

# AN EVALUATION OF THE ENGLISH COURSE FOR ACADEMIC PURPOSES AT THE INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL, THAI NGUYEN UNIVERSITY, VIETNAM

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper evaluates the effectiveness of the English course for academic purposes at the International School. Four aspects of the course including textbook evaluation, the workload, student-self assessment on their achievement and the evaluation on teaching performance were evaluated. To get the data, the researcher designed the questionnaire for 40 first year students and the interviews for 2 English lecturers of the school. The findings of the study indicated that the English course for academic purposes satisfied students in terms of teaching performance and the suitability of the textbooks. However, there still existed some drawbacks related to the applicability of textbooks, some important skills used for academic business English and the syllabus of the course. In the study, some suggestions were also offered in order to make the course more effective. Hopefully, this study will be of great value for the lecturers, course designers and managers.*

**Keyword :** - course evaluation, academic purposes, textbook evaluation

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, in many countries whose mother tongue is not English, English is not a general subject but a language used to instruct other subjects. In recent years in Vietnam, the development of education has required many universities to import curricula from other countries, whose official language used to teach those subjects is English. This raises another challenge for learning and teaching English: how to teach English for Academic Purposes. The International School under Thai Nguyen University, with the aim of applying imported advanced programs into the school, has implemented an advanced program collaborated with Manchester Metropolitan University since 2011. In this program, students need to use English as a medium of listening to lectures in their major. Therefore, for the first year of studying, students are taught English in such a way that they can use it for their academic purposes in the later years. In fact, the school has reviewed the textbooks and made some changes several times to meet the need of the program, but evaluation of the current course is still important for the course designers to get the feedback from students and teachers about the program.

Course evaluation which has been used in many universities in the world is of great importance for both teachers and students. Marsh (1987) points out five purposes of course evaluation. First, it is a diagnostic feedback to faculty about the effectiveness of their teaching that will be useful for the improvement of teaching. Second, it is a measurement of teaching effectiveness to be used in administrative decision-making. Also, the evaluation gives students information to use in the selection of courses and instructors. Fourth, it is a measure of the quality of the course which is used in course improvement and curriculum development. Finally, the evaluation's findings are an outcome or process description for research on teaching.

Hutchinson and Water (1987:96) gives the reason for evaluation 'Evaluation is a matter of judging the fitness of something for a particular purpose.' Cunningsworth (1984:64) puts toward the idea '...that the process of evaluation could not be a purely mechanical one and that professional judgment was involved at every stage.' In

Pamela Gravestock and Emily Gregor-Greenleaf's point of view (2008: 10), 'the quantifiability and comparability of most course evaluations makes the imprecise art of evaluating teaching seem more objective and manageable'.

Among many kinds of teaching and learning assessment, course evaluations are considered one of the most common tools used to assess classroom teaching and believed the most heavily weighted for personnel decisions (Franklin, 2001). Regarding to course evaluation, many linguists have conceded that there is not any better options than course evaluation for providing the same sort of quantifiable and comparable data. (Abrami, 2001). In general, most of researchers have appreciated the students' evaluation in being a useful measure of the instructional behavior that contributes to teaching effectiveness (Beran, Violato & Kline, 2007; Abrami, 2001; Schmelkin, Spencer & Gellman, 1997; Marsh, 1987). The results getting from formative feedback are used to facilitate improved teaching and course development (Pamela Gravestock and Emily Gregor-Greenleaf, 2008:10).

This study is done in a hope that it will help better the quality of teaching and learning English for academic purposes at the International School, Thai Nguyen University. Thus, it will help enhance students' English competence.

## 2. SUBJECT AND METHODOLOGY

To achieve the aims, the qualitative and quantitative approach including survey questionnaires and interview is used to collect the data. The method used in this research is formative evaluation. In common, the data for the study were obtained through the following instruments:

The questionnaires which were delivered to the first year students at the school to discover the students' background of learning English, their self-assessment on the course books used during the course, what they were taught and what they gained from the course. The interviews were used to get the feedback from the lecturers of the course on the students' English proficiency, the course books used as well as the suitability of the workload on each English skill.

