

How Kawasaki Medical School Students Have Evaluated Recent Significant Program Changes Taking Place Within the Small Class English Program

Alan Cooper

Department of Foreign Language, Kawasaki Medical School

577 Matsushima, Kurashiki, Okayama, 701-0192, Japan

(Received on October 1, 2013)

Abstract

From this academic year three major changes to the Small Class English Program (SEP) have been implemented: The introduction of Mixed-Level Groups (MLG's) across all SEP courses, the cessation of traditional term-end examinations replaced by practical communication assessment centred courses and three new communication and critical thinking based syllabi. The author will convey the rationale behind the key changes and reinforce the need to consistently evaluate all new language learning developments while adopting participatory approaches, in order to guarantee the short and long term success of the program.

This article deals with significant program developments, their origins and initial impact on SEP and highlights participants' evaluations of their experiences over one term. Further to this, while in the initial implementation stages the main priorities have been to gauge the response of participants to their new learning environment. Not just in terms of results achieved, but essentially to understand their overall sense of connectedness to the learning environment and how they feel about their lesson by lesson experiences.

This article will extract highlights from the students' first term feedback from across all courses. Ultimately, all changes have been well received by the student body and the majority of participants' remain very positive about their SEP experience and continued involvement in the program.

By adopting the practice of needs analysis and formative evaluation with key stakeholders the author hopes the on-going process of collecting data, analysing data and implementing the results then enables new course directions, supporting a program identity more in tune with the contemporary make-up of the student intake, as well as current second-language learning advancements; while ultimately creating a strong program identity with clear aims and goals.

Key words: MLG's (Multilevel Groups), SEP (The Small Class English Program), needs analysis, student survey, participants.

INTRODUCTION

This article will describe the rationale behind multi-level groups (MLG's) i.e. the implementation of Heterogeneous Grouping within the development of the Small Class English Program (SEP). The paper will then go on to:

1. introduce the development of practical communication and critical thinking skills
2. examine the cessation of traditional term end tests and implementation of practical communication assessments, and
3. present SEP participant's initial responses to the new programme, highlighting the elements that help to make the experience a positive one for the majority of the student participants.

RATIONALE FOR IMPLEMENTING MULTI-LEVEL GROUPS (MLG's)

Although streaming has been described as an organizational cornerstone of university second language learning programs, (McMillan & Paul Joyce 2011) some problematic scenarios generally associated with streaming via abilities must also be considered.

Firstly, not all students learn alike. All students possess very individual and differing approaches when processing new information and navigating through new educational experiences. This alone suggests that class groups even if streamed can effectively be considered multi-level, because students are often progressing in different stages at their own pace for any given topic/theme throughout each term.

Secondly, streaming may be responsible for encouraging segregation and status issues, particularly if it results in feelings of inferiority

and subsequent de-motivation in lower level groups. The stigmatizing effects of being in a lower level group might prove too difficult for some students to 'shake-off'. This may lead to a passive acceptance amongst lower group members of a shared "fate" in terms of their abilities and low expectations of their learning development. Ultimately, a perceived loss of real chances to ascend to a higher level could encourage and underpin a culture of de-motivation.

Furthermore, the teachers or facilitators themselves (depending on teaching experience and skill base) might approach a class with predetermined ideas and negative expectations, their prior teaching experiences of lower level groups could prove too strong an influence on their teaching outlook.

Social constructivist models of education suggest that it is through contextualized interaction that students negotiate meaning and learn (Vygotsky 1978). Given this assumption, mixed level classes create environments with a wide range of expertise where more advanced learners tend to scaffold the learning of others. Instead of an environment which is led solely by the teacher, teaching is spread among the students and this has an empowering effect (Korb 2012).

Each SEP class population of 10 to 12 students consequently form intimate learning 'communities' within personalised small (classroom) settings, thus lending itself to the adoption of MLG's. Learner to learner interaction is at a premium in such environments. Mathews-Aydinli and Van Horne (2006, p.1) suggest that in MLG's, "those with limited proficiency have an opportunity to interact with

more proficient speakers, and advanced learners benefit by using their English skills to help lower level students negotiate meaning.”

