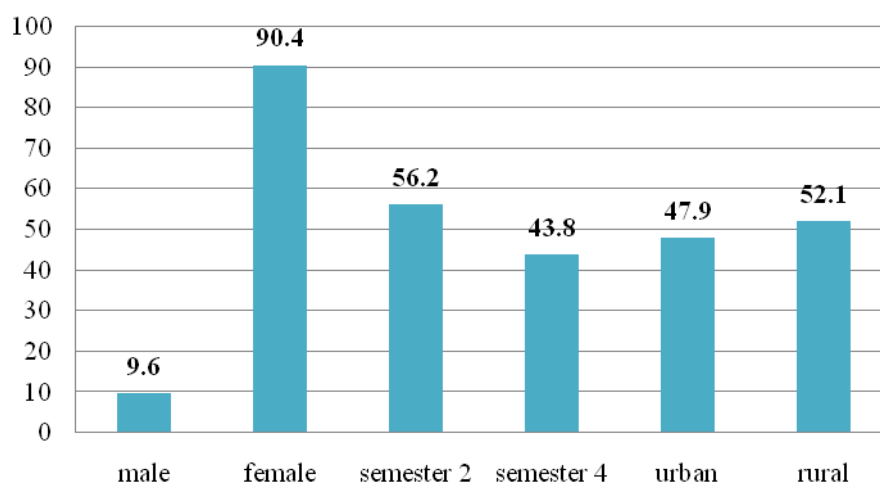


Figure 1: Demographic Profiles of Respondents

3.2 Objectives of the Course

The respondents were asked to express their extent of their agreement with a set of statements that may explain the course/camp objectives. A summary of the descriptive analysis (percentages, means and standard deviations) are shown in Table 2. According to the table, 75.4 % of the respondents strongly agreed or agreed that they were given sufficient information on the objectives of the course prior to attending the course while 69.8 % strongly agreed or agreed that the course covered the skills that they needed to learn. They also agreed that the course objectives were achieved (mean = 3.74 and S.D = 0.90) and the course lived up to their expectations (mean = 3.67 and S.D = 0.93). This is very important findings that need to be exposed to the committee organising the camp.

Table 2: Means, Standard Deviations and Percentages of the Course Objectives

| No | Items | Percent (%) | | | | | Mean | S.D |
|----|--|-------------|-----|------|------|------|------|------|
| | | SD | D | ND/A | A | SA | | |
| 1. | I was given sufficient information on the objectives of the course before the camp | 2.7 | 4.1 | 17.8 | 52.1 | 23.3 | 3.89 | 0.91 |
| 2. | The course lived up to my expectations | 4.1 | 6.8 | 19.2 | 57.5 | 12.3 | 3.67 | 0.93 |
| 3. | The course covered the skills I needed to master | 1.4 | 6.8 | 20.5 | 53.4 | 17.8 | 3.79 | 0.87 |
| 4. | The objectives of the course were achieved | 4.1 | 0 | 31.5 | 46.6 | 17.8 | 3.74 | 0.90 |

Note: SD=Strongly disagree, D=Disagree, ND/A=Neither disagree nor agree, A=Agree, SA=Strongly agree

3.3 Perceptions towards EC Activities

The respondents were asked to express their opinions regarding the activities covered during the course/camp. The findings are reported in Table 3. We will discuss item 4 separately since the question is related to different learning methods used during the camp. Examination of the percentages, means, standard deviation in the table shows that the highest scores in the perceptions towards EC activities were, “I found that English is fun through activities in the camp”(mean = 4.08, standard deviation = 0.88), “the language used was appropriate and easy to understand” (mean = 3.93, standard deviation = 1.00), “the outdoor activities help the learning process” (mean = 3.90, standard deviation = 0.97), “the indoor activities help with the learning process” (mean = 3.89, standard deviation = 0.81), “the activities carried out were stimulating” (mean = 3.74, standard deviation = 0.93) and “enough time was devoted to each activity” (mean = 3.29, standard deviation = 1.10).

In terms of the learning methods, the respondents placed “competition based” as the most relevant and of good quality (mean = 4.07, standard deviation = 0.96), followed by “speech related activities” (mean =3.97, standard deviation = 0.94), “trip” (mean = 3.95, standard deviation = 1.01) and “small group discussion” (mean = 3.92, standard deviation = 0.94). We believed the students that were more confident and motivated with the competition based activities (See Figure 2).