The subjects are 40 freshmen who come from different hometowns in Vietnam and 2 lecturers at the school.

## 3. FINDINGS

The following are the findings of the study:

### 3.1. Findings of the study

#### 3.1.1. The results of the questionnaire

The aims of the questionnaire were to explore students' self-assessment to the English course in terms of workload for each language skill, teaching materials, and the objectives of the course as well as the teaching performance.

##### 3.1.1.1. Students' background of learning English

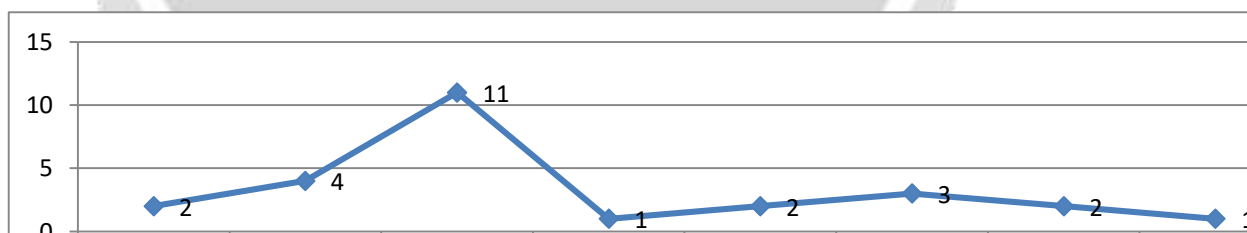
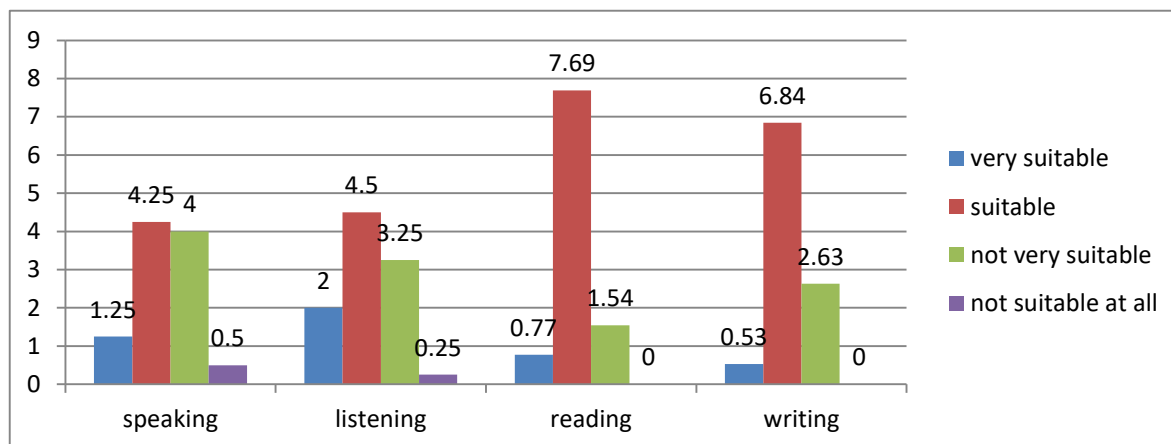


Figure 1: The variety of years that students have learnt English before going to university

As can be seen from figure 1, the students have learnt English for a different number of years before starting the university. The students have studied for at least 4 years of English before university. The maximum number of years that students spent learning English is 13 years. 11/40 of them have studied English for 7 years.

