

FORGING A FREEWAY FOR ENGLISH ACROSS DISCIPLINES

The Experience of the PPP, ITM A Level Programme

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ABSTRACT

This paper highlights the initiatives taken by teaching staff in the PPP, ITM A Level Programme to share classroom strategies and methodology towards quality classroom teaching. The reasons and events which led to the forging of inter-disciplinary links are detailed. These info-sharing sessions provided avenues for staff teaching English to interact more meaningfully and share commonly practised strategies while subject lecturers acknowledged the importance for improved language competence in their respective disciplines. Jointly supervised projects and team teaching approaches were recommended.

Later feedback from subject lecturers indicated a number of problematic areas as each subject had its own "profile" of difficulties. Nevertheless, it was generally agreed that an EAP cum ESP model would provide students with more insights regarding the language of their disciplines. Possible strategies were proposed and implemented while the outcomes and benefits derived are outlined.

This report would interest teachers engaged in parallel institutions where studies are perceived as highly compartmentalised. The integration of English with the subjects taught, the need for on-going staff development and communication and the call for a bottom-up mechanism for change may interest ESL/EFL teachers from a diversity of backgrounds.

1.0 Introduction

It is not always easy to over-ride the tyranny of the disciplines. This is especially difficult in an exam-oriented academic environment where success or failure is gauged quantitatively. In the spirit of info-sharing, this paper outlines descriptively the staff development workshops planned by and for staff of the A Level Programme in their efforts to bridge the inter-disciplinary divide and to address the immediate problems of declining standards in student performance.

This paper reports the work of many members of the A Level teaching staff, to whom all credit is due. The forums organised raised a number of issues within EAP/ESP and exemplify bottom-up change coming from staff not administration. Before proceeding to detail the prior and post-workshop developments, a statement of our goals and objectives and a brief survey of the literature in this area would help to put this case study in perspective as well as to establish the currency of the efforts undertaken.

2.0 Objectives of the Study

This study is undertaken with 3 main objectives. They are:

- to share the benefits of the initiatives taken with a wider audience;
- to recommend more inter-departmental talk and involvement to evolve a collegiate culture; and
- to propagate a combined skills and content-based teaching of English to meet the immediate and deferred needs of post-SPM students.

3.0 Literature Review

In the U.K. school system, Carol A. Wallace (1987:120) recounts that the Swan Report and its predecessor, the Bullock Report recognised the importance for ESL teachers to play a more instrumental role in the mainstream curriculum. Both reports in her view, reiterate that ESL teachers should be given opportunities for greater involvement for two reasons:

- they can provide more accurate input for the assessment of ESL students needs and
- they have a clearer idea of subject teachers expectations and thus are in a position to ensure there is congruence between students needs and perceptions on the one hand and staff expectations on the other.

Wallace (ibid) is of the opinion that a major setback faced by most ESL students is one of language rather than intelligence. The ESL teacher is therefore, encouraged to work integratively "across the curriculum" in schools to conduct appropriate language literacy programmes.

In a more recent case study, Martha Iancu (1993) integrated a regular academic course for skills-teaching to students enrolled in an Intensive English programme (IEP). This she found motivated students to make significant gains in English to enroll earlier in mainstream academic courses.

Contrary to these beliefs and recommendations, the English departments in most Malaysian educational institutions, occupy a fairly low niche. As a result, ESL instructional programmes are often mistakenly regarded as part of a remedial routine and not an essential exercise for answering students present and deferred linguistic needs.

A quick review of recent literature from the Dissertations Abstracts seem to support the trend of content-based language instruction in the context of EAP/ESP programmes. (Cunliffe 1993, Zhu Liping 1994 and Johnston 1995). In addition to academic language tasks to develop the four language skills, Zhu Liping (ibid) also calls for the integration of Study Skills using simulations to prepare students with "communicative functional competency" for university studies.

In their discussion of the status of ESP/EST in Colombian Public Universities, Mary Ann Larsen-Pusey and Clinton Pusey (1987) found that most of the university-run English programmes emphasised reading and were generally geared towards students' immediate needs rather than those of their future workplace. This emphasis conforms with the approach recommended by Markee (1984) and Escorcía (1985). Both Markee and Escorcía call for "here and now" techniques to equip students with the needed linguistic support in the early semesters of their university studies.