Table 3: Means, Standard Deviations and Percentages of the Perceptions towards EC Activities

| No | Items | Percent (%) | | | | | Mean | S.D |
|----|---|-------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| | | SD | D | ND/A | A | SA | | |
| 1. | The language used was appropriate and easy to understand | 4.1 | 6.8 | 8.2 | 53.4 | 27.4 | 3.93 | 1.00 |
| 2. | The indoor activities help the learning process | 1.4 | 2.7 | 21.9 | 53.4 | 20.5 | 3.89 | 0.81 |
| 3. | The outdoor activities help the learning process | 4.1 | 4.1 | 15.1 | 50.7 | 26.0 | 3.90 | 0.97 |
| 4. | I found the different learning methods listed below to be relevant and of good quality. | | | | | | | |
| | a. Trip | 5.5 | 4.1 | 8.2 | 54.8 | 27.4 | 3.95 | 1.01 |
| | b. Small Group Discussion | 2.7 | 6.8 | 11.0 | 54.8 | 24.7 | 3.92 | 0.94 |
| | c. Speech Related Activities | 1.4 | 6.8 | 16.4 | 43.8 | 31.5 | 3.97 | 0.94 |
| | d. Competition Based | 4.1 | 2.7 | 9.6 | 49.3 | 34.2 | 4.07 | 0.96 |
| 5. | Enough time was devoted to each activity | 5.5 | 19.2 | 30.1 | 31.5 | 13.7 | 3.29 | 1.10 |
| 6. | The activities carried out were stimulating | 2.7 | 6.8 | 21.9 | 50.7 | 17.8 | 3.74 | 0.93 |
| 7. | I found that English is fun through activities in the camp | 0.0 | 5.5 | 17.8 | 39.7 | 37.0 | 4.08 | 0.88 |

Note: SD=Strongly disagree, D=Disagree, ND/A=Neither disagree nor agree, A=Agree, SA=Strongly agree

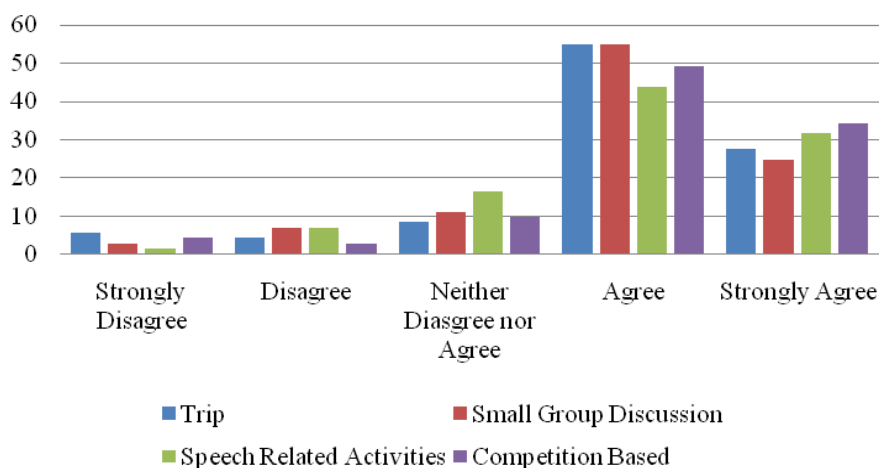


Figure 2: Learning Methods

3.4 Facilitators/Lecturers

Here the scales Agree (A) and strongly agree (SA) were put together for simpler understanding. It is quite interesting to note that the respondents viewed positively their facilitators/lecturers; they have sufficient knowledge, well-prepared, communicate well in English and help and encourage participation (85%, 76.7%, 91.8%, 83.5% and 82.2% respectively). Of important was that they communicate well in English. The credit should go to the facilitator/lecturers who were conducting the camp.

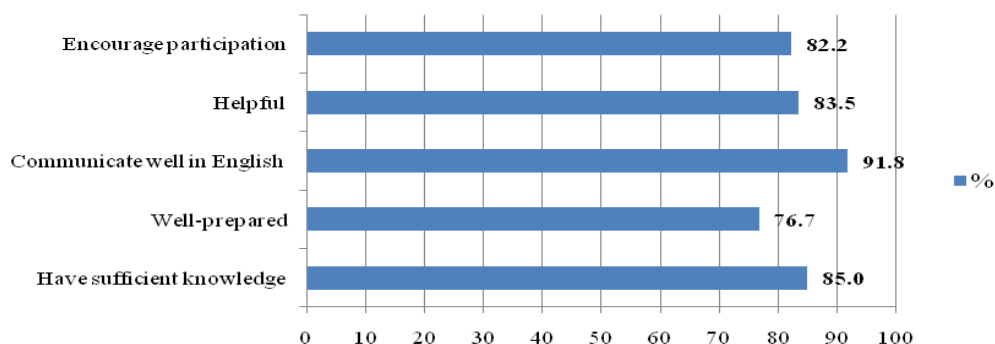


Figure 3: Facilitators/Lecturers

3.5 Benefits of the Activities

With regards to the benefits of the EC activities, the respondents had an increased awareness through the program. The respondents were asked of their opinions regarding the benefits they acquire through this camp, on a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 standing for “strongly disagree” and 5 for “strongly agree”. The benefits being:

