

# What Are We Doing Here? Students' Perceptions of English in Life

Joanne O'Carroll

---

This paper investigates the attitudes of current first year students to the English in Life program which is part of the English major course at Immaculate Heart College. The observations and suggestions for modifications are based on a survey of 26 English major students. The purpose of the survey was to discover which activities were most enjoyable and useful in the students' perceptions. This information may be used to modify future programs.

Key words: [immersion program] [students' perceptions] [English]

---

(Received November 4, 1999)

The English in Life program provides students with opportunities to develop their communicative competence in English by living with native speaker E.S.L. teachers and participating in organised learning activities in the dormitory. Although all students have opportunities to communicate in English, some students appear to actively avoid contact with their English speaking teachers while others complain that English is not used enough in the dormitory. To see if changes in the program could help remedy the problem, a survey of the students' perceptions of the program was conducted. The aim of the survey was to discover both which activities the students most enjoyed and which they believed to be most useful in improving their English. The decision to survey the students was based on the assumptions that most students can fairly accurately assess their own language learning needs and abilities; they are more likely to participate in and benefit from activities they both enjoy and believe to be useful; and it is essential for teachers to be aware of students' perceptions of their needs. As program designers it is important for teachers to combine their professional knowledge and experience with students' feedback when decisions are made. The information gathered reflects the needs of different learner types, reveals patterns in the types of activity students find useful and/or enjoyable, highlights affective issues, and helps teachers to stay in touch with students who are usually at least a generation younger. Providing students with an opportunity to comment on the program is part of maintaining good student-teacher relationships. This is particularly important when the classroom is also the home of teachers and students alike.

## Survey Design and Procedure

This survey required the students to grade each activity using the following criteria:

1- I really like it 2 -I like it 3 -it's ok 4- I don't like it 5 -I hate it

1- very helpful 2- helpful 3- sometimes helpful 4- not helpful.

Space was provided for students to comment on what they learnt from the activities and any changes they would like to see in the dormitory which would help them learn English. Two activities which are part of the program were excluded: diary writing and special events such as chapel attendance on Mother's Day and the Halloween party. Diary writing was excluded as it is not controlled by dormitory teachers and can be done in or outside the dormitory. Special events were excluded as they are often not active language learning opportunities. The remaining activities are listed and described below.

- a) Listening to teacher's evening announcements- a teacher or Sister makes announcements in English ( six nights a week ).
- b) Being interviewed on announcements- a student is interviewed on air in English about music, her interests and other simple topics ( five nights a week ).
- c) Doing Saturday Night Fever- ( second semester only ) on Saturday nights a group of students compose and broadcast a 'radio show' during announcement time.
- d) Buddy group conversation- every week students are expected to practice speaking English with their buddies ( groups of two or three ) about selected topics.
- e) Making word posters- each fortnight, in groups of 12, the students look up words related to a given topic and create a vocabulary poster. These posters are then displayed in the dormitory dining room.
- f) Talking with your friends in English
- g) Talking with your teachers in English during meals. The dormitory teachers attend meals five days a week and frequently on weekends, during which time they speak in English with the students. On Marathon days, other English department staff members participate during lunch.
- h) Talking to your teachers at other times- such as while doing the laundry or in the corridors
- i) Listening to visitors' speeches in English- foreign and Japanese English speaking guests regularly come to the dormitory for dinner, and make a speech in English on a topic of relevance and interest to the students.
- j) End of semester conversation tests - while observed by a teacher each buddy group has up to three conversations on up to three topics as part of their assessment tasks.
- k) Watching English speaking videos in one's free time
- l) Reading English books
- m) Using the dormitory library
- n) Being an English committee member involves duties such as organising radio interviews and newsboard schedules as well as recommending three students per fortnight for the Effort

in Speaking English awards. All the students elect their leaders.

o) Writing the English newsboard- five days a week a short news item is selected by the students and summarised in English on a white board in the dining room.