##### 3.1.1.2. Students' assessment on time spent for each skill

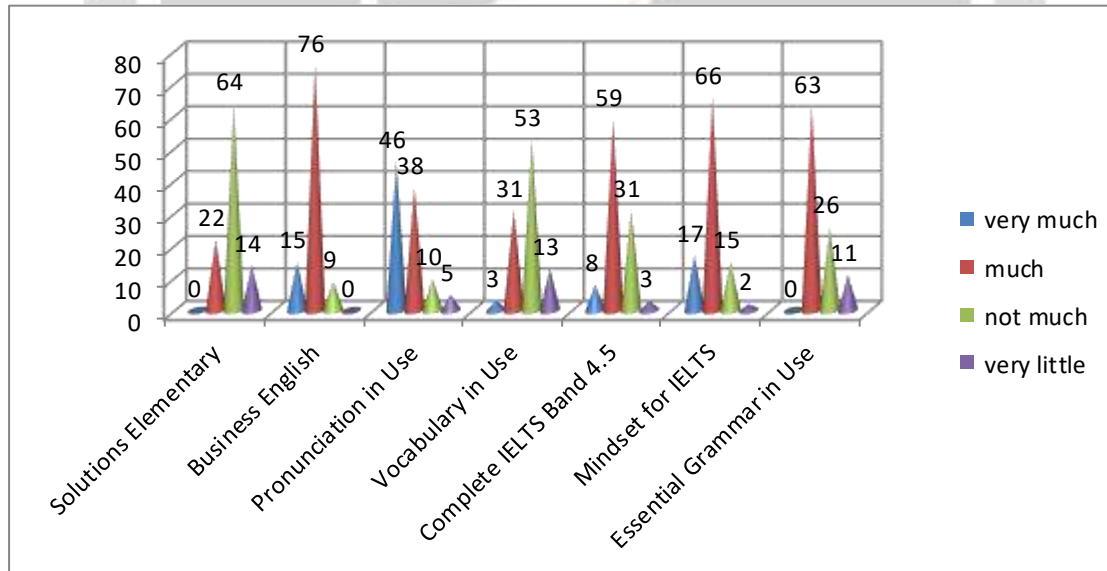


**Figure 2: Students' assessment on time spent for each skill**

A noticeable finding in Figure 2 is that most of students reached an agreement on the suitability of the workload spent for each language skill. For speaking skill, 22 students (55%) were satisfied with the time while 16 ones (40%) did not really agree with the division of teaching time and 2 students (5%) strongly disagreed with that. For listening skill, many students (65%) claimed that the time log for this skill was suitable whereas 13 students (32,5%) said it was not very suitable and 1 (2,5%) was totally unsatisfied with the time spent for listening skill. As for reading skill, 33 students (84,6%) agreed on the suitability of the length of time for this skill while only 6 (15,4%) did not really approve of it.

Finally, for writing skill, 28 students (73,7%) concurred with the length of time used for the skill. Only 10 of them (26,3%) had different ideas with the others on that.

### 3.1.1.3. Students' assessment on the teaching materials for each skill



**Figure 3: Students' assessment on the applicability of the textbook into business major**

Figure 3 expresses students' self-assessment on the application of the textbooks on their major subject.

For Solutions Beginner, the textbook used to teach the four English skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing, only 22% of students said that it was applicable on the business area while 64% did not think it helped them much for their business major. 14% considered that the textbook's applicability on business was very little.

