

The Social & Linguistic Benefits of Creative English—  
Language Community-Service Projects for Learners of English as a Foreign Language  
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Social initiative is defined as the confidence and motivation to initiate positive change in society. This study investigated an experimental academic speaking course taught by the researcher at the Saitama University English Resource Center (ERC) entitled “Problem Solving through Research,” assessing its effectiveness in helping learners not only improve their academic English speaking proficiency but also develop greater social initiative.

### Participants

Nine Saitama University students participated in this study, eight for credit and two out of interest alone. Seven were liberal arts majors with the remaining two majoring in science, while six were first-year students and three were third-year students.

### Procedure

At the opening of the course, students were told that they were participating in an experimental academic English speaking course which sought to develop their initiative in solving real-world problems in the community through critical thinking and research via the English language and negotiation with others in the community. To do this, the class followed the timeline below:

Weeks 1–3: Students discussed and chose problems they would try to solve on campus

Weeks 4–6: Students did research in order to develop possible solutions to those problems

Weeks 7–9: Students developed and presented plans for how to implement and test their solutions

Weeks 10–13: Students carried out their plans, reporting and discussing their progress in class

Week 14: Students compared data from before and after they implemented their solutions to gauge their effectiveness.

Week 15: Students presented the results of their projects

Some examples of issues participants chose were extending the open hours at a campus facility, improving a website for students to exchange information about their classes, and creating more seating space at another university facility. In every case, implementing their solutions required a great deal of communication with students and staff outside of class. Therefore, the teacher provided students with research from social psychology on ways of improving the effectiveness of one’s communication and negotiation with others. Aside from these resources, students were expected to gather their own academic resources (mainly from the internet) to develop and implement their solutions.

### Measures and Analysis

This section explains how improvements in language proficiency and problem-solving initiative were measured and analyzed.

To assess the effectiveness of the class in promoting academic English speaking proficiency, the teacher used the criteria of the final presentation, comparing it to qualitative measures of initial proficiency at the beginning of the class along with responses to an anonymous open-ended survey by students upon completing the course.

To assess the effectiveness of the class in raising students’ social initiative, an anonymous questionnaire was administered before and after they completed their projects asking them to rate how much power they felt they had to positively change 1) themselves, 2) their friends, 3) their community, and 4) the world on a scale of 1 to 10 and the composite of the responses to these items compared using a two-tailed paired *t*-test (NOTE: only six of the nine participants were present for both administrations). Student comments via the open-ended survey were also included as supplementary qualitative data on changes in social initiative.

### Results

This study found substantial evidence for students’ improved academic speaking proficiency though comparing observations of students’ early in-class discussions and presentations to their final presentations. During their early presentations and discussions, the teacher noted that few students were able to speak fluently without notes and that their body language and expressions displayed a lack of confidence. Moreover, students lacked the ability to talk about academic topics. During their final presentations, however, all students were able to present on their research, projects, and results, including discussing graphs and charts depicting their data analysis, fluently without recourse to notes as well as answer questions from the audience afterward. The following anonymous student comment about his or her improved performance in a presentation done at an internship illustrates this change well: “When I do presentation on the internship, I can well done. And every confirm member said ‘Your presentation is good! Why?’ I said that I have [this] class in the university.”

With regard to changes in students’ social initiative, a two-tailed paired *t*-test revealed a significant increase between levels before implementing their solutions ( $M=5.63$  points,  $SD=2.11$ ) and after completing the course ( $M=7.29$ ,  $SD=1.43$ ) of 2.66 points,  $t(5)=4.39$ ,  $p=.007$ . This quantitative measurement of a gain in perceived social initiative was supported by anonymous comments from students such as the following: “Before this class, I guess change the society is none of my business. I prefer sitting and waiting to actually doing something, but after this class, the action that I took show I have power to do it. I learnt a lot from this class and to an opportunity to test myself.”

In addition to the generally positive results described above, survey responses also indicated areas in which the course could be improved. Based on student comments, for example, more assistance with the initial process of researching solutions to problems would be helpful. Furthermore, students expressed a desire for more guidance in how to approach and explain their project to other students and staff that were involved in their issue. Finally, the teacher noted that explaining student projects as “problem-solving” may have given students a slightly antagonistic perception of their role which may have negatively affected their ability to negotiate with other people involved in their issues. Thus in future incarnations of the course, the title of the project may be changed to better reflect the positive role students are to play, perhaps using the following alternative wording: “cooperative projects to improve the campus community.”

### **Conclusion**

This study sought to develop and assess a course curriculum which not only aimed to promote academic language proficiency but also increase social initiative or the motivation and confidence to initiate positive change in society. Though the study was small-scale and the course investigated not without room for improvement, results indicated that the course both improved learners’ ability to present academic research in English and raised their perceived social initiative. Of course, further more formal studies are needed, but the researcher hopes that through the continued development of this course and others like it, he will help to better prepare students for entry into the workforce of this ever more globalized and rapidly changing world.