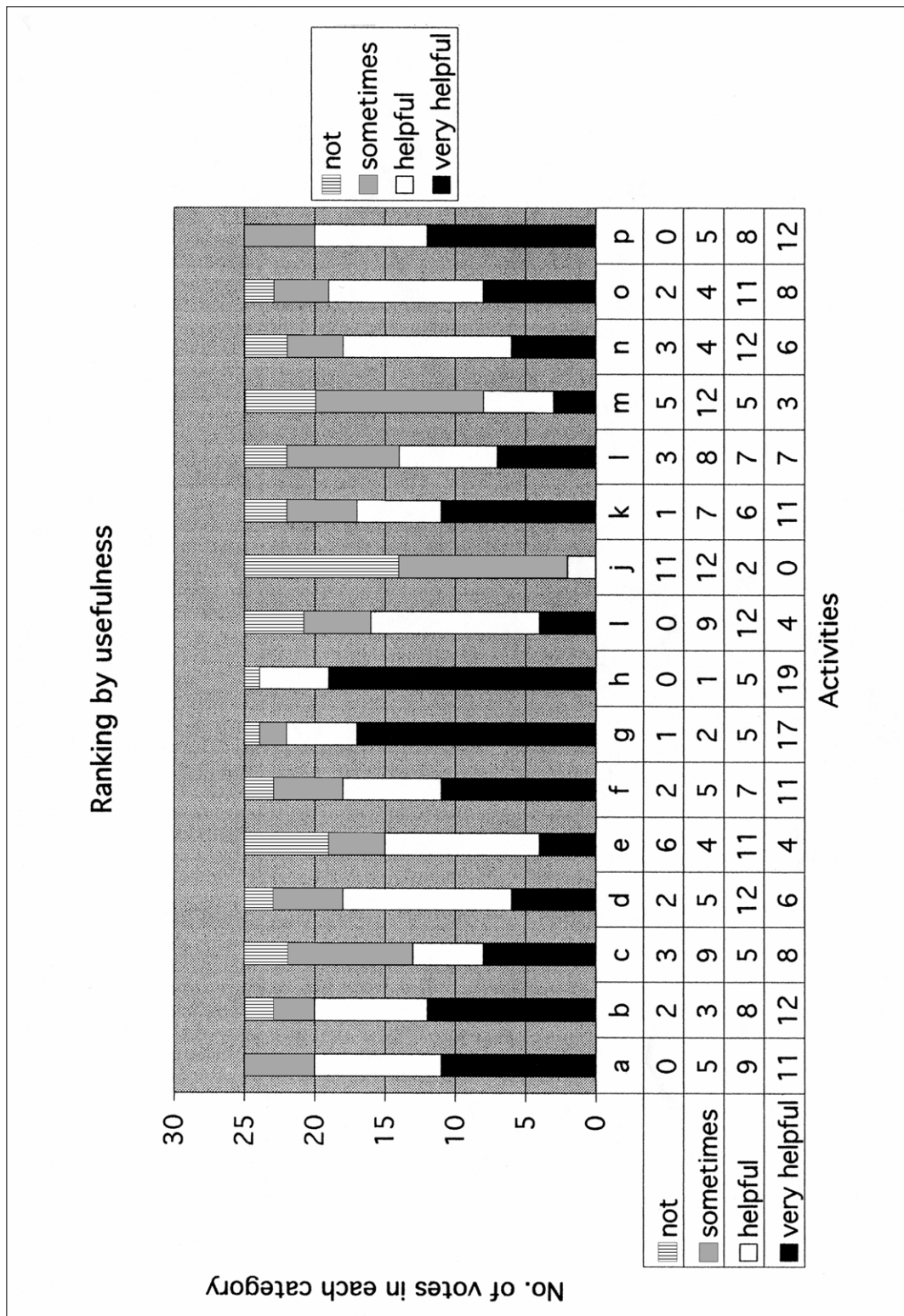
p) Reading the English newsboard

One class of 36 students was chosen as a pilot study group. As a result of this study the focus of the original survey was reduced to English in Life activities only. The pilot study showed that the students had no trouble understanding and completing the survey, and many added valuable comments both in English and Japanese. Following the pilot study the revised survey was completed by 26 students attending one class. The Usefulness data is out of 25 because one student did not complete this section.