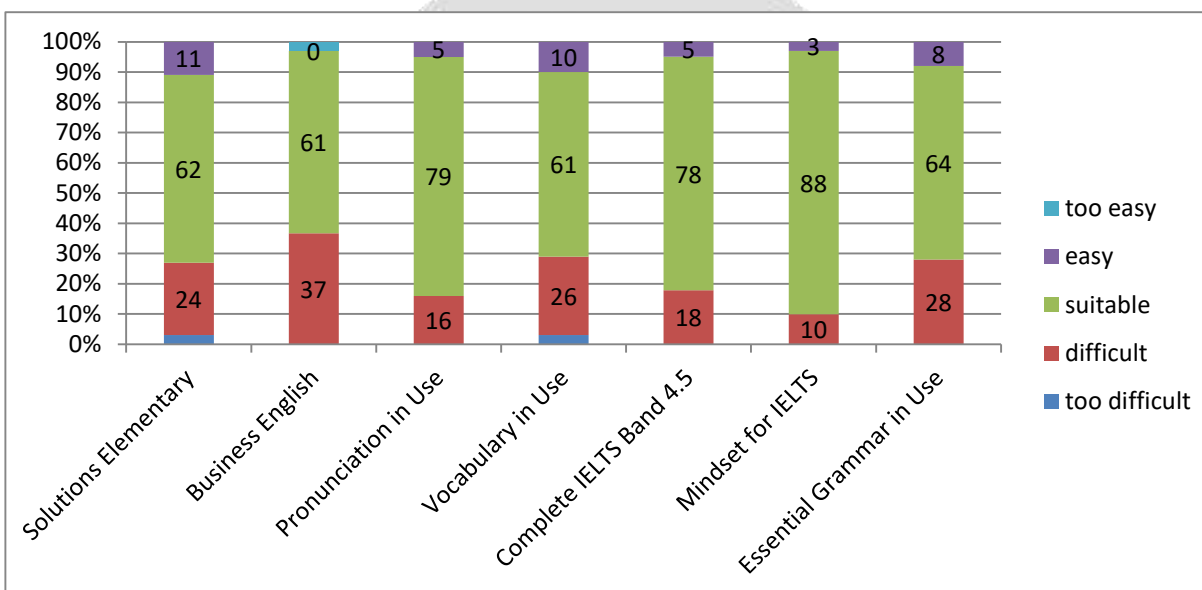
For Business English, the textbook for Business English subject, most of students (91%) agreed on its applicability on their major while only 9% of them thought that it was not very applicable.

It is quite interesting that many students (46%) appreciated that the textbook Pronunciation in Use helped them very much with their major. 38% said it helped them very much and in terms of their major while 15% of them said that it was not very applicable or not applicable at all.

For Vocabulary enhancement, 34% of students considered that the textbook Vocabulary in use was much applicable. However, 53% thought that it was not very applicable and 13% did not think it was applicable at all.

“Complete IELTS Band 4.5” and “Mindset for IELTS” are the two textbooks used to provide students with a fundamental knowledge about the IELTS Academic Test. Most students agreed on their applicability and usefulness. As can be seen from the chart, 67% thought “Complete IELTS Band 4.5” was much or very much applicable. For “Mindset for IELTS”, 83% had the same idea. Only 33% disagreed and 3% strongly disagreed on the applicability of the textbook “Complete IELTS Band 4.5”. For “Mindset for IELTS”, 15% disagreed and 2% strongly disagreed on its applicability.

Finally, for grammar subject, 63% considered that the textbook was much applicable on their major while 26 disagreed and 11% strongly disagreed with that.



**Figure 4: Students' assessment on the textbooks' suitability with students' level**

Figure 4 describes students' assessment on the difficult level of the textbooks. According to the data obtained from questionnaire, most students (average of 70%) considered that the textbooks used during the course were suitable with their level. Only a few of them said that they were difficult (average of 22%) or easy (average of 6%) to their level.

#### 3.1.1.4. Students' assessment on the sub-skills that they were taught

**Table 1: Students' opinion about the sub-skills they were taught**

Skill	Sub-skill	Number of students	Percentage
Listening	Listening for main ideas	28	70%
	Listening for details	1	3%
	Taking note while listening	25	63%
Speaking	Presenting topics in front of class/Public Speaking	31	78%
	Taking part in group discussion	26	65%
Reading	Skimming	23	58%

	Scanning	11	28%
	Writing the summary of the reading text	28	70%
Writing	Writing an academic essay	24	60%
	Writing reports	15	38%
Project related to economics	Yes	34	85%
	No	6	15%

Table 1 shows the difference in the students' idea of what they have been taught. For listening skill, more than a half of students admitted being taught the two sub-skills: listening for main ideas and taking notes while listening, while only one student (nearly 3%) agreed to be taught listening for details.

For speaking skill, most students (78% for presenting topics in front of class/public speaking & 65% for taking part in group discussions) harmonized in the sub-skills they were trained.

For reading skill, skimming and writing the summary of the reading text were concurred to be equipped for students by most students (58% for skimming & 70% for writing the summary of the reading text). However, just under a third of students thought that they were taught scanning skill.

For writing skill, over a half of students (60%) said that the sub-skill writing an academic essay was given in the writing lectures but only about 33% of them thought that they were guided how to write a report in accordance with different types of charts or figures.

