

海外実務訓練の事前研修としてオンライン 英語コースの効果を測る

豊橋技術科学大学 2013年11～12月

ライアン ユージン

Abstract

本研究は、豊橋科学技術大学の4学年18名による、2か月のオンライン英語コミュニケーションレッスン受講の成果を、レッスン前後に行った質問票とスピーキングテストにより測定した結果を示すものである。2か月という短期間のレッスン受講による英語力向上は、ある程度限定的なものであることを予想していたが、結果としてはスピーキングテストにおいて7%のスコアの向上が見られた。質問票調査においては、90%近い学生が、何らかの英語力の向上を報告している。80%近くの学生がレッスン受講期間を短いと感じているが、大多数の学生がコースが効果的かつ楽しめるものであると感じている。また、数名の学生がレッスンにおいて、専門分野に関するディスカッションの機会がないことを指摘する一方で、大多数の参加学生は、レッスンが日常英会話の自信をつけるのに役立ったと評価している。

Measuring the Effectiveness of an Online English Course as Preparation for Overseas Internships: Toyohashi University of Technology Nov-Dec 2013

Eugene Ryan

Abstract

A group of 18 4th year students from Toyohashi University of Technology (TUT) were required to take a twomonth online course of communicative English provided by the company Rarejob. The students were required to complete at least 5 out of the 7 available 25-minute classes each week (maximum one per day). The type of lesson chosen, such as daily news discussion or TOEIC, was free for the students to choose. After completion of the online course, this group of students attended a 2 month internship with businesses in Penang, Malaysia where English was the main language of communication. The effectiveness of the online course was assessed by means of speaking tests before and after the course, as well as a survey.

Given the short duration of the course, it was not expected that there would be time for significant improvement in the students' English communication. In fact the speaking tests revealed an average improvement of 7% on the speaking test results. The survey supported this finding, with almost 90% of students reporting some improvement. Although almost 80% of students felt that the course was too short, a significant majority of students found the course both effective and enjoyable. Although some students felt that the course did not offer much specific support for discussing their specialist field in English, most of the group strongly endorsed this type of course for building confidence in daily conversation.

Introduction

In 2013 the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) awarded a substantial grant to a group consisting of Toyohashi and Nagaoka Universities of Technology and the Institute of National Colleges of Technology, Japan (KOSEN) with the goal of 'Fostering Globally- Engaged, Practical and Innovative Engineers ' As a part of this larger project (Tri-Institutional Collaborative / Cooperation Educational Reform Project), TUT initiated a program of Overseas Internships, making use of the newly opened research facility TUT-USM Penang in Malaysia. Since the internships would be conducted in English, the author, as an English lecturer at TUT, was asked to assist in preparing the students.

Unfortunately, speaking and listening tend to be the weakest English skills of Japanese university students, in spite of the many hours of English study spent at high school. In part this is because such skills have traditionally been overlooked in the Japanese education system, where students are not required to speak for the English section of the competitive university entrance exams. Even in the world of work, the standard measure of English ability is still the TOEIC test, which has no written or oral components.

It is the author's opinion that while grammar for example can be taught reasonably effectively in a large class setting, the skills of speaking and listening develop correlatively to one-on-one time with a native speaker. Given the short time available (two months) for the course and the size of the group (18 students), the author felt that even an intensive group class would be a relatively inefficient way of providing each individual with enough conversation practice.

In this context, the author suggested to TUT that they employ the services of an online conversation company. Recently some such companies have been employing exclusively Filipino teachers, which combined with use of the free Skype video call service enables them to provide a highly affordable product (around 150 yen for a 25 minute lesson). Such companies are now popular with Japanese businesses, and are increasingly used in University education. It was decided that TUT would try using one of these services for a two-month trial program as preparation for the overseas internship. The company selected (Rarejob), was chosen on the basis of its relatively low cost (under 6,000 yen for a month of lessons), its reputation (winner of three lid awards 2012 in the English conversation school category) and popularity amongst businesses (Go to <http://www.rarejob.com/corporate/enquete/> for a customer survey by Rarejob of its business users).

Methods

Students on the course were required by TUT to complete a goal of five twenty-five minute lessons a week, out of a maximum total of seven. Students could take a maximum of one lesson per day, at any time between 6 am and 1 am the following day. In order to take a lesson, students needed

to first download Skype, which is a free provider of online video calls. For students who had not completed their goal of 5 lessons for the week, they were expected to attend one or two lunchtime supervised lessons to make up the total. The majority of students attended these lessons when requested. Prior to taking each lesson, students needed to choose a teacher from the Rarejob website. Students had the option of listening to a short audio introduction by the teacher to get an idea of the teacher's level and style of English. Students could also select teachers based on their profile, including their language ability in Japanese, their educational achievements (such as limiting teachers to those who were graduates or students of the University of the Philippines) and their areas of specialist teaching. Students were free to choose from any of the lessons available, which included free conversation, daily news discussion, grammar, TOEIC and TOEFL. Depending on the type of class students could sometimes also specify which level of class they wished to choose, out of beginner, intermediate and advanced levels.