Further studies have shown that different-proficiency pairs can collaborate effectively. Storch (2001) analyzed the interaction patterns of three pairs of students and found the most collaborative pair was also the pair with the greatest proficiency difference (low and upper intermediate), while the pair which was closest in terms of proficiency (low and intermediate) interacted in a non-collaborative fashion. (Joyce & McMillan, 2010)

Primarily, this author believes that the numerous (educational) variables existing within the unique SEP set-up help increase the greater probability of smooth integration of MLG's and possible success in the short and long term.

NEEDS ANALYSIS AND NEW COURSE DIRECTIONS

Needs analysis, course design, materials selection, teaching and learning, and evaluation are all key stages in creating suitable programs. The stages identified are not separate, linearly-related activities, rather they represent phases which overlap & are interdependent (Dudley & Evans, 121 1998). The application of needs analysis and evaluations should not be one-off activities; both are to be on-going throughout the initial and often challenging early stages of new course development. Actively taking place at intervals and consisting of 'mini-evaluations' the findings help to shape each course within and during its life-time. By adopting the practice of needs analysis and formative evaluation with key stakeholders the author

hopes the on-going process of collecting data, analysing data and implementing the results then enables new course directions, supporting a program identity more in tune with the contemporary make-up of the student intake, as well as current second-language learning advancements; while also being suitable for a large diverse part-time teaching team to collectively deliver.

By offering three new communication courses from this academic year (2013-14) the program has taken significant steps forward. Importantly, the majority of recent program changes have been based on students expressed needs derived from learning experiences within the program as evidenced in feedback via term by term surveys. The new syllabus is based on the following elements:

- The new first grade syllabus combines functional English covering all 4 basic language learning skills. Introducing a wide range of topical themes, as well as carrying an additional Medical Vocabulary component.
 - The new second grade syllabus introduces critical thinking skills connected to modern global health themes. Additionally, this also includes a medical vocabulary component.
- (Both the 1st and 2nd Grade participants will carry their medical vocabulary text through the entire three years of studying within the SEP)*
- The new third grade syllabus builds upon critical thinking and tasks the students with active discussion exercises while developing their skills for opinion making, giving and responding to their peers in a discussion/debate scenario.

All three courses are designed to flow

consecutively. The first year grounds basic functional English skills that will be necessary in the second year when participants begin to process & communicate critically their own ideas. Combined these skills provide the platform for the third year when students logically discuss ideas and opinions amongst student peers in a small or larger discussion setting.

While in the initial stage of MLG implementation the main priorities have been to gauge the response of participants to their new learning environment. Not just in terms of results achieved, but essentially to understand their overall sense of connectedness to the learning environment and how they feel about their lesson by lesson experiences over one academic term. Therefore, first term student surveys were designed to explore and identify any shared areas of feedback across all courses from the first to the third year grades.

CESSATION OF TRADITIONAL TERM-END TESTS

By nature of setting, class size, diverse teaching-team and course content, the main characteristic of SEP is active communication. Rich in practical communication experiences while being functional and skills based, both listening and speaking elements remain the dominant language skill-set acquired by all participants.

Historically, across each term SEP participants have been subjected to several practical communication assessments in the form of presentations and role-play scenarios in the practice setting. The ability to recall, convey and demonstrate use of English in the target situation still remains a fundamental require-

ment for all courses. In addition, previous terms finished with formal paper tests involving some listening sections, but in the majority tests were based on reading and writing.

However, term-end student surveys regularly gave predominant negative feedback around time-management of hectic academic workloads, exam commitments and on top of these practical English communication assessments requiring much preparation and practice time to obtain a satisfactory grading.

In relation to the use of formal examinations within SEP, the following is a response from a third grade student approaching the end of three academic year's participation in the program and reflecting on the experience of formal examinations and practical assessments:

"I think practical assessments are good because paper examinations can't measure our English conversation ability." 3rd Grade Student.

Jill Sinclair Bell (2004) proposes that assessments are often neglected in multilevel classes, moreover final evaluations at the end of terms are less common in the multilevel class. Stating the difficulties of devising effective evaluation instruments suitable for such varied backgrounds, skills and goals as the reasons why assessments are badly neglected in multilevel classes.

