On the English Learning with NNS-NNS Pair Work Format in "EZ TALK" Program

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ABSTRACT

Since the late 20th century globalization has become a worldwide trend and English is by far the language of choice for international communications. Hence, learning English as a lingua franca (ELF) is a pressing issue for many non-English-speaking countries. In response to this issue the program "EZ TALK," pairs international graduate students on campus with domestic college students in an informal setting to engage in casual conversations in English in a NNS-NNS (non native speaker of English) pair work format. It provides the participants with a simulated environment where English is the only way to communicate, and thus encourages participants to practice oral communication skills.

The objectives of this study aim to explore the learning attitudes of the participants and to measure the program effectiveness in improving their oral communication skills. Through quantitative research methods this study found that most "EZ TALK" participants had a clear focus on developing the skills of English listening and speaking when coming into the program, but with certain learning preferences and difficulties. This study also showed that the program was effective as an extracurricular aid in improving the oral communications skill of the participants. Based on the research results, specific suggestions are provided for further improvement of the "EZ TALK" program design.

Key words: oral communication, extracurricular learning, learning effectiveness.

1. INTRODUCTION

Globalization is a fashionable word to describe trends perceived to be dramatically and relentlessly increasing human contact and communication around the world, regardless of nationality and geography (Tobin , Seiler, & Smith, 1999). The concept of globalization has been spreading worldwide since the late 20th century. The world is indeed getting smaller and the "global village" concept is getting closer to being a reality. However, to realize the benefits of globalization, first and foremost is to have a common communication platform that can be used globally (Phillipson, 1992; Kachru & Nelson, 1996; Seidlhofer, 2003). The population of non-native English-speaking countries which can communicate using English is currently estimated to be three times the population of native English-speaking countries (UNCTAD, 2005). Analysis of international travel movements suggests that three-quarters of all travel is between non-English speaking countries (Saul, 2005). This also reveals a large demand for either foreign language learning or the increasing use of English as a lingua franca. In the Asia region there are over 350 million people who speak English, equivalent to the entire population of United States and Canada. Just in China alone, over 60% of the student population is studying English language, a figure which exceeds the population of England (Farrell & Grant, 2005; Graddol, 2007).

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Recognizing this global trend of using English as a lingua franca (ELF)[†], higher educationalists in many non-native-English-speaking countries are taking steps to prepare their students by offering programs such as international student exchanges, international research collaborations and even international dual-degree programs. The purpose of these globalization efforts seeks not only to elevate the students' English language communications skill but also to promote mutual understanding, and respect among different cultures, and broaden perspectives and viewpoints of international issues (Jenkins, 2000; Graddol, 2007; Harmer, 2008).

Universities have been, traditionally, national institutions catering for the higher education of domestic students. Now universities compete at a global level. The changing nature and role of higher education is placing pressure on the rest of the education system (McKay, 2002). Being increasingly aware of the trend of globalization, the Ministry of Education (MOE) in Taiwan has applied a great deal of effort to elevating the international standing of Taiwan and promoting English language learning (Bureau of International Culture and Education at the Ministry of Education, 2008). These efforts are particularly evident in the higher education area, by way of attracting international students to attend universities and colleges in Taiwan and providing scholarships to assist them. The main purpose is certainly to recruit foreign talent to Taiwan, not only for globalization efforts, but also to make Taiwan's university system more internationally famous. During the academic years 2005 and 2006, the MOE funded over 5.4 million dollars to 43 universities and colleges in Taiwan for scholarships and expenses for international student exchanges (Department of Statistics at the Ministry of Education, 2007). Table 1 shows that the overall number of international students attending formal degree programs in Taiwan has increased yearly, from 7,844 new students in 2003, to 9,616 by 2005, and to 15,436 by 2008 (Department of Statistics at the Ministry of Education, 2008).

Table 1. *Number of Foreign Students in Taiwan from Year 2003 to 2008*

School Year	Number of Foreign Students
2003-2004	7,844
2004-2005	9,616
2005-2006	11,035
2006-2007	13,070
2007-2008	15,436

Note. Source: The Statistics Bureau of Ministry of Education (2008), from http://www.edu.tw

Higher education has been rapidly globalized, which can be proved by the fact that global institutions in non-English-speaking countries are using English lecture courses to attract international students and teachers (Phillipson, 2003). To take this view of ELF into practice and to take advantage of having international

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[†] 'Lingua franca' is originally Italian for 'Frankish language', and describes a language used to communicate between persons not sharing a mother tongue, particularly when it is a third language distinct from both persons' native language.

students on campus, the International Language Center of Asia University has designed the "EZ TALK" program by pairing international students on campus with domestic students in an informal setting to engage in a real-life communication platform in English. This NNS[‡]-NNS (non-native speaker to non-native speaker) pair work format promotes students learning interests and strengthens students' communication abilities.

The purpose of this study is to offer quantitative perspectives on the participants' learning attitudes and the program effectiveness in elevating the oral communication skills of the participants. Several language learning concepts applied to design the "EZ TALK" program are addressed in the research literature review. Findings are discussed and useful suggestions for program improvement in the future are provided.

2. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF THE PROGRAM

2.1 English as a Lingua Franca

Although there is an extraordinary diversity in the ways in which English is taught and learned around the world, some clear orthodoxies have arisen. "English as a Foreign Language (EFL)" has been a dominant one in the second half of the 20th century, but it seems to be giving way to a new orthodoxy, more suited to the realities of global English. EFL tends to highlight the importance of learning about the culture and society of native speakers; it stresses the centrality of methodology in discussions of effective learning; and emphasizes the importance of emulating native speaker language behavior. (Howatt, 2004; Graddol, 2007). EFL approaches, like foreign language teaching, position the learners as outsiders, as a foreigner who struggles to attain acceptance by the target community.

In contrast to EFL, one of the defining features of teaching English as a second language (ESL) is that it recognizes the role of English in the society in which it is taught. As the learning of English for ESL is taught to immigrants entering English-speaking countries, it is not surprising that a key component in the curriculum is often "citizenship-oriented:" ensuring that learners are aware of the rights and obligations as permanent residents in English speaking countries. Citizenship rarely figured in the traditional EFL curriculum (Howatt, 2004; Ostler, 2005).

Foreign-language teaching has put forward a case for the culturally informed teaching of English as an international language (Crystal, 2003; Johnson, 2008). Such a paradigm stresses the need for reinforcing native and non-native speaker's sense as communicators at a global level by adding an extra dimension to our communicative competence (Fay, 1999). Despite the extraordinary changes over the last few years, one thing appears to remain the same; more people than ever want to learn English and learners are increasing in number and decreasing in age (Maurais, 2006). An inexorable trend in the use of global English is that fewer

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[‡] NNS means "non native speaker of English" in this article.

interactions now involve a native-speaker. English is being used as a communication tool between non-native speakers. Proponents of teaching English as a lingua franca (ELF) suggest that the way English is taught and assessed should reflect the needs and aspirations of the ever growing number of non-native speakers who use English to communicate with other non-natives. Unlike traditional EFL and ESL, ELF focuses also on the pragmatic strategies required in intercultural communication (Brutt-Griffler, 2002; Crystal, 2003). The target model of English, within the ELF framework, is not a native speaker but a fluent bilingual speaker who retains a national identity in terms of accent, and who also has the special skills required to negotiate understandings with another non-native speaker (Graddol, 1997, 2007; Jenkins, 2000; Howatt, 2004). In the "EZ Talk" program, learners interact in an ELF setting where they are encouraged to use English as a lingua franca to engage in effective communication with other non-natives.

2.2 Oral Communication Skill as an Important Goal in Language Learning

Recent theories in learning English as a lingual franca have gradually changed the previously accepted view by placing more emphasis on oral communication skills as the major goal rather than on English writing and grammar as in the traditional view (Graddol, 2007). Brown (2006) pointed out that "Courses in foreign language are often inadequate training grounds, in and of themselves, for the successful learning of a second language. Few if any people achieve fluency in a foreign language solely within the confines of the classroom (p.350)." He also proposed the following assertion to reinforce this concept:

Classroom goals are focused on all of the components of communicative competence and not restricted to grammatical or linguistic competence. Language techniques are designed to engage learners in the pragmatic, authentic, functional use of language for meaningful purposes. Organizational language forms are not the central focus but rather aspects of language that enable the learner to accomplish those purposes. Fluency and accuracy are seen as complementary principles underlying communicative techniques. At times fluency may have to take on more importance than accuracy in order to keep learners meaningfully engaged in language use. In the communicative classroom, students ultimately have to use the language, productively and receptively, in unrehearsed contexts (ibid).

Currently, English teaching in universities in Taiwan is mostly divided into units of Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing. This division is mainly an extension of high school curriculum design. The conventional thinking is that by setting the language learning environment of four skills, the learners will somehow trigger the sense of language mechanism and integrate all four components. This conventional view missed the point that language is a human communication tool and human interaction is essential in language learning (Richard-Amato, 1996; Lee & Van Patten, 1995; Nunan, 1991). English language teaching in high schools in

Taiwan emphasizes mainly reading and writing (Chen, 1999). The majority of high school English language teaching is still restricted in the classroom by way of English grammar-based methods with little learner's interaction due to the large class size, mostly forty students or more. The main purpose of English language classes in high school is to prepare students to achieve high scores in the written test in College Entrance Examinations. Most high school students concentrate on English reading and grammar rather than oral communications skills (Chang, 2006; Li, 2003). That is why the population of English learners in Taiwan is increasing exponentially; the learner's age is getting younger; but the overall effectiveness of their English language skills is actually decreasing.

In consideration of this issue, one of the objectives in designing the "EZ TALK" program is to specifically provide the participants with a simulated environment where English is the only way to communicate and encourage participants to practice oral communication skills.

2.3 University Provides an Opportunity to Re-learn English Language

Brown (2006) has asserted that adult second language linguistic processes actually do not much conflict with those of their first language. Under the misconception that English language can only be learned well if started at young age, many university undergraduate students give up their willingness to learn or think it is too late to learn (Chen, 1999). Even so, several research findings have disputed such a misconception (Snow & Hoefnagel-Hohle, 1978; Ekstrand, 1979; Kinsbourne, 1981; Welsh & Diller, 1981). After the emphasis on English reading and grammar in high school years, college students still have the chance to re-learn English language once more. The "EZ TALK" program is therefore a medium to provide students with such a new opportunity for English language learning.