In terms of monitoring student progress, the author had access as the course supervisor to data from Rarejob showing the number, type and level of lessons taken over the duration of the course. All participants on the course were asked to complete a survey in Japanese, which is included at the end of this report (See appendix A). For the purposes of this paper, the author translated the student comments into English, with assistance from a Japanese native speaker. Finally each student underwent one five-minute interview at the start of the course, with a subsequent interview after the course was completed. Interviews were conducted one to one with the author. Students were asked if it would be acceptable to record the interview. In all cases students assented to this request. In order to measure students' conversational skills, the author used a score sheet (See appendix C), which tested five skills (Interactive communication, extended response production, grammatical range and accuracy, lexical range and accuracy, pronunciation) on a five-point scale, making a maximum possible score of 25. The great majority of the interviews took place face to face, however for the post-course interview about one third of the students were interviewed over Skype. The reason for this was that not all of the students had the time to complete the post-course interview before beginning their internships in Malaysia.

Results

The results are divided into 5 sections, which are as follows:

A: Duration and frequency of study

B: Type of study

C: Quality of service

D: Course effectiveness

E: Student improvement

A: Duration and frequency of study

Questions 1 and 10 of the survey addressed the number of lessons students completed each week on average. As stated above, the students could take as many as 7 lessons a week (one per day), and were requested by TUT to take 5 per week. Question 1 asked the students to self-report on the number of lessons they took per week. Question 10 asked the students to say how many lessons they thought would be ideal. In fact precise data was available from Rarejob to indicate how many lessons students had actually taken. The data from these sources is shown together in Figure 1.

Students estimated that they had completed 4.16 lessons a week, which was remarkably close to the actual figure of 4.13, which the data provided by Rarejob showed. Student lesson completion then was 80% of the target requested by TUT. In total, each student completed an average of 36 lessons, ranging from a low of 19 to a high of 59. Judging by the overall favourable attitude of students to the program (See fig. 8), and the fact that the majority of the students felt that the course was too short (See fig. 3), it can be surmised that their failure to meet the goals set for them was not due to a problem of motivation, but rather due to the students being busy because they were facing the deadline for their graduation research in December (See figs. 11-12).

Regarding the compulsory catch up lessons for students who had failed to complete their target, student opinion was fairly evenly divided (See fig. 2)

Although a large number of students were undecided, more students were opposed to such lessons than were in favour, by a margin of 5%.

Regarding the overall length of the course, student opinion was fairly clear. Only 6% felt that the course was too long, whereas 76% felt that it was too short, with a third of those feeling that it was much too short. As will be seen below, many students felt that the brevity of the course limited its effectiveness (See figs. 11-12).

