

ELT010

The impact on students of British Council teaching centre EFL classes

Final report

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July 2009



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Summary

This study explored the impact on students' lives of British Council EFL courses. Impact was viewed here as going beyond the immediate goal of language improvement and examined the consequences of studying English more broadly. Qualitative interviews were conducted between January and April 2009 with a non-random sample of 47 former and current British Council students in Muscat, Cairo, Rome, Madrid, Kuala Lumpur and Ho Chi Minh City.

The findings of the study suggest that British Council EFL courses have significant impact on the lives of students. The precise nature of these impacts varied across the centres studied and even among individuals in these centres. The major forms of impact identified across all centres related to the following issues:

- Employment prospects, performance and promotion
- Access to education and professional development
- Use of technology
- Leisure activities
- Intercultural communication
- Intercultural understanding
- Confidence
- Attitudes towards English and the UK
- Access to information
- Service encounters
- Citizenship

This report first discusses in turn the specific impacts identified in each centre, before commenting on the overall types of impact to emerge here. Suggestions for follow-up research are made and the report concludes with a comment on the practical implications of these findings for the British Council.

1 Introduction

This report presents the results of a study into the impact on students of British Council Teaching Centre English as a Foreign Language (EFL) courses. I first outline the rationale and objectives of the study together with the methodology used before moving on to present the findings. The report ends with a summary of key themes to emerge here and recommendations which they imply.

1.1 Rationale

This research project was driven by a need to understand, in ways that extend beyond end-of-course student evaluations and exit measures of students' linguistic proficiency, the nature of the impact that taking an English language course at a British Council teaching centre has on students. Impact is here taken to refer broadly to the ways in which EFL classes are felt by students to enhance their lives; more specifically, such impact can be seen in terms of how EFL classes might enhance students' personal development, professional growth, organisational development, interpersonal/networking skills, academic and economic potential and capacity for intercultural dialogue and sensitivity (the literature on the potential benefits of foreign language learning generally was also considered here¹). Empirical evidence of the ways in which British Council EFL classes impact on the lives of students is valuable in a number of ways; it can inform the British Council's own internal planning and review processes; it can demonstrate the impact of the British Council's work to external agencies to which it is accountable; in a research sense, it can also add to current knowledge about the difference to students' lives that learning English as a foreign language makes.

1.2 Objectives

This study addressed the following research questions:

1. To what extent do British Council EFL courses impact on students' lives?
2. What kinds of impact are most powerfully experienced by students?
3. Where students feel that their EFL course has had limited impact on their lives, what factors do they feel have contributed?

The third question was originally included here to guard against the assumption that only positive evidence of impact would be identified through this study. In other words, the study was open to the possibility that little evidence of impact would be found; however, as the results below will show, there was no evidence of lack of impact and consequently this third question will not be discussed in this report.

2 Methodology

Data for this study were collected through face-to face semi-structured interviews² with a non-probability sample of 47 mostly former (but in some cases current) British

¹ See, for example, the research summarized on the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages website at <http://www.actfl.org/i4a/pages/Index.cfm?pageID=4527>; relevant background for this project is also provided in Graddol, D. (2006). *English next*. London: The British Council.

² For a discussion of qualitative interviewing strategies, see Bryman, A. (2008). *Social research methods* (3rd ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Council learners in six locations (chosen by the British Council to represent a range of teaching centres): Muscat, Cairo, Rome, Madrid, Kuala Lumpur, and Ho Chi Minh City. Table 1 summarizes the data collection phase of the study. The respective British Council centres were responsible for recruiting interviewees on the basis of pre-defined criteria. Target respondents were individuals who:

- had taken a general EFL course with the British Council;
- had completed this course 6-12 months previously;
- had at least an intermediate standard of oral proficiency in English.

The target number of respondents in each centre was 10. As Table 1 shows, this target was fully met in two cases. Gender-wise, the group was split almost equally between males and females (24 males, 23 females). Specific information about each set of respondents will be given when I present the results below.

Table 1: Data Collection

Date	Centre	Interviews	Total Length
14-18 January 2009	Muscat	6	1 hour 50 mins
19-22 January 2009	Cairo	6	2 hours 54 mins
22-25 March 2009	Rome	8	4 hours 10 mins
25-28 March 2009	Madrid	7	3 hours 34 mins
4-7 April 2009	Kuala Lumpur	10	4 hours 24 mins
8-11 April 2009	Ho Chi Minh City	10	5 hours 22 mins

The interview schedule used in this study appears in the appendix. This was the final version of the schedule, progressively developed through each successive phase of the project. The questions in this schedule were informed by the literature on learning English and learning foreign languages generally, by discussions with the British Council and by the analysis of documents relevant to the British Council's overall mission and strategy³.

In total, over 22 hours of interview data were collected. The interviews were conducted in English and, with respondents' permission, digitally recorded. They were transcribed in full and analyzed using established strategies for working with qualitative data⁴; briefly, this involved (through a process of close readings) identifying recurrent themes in the transcripts (e.g. the kinds of impact which emerge), collating interview extracts which provide evidence for each theme, and producing an account for each theme, supported by relevant quotations from the data.