Finally, students were asked whether they were taught to do a project related to economics. Most students (85%) said 'yes' for this questions while 15 % of them said 'no'.

#### 3.1.1.5. Students' self-assessment on the skills they have gained

**Table 2: Students' self-assessment on the skills they have gained**

Skill	Yes	No
Understand the majority of the lectures in English	91%	9%
Take notes of important contents when listening to the lectures	74%	26%
Write an essay in English	74%	26%
Write a report in English	81%	19%
Paraphrase what is read in English	84%	16%
Take part in an economic project in English	76%	24%
Take part in the discussion related to economics in English	58%	42%
Present a speech on the economic area in English	73%	26%

As can be seen from the table, for listening skill, 9% students said that they could not understand the majority of the lecture in English. 26% of them did not think that they could take notes of important contents when listening to the lectures.

For writing, also 26% students admitted that they could not write an academic essay after taking the English intensive course. 19% said they did not have the ability of writing a report basing on the given data collected from different types of charts and figures. 16% students disagreed that they could paraphrase what they had read with their own words.

For speaking skill, 42% students thought that they could not take part in a discussion related to economics in English, and 26% of them disagreed that they could present a speech on the economic area in English.

In terms of project research, 76% students thought that they could take part in an economic project in English.

#### 3.1.1.6 The evaluation on teaching performance



For teaching evaluation, there were 4 teachers whose teaching performance was evaluated by their students. Their names were coded by the letters: A, B, C and D, in which:

- Teacher A teaches Grammar, Pronunciation and Vocabulary subject
- Teacher B teaches subjects related to IELTS foundation knowledge
- Teacher C teaches the integrated English skills
- Teacher D teaches Business English

### 3.1.1.6.1. Students evaluation on Ms. A's teaching performance

**Table 3: Students' evaluation on teacher A's teaching performance**

CRITERIA	EVALUATE (%)			
	Not good	Fair	Good	Excellent
1. The objectives and requirements of each lesson are clear.	0	0	28	72
2. The lesson contents and textbooks meet the requirements and objectives of the subjects.	8	15	51	26
3. Effective teaching aids are used (PowerPoint, pictures, photos, video clips, etc)	0	8	46	46
4. Multifunctional teaching methods are applied to attract students' attention.	0	23	31	46
5. Teaching methods encourage students' abilities of thinking creatively and analyzing independently.	3	15	33	49
6. Students have opportunities to raise questions and discuss in groups.	3	15	33	49
7. Major knowledge and skills, which students have to approach, are emphasized.	0	0	41	59
8. Diversified questions are used to evaluate students' level of acquiring knowledge, and studying results	0	13	38	49
9. Faculty's behaviors to students	3	3	13	82
10. The language used is clear and understandable	0	0	23	77
Total	1.7	9.2	33.7	55.2

As can be seen from table 3, Ms. A was highly appreciated on the clearness of the lessons' objectives and requirements, faculty's behaviors and understandability of the language used for the lessons. According to the table 4, 72 % students said that the objectives and requirements of each lesson were clear. In addition, 77% thought that the teacher used clear and understandable language. Especially, 82% students agreed that the lecturer's behavior to students was excellent.

However, for the lesson contents and textbooks, only 26% of students considered them excellent while 15% thought that they were fair and 8% said that they were not good. Besides, the application of multifunctional teaching methods of the teacher was not highly appreciated by students. 49% of students conceded that the teacher used different teaching methodologies excellently to attract learners' attention while 23% of students graded the teacher's application of teaching methods at fair level. For criterion 5 (evaluating on teacher's methods to encourage students' abilities of thinking creatively and analyzing independently) and for the criterion 6 (students' opportunities to raise questions and discuss in groups), 3% of students did not think these criteria met the need, and 15% of students considered them fair. However, 33% of students thought that the teacher performed well on giving students opportunities to raise questions and discuss in groups and nearly a half (49%) said her performance on that was excellent.