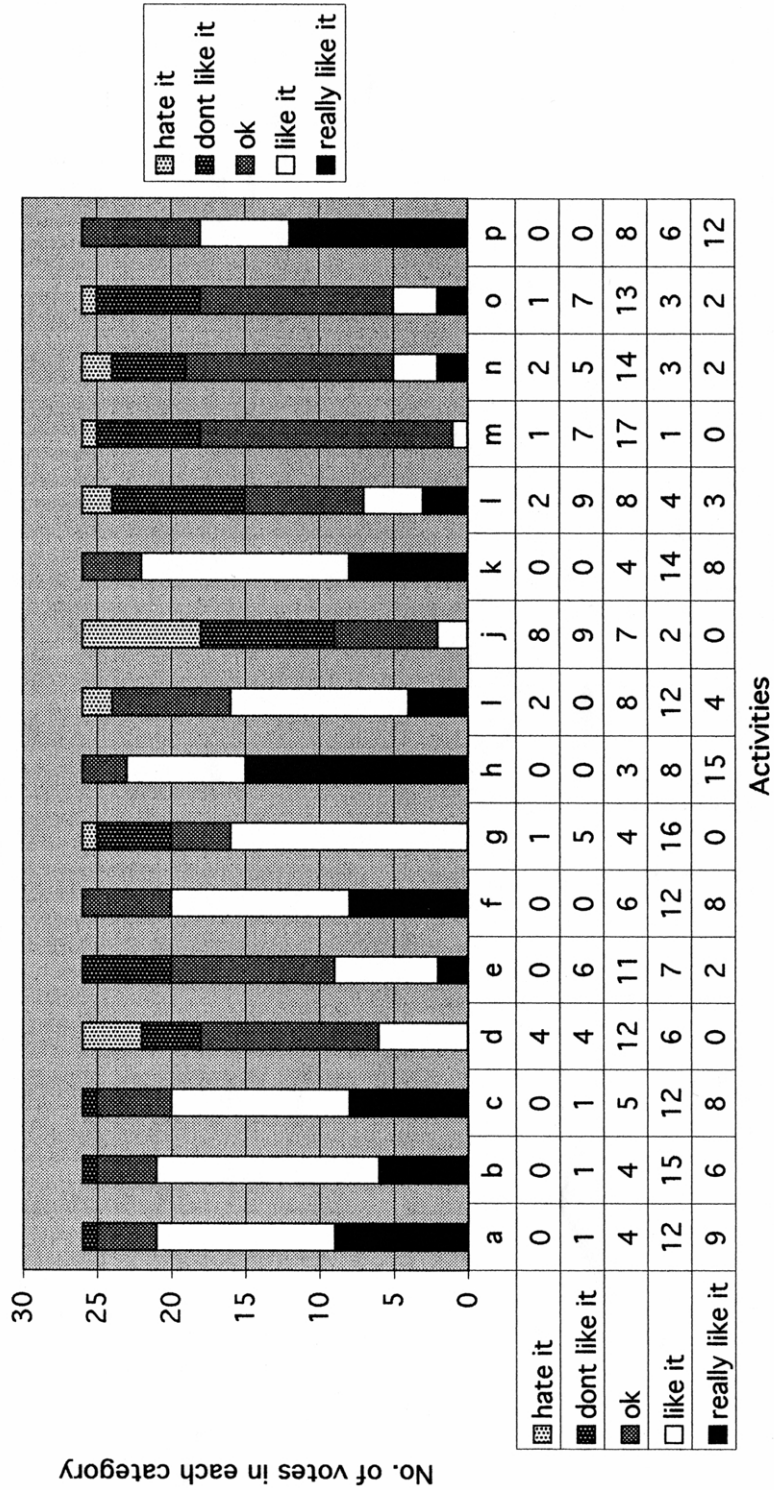
## Results

The results of the ranking by enjoyment, ranking by usefulness and a comparison of the two are tabulated and charted on the following pages. The lowest ranked activities in both categories are Using the Dormitory Library and End of Semester Conversation Tests. Both of these are compulsory and not student centred. Of the top five activities, four involve speaking and listening and the fifth involves reading other students' work. The top two in both categories are talking with teachers at meals and at other times. Overall the pattern seems to be that activities involving speaking and listening in a context of genuine communication, (T-S & S-T, S-S interaction activities) or listening to a native speaker passively are perceived as most enjoyable and most useful.

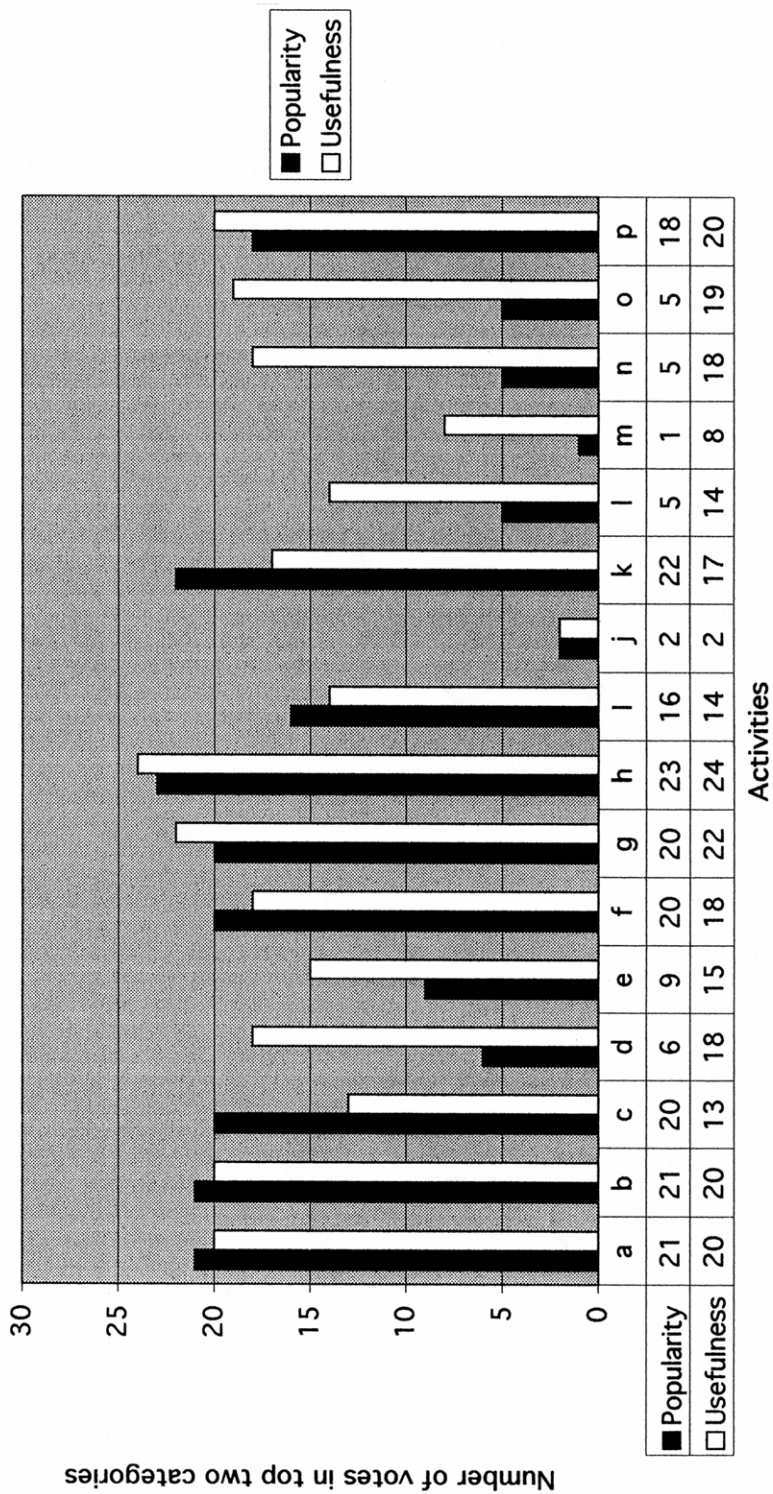
Interestingly, not all activities show a correlation between perceptions of how enjoyable they are and how helpful they are to the students' language learning. Nine out of sixteen categories show a correlation between the two while seven show a great disparity. For example, writing the English newsboard is ranked eighth for usefulness but thirteenth for pleasure. Listening to visitors' speeches is ranked ninth for pleasure but thirteenth for usefulness. To understand these apparent anomalies we must consider the nature of the activities and look at the students' comments. Some activities have not yet been experienced by all students surveyed- (c) doing Saturday night fever, which has a high popularity rating but lower usefulness rating, only occurs once a week and is performed by a different group of three or four students each week. The results may be reflecting students enjoyment in listening to it as much as doing it. (n) Being an English committee member is ranked as very useful but not popular. This may be because only a few students can be members, and the membership changes only each semester. Other activities such as (e) making word posters (d) buddy groups, (l) reading English books, (m) using the dormitory library and (o) writing the English newsboard have high rankings for usefulness but low for enjoyment. All of these have qualities in common with ordinary school work. They are compulsory and four involve