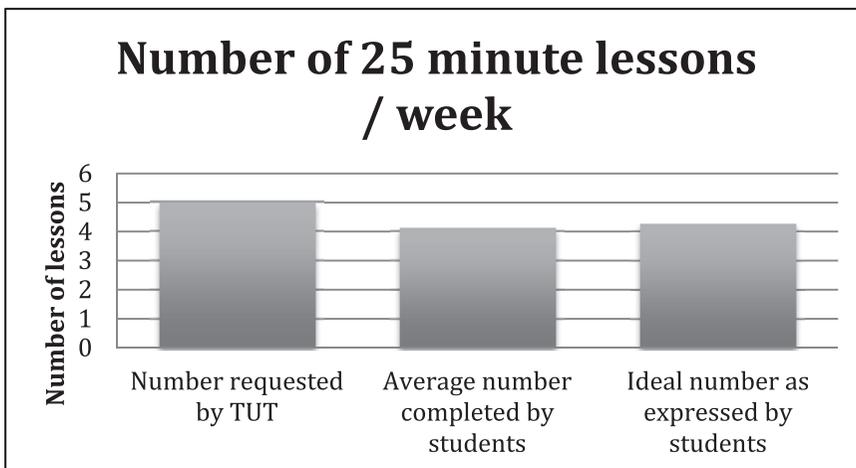


Figure 1. Number of 25-minute lessons/ week

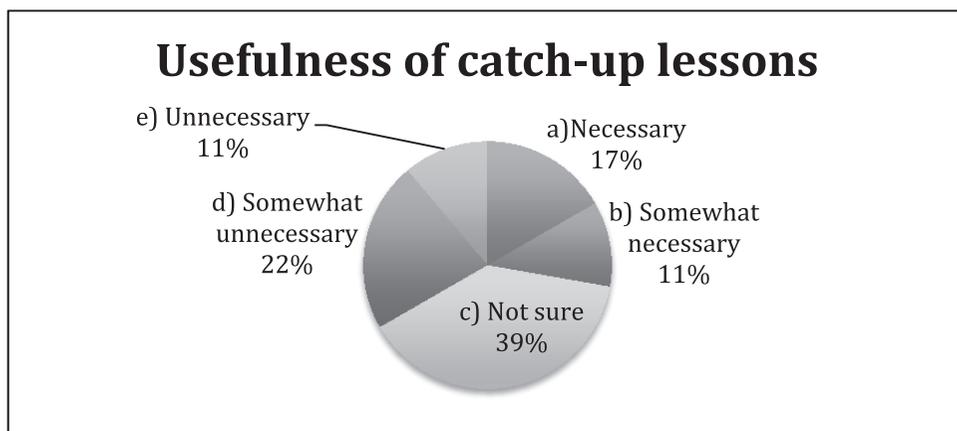


Figure 2. Catch-up lessons

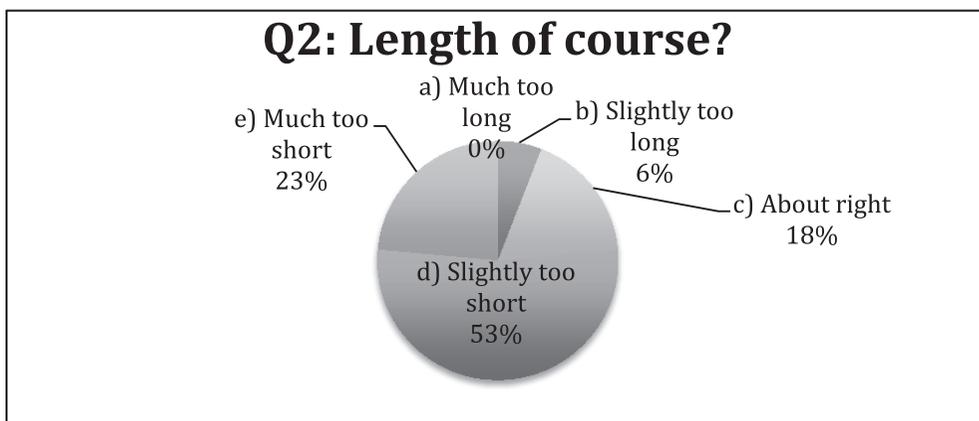


Figure 3. Course length

B: Type of study

Question 7 of the survey asked students which type of lesson they preferred of those offered by Rarejob. For this question also we were able to use the actual lesson data from Rarejob to determine student lesson selection.

Figure 4 shows the student's expression of which type of lesson they preferred. Figures 5 and 6 show what type of lesson the students actually took, in terms of type and level respectively. Figure 5 shows that more than a quarter of all actually lessons taken were non-conversational, such as grammar, TOEIC and writing lessons. However when we examine figure 4, we can see that when it comes to assessing the effectiveness of those lessons, 85% of students felt that conversation based lessons (various types of conversation and daily news discussion) were the most effective for this type of study.

This finding suggests that students were aware of the particular advantages of this type of study compared to classroom study, namely that they could conduct real, live conversations, which were based on their own interests or the news events of that time. Student comments on the overall effectiveness of the course in response to questions 5 and 6 (see figs 8,9.) underline their awareness of these strengths.

Regarding the breakdown of lesson type by level, of the roughly half of classes taken which were level specific, about two thirds were taken at beginners level. No advanced level classes were taken. A simple explanation for this would presumably be that students wanted to make things easier for themselves. As stated elsewhere, many students felt that they struggled to find time for the classes at all because of their research workload. Given that the free conversation classes had no lesson