It is evident thus far that efforts to integrate an ESP approach into language literacy programmes are mainly implemented at pre-university or university level. Bearing in mind what has been done and what can be adapted to our context, we shall proceed to identify the problems which led teaching staff of the A level programme to explore possibilities and avenues for quality teaching.

4.0 Problems

4.1 Institutional Background

PPP (Pusat Peralaksanaan Pendidikan or the Centre of Preparatory Education) is a division of ITM which conducts matriculation to first year degree courses for selected post-8PM students. Its various departments function largely independently of each other. However, as all instruction is in English, one feature which all its programmes have in common is the need to equip students with language, content and study skills ahead of those achieved at SPM level English.

Students admitted into the programme are no doubt of mixed abilities. Even so, the CELT (Comprehensive English Language Test) placement average scores achieved by new intakes of students upon arrival for 3 consecutive years show a general decline in language proficiency. (See Table 1)

Table 1: CELT Average Scores for 3 consecutive years

Year	CELT Average Scores
X3	215.9/300
X4	201.6/399
X5	203/300

Few have a natural flair for the language, more have very functional command while many have limited comprehension skills and great difficulty expressing themselves in speech and writing. The English programme thus has to equip students with the skills they need for the following immediate and deferred purposes:

- to study successfully for their A Level examinations
- to obtain a satisfactory band in the general academic module of the IELTS. (This is the assumed prerequisite for admission into a UK university and for continued sponsorship.)
- to embark on future research work at degree level study in English
- to cope with the social and practical aspects of student life at home and in the UK.

From the foregoing it is obvious that the English department plays a supporting role to serve needs determined externally to it. This subsidiary role is no doubt common within EAP situations and would be greatly facilitated by dialogue between departments. However, such inter-communication either planned or incidental and informal is not particularly fostered by the physical or organisational situation.

4.2 Student Attitude

At this level, students seem to under-rate the importance of English. They willingly spend more time on their academic subjects than on English classes or English-related activities like participation in clubs, societies or projects. Iancu (1993) in her study among university students aired a similar observation. Overall, there is a lack of push on the part of students to strive for better standards of language achievement as they are more concerned about their A Levels. The ability to write with flair is difficult to cultivate and most get by with functional communicative English and very limited background reading.

Current Manglish expressions embody the bulk of current teen talk and it is seemingly difficult to wean students from the "bottle-feeding" culture to help them achieve a degree of learner autonomy. Students intensively, solicit the help of their English lecturers in and out of class to write or edit formal letters, essays, debate speeches and L'personal statements" on their UCAS forms.

4.3 Fuzzy correlation between language proficiency and academic performance

Estad and Ferryman (1991), Goh and Chan (1993) [cited in Le Vasan 1994:55] claim that there is a high correlation between professional success and English proficiency at the workplace. However, at college or matriculation level the correlation between academic success and English is often difficult to establish with any certainty. From records of students achievement in the A Levels and the IELTS examinations for 3 consecutive years, the following findings can be noticed. (See Appendices 1a and 1b)

- i. In Year X3, 2 student high achievers (SHA4 and SHA5) who obtained marginal IELTS passing band of 6.5, scored 3A's or a maximum of 15 points in their A Level Exam. On the contrary, in Year X4, student low achiever (SLA5) who scored band 7.5 in the IELTS, failed to obtain sufficient points to qualify for university admission.

A quick look at the data in Appendix 1a will show this pattern of A Level failure is quite marked for students in language-based majors like English Language, Law, Economics, Business Administration ... etc, although they secured fairly good IELTS bands.

- ii. In Year X4, the overall average bands obtained by the 8 SHA was only 1 band higher (7.6) than that obtained by the 8 SLA (6.6).
- iii. A further analysis of Year X5 IELTS individual component scores for 4 candidates, (SLA1, SLA3, SLA4 and SLA5) show that in spite of sufficiently good writing scores, they obtained 0 points in the A Level.