2.4 The Importance of Fluency

According to Scovel (1999), there is a clear association between age and ability to learn a standard language accent. Having a different view, Brown (2006) asserts that perfect native accent in language is not the key indicator of language fluency. Some people acquire foreign language fluency, even exceeding native language speakers. A case in point is so called "Henry Kissinger Effect" in which Dr. Kissinger, the ex-Secretary of the State for the USA, mastered English language fluency better than a native speaker even though with a strong German accent (Brown, 2006).

Since English language is by far the most common communication platform of choice in this globalization era, and since the advancement and popularization of Internet communication is the single most significant facilitator for globalization, with most information being posted in English language format, there is no choice but to master the language. Learning English well refers to language fluency being more valued than correct accent (Munro, Derwing & Sato, 2006; Johnson, 2008).

With this concept, the "EZ TALK" program aims to build in the mechanisms for acquiring English language fluency by using nonnative-English-speaking

international students as off-class English conversation partners and helpers and additionally using the program as an extracurricular teaching aid.

The "EZ TALK" program is designed to be suitable for multiple learning strategy applications. Since neither the international students nor the domestic students are native English speakers they often have to guess meanings from context to engage in the topic sharing and communicating processes. Thus, all speakers may have to rely on relevant language learning strategies to effectively achieve real communication and comprehension (Oxford, 1990), as summarized below:

(1) Memory strategies: Human memory is composed of "sensory memory," "short-term memory," and "long-term memory." The operation route of these three memories works like this: when a message is received it will be temporarily stored in the sensory memory and subsequently the short-term memory will organize and delete the unnecessary information thus leaving the most important information to be stored in the long-term memory. Memory strategies use categorization, pictures or sound to help reinforce memory.

(2) Cognitive strategies: Direct strategies such as thinking, analysis and deciphering are used to receive and transmit information so that a learner can understand and practice the target language.

(3) Compensation strategies: Learners use compensation strategies to counteract their insufficiencies in language ability. In doing so they can still grasp the semantic meanings of the foreign language or the content of conversations. This can be illustrated by learners' ability to associate new vocabulary with the roots and prefixes to understand the new word.

(4) Contextual guess: Language acquisition is the process by which humans acquire the capacity to perceive, produce and use words to understand and communicate. This capacity involves the acquisition of diverse capacities including syntax, phonetics and an extensive vocabulary. This language might be vocal, as with speech, or manual, as in sign. Language acquisition usually refers to first language acquisition, which studies infants' acquisition of their native language, rather than second language acquisition that deals with acquisition of additional languages.

(5) Affective strategies: These can help learners to learn how to control their emotions and attitudes so that their psychology can be useful when learning a foreign language. In other words, the strategies help decrease anxiety and reinforce self-confidence and emotion control.

(6) Social strategies: These can help learners to learn a foreign language through interaction with others, including the posing of questions, cooperation and sympathy.

In the "EZ TALK" program, "memory strategies," "cognitive strategies" and "compensation strategies" are most frequently employed when participants conjecture about the meanings of the language context or the contents of conversations to compensate for their insufficiency in language ability. Likewise, "affective strategies" and "social strategies" are favored by many program participants to smooth the verbal and non-verbal interaction processes among them. Body language is often used to help define a speaker's meanings. Under limited language ability, both parties have to use all means available to understand the

conversation scenario and formalize the habitual language usages to keep conversations going. According to Brown (2006), "Well-organized language patterns are not the main concern of pedagogy; rather, those that can help learners to achieve communication ends are the points" (p.350). The conversation patterns devised in the "EZ TALK" program provide participants with opportunities not only to become familiar with English language, but also to adopt individualized learning strategies according to their own efforts.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Actual Implementation of the Program

The "EZ TALK" program has been operating since the beginning of the academic year 2006. The international graduate students of the university have been stationed at the International Language Center as teaching assistants, five days a week, nine hours a day, to engage in informal conversations in English with domestic students. The program has become the most popular learning event since then; it had 2,291 attendances in the first semester of 2006, and up to 5,941 attendances by the first semester of 2008. The total program participation person-time from the school years 2006 to 2008 was over 20,000.

During the actual implementation of the "EZ TALK" program, the operation instructions and several specific observations were made and described, as follows:

Operation instructions for the program participants. The "EZ TALK" program allocates one hour as a conversation period, with nine periods a day for five days a week. Usually, two international students are available as teaching assistants to help domestic participants during each conversation period. Equally, domestic students are welcome to participate in any session at their convenience. After participating for one half conversation period, students will be given a participation ticket by their conversation partner, the duty teaching assistant. Domestic students may collect tickets to accomplish their instructors' learning tasks or assignments.

Personal traits and characteristics of international students as influential factors in building attraction with participants. The international students that take part in the "EZ TALK" program are from three different continents; Asia, America and Europe. They differ in age, expression styles, language accents and abilities, color of skin, sartorial appearance, social manners, professional fields, interests in conversation subject area, etc. It is interesting to note, to reduce the fear of speaking a foreign language, domestic participants often chose conversation partners when engaging in a casual conversations with international students. Both internal and external personal factors of international students as mentioned above might contribute to domestic students' willingness to talk.

Language learning purposes, needs and difficulties of domestic students. It seems that domestic students have different learning needs and diverse purposes in participating in the "EZ TALK" program. Some might hope to strengthen their skills in English, while others might want to expand their international perspectives, to have better understanding of foreign cultures, or to satisfy their curiosity about

foreign students, etc. In terms of pursuing further studies, a few participants' purposes might involve making preparation for overseas studies or English efficiency tests. There have also been a certain number of students joining "EZ TALK" simply to fulfill their instructors' requirements.