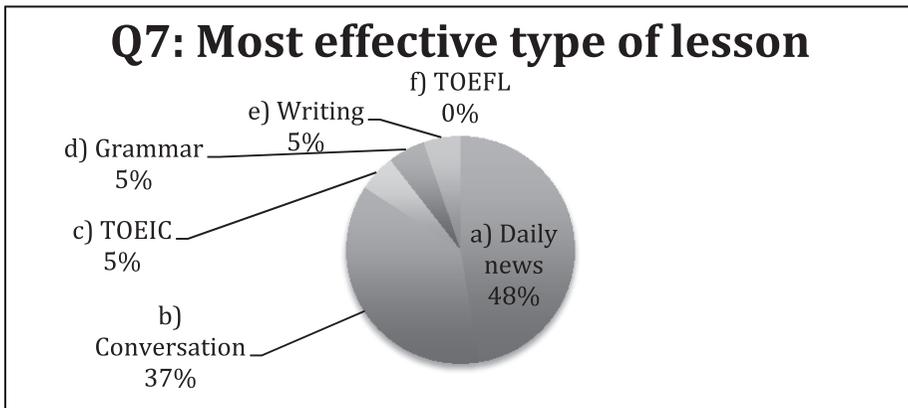


Figure 4. Most effective type of lesson

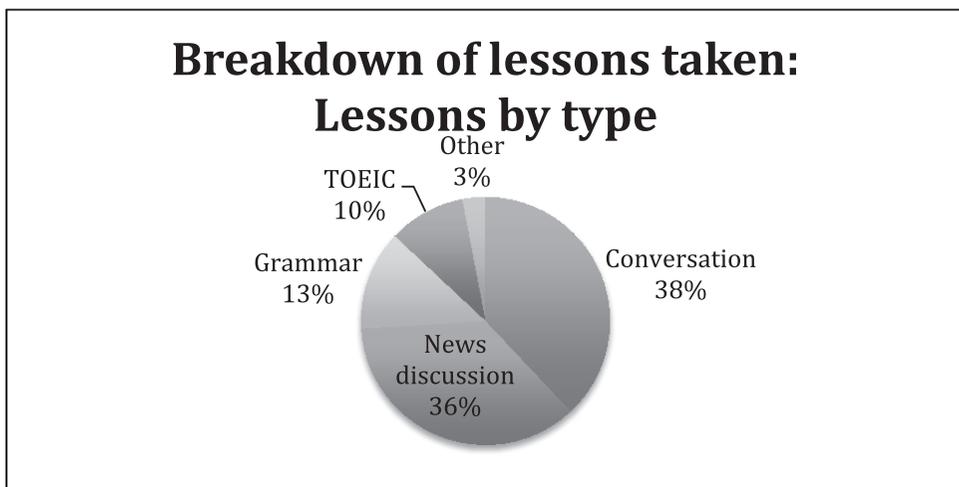


Figure 5. Lessons by type

content, it is likely that the level of the class had little bearing on the actual level of conversation. The author supposes that the lower levels chosen were less an expression of the students' true ability than a mixture of other factors, such as low confidence about their ability, or the simple wish to make the lessons easier and so less stressful.

On the other hand, several students complained that they were frustrated by the lack of availability of more specialized study materials (see fig.12). This course immediately preceded their overseas internship, and they may have been concerned that the lessons gave them inadequate preparation for discussing their specialized research areas. Once they arrived in Malaysia however, it would seem that some students changed their attitude. One student commented that explaining his research to non-specialists (the various teachers he had) regularly, prepared him well for the reality of his internship, where he frequently had to introduce himself to many people from various backgrounds.

C: Quality of service

Question 8 of the survey asked the students if they encountered any kind of trouble with the service provided by Rarejob. Compared to a regular classroom lesson, two possible areas of concern were anticipated. Firstly, as the lessons rely on a good internet connection and the smooth running of Skype, there existed the possibility of technical trouble with the line. Secondly, while Rarejob apparently endeavors to ensure that its teaching-staff are high quality as explained above, it is not possible for the school (in this case TUT) to conduct its own quality control of the teachers. The nature of Rarejob courses is such that it is likely that any one student will make use of several

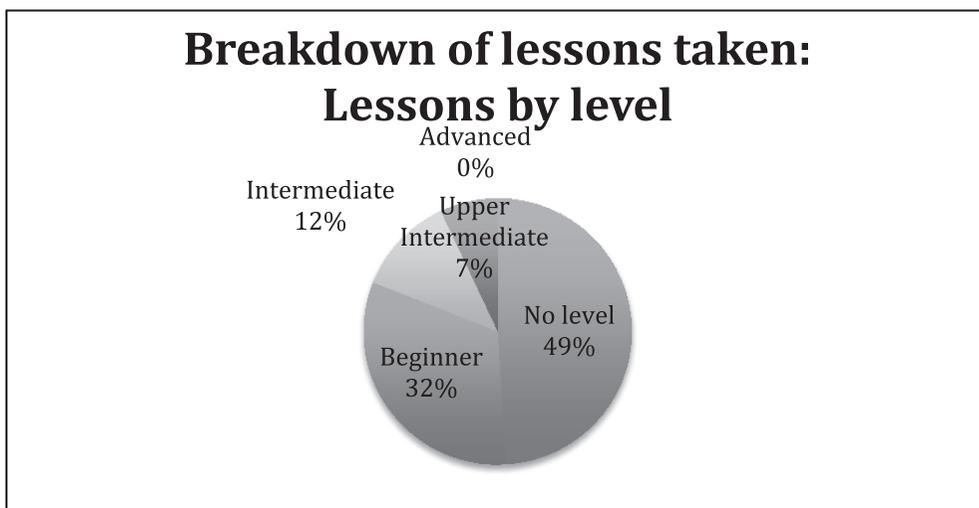


Figure 6. Lessons by level

different teachers, so the author anticipated that the quality of teachers may be uneven. In fact both of these predictions proved to be accurate to a degree. All problems expressed were with 'Teacher trouble' or 'Line trouble'. As for the latter, four students mentioned that the line was either poor or cut out altogether on at least one occasion. As for the former, excepting one complaint that the teacher was not prepared for the class, the remaining 3 comments stated that the teacher failed to turn up online although an appointment had been made. One of these students declared that they were ultimately satisfied because they were provided with a free compensation lesson. Another said that they later discovered that the absence of the teacher was connected to the impact of Super-Typhoon Haiyan, which devastated the Philippines in November of 2013 while the course was ongoing. In fact, given that this typhoon was the most destructive the Philippines has ever experienced, and may have been the strongest typhoon in terms of wind speed ever recorded, it is remarkable that more disruption was not experienced. Overall, almost 60% of students reported no problems with the service.