This fuzziness in correlation, in a way undermines the importance of English in the eyes of students and subject lecturers. It also serves to demonstrate the importance for staff cross-disciplinary cooperation and involvement as student success in the A Level warrants more than the quest for language proficiency.

4.4 The Fall in the A Level Passing Rate

The uncertain correlation between language proficiency and academic performance is further evidenced in the following table which charts students achievement for 5 consecutive years. (See Table 2) From the data presented, it can be generalised that while the passing % is dipping towards the lower end of the 90s with a resultant higher student attrition rate, the average IELTS band is, on the contrary, gradually edging upwards to show an overall improvement in language proficiency.

Table 2 : A 5-year record of student overall performance in the A Level and IELTS

Year	% A Level Pass	Average IELTS Band	% admitted into UK universities
X1	99.4	6.5	99.1
X2	97.0	6.8	93.4
X3	98.0	6.7	95.6
X4	96.5	6.9	89.0
X5	94.7	6.9	86.3

The fall in quality passing rates in the A Level was a matter of grave concern and staff sought ways to beef up efforts to address the problem. The number of students who scored 3A's declined from 17 to 7 while those who failed to gain places in British universities rose markedly.

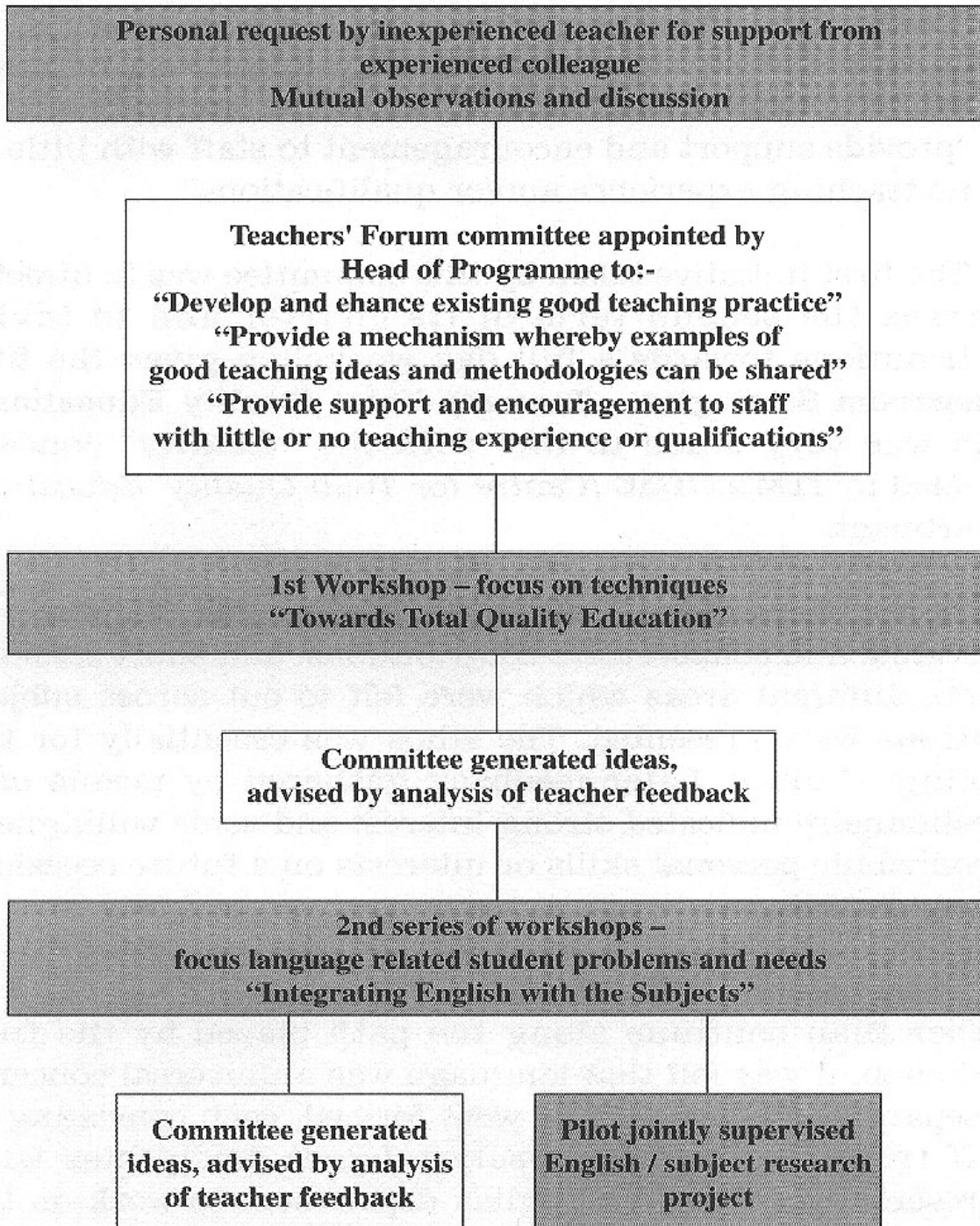
Although language proficiency was not an established criteria for academic success, lecturers agreed the use of English for instrumental purposes was important and the language had to be taught in context. Where possible, subject lecturers were encouraged to contribute relevant content like lists of terms, related readings, exercises and examination question papers as supplementary teaching materials for English lecturers to have an idea of the kind of language needed.