To clarify the purpose of the interview to the respondents I started each interview with the following points: (a) I was doing this project for the British Council but that I was not their employee (i.e. I was independent); (b) the interview was not an evaluation of the quality of the British Council's courses; (c) the interview was not an assessment of the respondent's English; (d) my interest was in understanding the impact on them of studying English with the British Council; and (e) all responses would be treated confidentially.

³ *Making a world of difference: Cultural relations in 2010* (2006); *Trust and understanding: Intercultural dialogue* (2008); *The British Council: An Introduction* (2008);

⁴ See, for example, Dörnyei, Z. (2007). *Research methods in applied linguistics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

I will now present the findings for each centre in turn and follow this with an overall analysis of the key themes to emerge from this project. Two general findings can be mentioned before proceeding. First, all respondents were asked why they chose the British Council as their English language course provider. The overwhelming answer across all six sites was reputation – the British Council is seen globally as a reputable provider of high-quality English language courses⁵. Second, respondents were asked how satisfied they were with the British Council courses they did. Responses were generally positive, though in some centres individual respondents highlighted issues they were less satisfied with. I will not comment on these issues further as they are beyond the scope of the current project.

3 Muscat

3.1 Profile

Table 2 summarizes the profile of respondents in Muscat. All respondents here were former British Council students. An unexpected national holiday (announced due to the national football team’s success in a regional tournament) on a day when interviews were scheduled was the reason for the lower number of interviewees (in relation to the target of 10) here.

Table 2: Muscat respondents

Respondent	Level*	Gender	Age ⁶	Nationality	Length of Interview (minutes)
M1	INT	M	30s	Omani	15
M2	INT	F	30s	Omani	17
M3	INT	M	20s	Omani	20
M4	UPP INT	F	30s	Omani	19
M5	UPP INT	M	30s	Omani	19
M6	INT	M	30s	Egyptian	20

* Level = highest level studied at the British Council (INT = Intermediate; UPP INT = Upper Intermediate)

3.2 Impact of Studying with the British Council

The interviews with Muscat respondents identified a number of ways in which these individuals felt that studying English had been of benefit to them. I do not focus on specific linguistic benefits here or in the rest of this report; it is assumed throughout (and respondents confirmed this) that British Council EFL courses did enhance respondents’ proficiency in English. The focus in this report is on understanding more general non-linguistic impacts on respondents’ lives.

3.2.1 Benefits at work

This was a commonly identified benefit, which is understandable given that most respondents wanted to improve their English for work-related purposes. Respondents noted that as a result of their English course they were able to do their job more effectively; they could use English to complete tasks at work more efficiently and

⁵ Native English-speaking teachers were one factor which respondents said attracted them to British Council courses. Given current debates in the field about the status of native-speaker teachers of English, learners’ views about native and non-native teachers, while beyond the scope of this study, merit separate investigation in their own right.

⁶ Respondents were asked for their age group – under 20, 20-29, 30-39, 40-49, 50+

communicate with greater ease with colleagues who did not speak Arabic. One respondent explained that improvements in his English at work had not gone unnoticed:

SB: And so one question is, have you been using English in your life after the course?

M6: Sure I told you what was said from the beginning, I am working with, I think foreigner peoples who are not using Arabic too much in our country, that's why it's improved my English inside the company also, even my manager said, I think your English after this, the course has become better than before.

3.2.2 Use of technology

Respondents also noted that improving their English had enabled them to increase their engagement with technology, particularly the internet. In one case this was facilitating the respondent's task of finding a university to study at in the UK:

SB: What about on the internet, does English help you on the internet, or is it mostly Arabic sites?

M5: Of course, of course, it is very important English now, you know that it's the world language. I have, I use many English websites, especially in the university, when I check for universities and that.

SB: So English is helping you to find the information you need about your [course].

M5: Yeah.

There was not much evidence in this group, though, of using English for e-mail communications, particularly socially and with people outside Oman.

3.2.3 Service encounters

Another area of life where English had impacted positively on respondents was that of service encounters. There is a large expatriate workforce in Oman, and service encounters involving shopping, healthcare, and domestic services (e.g. laundry) often need to be conducted in English. Healthcare seemed particularly important:

M6: Something else very important you have to have English in this country, you know why ...? Even if you are going for the medical.

SB: To a medical clinic?

M6: Yes, all the staff there talk English, because they are not talking Arabic, so how do you expect them to know what you're feeling or something, so you have to do it, to talk and do it in English.

SB: And they're speaking English because they're not Omani?

M6: Yes, yeah not Omani, maybe 5% only in Oman, and he is not able to understand exactly what you would like to say to him. So you can use all English also medical.

3.2.4 Confidence

Another area of impact mentioned by this group was that they felt more confident talking in English to people from other countries. There was not much evidence here of intercultural engagement on any significant scale, though one respondent did narrate this episode:

SB: What about when you're travelling, does English come in handy there?