D: Course effectiveness

Question 5 (see fig. 8) asked students if online conversation classes represented an effective method of study or not. Almost 90% of the students felt that such classes had some effectiveness, with half of those rating them as being very effective.

A similarly strong endorsement emerges if we consider the breakdown of comments written in reply to Question 6, which asked students to explain their choice of answer for Question 5. Out of 29 comments made (each student could make multiple comments) 21 comments (72%) were positive whereas only 8 (28%) were negative. Let us now consider the breakdown of positive and negative comments by type.

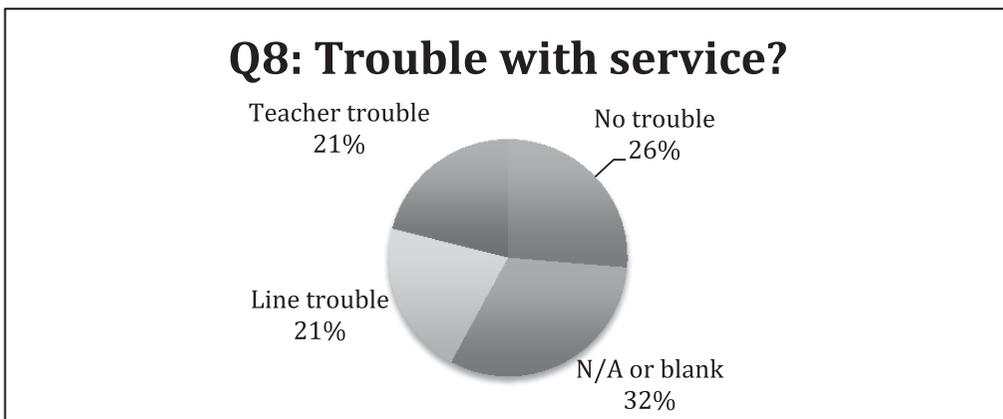


Figure 7. Service Quality

Q5: Effectiveness of using an online conversation course ?

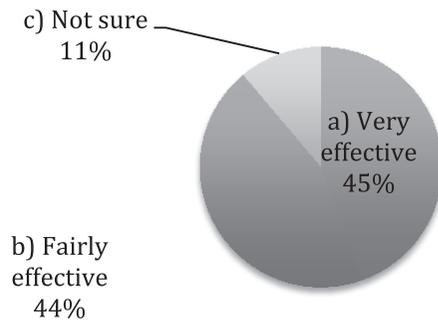


Figure 8. Effectiveness of online course

Q6a: Reasons for effectiveness



Figure 9. Breakdown of positive comments

Figure 9 analyses the types of positive comments made in response to Question 6. The most popular reason given for the effectiveness of the course emphasized a particular strength such lessons have in comparison with classroom lessons, namely that communication is *real* and *live*. When students are asked to produce English in a classroom, in most instances they will be either drilling or roleplaying. Their communication is likely not genuine, but rather a structured practice of a particular point. Genuinely free communication is unlikely to occur. In addition, a student's conversational partner, whether teacher or student, is highly likely to be able to resort to Japanese if necessary to clear up misunderstandings. In the case of using Rarejob, students did have the

option of choosing teachers who spoke Japanese, however judging by their comments they rarely did so. This meant that students in their online lessons were in a situation where English was the only means of communication. Considering that three quarters of lessons taken by students were discussion based, it can also be considered that such lessons required more spontaneous and unscripted English than is typically required from a classroom lesson. Several students said that they appreciated this 'real' nature of the lessons., such as in these comments:

'Speaking and listening to English for real is very important. We could learn real English even in lunch time in Japan.'

'I don't normally have the opportunity to construct sentences by myself, or to express my own opinions. By repeatedly using natural daily English with my teachers, I could easily learn many useful expressions.'

'This method was effective because I had the opportunity to talk with foreigners which is rarely present in Japan.'

Thus, by being both relatively spontaneous and open the online lessons provided a closer approximation to the kinds of English students may need to use in real life.

Three other types of reason for the effectiveness of this study method tied in equal second place on 24% each. The first of these reasons emphasized the virtue of having a study session available on a daily basis, such as in this comment:

'Thanks to the daily lessons I acquired the habit of studying English.'

Amongst the skills listed by those students who cited an improvement in skills thanks to the course were speaking, listening, expressing opinions, pronunciation and reading comprehension. The remaining 24% of students cited that the course was effective in a general sense.

One overall result would certainly seem to be that speaking English became more enjoyable. Figure 10 shows the results of Question 4, which addressed this point directly. Over 70% of the students felt that English conversation became more enjoyable, whereas no student felt that it had become less so.