### 3.1.1.6.2 Students evaluation on the teaching performance of teacher B, C, and D

**Table 4: Students evaluation on the teaching performance of teacher B, C, and D**

Criteria	Teacher B				Teacher C				Teacher D			
	Not good (1)	Fair (2)	Good (3)	Excellent (4)	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
1	0	0	21	79	8	13	39	40	0	5	10	85
2	0	8	23	69	5	10	53	32	0	0	30	70
3	15	28	44	13	3	13	37	47	0	0	20	80
4	3	3	36	59	8	25	35	32	0	0	20	80
5	0	5	36	59	10	18	30	42	0	0	20	80
6	0	5	26	69	5	30	27	38	0	0	10	90
7	0	5	31	64	8	18	38	36	0	0	15	85
8	0	11	38	51	8	23	33	36	0	0	10	90
9	0	0	10	90	5	25	35	35	0	0	5	95
10	0	3	10	87	8	28	37	27	0	0	5	95
<b>Total</b>	1.8	6.7	27.5	64	6.8	20.3	36.4	36.5	0	0.5	14.5	85

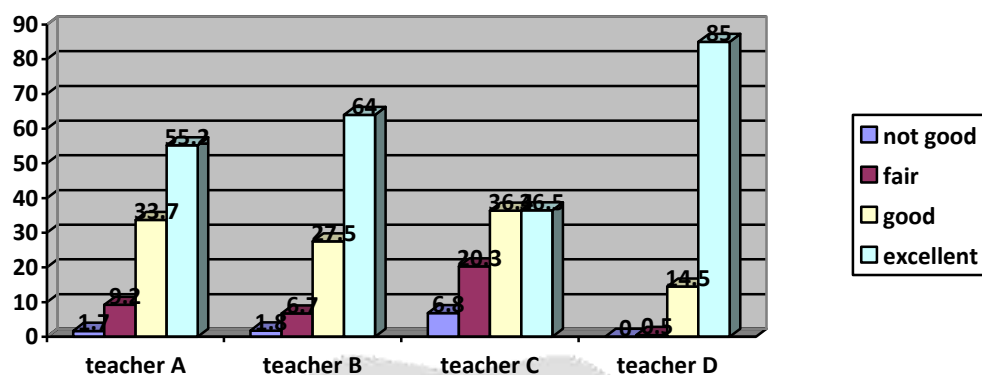
The significant feature of Mr. B's teaching performance is that he satisfied students with his behavior to them (90% said it was excellent), usage of the language (87% considered it excellent) and the clear objectives and requirements of each lesson (79% agreed that it was excellent).

However, for some aspects of teaching, Mr. B did not perform very well according to his students. For examples, regarding to his usage of effective teaching aids, only 13 % of students said that it was excellent while 28% evaluated it at fair level and 15% thought that it was not good. Besides, in terms of the teachers' using of diversified questions to evaluate students' level of acquiring knowledge and studying results, still 11% students put it at fair level.

As can be seen from the table, teacher C did not satisfy students much, in general. Students were not really attracted by her methods of teaching (8% said it was not good and 25% said it was fair). In addition, 35% of students did not think that they had many opportunities to raise questions and discuss in groups. For the language used by the teacher, 28% of students graded it at fair level and 8% said that it was not good. Also, in terms of using diversified questions to evaluate students' level of acquiring knowledge, and studying results, 31% of students did not really highly evaluate the teacher.

In general, teacher D is the one whose teaching performance was evaluated the most highly among the 4 teachers. He was excellently appreciated by 85% of students. Overall, only 0.5% thought that his teaching was fair. This teacher was especially liked by students (95%) in terms of using diversified questions to evaluate students' level of acquiring knowledge, and studying results and his language used in the classroom.

### 3.1.1.6.5. Comparison of the students' satisfying about the English teachers



**Figure 5: Comparison of the students' satisfying about the English teachers**

Figure 5 shows how the students were satisfied with each teacher. The teacher who most students really felt satisfied with was teacher D, teacher of Business English: 85% of students chose the option "excellent" and 14.5% of students believed that his teaching performance was "good".