The process of evaluating and assessing SEP's active communication courses has become a reoccurring discourse. The following questions have continually been raised: How best to meaningfully and accurately assess participants within a communication heavy course? What roles (if any) do traditional methods (formal term-end exams) play?

Regarding the implementation of major structural changes for curriculum centred solely on practical communication assessments and in-class participation assessments within multilevel groups. The latter was the coordinator's task to ensure development of 'systems' that would fully guarantee transparency and accountability for capturing students' lesson-by-lesson participation levels (40% term-end grade). With the former (60% term-end grade), suitable assessments to replace previous traditional exams dominated priorities. Once initiated changes had to be clear and understandable to both the recipients and the program instructors.

Through the use of practical assessments students are able to demonstrate what they know when given the opportunity to create and present projects. In this way, grading English language learners by 'informal' assessment is effective as well as enjoyable and can lead to some very enthusiastic participant responses. With considered planning, project assignments, presentations and practical activities cover all main language skills.

PROGRAM ASSESSMENT METHODS

To approach the first term evaluations a mark-sheet format was implemented utilizing transferable cross-course and course-specific questions. The coordinator-devised mark sheets adopted ordinal questions combined with open and closed questions to evaluate effectiveness and bring out students' experiential feelings. All surveys finished with a question requiring a free writing response encouraging students to volunteer any feedback (in English or Japanese) about their new experiences of MLG's. As an

innovation this year, all questions were translated from English into Japanese to ensure SEP participants understood all questions linguistically and culturally. Participation in the survey was voluntary and assurance was given that the participants would suffer no material or psychological harm through their participation.

EXTRACTED HIGHLIGHTS OF SPECIFIC COURSE FINDINGS

1st GRADE - In English & Professional Medical English

With no prior SEP experience it was essential to investigate students' feelings on beginning the program and then after one term involvement. When asked "How did you feel about your first SEP lesson?" the new students expressed a majority feeling of Nervous (56 students) initially, (see Fig1.) but after one term a similar number (59) chose Happy while Nervous (4) had

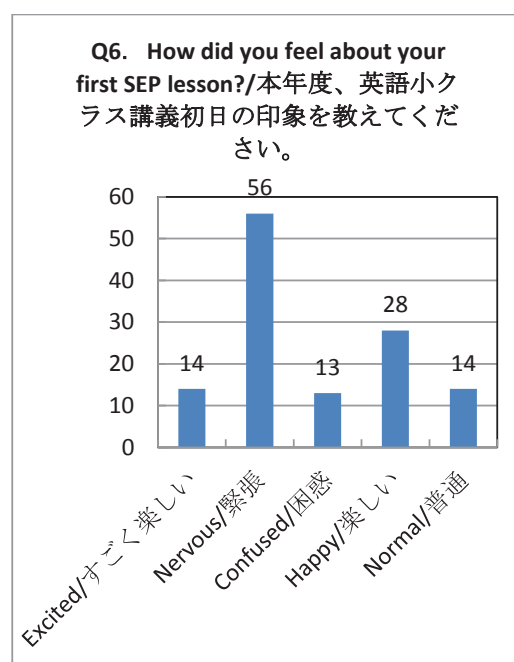


Fig 1

reduced considerably. (see Fig 2.) Worth noting is the increase in feeling Excited about the classes (14) initially and (36) at the term end.

The penultimate survey question focused on continued participation within the program - "How do you feel about continuing to study in the SEP classes?" Again, the largest number (49) responded with Happy, and Normal (40) illustrated that participants had over a very short time assimilated and coped well with their first experiences of SEP. (See Fig 3.)

When asked to find on a Likert Scale of 1 to 5 (1 being the least improved and 5 the most) recognizing improvements in their English communication skills, the majority of participants responded positively to this. (see Fig 4.)