Figure 11 on the other hand examines what type of negative comments students made in response to Question 6. The most common type of negative comment (50%) was to pick up on a deficiency of this teaching method. Two students suggested that it was hard to find teachers whose level of English teaching matched what the students were looking for.

'Students are free to choose the text for their lesson, but I'm not sure if the texts were suitable for my level of English.'

'This method may be effective for lower to intermediate level, but I think it's not so effective for higher level students.'

One other student suggested that the virtual aspect of online conversations detracted from their effectiveness.

Q4: Did speaking English become more enjoyable?

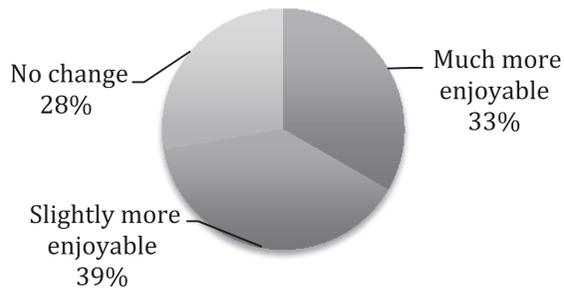


Figure 10. Enjoyment of English conversation

Q6b: Reasons for ineffectiveness

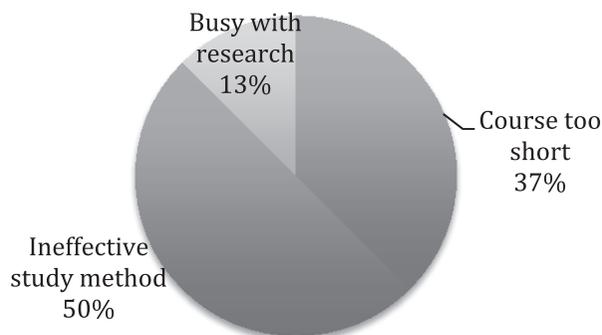


Figure 11. Breakdown of negative comments

'Having lots of conversation opportunities is effective, but the most effective method is to have such conversations face to face.'

The student's opinion is logical, however the cost of replicating the one-on-one teaching of Rarejob live using faculty staff would likely be prohibitive.

The remaining 50% of criticisms were not with the course itself, but rather its timing. One student complained that the timing of the course coincided with the deadline of their graduation research, the busiest time in their school year.

'The timing of the course clashed with the busiest period of my research, so it was really hard to find

time for lessons, and I was often exhausted when I took them.'

The remainder of the complaints (37%) stated that the students felt that the course was too short to be really effective, such as this comment:

'I got better at speaking and listening, but more time would be required if the goal is to master English.'

Overall then, it can be seen that regarding the effectiveness of the course itself, positive comments outweighed negative ones by a ratio of five to one.

Figure 12 shows the breakdown of comments by students in response to Question 9, which asked them to focus more specifically on the effectiveness of the online course as a preparation for the students' overseas internship program, which began shortly after the completion of the course. The 52% of comments that were positive about this aspect, represents a sharp drop from the 90% of students who felt that the course was effective in general (see fig. 8).

Reasons expressed for the ineffectiveness of the course as preparation for the overseas internship program (see above) closely mirrored those for the general ineffectiveness of the course (see fig. 11). Roughly one third of the negative comments stated that the course was too short, and another third complained that the clash with a busy period of research made it difficult to find time for lessons. However the remaining third remarked that they were dissatisfied with the level of expertise of the teachers in technical English relating to their research field rather than simply the English level of the teachers in general.

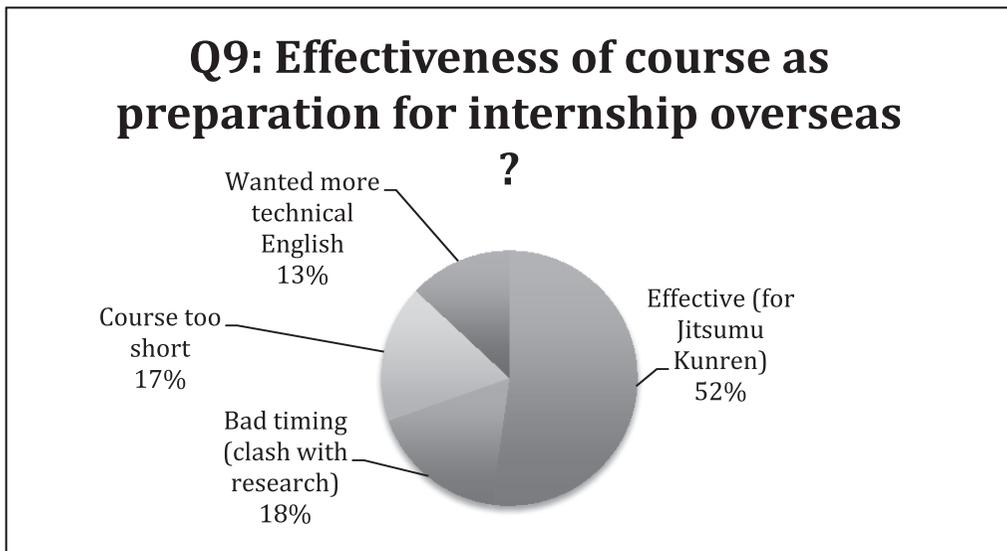


Figure 12. Specific effectiveness as preparation for internship

Given that each student has their own specialized research field with its particular jargon, it is unsurprising that teachers were often unfamiliar with such language. Students had the option of accessing the profile of each teacher before choosing one for a lesson, and could check the specialist knowledge of each teacher in advance. It is unclear whether or not students took advantage of this possibility, but given how specific each student's research specialisations were, it seems unlikely that they would be able to easily find a teacher who could fully understand their research.