Ranking by enjoyment



### Comparison of ranking by popularity to ranking by usefulness



only reading and writing skills, the mainstays of standard Japanese high school language learning and assessment. The (d) buddy groups, which involve speaking and listening, depend on students' self discipline and lead to an interview style exam twice yearly. Possibly students' familiarity with these types of tasks in their past education leads them to believe they are useful without being able to clearly identify why.

## Students' Comments

The student comments below provide some insights into what the students value in the program. Not all students surveyed commented. Below are a representative selection of their comments recorded verbatim. Next to each is the number of other comments with the same key content.

### What Do You Learn From These Activities ?

"I could learn some new words, some Australian lifestyle. I am interested in talking about the difference between Japan and other countries with native teachers. I don't know other countries, so it is good for me to hear many things from them. I can't speak English very well, but they listen to me carefully, this makes me very happy, so I want to talk them more." (5)

"I want to learn speaking naturally without being shy." (2)

"I can learn many English vocabulary from speaking with teachers or friends in English. In summer vacation I went out from dormitory. I couldn't use English outside dormitory, so I forgot some words. I think dormitory life really helps me to learn English." (4)

"Especially I learn pronunciation when I listen being interviewed in announcement or teacher's evening one. Then I like them." (3)

"From the daily newsboard, I can get some useful information, but I don't think it help me improve my English. Guest's speech is really good!!"

"New words from English posters. How to explain the accidents or happening from the newsboard."