When having conversations in English, many students encounter some difficulties, for instance, some of them might have trouble understanding the conversation due to their poor listening ability or the accent or expression manners of the other talker(s). They understood the meaning of the expressions conveyed by the international students; however, they might not be able to answer correctly due to lack of vocabulary. Likewise, they might feel embarrassed if they used incorrect expressions during conversation or had no idea what to chat about with the other(s). Compared with their compeers, a few participants might bear the pressure of awkward moments of silence, not only from the international students but also from their compeers, especially when their English ability or social skills are comparatively weaker than their compeers.

Free-talking conversation setting with free option topics. In the "EZ TALK" program, domestic students may have a chance to join a one-to-one conversation with an international student during off-peak periods. Otherwise, a conversation group is frequently composed of three to four people. The conversation topics between domestic students and international students are purposely flexible. To make participants feel more at ease and to solicit their desire to talk, no specific topics are assigned to participants. Topics favored by many participants include daily happenings, leisure activities, personal interests and hobbies, etc.

3.2 Research Design

To investigate the learning attitudes and the difficulties and preferences of students who participated in the "EZ TALK" program, a survey using a quantitative-descriptive research method was designed. Krejecie and Morgan (1970) state that in order to obtain a representative sample, a researcher needs to sample 217 people for a population of 500, 285 people for a population of 1,000, 381 people for a population of 5,000, and 384 people for a population of 1 million. The program actually had over 2,000 person-times per semester with an estimated 3 to 4 attendance per person per semester. Based upon the above-mentioned guidelines, to develop a representative sample this study needed a minimum of 285 usable survey copies if 1,000 people were calculated to be the population of the study.

Following the survey research, and to obtain a deeper understanding of whether the design of the "EZ TALK" program could be applied effectively as an extracurricular teaching aid, the present study further conducted quantitative-inferential research to examine the learning effectiveness of students who were taking the academic course "English Listening and Speaking;" and also were participating in the "EZ TALK" program as an extracurricular activity. Hence, a pretest-posttest single group design was adopted to meet the purpose of this research. A selected group of students was given a pretest. They then received the program, and afterwards were given a posttest to compare the pretest-posttest score differences.

3.3 Research Objectives

Two research objectives were proposed in the present study:

Objective One: To understand the learning attitudes, the difficulties and preferences of students who participated in the "EZ TALK" program and to use the results as the basis for further improvement of the program.

Objective Two: To investigate whether the design of the "EZ TALK" program is effective as a supplemental teaching aid for students who are currently taking the academic course "English Listening and Speaking" and whether the frequency of attending the program has a positive effect on English listening and speaking ability.

3.4 Participants

The target population for the survey consisted of students from Asia University, all of whom came to join the "EZ TALK" program. As for the one-group pretest-posttest research, the participants were from a sophomore class of the College of Humanities and Social Sciences. The class consisted of 55 students taking the "English Listening and Speaking" as an obligatory course for the academic year 2007.

3.5 Instrumentation and Data Collection Procedure

The survey procedure. The questionnaires in this survey were divided into two sections. The first section included demographic information such as gender, college and year attending, etc. The second section, which comprised 10 items, investigated the perceptions of the interactions between international students and domestic students. Ratings of items 1 to 6 are based on a 7-point Likert scale. The remaining items are questions with multiple choice answers.

A pilot test was conducted with 20 randomly chosen student-participants from the "EZ Talk" program. After the pilot test, the researchers amended a few items based upon the comments of those respondents. After the content validity of the survey instrument was ensured, it was distributed to the formal participants in the Language Corner from mid-March to late-May of 2007. Before the distribution, the program assistant had to ascertain if the participants had previously completed the questionnaire in order to avoid repetition. In this study a total of 488 questionnaires were completed, with 429 being valid for analysis.

The one-group pretest-posttest procedure. The "Intermediate General English Proficiency Test (GEPT) Database[§]" was used as the research tool. The

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[§] cf. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/GEPT for the General English Proficiency Test. The present study used the GEPT Intermediate test that contains 45 multiple choice questions for Listening Comprehension, 40 for Reading, and 13-14 for the Oral test, using scale measurement. To be precise with the test, this intermediate examining sheet is based on the first and the third units of the tests published in June, 2007 by Ivy Publishers. The test time is the same as the formal GEPT, about 30 minutes for Listening Comprehension, 45 for Reading, and 15 for the Oral test. To fit the need of this study, the researchers adopted the Listening and Oral comprehension sections.

researchers randomly took two tests from the test database: one for pretest and the other for posttest. The chosen class was mandated by their instructor to participate in the "EZ TALK" program during the tested semester at least 10 times for 30 minutes or more each time. In order to keep any potential variables from affecting the results of the research the instructor of the chosen class followed the syllabus and teaching progress as usual, which meant there were no extra listening or speaking practices during the tested semester. The whole class was asked to take a pretest during the first two weeks of the first semester of the academic year 2007 and a posttest during the final two weeks of the same semester. The General English Proficient Test tool that was used included tests for listening and speaking proficiency.