The pattern of positive comments also somewhat mirrored those given for the course in general in figure 10. Positive comments generally referred to the benefits of the course for teaching conversation:

‘ Being able to use real English to express my ideas was totally unlike the situation in my classroom English lessons, and I found it very refreshing. Even having only 30 minutes a day is a very effective way of mastering daily English conversation. ’

‘ I lack confidence in daily conversation, and especially business conversation, but by talking with my Rarejob teacher I felt that I was somewhat able to overcome this barrier. ’

In terms of specific preparation for internship, while the course may have been weak on specialist language, some students felt that it had other strengths, .:

‘ I think that the Rarejob lessons provided a great simulation of communicating abroad for someone who has never had such experiences. The continual practice of introducing myself to different teachers will likely prove very useful for when I have to introduce myself to different people on the internship. This kind of practice would be good in a general lesson anyway, but it is essential as preparation for our internships. ’

The practical usefulness of the English students learned on the course seemed to become clearer once they actually started the internships. Skype conversations I had with students who had already started the internship confirmed this point.

Overall then, a slim majority of students were satisfied with the course as a means of preparation for internships abroad. As one measure of this, 11% of the students stated that they would continue with Rarejob lessons out of their own pocket. Of those students who felt the course was ineffective, only 13% criticized the course itself, with the majority complaint being that teachers lacked knowledge of the student's specialist jargon.

E: Student improvement

Student comments on the survey provided one means of measuring progress as discussed above. In addition the author used five-minute interviews before and after the course as discussed in the methods section. The verbal content of the interviews was scored from 0 to 25, and this data was used to examine student progress.

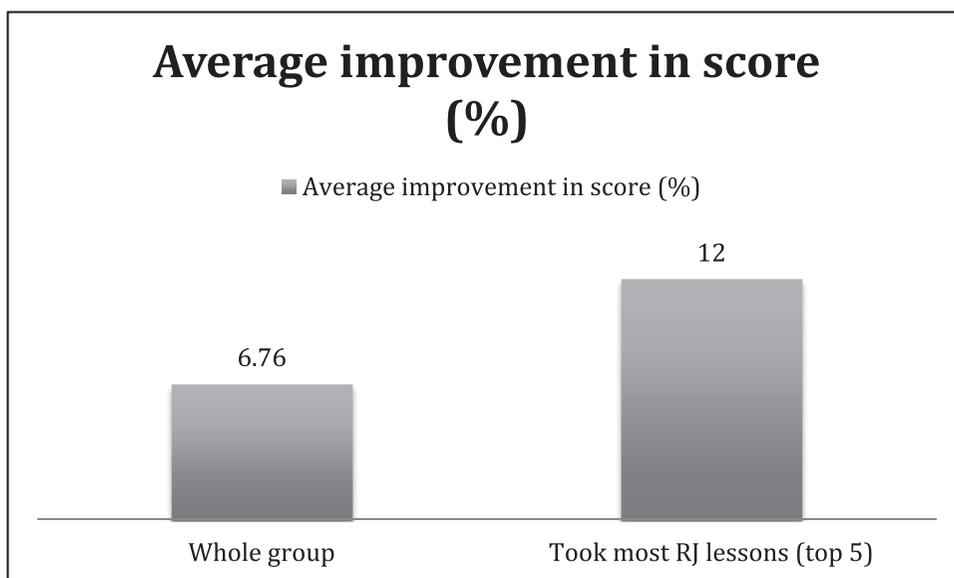


Figure 13. Student improvement

Overall, as we can see in figure 13, there was some small improvement in student scores.

On the whole the average score of the group increased by about 7%. As a whole the group took on average 36 lessons over the duration of the course, which represented 83% of the number of lessons they had been required by TUT to complete. In order to examine whether the number of lessons taken correlated with student improvement (as measured by the interviews), the author then looked at the data for the top 5 students in terms of lessons taken. This group completed an average of 48 lessons during the course, representing 110% of the target they had been set. The average improvement in this group was 12%, almost double that of the group as a whole.

This would appear to suggest that taking more lessons on the course was correlative with improving speaking and listening skills. However the author should state that he is inexperienced in formally assessing spoken language, and as such is uncertain of the reliability of the data provided by the tests. Formal testing was provided by Rarejob as an additional-extra, but the cost was considered prohibitive by TUT, since the cost of having a pre and post-course test would have almost doubled the cost of the course as a whole.