- The content of the activities was useful and practical
- I will be able to use the knowledge and skills gained through these activities
- I have gained confidence to speak in English after the camp
- Team work activities help me in improving my English proficiency
- I am motivated to speak in English after the camp
- I will be able to use and apply what I learned in this English camp outside class
- The activities help me to develop creative and critical thinking
- The activities help me to be good leaders
- The activities instil sense of belonging
- The activities teach me how to be a responsible person

From their opinions we rank them from the most important to the least important. For the purpose of simplicity, the scales of 4 (agree) and 5 (strongly agree) were put together. This is presented in Figure 4. It is interesting to note that the main benefits that the respondents obtained from the course/camp were, “I will be able to use the knowledge and skills gained through these activities” and “the activities help me to develop creative and critical thinking” (82.2%). Survey results also indicate that “the contents of the activities were useful and practical and that “the activities teach me to be a responsible person (80.8%). A total of 78.1% of the respondents mentioned “team work activities help me in improving English proficiency” and “I will be able to use and apply what I learned in this English camp outside class”. Benefits like “I have gained confidence to speak in English after the camp”, “I am motivated to speak English”, “the activities help me to good leaders”, “the activities instil sense of belonging”, appeared to be of least important (76.8%, 75.4%, 72.6% and 71.3% respectively). The results clearly show that students gained benefits from the activities in the camp and this would be of important findings to the relevant centre to maintain the standard and quality of the activities.

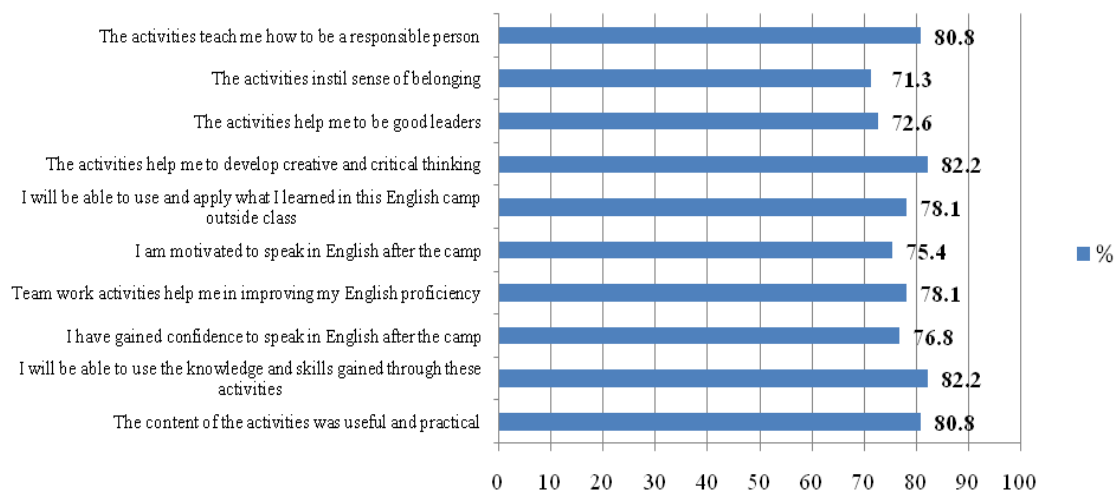


Figure 4: Benefits of EC Activities

3.6 Improvements

In this study, we also explore whether students need improvements in all or certain areas relating to the activities. We asked the respondents to response whether “yes” or “no” to the statements. Figure 5 shows the results. In all the statements majority of the students agreed that all the items in the category need improvements except item no. 9 where the respondents did not want the period of the camp to be extended. This should be taken into consideration by the relevant centre/faculty so as to maintain the standard and quality as mentioned earlier.