3.6 Data Analyses

The data were analyzed using the SPSS and EXCEL computer programs. In the survey research, the results from the first part were presented as frequency tables. Items 1 to 6 from the second part were presented as descriptive statistics; and items 7 to 10 were presented as a multiple responses set. In the one-group pretest-posttest research, the researchers adopted a paired-samples t-test to verify whether the posttest scores were significantly higher than the pretest scores for the class that participated.

4. FINDINGS

4.1 The Survey Research

Demographic information of the participants. As shown in Table 2, out of 429 valid responses, 141 were men and 288 were women, the ratio being approximately 1:2. More than half of participants were from the College of Arts and Sciences (226 people, 52.7% of the total sample), while the least number of participants were from the College of Management (44 people, 10.3%).

Most participants were sophomores (161 people, 37.5%) and freshmen (144 people, 33.6%). Only a very small group of participants were those from night school, graduate school, or non-credit programs (20 people, 4.6%).

The Interactions between the domestic and international students. As shown in Table 3, the mean scores of the survey items in this category were mostly above 5.00. The participants were "very agreeable" (5.50-6.49) with the following statements: "It is more effective for me to have English conversations with the international students than with the domestic students" (5.79), and "I can benefit from having talks with the international students by understanding different cultures and gaining more knowledge" (5.67).

Likewise, the participants were "agreeable" (4.50-5.49) with the statement, "I feel more at ease talking to the non-native English-speaking international students than with the English-speaking natives" (5.18). They also agreed with the statement "I can understand the overall meaning of the English conversation conducted by the

international students" (5.03), despite the fact that they "still have fear when conversing English with the international students" (4.90). Interestingly, a majority of participants stated that they "would choose their favorite international students as conversation partners" (4.73).

Table 2. *Demographic Information of Participants*

	Frequency	Percentage
Male	141	32.9
Female	288	67.1
Total	429	100.0
College of Health Science	72	16.8
College of Management	44	10.3
College of Computer Science	87	20.3
College of Arts and Sciences	226	52.7
Total	429	100.0
Freshman	144	33.6
Sophomore	161	37.5
Junior	44	10.3
Senior	60	14.0
Others[**]	20	4.6
Total	429	100.0

Table 3. *Perceptions on the Interactions between Domestic Students and International Students*

	Items	Mean	SD
1.	It is more effective for me to have English conversations with the international students than with the domestic students.	5.79	.986
2.	I feel more at ease talking to the non-native English-speaking international students than with the English-speaking natives.	5.18	1.097
3.	I can benefit from having talks with the international students to understand different cultures and gain more knowledge.	5.67	.995
4.	I still have fear when conversing with the international students.	4.90	1.270
5.	In most cases, I can understand the overall meaning of the English conversation conducted by the international students.	5.03	1.012
6.	I would choose my favorite international students as conversation partners.	4.73	1.281

Note. The agreement means ranged from 6.50 and above were defined as strongly agree, 5.50–6.49 as very agree, 4.50–5.49 as agree, 3.50–4.49 as neutral, 2.50–3.49 as disagree, 1.50–2.49 as very disagree, 1.49 and under as strongly disagree.

Internal and external personal factors of international students that affected participants' choice for conversation partnership. As shown in Figure 1, the favorite personal factors of international students that affected the choice of the participants for conversation partnership included "friendliness" (283 counts over 1,131, 25.0% of the total responses), "smiles" (156 counts, 13.8%), "providing wide conversation contents" (140 counts, 12.4%), "taking the initiative in greeting

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[**] Students from night school, university extension, or graduate school.

the participants" (125 counts, 11.1%), and "giving timely encouragements" (119 counts, 10.5%). A certain number of participants considered "English expression skills," "language accent," and "gender" of international students as factors of choice.
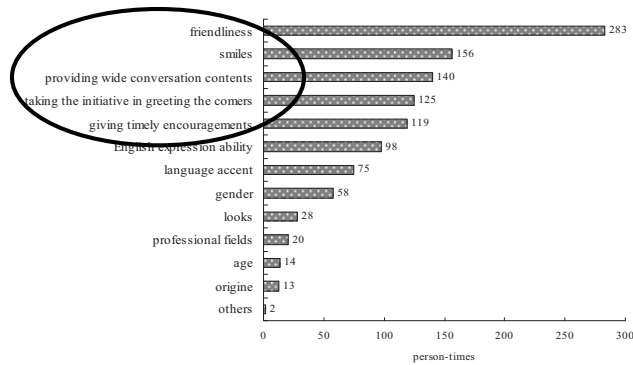

Figure 1. International students' internal and external personal factors that affect participants' choice for conversation partnership.

Out of 429 respondents, 58 people chose "gender" as their most valued personal factor for international students. Ten out of 19 male participants choose female international students for conversation partnership, but all the 39 female participants preferred to converse with the female international students, suggesting that the "gender" choice of the male participants is less significant than female participants. Figure 2 shows the participants' gender tendency that affected their choice for conversation partnership.

Main purposes for participating in "EZ TALK." As seen in Figure 3, reinforcing "speaking" and "listening" abilities were most in need by the participants. The first two important purposes of many participants to join the "EZ TALK" program were "to strengthen English speaking ability" (328 counts over 1,287, 25.5% of the total responses) and "to strengthen English listening ability" (312 counts, 24.2%), respectively.