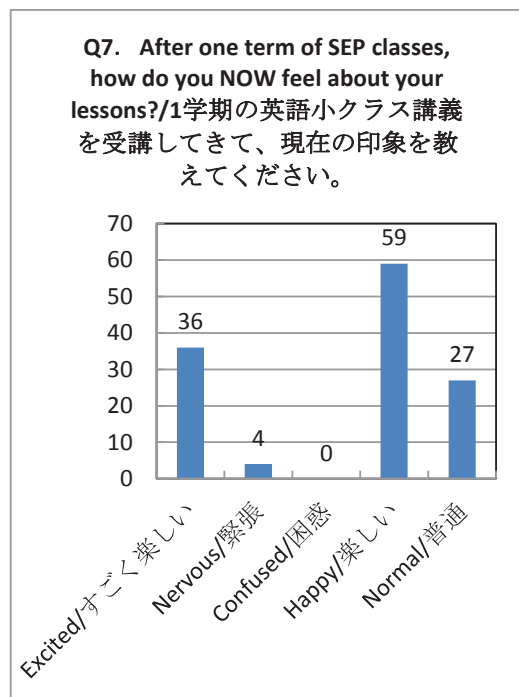


Fig 2

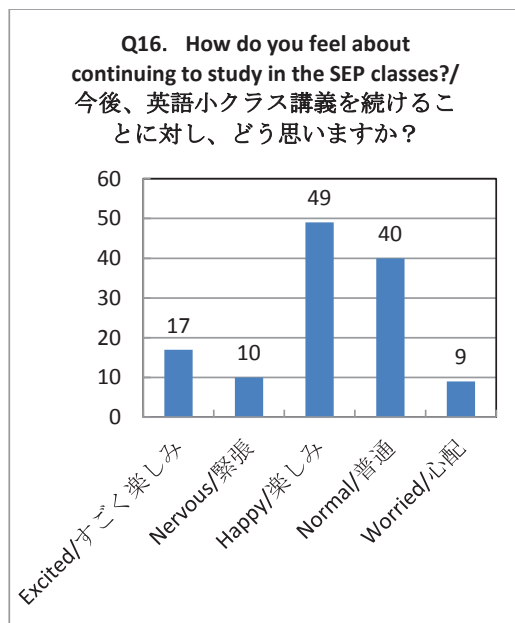


Fig 3

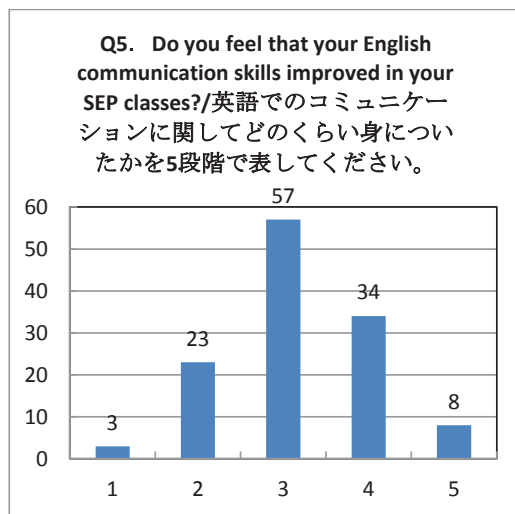


Fig 4

2nd GRADE - Thinking Critically About Health Issues & Professional Medical English

Previously course aims were concerned with solely developing participants' presentation skills over one academic year. However, new course directions incorporated a presentation

skills-base as just one amongst several functional communication skills. In response, the majority of students' highlighted the importance of acquiring presentation skills. Gauging the participants' responses to this development, specifically the importance of practical presentation activities (see Fig.5) remains on-going and is necessary for consideration of course components in the near future.

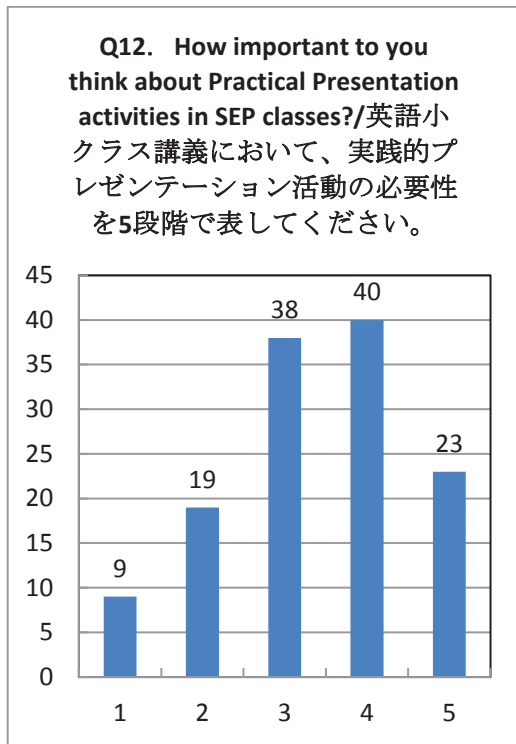


Fig 5

3rd GRADE - Discussion Matters

In their third and final year of SEP the students were generally asked to reflect on their program experiences and personal ESL development. It was also important, as with all new courses, to gauge experiences of a course based on active discussion and debate; as this would also affect future participant experiences.