5.0 The Teachers' Forum

5.1 The First Initiative

Besides the push from subject lecturers, the English lecturers themselves have felt the need to teach English in more meaningful contexts. Against this background of problems and needs, the Teacher's Forum arose. It did so at the suggestion of individual members of staff. (*See Fig.1*)

Figure 1
The Teachers' Forum 1st and 2nd series of workshops



As there was no vehicle for in-service training or support for less experienced staff at that time, one of the new teachers took the initiative and approached a highly experienced and professionally trained colleague in her own (Chemistry) department for support. They decided this should be based upon the mutual observation of classes, for analysis and discussion. Other staff expressed interest, and as a consequence, it was suggested that a mechanism be put in place for the wider sharing of ideas and support. The idea was welcomed by all staff, and a self-selected committee was formed, and empowered to act to:

- "develop and enhance existing good teaching practice"
- "provide a mechanism whereby examples of good teaching ideas and methodologies can be shared"
- "provide support and encouragement to staff with little or no teaching experience and/or qualifications"

The first initiative taken by this committee was to directly address the second term of its charter and to invite contributions towards a full day workshop given the title "**Classroom Strategies - Towards Total Quality Education**". This was very much in line with the "Quality" concept initiated by ITM's CTQE (*Centre for Total Quality Education*) department.

11 members of staff, from all departments, volunteered individual and collaborative contributions, and short sessions on six different areas which were felt to cut across subject divisions were presented. The ethos was essentially for the pooling of ideas. Later feedback gathered by means of a questionnaire indicated strong interest and some willingness to contribute personal skills or interests on a future occasion. (*Appendix 2a*)

5.2 The Second Initiative

Rather than continue along the path blazed by the first workshop, it was felt that language was a universal concern. So separate working groups were formed, each consisting of staff from one (or two closely related) disciplines with representatives from the English department to work on the theme: "**Integrating English with the Subjects**". The following guidelines were distributed to all lecturers prior to the workshops.

- English lecturers sit in on a subject class,
- Subject lecturers share examples of typical exam questions, essay titles, etc.,
- Subject lecturers pass on syllabuses and examples of students work,
- Lecturers video record classes,
- Lecturers identify supplementary articles from journals/newspapers, etc.,
- English lecturers inform subject lecturers about study skills covered in the English course.

Groups were then to meet, discuss difficulties observed from both perspectives, and seek ways in which the English department could provide more support to the other departments. After a short interval, participants were to meet for a plenary session, to report their observations and share ideas or activities generated.

These sessions were productive in the identification of problems which need to be addressed, and had limited success in engendering specific activities for English classes. Although there were fewer returns of the questionnaire this time, feedback from those received was very positive. (*Appendix 2b*) The chief concern that emerged was that the effort made should be followed up by all so that genuine positive action would result.