For the teacher of IELTS foundation knowledge, teacher B, the number of students who highly evaluated his performance was quite high: 64% chose "excellent", and 27.5% thought that his teaching performance was "good". However, 1.8 % of students were not pleased with his lessons.

The teacher of Grammar, Pronunciation and Vocabulary - teacher A, ranked the third among those who satisfied the students: 55.2% considered her lesson excellent, and 33.7% of students agreed that her teaching activities were good while 1.7% of them did not like her lessons.

It was quite interesting to find out that the teacher of the integrated English skills, teacher C, was not highly appreciated by the students. Only 36.5% of students liked her teaching performance very much and 20.3 % of them thought her lessons were fair. The number of students who did not consider her teaching good was the highest one compared with the other teachers (6.8%).

### 3.1.2. The results of the interviews

To make the data more reliable, the researcher interviewed two teachers of English. The teachers were asked to evaluate the textbooks used for the course, the workload for each skill as well as their students' English proficiency regarding to the academic purposes.

#### 3.1.2.1 Answer to textbooks

When being asked about the textbooks used for the course, the two teachers had the same answer that all the textbooks but Business English could be better to suit students' level. However, they both agreed that the textbooks' usefulness also depended much on the teachers who were using them. They meant that the teachers could adapt the textbooks to make them suitable with students' level and the purposes of the course.

#### 3.1.2.2 Workload

For the workload, the first teacher had the idea that time would never be too much for students to study in the course. To him, it was even too little. He emphasized that one year of learning English was too short for students to meet the requirement of IELTS 4.5 at the end of the course to be able to further their study in English. He also indicated that it was very demanding for teachers to improve students' four integrated English skills as the time they could use for those skills was very little. However, the second teacher gave his agreement on time distribution for each skill but listening. He said that time for listening should have been longer.

#### 3.1.2.3 Students' English proficiency

In terms of student's English proficiency, the researcher got two nearly opposite ideas. One English teacher was quite confident of most of his students' English skills while the other disagreed with that. The reason for the first English teacher to feel unconfident of his students was that they did not have enough vocabulary, sentence structures, the syntax and experience of practicing speaking and listening to native speakers. In contrast, the second interviewee was quite confident in students' listening and speaking skills. He explained that the teachers at the International School applied a variety of activities; for example, pre-teach activities and follow-up activities and so on that could help students gain the skills effectively and quickly. However, regarding to students' note-taking and writing skills, they both agreed that these skills should have been taught more for students. The second English teacher claimed that note-taking skill required students to understand the contents logically, so it was hard for



beginning – level students. For academic writing, he also said that students could not do it well because he did not spend much time teaching that skill, but he focused much on the teaching of general English.

### 3.2. Discussions on the study results

As regards the number of years for which students have learnt English, we can see that students were not equipped equally with English preparation before going to university. The number of the years of student's learning English varies from 4 to 13 years. Therefore, there is a big gap here, which makes teaching and learning process much more difficult. In addition, the fact that students sat for entrance exams on different groups of subjects (group A, B, C, D) explains the dissimilarity of their English proficiency.

Figure 3 (c.f. 3.1.1.2) shows that most of the students were satisfied with the time spent on the teaching of each skill, which fitted with the idea of the second interviewee that the workload for each skill is quite suitable. For students' assessment on the teaching materials for each skill, the researchers also found out that students and teachers had the same idea that the textbooks were not very suitable. Especially, for the four integrated English skills Solutions Elementary was not considered suitable to students' major (by most of them); neither was "Vocabulary in Use", the textbook for broadening students' vocabulary. "Business English" was regarded as the most suitable textbook for the students' major.

According to figure 5 (c.f. 3.1.1.3), all the books were considered suitable to their English level (above 60% of students agreed with this), which can be understandable because most books used were at elementary level.

As for the academic English tasks including reading abstracts, understanding the key ideas, doing research projects, writing expository essays, it was quite interesting to have different answers. The percentage of students identifying the sub skills they were provided varied from 3% to 85%. That figure indicated that the students themselves were not aware of what they learnt or what they needed to learn from the course. For the teachers, both of them said that they should have given students many chances to practice note-taking skill, paraphrasing and academic writing. This meant that they were not very confident on those sub skills of their students. When being asked about students' ability to do a project related to economics, the teacher of business English definitely thought that most of students could do this because they practiced that skill a lot during the course, which was quite the same as the ideas obtained from students, with 85% of whom said that they were taught how to do an economic project and 76% claimed that they could do this task.