With the latter, (see Fig.6)the core elements of Learning to have Discussions, scored high amongst participants as did Small Group Learning, illustrating the positive relationship between experiencing new communication skills/activities while in the small group setting.

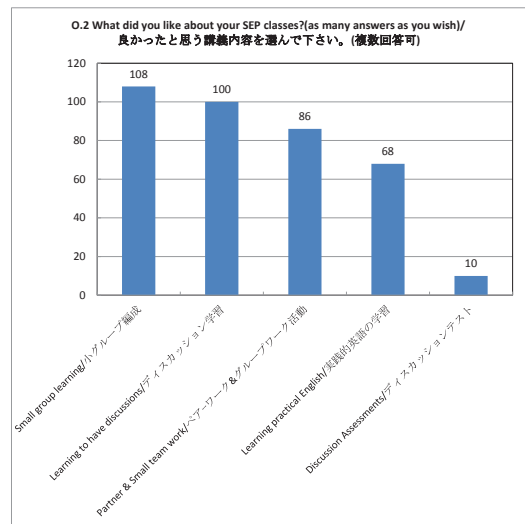


Fig 6

With the former, adopting a Likert Scale of 1 to 5 (1 least improved and 5 most) the participants were required to self-assess the improvement of their English skills while participating in the program for almost 3 years. (see Fig 7.) In the majority, the results showed most responding participants to have recognized improvements in their acquisition of English skills. Such feedback based on the students' own perception of their learning development conveys the positive impact SEP is having on the first 3 years of tertiary education within Kawasaki Medical School.

Finally, the following three charts (see Fig 8. Fig 9. Fig. 10) depict the participants overall feelings of SEP satisfaction with 'Great' and