Other reasons for participating in the "EZ TALK" program were also taken into account by many participants, including "to fulfill to teachers' requirements" (160 counts, 12.4%); "to respond to the solicitation of peers" (104 counts, 8.1%); "to make friends with international students" (102 counts, 7.9%); "to expand global perspectives" (74 counts, 7.9%); and "to satisfy curiosity about the international students" (102 counts, 7.9%).

Most embarrassing moment when participating in "EZ TALK." 91.4% of the population (392 people over 429) admitted that they had experienced embarrassing moments when participating in the "EZ TALK" program. As shown

in Figure 4, their "insufficient ability to express due to lack of meaningful vocabulary" (333 counts over 1,093, 30.5%) embarrassed them the most. "Having no idea what to chat about with international students" (170 counts, 15.6%) and "having trouble understanding the conversation due to poor listening ability" (140 counts, 12.8%) were ranked 2nd and 3rd, respectively.
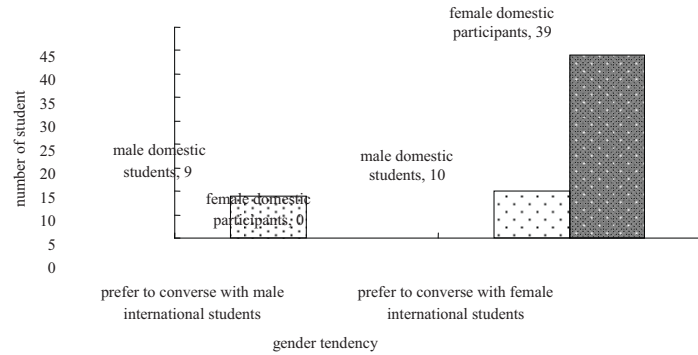

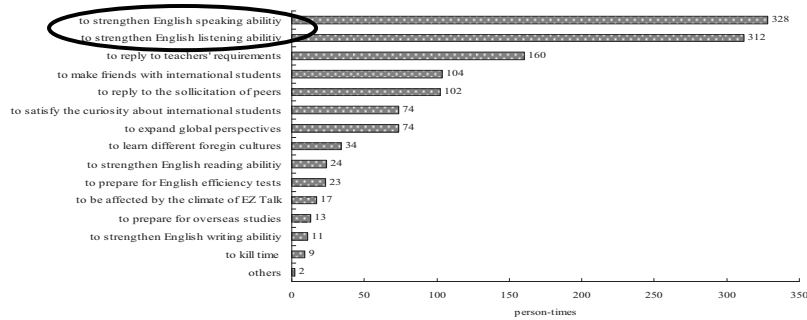*Figure 2*. Domestic students' gender tendency.

Figure 3. Main purposes for participating in the "EZ TALK" program.

It is interesting to note that "having weaker expression ability than the peers," "having trouble understanding the conversation due to the accent or expression of the other participant(s)," "using wrong expressions during conversation," and "being unable to speak English during conversation," were also regarded as very embarrassing situations by many participants.

Conversation topics that interested participants. As shown in Figure 5, the top five interesting topics for the participants were: "personal interests and hobbies" (189 counts over 1,287, 14.7%), "cultural issues of foreign countries" (169 counts, 39.4%), "leisure activities" (160 counts, 37.3%), "daily life issues" (153 counts, 35.7%), and "just chatting" (136 counts, 31.7%).
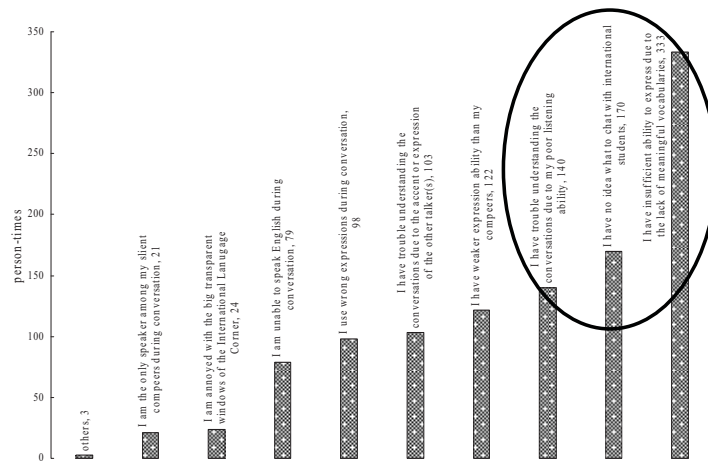

Figure 4. The most embarrassing moments perceived by participants when joining the "EZ TALK" program.

The participants were less interested in the following topics: "art," "news," "internet," "TV/Movie star idols," "computer," "shopping," "English books," and "love relationship issues."

4.2 The One-Group Pretest-Posttest Research

As shown in Table 4, the class being studied had a significantly greater improvement in test scores when comparing its pretest scores with its posttest scores, Listening t=-4.75, p < .001 and Speaking t=-12.08, p < .001.

From the pretest-posttest mean score perspective, the class being studied gained a mean score of -9.42 in Listening comprehension ability and a mean score of -28.07 for Speaking comprehension ability. Thus, the class being studied had significant improvements in both Listening and Speaking abilities.