"I can learn speaking and hearing. I think these activities help for me, but I don't like test. I don't like end of semester conversation test." (2)

"I'll go to Australia to homestay, so I learn natural conversation." (3)

### Student comments on changes in the dormitory

"I like to talk with foreign teachers in the dormitory and in the college, but I'm afraid of don't understanding each other. I don't know many words or my English is very poor, so I can't catch what the teachers say sometimes. Then I may make them disappointment, so I'm afraid talking to them." (2) (affective issues- shyness/self consciousness)

"I always think that if I have a lot of time in the evening, I can talk to English teachers at a meal time. As I am very busy, I have to return to my room as fast as possible, take a bath and do my homework. If I can go to bed at 11.00 I can spare time to talk to everyone in English. I want to try to speak English, but if I do it I can't do my homework. "Nothing is more precious than time." (4) (time limits)

"I think there should live more teachers in the dormitory." (6) (student:native speaker ratio)

"Please change a rule to go to bed! its early time. I can't have much time to do homework and study what I want to study. And I want my own free time! I have confidences to be able to get used my desire life schedule. (Maybe everybody agree with me!!) So, please devate with all teachers and Sr. about this important problem." (2) (time limits/rules/student independence)

### Suggestions For and Limitations on Improving the Dormitory English Program.

Clearly the students want more contact with native speakers, primarily for casual conversation but also as sources of passive listening material (eg visitors' speeches). Homework style assignments such as word posters may be of benefit educationally but are perceived as yet another homework task stealing valuable speaking time. Some activities should be maintained although unpopular because they are essential parts of the teachers' assessment of student progress. Buddy groups and tests are part of this. Students' awareness of the purpose of these elements needs to be increased so they can find the self discipline to keep speaking English in a Japanese environment. Many common English phrases, such as "Pass the salt please", "Excuse me" and "See you later" can be used between the students themselves. In doing so the students unconsciously increase their fluency and reinforce what they have learnt from both conversation classes and the dormitory. In other areas, rather than cutting activities, greater provision of resources and opportunities is required.

1) Improve teacher to student ratio. The current ratio of 1:25 is too low to provide each student with more than occasional communication opportunities. Increase the frequency and number of guest speakers in the dormitory. Guests usually eat and chat with the students before giving their speeches.

2) Increase the time available to students to speak English. This would involve major changes in the current running of the dormitory and the school. The mealtimes include time taken up by cleaning duties, collecting the meal, serving, clearing away afterwards and preparing for the next class. Many students complain of having too much to do in a limited time so are unable to continue chatting once they have finished eating. Study time runs from 7:30pm until 9:20pm, so even if a teacher has free time which she is willing to use conversing with students this is almost impossible. On weekends there is only one student lounge in which students and teachers could meet informally if they wished to do so. Options: When reviewing the



curriculum, consider including a period a week for students to have small group conversation/discussion with teachers as part of their course work. This could be done as part of normal class time so the necessary parts of dormitory routine would not be disrupted. Renovate the dormitory to create student-friendly English spaces so that teachers and students could meet and chat in free time when willing.

3) Increase the students' passive exposure to English. The popularity and perceived usefulness of English language videos would suggest that an in house library of videos in English would be a worthwhile investment. Topics could include foreign countries, films of well known Australian, American, Canadian and British literature and popular films.

The strength of the program lies in the opportunities for students to develop communicative competence, fluency and learn English relevant to daily life. Rather than creating new activities and thus homework for the students we need to maximize the communicative opportunities available and raise students awareness of how they can contribute to their own language skill development.

## References

- Griffiee, Dale T. (1999) Questionnaire construction and Classroom research *The Language Teacher* 23 (1) 19-21
- Littlewood, William (1991) *Communicative Language Teaching*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Okuzaki, Mariko (1999) Empathy and English Teaching *The Language Teacher* 23 (7) 11-13
- Painter, Colin (1999) Evaluating Learner Self Assessment *The JALT Journal* 21(1) 87-100

## 要 旨

本論文は鹿児島純心女子短期大学英語科の「生活英語実習」のプログラムに対する現一年生の態度を研究するものである。改善のための観察に基づく所見ならびに提案は、英語科学生26名を調査したものにに基づいている。この調査の目的は、学生の認識においてどのような活動がもっとも楽しむことができかつ役に立つものなのかを明らかにすることである。ここで得られた情報は将来プログラムを修正していくにあたって有用と思われる。