Conclusion

All the data suggests that overall the use of the online course was an effective method of improving the students' ability and confidence regarding English conversation. The student group registered a small increase (7%) in their speaking test scores, and the majority of the group felt that

the course was both effective (89%) and enjoyable (72%) as a means of education. Given the flexibility of lesson access and the strikingly low cost (about 6,000 yen for one month's worth of daily 25 minute lessons) the author feels that it can be a highly effective tool for training students in English speaking and listening. Student comments emphasized their appreciation of these lessons as being authentic daily conversation.

In terms of the effectiveness of such a course as preparation for overseas internships, only 13% of comments were negative. However students had significant concerns about the timing of the course and its length. The course exactly coincided with the deadline for the students' graduation research, which made it hard for some students to find time for the lessons. Many students also stated that they felt that the course would have been more effective if they had been allowed to do it for longer. While some students felt that the course was weak on technical language, others appreciated how it built up their confidence for talking to others in English.

In conclusion, the author feels that online courses such as that provided by Rarejob should be seriously considered for special programs at TUT in the future. In order to make such future courses more effective, thought should be given to the timing and length which best suits the students' needs. Services like Rarejob have their limitations at the upper end of technical language, but the simpler everyday communication skills it can improve are nevertheless essential for the successful development of global engineers.

Appendices

Appendix A: Survey for students. (Japanese version)

実務訓練学生のオンライン英語講座アンケート (2013年11・12月)

問1. 毎週平均何回レッスンを受けてみましたか? 【 】 回

問2. 講座の期間の長さ (今回2ヶ月) についてどう思いますか?

a) 長すぎる b) 少し長い c) ちょうどいい d) 少し短い e) 短い

問3. 2ヶ月の講座を完了して、自分の英語 (話す、聞く力) はどの程度アップしましたか?

a) とてもアップした b) 少しアップした c) アップしなかった

問4. この講座のお陰で英語を話すのが楽しくなりましたか?

a) 楽しくなった b) 少し楽しくなった c) 変化なし d) いやになった

問5. 英語の勉強の方法としてオンライン会話はどの程度効果があると思いますか?

a) とても効果的があった b) 少しは効果があった c) 効果があるかどうかはわからない

問6. 問5で回答を選んだ理由を簡単に説明してください。

問7. レアジョブのレッスンはどのタイプ（たとえ会話、デイリーニュース、TOEFL など）が一番役に立ちましたか？

問8. スカイプやレッスンの予約について何かトラブルがあった人はここで簡単に説明してください。

問9. 実務訓練の学生としてレアジョブのレッスンについてどう思いますか？

問10. この講座で週5回のレッスンを目標としました。週何回のペースが最適だと思いますか？

【 】 回

問11. この講座では週5回の目標を達成できなかった学生は火・水曜日のランチタイムに特別レッスンを受けるルールがありました。この特別レッスンの必要性についてどう思いましたか？

a) とても必要 b) 少し必要 c) 必要があるかどうかわからない d) あまり必要ではない e) 不要

Appendix B: Survey for students. (English version)

SURVEY OF RAREJOB COURSE: NOV – DEC 2013

Question 1. On average, how many lessons a week did you manage to take?

Question 2. How did you feel about the length of the course?

- a) Much too long b) Slightly too long c) About right d) Slightly too short e) Much too short

Question 3. Taking into account the length of the course (2 months), how much do you feel that your spoken English has improved since the start of the course?

- a) Great improvement b) Some improvement c) No change

Question 4. Do you find speaking English more enjoyable than at the start of the course?

- a) Much more enjoyable b) Slightly more enjoyable c) No change d) Less enjoyable

Question 5. Is online conversation an effective way to practice English?

- a) Very effective b) Fairly effective c) Not sure d) Fairly ineffective e) Very ineffective

Question 6. Please explain simply the reasons for your answer for Question 5.

Question 7. What kind of lessons did you find most helpful? (For example free conversation, daily news article, TOEFL etc.)

Question 10. If you had any difficulties connecting using Skype or problems booking lessons please explain these problems.

Question 11. What do you think of doing English conversation lessons online? (Required question).

Question 12. For this course you were required to do 5 lessons a week. How many lessons a week do you think would be reasonable given the time you need to research?

Question 13. Students who were unable to complete 5 lessons a week were asked to attend lunchtime sessions on Tuesdays and Wednesdays. How did this affect your motivation to reach your weekly goals?

- a) Very motivating b) Slightly motivating c) No effect d) Slightly demotivating e) Very demotivating

Appendix C: Score sheet for interviews

Name :

Number:

Total: /25

Assessment for Speaking Skills

Assessment Criteria	1	2	3	4	5
Interactive Speaking and Listening Ability					
Production of extended responses					
Grammatical Range and accuracy					
Lexical range and accuracy					
Pronunciation					