6.0 Outcomes

The train of developments so far represented a push to introduce a more ESP element into our generalised EAP approach. Typical of a result-oriented forum, we naturally focused on addressing the immediate needs of our students and left their deferred needs unattended.

Differences in the observed language difficulties and needs of students did inevitably arise with subject matter. Numerical subjects felt that their areas were so specialised in kind that language competence over and above a threshold level which most students had attained had no major importance. All other subjects however, considered that language based problems did impede student comprehension and ability to produce well-written assignments. Major problems were common to two or more subject areas, although each had its own particular "profile" of difficulties. Subject lecturers generally expressed more concern with the students actual output, than in their aural comprehension and ability to gain conceptually from the instruction received. The main areas of concern are outlined below.

6.1. Vocabulary Problems

The first major problem area was vocabulary, reflecting the realisation that lexical differences constitute the most significant difference between specialised "Englishes". (See Table 3 for summary of problems identified and recommended strategies to overcome them.)

6.1.1 Technical terms

Problems arose with a number of different types of lexis. Technical terms are inseparable from the concepts they represent, and thus come into the subject teachers' sphere, rather than the English staff's, whose own understanding could well be imperfect. The suggestion was made that word building be taught through affixation of meaningful roots in the English class. More attention could be paid to those morphemes (affixes, suffixes prefixes) used in scientific terms to provide students useful insights to arrive at their meanings. (*See Appendix 3*)

6.1.2 Word clusters which can be arranged on a kline according to intensity or shades of meaning

Problems with these terms were also mentioned and it was generally felt that these could be usefully handled in English classes. Owing to limitations of time, subject lecturers may not be able to cover terms with different contextual connotations in sufficient depth. Approaches recommended for use were word tree or word klines depicted visually to illustrate the difference in meaning for word clusters for example; "**beliefs - ideologies - philosophies - convictions**".

6.1.3 Sub-technical terms

Another category of technical language was recognised - the word which has a precise technical meaning within a particular discipline, and which is also current in general usage, with a different or less clearly defined meaning. Examples of this include legal terms like '**bench**' and '**intention**';

'**fungi**', '**ringworm**' and '**microsporium audonini**' in biology;

'**a data field**' in computer science, '**a magnetic field**' in physics as compared to '**a playing field**' in everyday use.

Here the feeling was that English lecturers should at least be aware of such dual or multiple meanings, and avoid confusing the students when teaching lexis in this category.

6.1.4 Meta-language

Another problem which was noted arose with the 'metalanguage' of the educational system itself. Students often misinterpret the import of examination questions, failing to appreciate the different types of answer required when signaled by such instructions as "discuss", "review", "comment on", "analyse", "explain" etc. The opinion was expressed that the import of these terms should be defined for students and used consistently across the English/discipline divide. Reference was made to Wallace's Glossary of D-words (1980:154-155) and Patricia Grant (1989:230). (See Appendix 4)

6.2. Transference Problems Lack of transfer skills was another major, group of difficulties. Economics, Biology and Physics all noted students have difficulty with reading comprehension, whilst not feeling that poor self expression in writing was a major handicap in the subject. Law on the other hand, felt that poor organisation and grammar did adversely affect the students performance in writing. It was also suggested that the compartmentalisation of subjects within the institutional structure is mirrored by compartmentalisation of skills in the students' minds, and that study skills taught in English is failing to fully achieve its objective of facilitating a transference of study patterns to other areas.