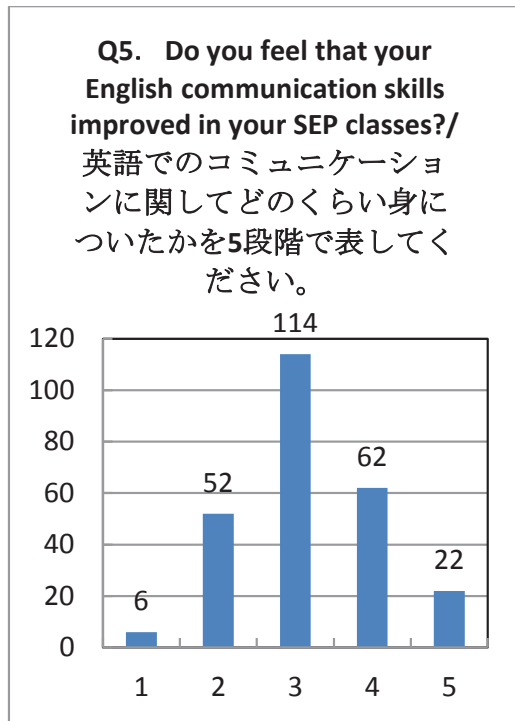


Fig 7

1st GRADE STUDENTS

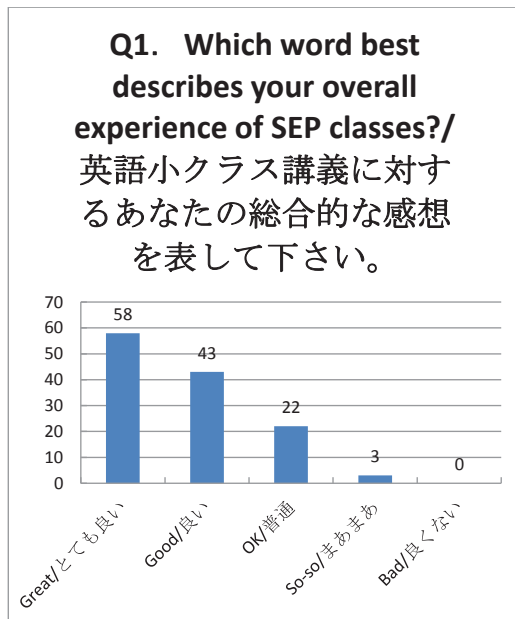


Fig 8

2nd GRADE STUDENTS

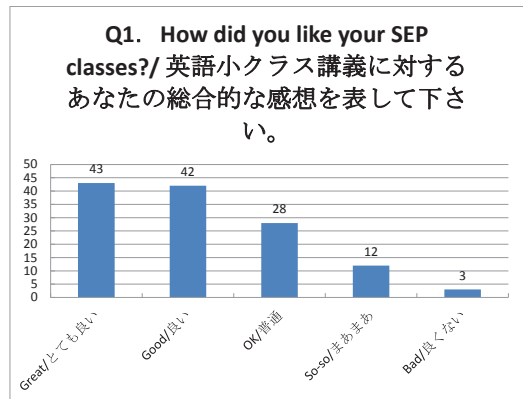


Fig 9

3rd GRADE STUDENTS

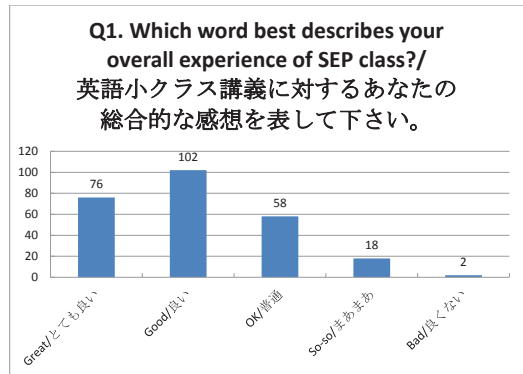


Fig 10

'Good' drawing the highest number of responses across all courses:

SHARED RESPONSES SEEN ACROSS ALL COURSES

In general, positive first term reactions have illustrated 'moderate to high' levels of participant satisfaction with the three program changes. This has been particularly reassuring when considering not only the number but also the extent of such changes concurrently integrated during the same academic term.

The following results (see Fig 11.) emerged as

general shared areas of positivity across all three courses specifically illustrating elements the participants appreciated and felt to be the most important within their SEP classes: (Not in order of importance)

- Pair and small group work
- High percentage of English used in class
- Class atmosphere
- Practical communication activities.

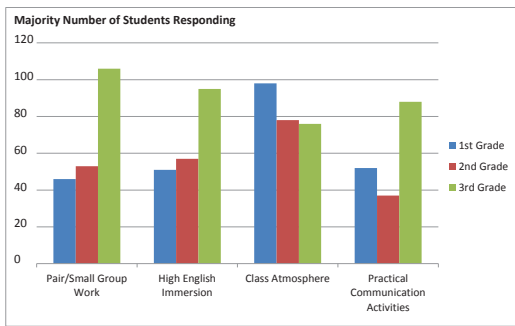


Fig 11

(Figures are based on participant voluntarily completion, showing the highest uptake of choices/answers)

MIXED LEVEL GROUPING

In response to the final survey question:

“This term you have been studying English in mixed level classes. Would you like to continue to study in a mixed level class or would you prefer to study in a split-level class in the future?” (Please say why)

A majority number of participants responded to this question and a large number strongly requested that MLG's continue to be used to form SEP class groups. The following are just a few of the handwritten examples given:

- *“I think a mixed level group should be continued. That's because there are also*

various levels of people in society.” First Year Student.

- *“Please keep a mixed level group because I am weak at English so I want to be supported.”*

Second Year Student.

- *“A mixed level class gave me a valuable experience.” Third Year Student.*

DISCUSSION

This article has attempted to document several SEP changes implemented this academic year while acknowledging the significance of such changes. Although challenging for the students and teachers, the direction of the program is now taking on a clear focus and stronger identity of its own. Needs analysis, evaluations and teachers input have greatly assisted in ensuring that all developments are sound responses to expressed needs and/or gaps in the program and therefore posses credibility.