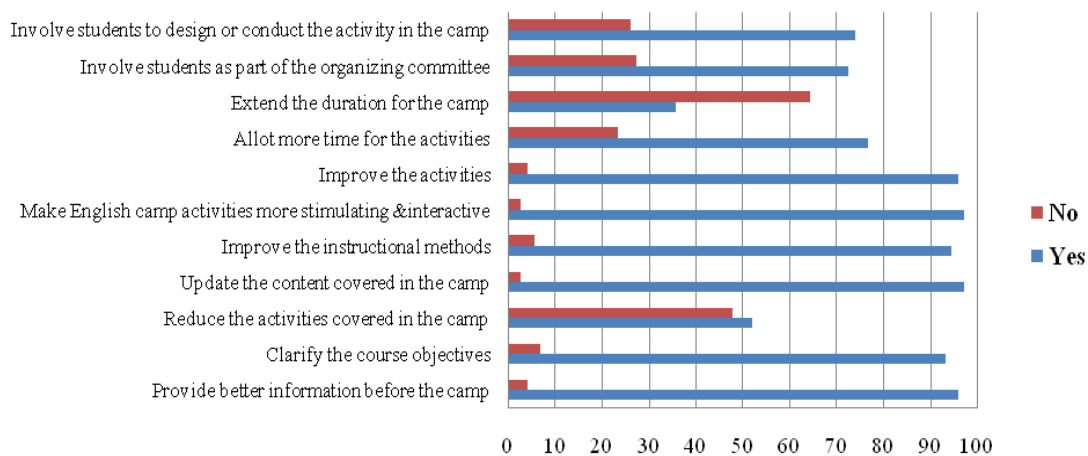


Figure 5: Improvements

3.7 Satisfaction

Overall satisfaction is one important element to ask when training or activities or courses being conducted so as to find out whether the respondents were satisfied with the course, facilities, duration of the course, venue and etc. In this study the students were asked to express their opinions regarding their satisfaction. Here again the scales of 4 (agree) and 5 (strongly agree) were put together for simpler understanding. Figure 6 presents the results. Interestingly, the respondents were most satisfied with the facilitators/lectures who conducted the course. This is consistent to the results in 4.4 where students had positive opinions about them. They are also satisfied with the activities followed by organization of the

programme. However, they were least satisfied with the fees and accommodation (45.2% and 31.5%, respectively). Therefore, the fees and the accommodation should be revised perhaps by the faculty organising the programme.

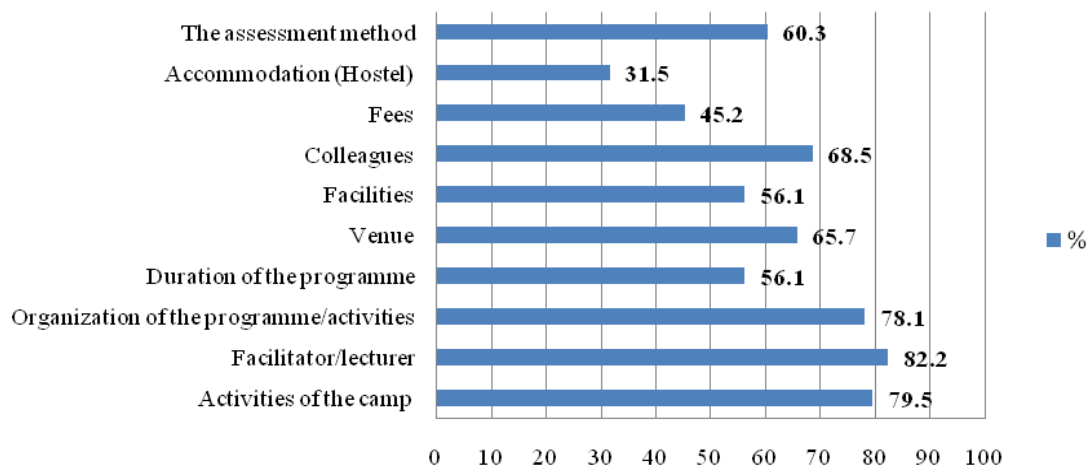


Figure 6: Satisfaction

CONCLUSIONS

This study examines the perceptions of students towards English camp activities. Overall, the findings clearly show that the students have positive perceptions on the EC activities. The students have gained a lot of benefits and were very satisfied with programmes especially the facilitators/lecturers.

It was interesting to note that through the study the respondents came out with some kind of suggestions to improve the programme. In fact the students would like to improve on all aspects of the activities except not to extend the time of the programme.

A persistent problem faced by many English teachers in Malaysia today is the attempt to sustain genuine interest and enthusiasm among students in continuing to learn English and to use English language once the examinations are over. Teachers have to create a healthy balance between preparing students for the standardized examinations and for life-long language skills. One solution is to develop a continuous programme which includes an integrated in-class and out-of-class language activities that help nurture students' language skills. And a lot of such activities are typically found in the EC enrichment programme.

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