Table 3 : Summary of Common Problem Areas Identified and Proposed Recommendations

Area	Problems	Recommended Strategies
I: Vocabulary	1. Failure to comprehend/ perceive distinctions a: - technical terminology	teach subject-related morphemes/ affixation
	b: - sub-technical words	introduce subject-related readings for the layman
	c: - the meta-language of the education system	consistent use across disciplines
II: Transference	1. Failure to apply knowledge of English / study skills in dealing with subject-related tasks a: - difficulty with text comprehension	base English exercises on texts with subject content
	b: - poor grammar and text organisation	collaborative teaching – cross- disciplinary activities/projects
III: Study Skills (lack of awareness or attitudinal)	1. Failure to follow instructions in questions correctly a: - lack of attention to detail; failure to relate separate sections/items of exam. questions;	provide more directed practice in giving and following instructions in general contexts
	b: - failure to check and edit for overview	error-correction exercises from samples of students' work
	c: - failure to take an active approach to learning	teach study skills with or related to subject course materials

Lecturer feeling on this issue somewhat supported a more "content" biased approach to the selection of materials for English instruction. The biology lecturer noted with appreciation that many reading texts on health and environmental issues for instance, were in fact used by the English department. Other lecturers felt this could also be useful in their subjects.

Shared projects were also suggested, and such jointly supervised and marked research project were assigned to students for the present semester. From this pilot venture, lessons are being learnt regarding the type of joint planning and organisation required, and further

development of this is envisaged. Feedback from the students (See Tables 4a & 4b) indicates it has served to enhance motivation with regard to English while English and subject lecturers' feedback (See Table 5) suggests the influence in effecting mental "desegregation" and improving the application of language skills in performing subject tasks.

Table 4a : Questionnaire to obtain Student Feedback on English/Subject IRA Project

Major :

Project Title :

Please circle the letter by your answer.

1. Have you enjoyed doing this project –
 - A: more than the previous English ONLY IRA project
 - B: as much as the previous English ONLY IRA project
 - C: less than the previous English ONLY IRA project.

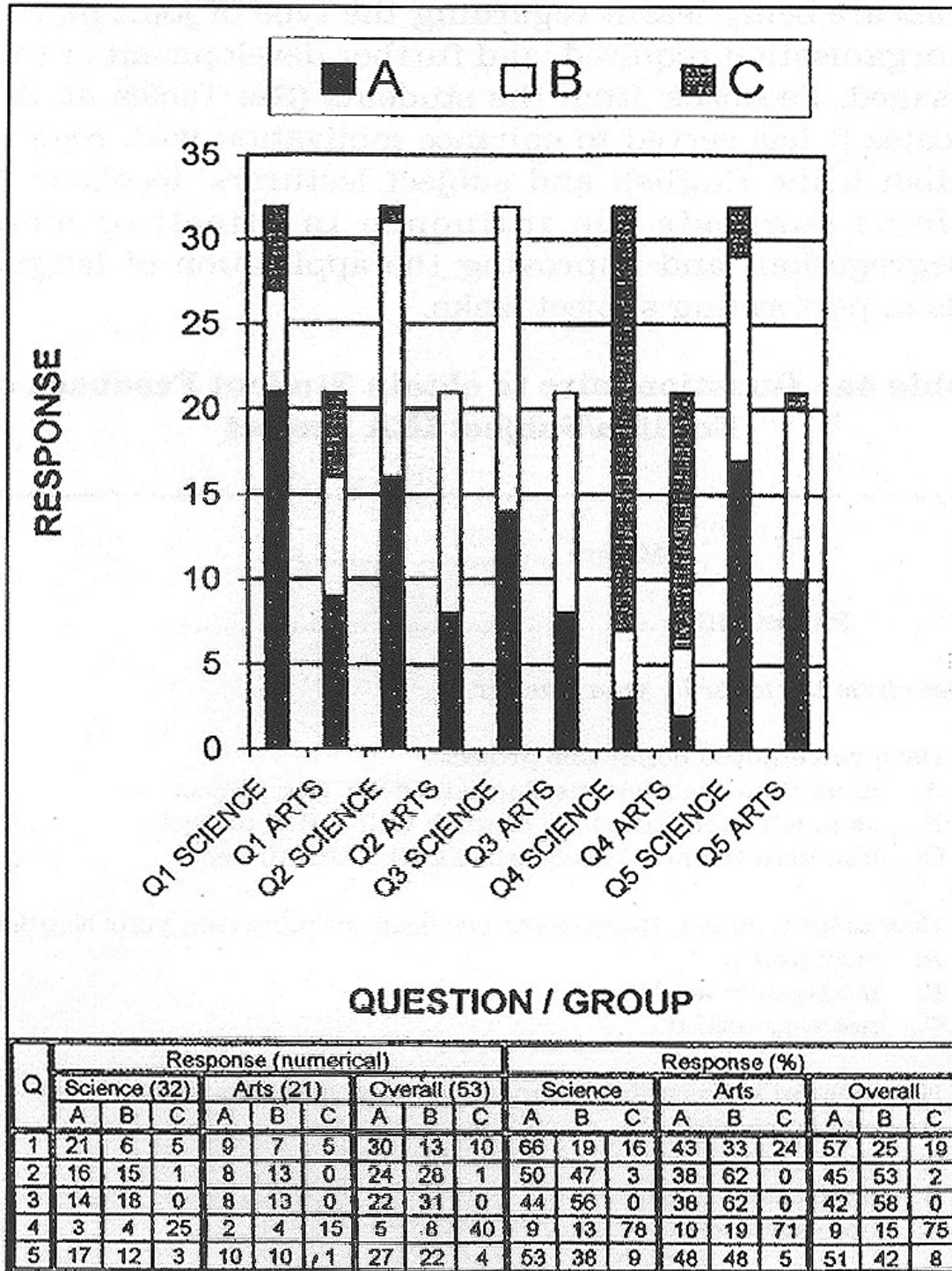
2. How helpful do you think this project has been in improving your English?
 - A: very useful
 - B: moderately useful
 - C: not very useful