The data collected from the questionnaire showed that many students believed they could perform the skills related to the use of English as a medium of instruction in the academic environment after the course. However, the figure of students who thought that they could not gain the language skills was not a small figure counting from 9% to 42%. That figure fitted quite well with the teachers' ideas about students' language proficiency.

For teaching evaluation, students were quite satisfied with all the English teachers. The teacher of Business English was most highly appreciated. The second-rank teacher was the teacher of IELTS foundation knowledge. However, the teacher of the integrated English skills was the least preferable. The result of teaching evaluation seems logically when comparing with students' evaluation on the applicability of the textbook. The teacher who used the most applicable textbook was loved most by students.

In summary, the English course for academic purposes had its own effectiveness on students' language proficiency. However, because of many objective and subjective factors, some purposes of the course were not gained.

## 4. CONCLUSIONS

The findings revealed 4 aspects of students' course evaluation: workload, textbooks, self-assessment on their achievement and teaching performance. Also, through questionnaire, the researcher had an overview of students' background, which was very important for the evaluation as well as the pedagogical implications referred later on. Together with the student's evaluation, the interviews for the teachers were conducted in order to get their ideas of the students' language proficiency.

First, because of students' background of learning English is different, teachers should be aware of students' level at the beginning of the course. After that, they can form students in groups in which the good ones help the "weak" ones during the course. To do that, the training manager should design a placement assessment for all the students before the English course. The assessment should include 4 English skills: listening, speaking, writing and reading. The teachers need to have the academic records when they get involved in teaching at the department. Understanding students well helps teachers know how to give the lectures effectively.

The results showed that students were quite satisfied with the workload, especially the time spent for reading and writing skills. However, the findings suggested that the workload for speaking skill should be added. In addition, one of the English teachers said that one year of English learning was too short for students to get IELTS

4.5 or equivalent so that they could use English as a language to study their major subjects. Another teacher agreed on the workload for most language skills but according to him, the students should invest more time in listening skill.

For the textbooks, except for the book “Business English”, Pronunciation in Use and Mindset for IELTS, many students did not highly appreciate the application of the books to their major. However, most students agreed on the books’ suitability to student’s level. In comparison, the two English teachers seemed to have the same ideas as the students. Therefore, the English teachers and the staff of the Administrative Department should have a review of all the textbooks used and select the ones that are both suitable to students’ level and applicable to their major. For students at the beginning level, textbooks are very important because it is the guide for them to improve their English. In addition, the syllabus should be more specific, which should be strictly followed by the teachers.

For students’ self-assessment on the skills they have gained, most students thought that they could perform well on the skills they were taught. However, only 42% students agreed that they could take part in the discussion related to economics in English. The reason might be that the teachers, when teaching the first year students, focused much on General English. English for General Business Purposes was introduced in the second semester through only one subject “English for Business Purposes” which used “Business English” as the textbook. However, according to the teachers’ ideas, students needed teaching note-taking skill, academic writing and paraphrasing more. Then, students should be given much more instruction on such skills as note-taking skill, paraphrasing and academic writing, which are necessary for their study of business subjects in English. Especially, the teachers should design more speaking activities and group activities where students can undertake a research project or participate in a discussion related to business areas.

Regarding to teaching evaluation, in general, most students were satisfied with the English teachers. The teacher of Business English was most highly appreciated by the students. However, for the subject about the integrated English skills, more than one fourth of students were not really satisfied with the teacher. Therefore, together with choosing suitable textbooks for the course, they should make students understand well about the purposes of what they are teaching and the learning outcomes of the subjects. In addition, English teachers should use various techniques to encourage all the students to take part in the lesson. Also, the teachers should be more enthusiastic not only in teaching but also in insulting training managers the way to help students study well.

## 5. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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