The introduction of MLG's appear to harmoniously fit and have functioned surprisingly well with the assorted elements of SEP's unique learning environments. This tells us something about the 'culture' existing within SEP and the benefits of learning in such unique surroundings. Participants generally expressed a preference for peer to peer collaborations and/or working in small groups, reinforcing that scaffolded learning was employed to good effect. Students' appreciated the class atmosphere which undoubtedly can feel more informal when compared to traditional larger class settings.

However, we should be mindful not to readily assume that one is more 'serious' than the other just because of the context of class size and

atmosphere generated within. Although somewhat challenging for some, the participants enjoyed being immersed in lessons with a high percentage of English shared in their peer groups and the dominant instructional language being English. From the numerous classroom activities offered throughout the term the students preferred practical and active communication activities. Conveying high satisfaction with functional second language learning, which will be transferable into future professions and daily life.

The effects of student feedback have steadily influenced course changes and recent major directional developments of the program. Essentially, students are aware that their opinions are valued and often acted upon, which has served to create an empowering culture of inclusion. The regular high uptake of responses to student surveys offers a clear indication of the constructive dialogue and healthy relationship continuing to take place between the program and its participants. It is noteworthy that a long term commitment to engagement between the student body as key stakeholders and the SEP remains on-going and a prioritized activity to be valued. Indeed, Robinson (1991: 16) comments that 'repeated needs analysis can be built into the formative evaluation' process.

The author, in the role of coordinator hopes MLG's become an established component of the program. That being said, much reflection is necessary in this area but can only realistically take place over time and within the lifetime of MLG experiences. The participatory approach to program development still needs to continue through the remainder of the year, for successful growth of the program. Considerations of

future course directions and student assessment strategies should underpin the approaches in the near future.

Looking further ahead, summative evaluation is planned for the end of the academic year of each new course. Naturally, this would not influence that version of each evaluated course but it will be crucial for reassessing impact and affecting decision-making for future course directions. Given the time and resources, the coordinator also believes that the introduction of team development activities, such as practical workshops centred on teaching MLG's would be of great benefit to the professional progression of the team, and also for the greater good of the students learning experience and the program itself.

The teachers as program stakeholders will continue to be asked to play a participatory role in the on-going evaluation and assessment of MLG's as they work through and reflect on their journey. Not only to create increased program clarity but also to advocate the valuable contribution made by SEP within Kawasaki Medical School.

And beyond, nationally and internationally the great number of positive SEP attributes should be celebrated and promoted.

References

- 1) McMillan B, Joyce P: Teacher Perspectives on Student Placement in University EFL Programs. *Journal of NELTA*, Vol. 16 No1-2, December 2011
- 2) Vygotsky, L. *Interaction between learning and development*, *Mind and Society*. Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press. 1978. PP. 79-91.
- 3) Korb, K. A., *Vygotsky and Situated Cognition*,

2012 http://korbedpsych.com/LinkedFiles/556_07_Situated_and_Vygotsky.pdf, accessed 24/02/2013.

- 4) Mathews-Aydinli, J., & Van Horne, R. Promoting the success of multilevel ESL classes: What teachers and administrators can do. Washington, DC: Center for Adult English Language Acquisition. 2006. Retrieved from <http://www.literacyminnesota.org/sites/6bc90f8a-e528-403a-8c6b-ffdd2e3dd3a7/uploads/promo.pdf>
- 5) Joyce P, McMillan B: Student Perceptions of Their Learning Experience in Streamed and Mixed-Ability Classes. *Language Education in Asia*, 2010, 1(1), 215-217. http://dx.doi.org/10.5746/LEiA/10/V1/A18/Joyce_Mcmillan
- 6) Dudley-Evans, St John: *Developments in English for Specific Purposes: A multi-disciplinary approach*. Cambridge Language Teaching Library. Cambridge University Press. 1998 p.121
- 7) Sinclair Bell, J: *Teaching Multilevel Classes in ESL*. Pippin Publishing, Dominie Press 2004 p.25
- 8) Robinson, P: *ESP Today: A Practitioner's Guide*. Hemel Hempstead: Prentice Hall International. 1991