3. How helpful has it been in improving your understanding in the subject you chose?
 - A: very useful
 - B: moderately useful
 - C: not very useful

4. Which lecturer did you consult and rely on for advice?
 - A: your English lecturer
 - B: your subject lecturer
 - C: both

5. Would you like to have more activities which involve reading or writing about your academic subjects in your English classes?
 - A: yes
 - B: maybe
 - C: no

Table 4b : Student Response to Jointly Supervises English / Subject Research Project



6.3 Study Skills problems

Echoing our concern regarding "bottle-feeding", a final category of problems discussed were those due to poor study skills. This may be termed "attitudinal". As previously mentioned, students often fail to comprehend what key instruction words in examination questions require of them. Furthermore, answers presented seem to reflect lack of attention to detail. Sub-sections of questions were often answered in haphazard fashion and students fail to relate different parts of a question to each other. This lack of system is due to poor examination technique, and failure to check, edit and comprehend the overview of the given task.

Another impression lecturers have is that students do not approach learning actively, and have no clear perceptions of where they are going in their studies. One idea put forward was for English to teach certain study skills from the subject course materials. A text book survey for an economics text book was designed in response to this problem. Note making and note taking, concept mapping exercises were other possible areas to be exploited.

**Table 5 : IRA Project –
Feedback from English and subject lecturers**

No.	Question	English staff	Subject Staff
1.	Were you happy with the students' performance?	Definitely. (1) Yes (2)	Very (1) Quite. (1) The girls performed well, not the boys. (1)
2.	Did the students demonstrate they have added understanding of the topics?	Yes (3)	Tried hard to understand. (1) They were memorizing more than understanding (1)
3.	Did the project increase their interest in learning more about the subject?	Not really, Showed only that much interest to complete the project. (1)	Yes, very much. (1) I hope so. (1)
4.	How much of the material used came from those you recommended?	Very little. (2)	All of it (1) Not much. They did their own research. (1) Some. (1)
5.	Did you help them plan it?	Yes, the opening, the sequencing of the presentation. (2)	Minimal help was given. (2) No. (1)
6.	Should the activity be continued?	Yes, but the supervision should be fairly shared out. (2)	Definitely. (1) Yes. (2)

7a: Comments from English Lecturers:

"As far as Group X was concerned, the complete research work came from the group themselves with very little guidance from the subject lecturers."

"Interest after a while waned. But the girls worked at it harder than the boys."

7b: Comments from Subject lecturers'

"It was a great exercise for stimulating interest above and beyond the confines of the syllabus. To research, collate info, strive to understand, precis that info and present it is an excellent activity."