In summary, the class being studied showed a high degree of improvement in both listening and speaking scores when comparing its pretest scores with its posttest scores. This result indicates that the frequency of attending the "EZ TALK" program actually improved listening and speaking skills among participants. Such a

finding suggests that the "EZ TALK" program is helpful as a supplemental teaching aid to the academic "English Listening and Speaking" course.
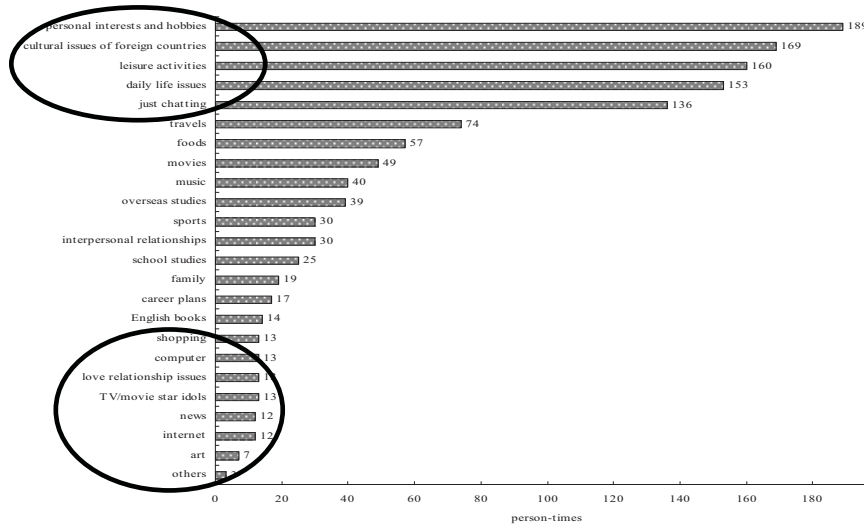

Figure 5. Conversation topics that interested participants.

Table 4. *A Paired-Samples t Test for Comparing Pretest Scores with Posttest Scores of the Class Being Studied*

	Pretest Mean Score	Posttest Mean Score	Pretest-Posttest Mean Score	SD	*t* value
Listening	53.22	62.64	-9.42	14.71	-4.75***
Speaking	33.04	61.11	-28.07	17.24	-12.08***

5. DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Today, an increasing number of colleges and universities in Taiwan have placed great emphasis on teaching English as an international language to domestic students and on building an internationalized campus by recruiting international students to study on campus (Bureau of International Cultural and Educational at Ministry of Education, 2008). If international students can be used as a resource to facilitate an effective English extracurricular learning platform, such as the "EZ TALK" program, then the efforts to elevate higher education with an emphasis on globalization can be enhanced. The results of this research suggest that participating in the "EZ TALK" program can have a significant influence on students' effectiveness in learning English oral communication skills.

However, the study also revealed some obstacles in the process of using "EZ TALK" as an extracurricular learning platform, such as; participants' weak comprehension of English and fear of speaking out in a group, the international students' personal factors affecting participants' willingness to converse, etc. To many college students who have already given up learning English in high school, the "EZ TALK" program provides a new opportunity to re-learn English again not only because it creates a real world platform to practice a foreign language, but also it offers multiple learning strategies for the participants to use. In the "EZ TALK" program, the domestic students and the international students jointly communicate in English about daily life topics and use verbal and non-verbal means to get the meanings across. Such a scenario will certainly provide practice opportunities for both parties to develop their socialization skills, improve their oral communication ability, and even broaden their global views and cross-cultural knowledge (Hewitt & Scardamalia, 1998; Kachru & Nelson, 1996).

5.1 On the Design of the "EZ TALK" Program

It is often assumed that all language proficiency tests judge the second language performance using the "native speaker" criterion (Barnwell, 1989; Magnan, 1982). While this may have been true in the past, it is far less the case today. Many tests no longer make reference to native speaker competence in their assessment criteria or rating scales. One reason is the problem of defining and describing the idealized native speaker (Taylor, 2006). In spite of Scovel's assertion (1999) that there is an essential connection between age and ability to learn a correct language accent, recent views of English language learning have started emphasizing that communication ability is more important than perfect accent and regard English as an international language for communication (Gnutzmann & Intemann, 2005). In other words, a perfect native accent in language is anything but a determinant factor to language fluency (Brown, 2006). Whether or not the objectives of communication are achieved is much more valuable than speaking a language with a perfect native accent. When English has become the international communication platform, the importance of the communicability and comprehension of English will outweigh the importance of correct pronunciation and fluency (Gnutzmann & Intemann, 2005).

While any learner can make use of traditional teaching and recitation to "acquire" the second language, Lightbown (1985) argued that "a person who knows grammar does not mean that he is capable of mutual communication in specific occasions (p.176)." He added that "a learner has to position himself in a meaningful and useful environment so that he can have a better opportunity to grasp the complexity and precision of the second language (ibid)." In the classroom, vocabulary, sentence patterns and grammar can be introduced by teachers, but outside the classroom real-life practices are more beneficial to learners' communication ability. Providing a literacy enriched environment can also improve lower-achieving students' language ability on a large scale (Goodman, 2005; Gunning, 2002; Moustafa, 1997).

To sum up, the design of the "EZ TALK" program provides a simulated real-life communication platform for non-native English-speaking participants

(both domestic and international students) to converse in English, in which they adopt individualized learning strategies to make two-way communication possible according to their own efforts.