"Prior to the presentation, the important points should be reviewed by subject lecturers."

"Students should work on presentation skills"

7.0 Discussion and Recommendations

From the account given, it is clear that two areas of concern then have intersected: a desire to improve the status of English has found a central role in a process intended to share and improve teaching techniques among lecturers.

PPP A Level students have from one perspective clear-cut needs - to cope with their present and degree level studies. However, when one goes beyond this level of generality, definition of needs becomes less clear - features of the future language situations need to be more closely considered. Instruction at the A Level should put the learner through a learning process which equips him with the skills to perform set activities either individually or in teams. Skills then become more transferable and may in the case of EAP cut across subject divisions (Hutchinson and Waters 1987). The route is the stuff of instruction, and is distinct from and need not simulate the target situation. Skills might be taught through performing various tasks, not closely related to the core subjects taught. A number of projects in tertiary level institutions have adopted and reported on the success of such an approach. Extensive discussion of a university EAP project which employs "a series of tasks which gradually leads the student to display the terminal behaviour required" is documented in Harper (1986) whilst somewhat more recently, Mountford (1988) asserts that appropriate task based activities were "what really works" in his university setting.

Thus the approach implicit within the English teaching of the PPP A Level Program has been of this latter type. There are certain abilities which are necessary and common to the language activity of all subject areas. Findings in discussion with subject lecturers have not led us to question the validity of our approach that has suggested it would be worthwhile to integrate some subject content into English language classes. It is not a rejection of a paradigm but an acknowledgement that the adoption of an eclectic approach may be beneficial to unlock subject content and heighten the relevance of English.

The "Teachers' Forum" is obviously not a mechanism for bringing about wholesale or profound change. It has been essentially fluid and non-directed, and thus cannot provide the overview needed before introducing major changes. In this case there has been a movement from purely methodological concerns towards broader issues of course content. However, it can equally be argued that its evolutionary nature means that fine tuning towards actual detailed concerns can and has taken place.

With regard to bringing about adjustments to the English curriculum, it can be pointed out that whatever the governing principles behind the curriculum may be, "classroom teachers.... largely determine the details of the curriculum" (Doll, 1989) through their individual preferences. This being so, it must be advantageous for them to have an articulate voice and greater knowledge of the total education process. Moreover, as Doll (ibid) again mentions, many teachers are happier with a consensus than having to make decisions individually. The open discussion must encourage consideration of advantageous adjustments beyond the individual ambit. Increased knowledge of subject content and techniques and of what others and the institution overall is trying to achieve should ensure this grass roots fine tuning is more relevant and cohesive.

Moreover, participation in an open forum must invite commitment from those who, as in the case of any changing situation, are likely to find their workload increased. There are no proven equations to ensure fair distribution of workload for the supervision of students' projects among subject lecturers. Such extra work is often resented, especially as many or most teachers are to some degree conservative, or at least cautious and tend to rely on proven methods. Where ideas have been generated by those who must then make them work, resistance is replaced by personal investment, a feeling of 'ownership' and a desire that they should succeed. This is more so in that changes come from the "bottom up" and are thus not imposed by an authority who may be felt to have a very different perspective. Possession of a voice empowers, and possession of a degree of power must carry with it the enhanced acceptance of responsibility on which true professionalism can only be built.

A further area where it has had some effect has been in bringing about some measure of change in the institutional culture. The observation is that "the cellular organisation in schools means that teachers struggle privately with their problems and anxieties. It is unusual for teachers to observe and discuss their colleague's work" (Everard and Morris, 1985) has certainly applied within the A Level programme. To have brought a more "collegiate culture" into being is in itself a significant innovation.

It is our contention that the forging of closer links between English and academic subjects will result in a range of beneficial involvements for students and lecturers. Added variety to learning situations and tasks will mean more interaction and cooperation among lecturers from all departments. These may be carried out on a small scale adhoc basis with some mechanism for coordination and dissemination of ideas. All such efforts would enhance professionalism and commitment by capitalising on existing skills and knowledge and must surely be worthwhile investigating in any institution of learning.

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