5.2 On the Participants' Learning Attitudes and Obstacles

In the present study, over 50% of the participants had a tendency to choose their favorite international students as conversation partners. "Friendliness," "smiley face," "being conversational," "taking the initiative in greeting the comers," and "giving timely encouragements" were important welcomed traits of the international students for the domestic participants, particularly for those who were weaker in language skills or lacked self-confidence. Therefore, the learning preferences and attitudes of the domestic students as well as language communication skills and cross-cultural knowledge should be emphasized in the educational training of international students as program teaching assistants in the future.

Another finding in this study showed that the attendance of the female students to the "EZ TALK" program was twice that of the male students. This finding is consistent with the previous studies that revealed that female students have a higher tendency for language learning than male students (Liang, 2000; Feng, 2001; Fan, 2007). Also, more students from the College of Arts and Sciences attended the program than those from the other Colleges. Such a finding is also consistent with many previous studies (Liang, 2000; Li, 2006), suggesting that students of Arts and Sciences have higher interests in language learning.

Most female participants chose female international students as conversational partners, while male participants had less discrimination in gender selection. This finding may be explained by the fact that more female instructors are working in elementary and high schools nowadays than male counterparts and students have more opportunities to contact female instructors and are more used to depending upon them (Chang, Wang & Ting, 2004). In addition, the feminine traits of a female instructor, such as being kinder, more tolerant and less threatening make students feel safer and more comfortable, especially for female students. Therefore, the female participants had a higher tendency to choose female international students as conversation partners.

In terms of conversation topic choice, the most highly ranked topics were "personal interests and hobbies," "leisure activities," and "daily life issues," while topics in "love relationship issues," "internet," or "TV/movie star idols," were less popular in the "EZ TALK" program, even though those have been hot topics among the domestic students in their daily conversations in Chinese and Taiwanese languages. Our observation is that the participants' ability to describe events was actually the reason for their topic choice. They tended to stay with the topics with which they had more confidence and knowledge of vocabulary. To break conversation barriers and to reduce expression difficulties, some remedies such as releasing weekly or monthly topics of current events on the school website, providing relevant vocabulary lists on the tables and bulletin board to encourage participants to take on the subjects, and training the international students to help are in consideration for future program improvement.

Despite having a fear of speaking English, the majority of participants agreed that they felt more effective when conversing with the international students in English than with the domestic students; and similarly, they felt more at ease talking to the non-native English-speaking international students than with the English-speaking natives. Noticeably, as both sides were not native speakers of English, neither the domestic students nor the international students were pressured into "speaking fluently and accurately. Under this circumstance, the "EZ TALK" program succeeded in creating an interactive learning environment which allowed participants to carry on conversations while being at ease with each other. By repeated practice, domestic participants may improve their confidence level in speaking English.

5.3 On the program Effectiveness as an Extracurricular Aid to Academic "English Listening and Speaking" Courses

Since the objective of an "English listening and speaking" academic class is to improve students' oral communications skills, the "EZ TALK" program is a very practical supplement to its course objective. From the current data analysis of the program effectiveness study, the selected student-participants from a sophomore class taking an "English Listening and Speaking" course greatly benefited from the "EZ TALK" program both in listening and in speaking skills, after their mandated high frequency attendance of the program. The finding is consistent with the assertions of Yang (2002) and Li (2007) that the key to successful language learning is more related to language practice than to traditional class teaching. The "EZ TALK" program provides participants with a simulated real-life environment for communication in English whereby one has to use all means including a limited vocabulary, intelligent guesses, and even body language to continue a conversation. Such practice provides participants with a realistic oral communication platform. With regular participation, students may find their own learning strategies and improve their oral communication skills.

The design of the "EZ TALK" program emphasizes a free-format English conversation learning approach that is far from the one-way communication in more structured learning environments like academic "English listening and speaking" classes. It appears that such a free conversation format actually provides a fertile ground for practicing what is being learned in academic English language classes; and consequently is a valuable supplementary teaching aid.

5.4 Suggestions for Future Improvements of the Program

From the results of this study, some suggestions for further program improvements can be drawn as follows:
(1) Find ways to encourage more students to attend the "EZ TALK" program and work to eliminate the fear and low-confidence of doing so.
(2) Convince students that English is the international language and the best global communication tool for all people in the world and not just for native English-speaking peoples.

(3) Eliminate the misconception that a high English test score in college entrance examination implies high English communication skills; and encourage students with low English test scores to re-learn English language during their university years.

(4) Emphasize the importance of English communication skills and global viewpoints as the two most important skills for getting ahead in this globalization era.

(5) Encourage students to participate in some international activities or gatherings in order to broaden world views and socialization skills.

(6) Encourage language teachers to use the "EZ TALK" program as an effective supplemental teaching aid to their academic "English listening and speaking" classes.

English language learning should not end within the traditional classroom. It is high time to integrate all things learned in the classroom and actually apply the language skills in practical settings through real-life human interactions (Macaro, 2001; O'Malley, 1993). The "EZ TALK" program provides such a practical learning environment and, hopefully, encourages university students to get a second chance to re-learn the English language even if they missed the first chance during their previous years.

5.5 Research Limitations

This study used domestic students inside Asia University as participants; therefore, it is defined as a case study. The results and conclusions of this study may not be applicable to other organizations, even with similar compositions. Other limitation involve the participants' identity. This study included multiple objectives and the data collection period lasted for an academic year, it was difficult to know whether or not the same students might have participated in both the survey and the pre-experimental research studies due to all the participants' personal information being anonymous.

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