M6: Course. Yeah, sometimes I coming from Salalah, I sit beside I think English man from UK.

SB: On the plane?

M6: Yes on the plane, we are together on separate seats. So I so interested to talk to him, and he is also nice man, I am talking with him maybe almost one hour until we arrive from Salalah.

3.2.5 Attitudes towards the UK

Studying with the British Council also had attitudinal impact; it confirmed or even strengthened positive views respondents already held about the UK. It also countered less positive political images of the UK (e.g. due to its military involvement in the region). Language teaching centre teachers were often seen as representatives of the UK and their behaviour towards the respondents seemed to impact on how the latter felt about the UK more generally:

SB: And did studying here with the British Council, did it make you like English people more, or did it not change your feelings?

M4: Yeah I like more.

SB: Yeah, you like them more? Can you tell me why?

M4: They are very kind here.

SB: So the people you were working with here, the teachers were kind?

M4: Yeah they're kind, yeah.

SB: And they made you like English people more?

M4: Yeah.

The Omani respondents did not offer any comments of a political nature on the UK; the Egyptian respondent in this group, however, did:

SB: And do you think the way the British are shown in the media, do you think it influences people a lot here?

M6: Muslims now, now all Muslim in front of the eyes he [UK government?] considers a terrorist or something, but if you're dealing with other UK ... they are kind ... and they are not interested in what they're seeing this. So the same happened with us dealing ... to us or hearing only about the British we can say in my class always killing and the war and, but when we are dealing with them here in the UK they are so kind, they are really, and helpful too much they are so kind, and they're ready to help you in any time. So there is different images. (M6)

This perspective suggests that British Council teaching centres may have a role to play in countering adverse political views or media portrayals of the UK where these exist.

4 Cairo

4.1 Profile

Table 3 summarizes the profile of respondents in Cairo. These respondents were all former students. Failure to meet the target of 10 students here was due to individuals not turning up for appointments they had previously agreed to.

Table 3: Cairo respondents

Respondent	Level	Gender	Age	Nationality	Length of Interview (minutes)
C1	UPP INT	M	30s	Egyptian	32
C2	UPP INT	F	<20	Egyptian	28
C3	UPP INT	M	30s	Egyptian	31
C4	UPP INT	M	30s	Egyptian	32
C5	UPP INT	M	30s	Egyptian	23
C6	UPP INT	M	30s	Egyptian	28

4.2 Impact of Studying with the British Council

4.2.1 Benefits at work

Many specific examples of how an improved knowledge of English had enhanced Cairo respondents' performance at work did not emerge in the interviews. It was implicit, though, that English was in many cases an important part of their working contexts (e.g. e-mail correspondence, communicating with clients, attending international conferences) - and an important factor in enabling them to do their job well and to progress along the career ladder. As one respondent explained, English is "becoming the main qualification that's in all jobs ... You have to know English to get the job" (C2).

One respondent agreed he was able to perform better at work as a result of improving his English:

SB: So do you feel that you're better at your job because of your improved English?
C1: Now?
SB: Yeah.
C1: Yes it's, now I, better than when I applied in my job.
SB: Better than when you started yeah.
C1: Yeah.

Another also linked improved English to better performance in his job as an executive salesperson:

SB: And so if you want to move forward in your job and to get a better job maybe is English going to help you do that?
C4: Yes of course, because it's a language for business, yeah, I have to yeah.
SB: So knowing English helps you do better.
C4: Yes, yes of course.
SB: Better business, more sales?
C4: Yes, yes.

4.2.2 Social use of English

Although there was no strong evidence here that studying English had enhanced respondents' social use of English, in some cases it was clear that it had. One respondent, for example, had many international friends and communicated with them via social networking sites:

SB: There are questions here about using the internet in English, from what you're saying you do a lot of that do you?
C2: Yeah, my best friends are English.
SB: How did you meet these people?
C2: Through chatting, meeting them.
SB: On?
C2: Facebook.
SB: Facebook, discussion, chat rooms and all of that. So you've got friends from lots of different countries?
C2: Yeah.
SB: So English is important there as well. Do you feel that you do more of that now than you did before you studied with the British Council?
C2: Yeah it made it easier for me to communicate with them.

4.2.3 Attitudes towards the UK

The views about the UK expressed by the Cairo respondents were varied. They generally distinguished between historical-political perceptions of the UK (which were negative) and their own more positive experiences of the British. Once again, British Council teachers played a role in shaping these experiences:

- SB: I'm also interested in how you feel about the UK generally and about British people, you seem to have positive feelings about them?
- C1: Yeah I have all positives. They may say here we have different religions but they don't think it's a problem at all because they know how to do something right. They have principles....
- SB: And when you were studying here at the British Council did you see that in the British people you met here?
- C1: Yeah, they were very fair, fair indeed and they knew how to do their work well.
- SB: And you think that's a characteristic of British people generally?
- C1: Yeah.

The respondents talked about their teachers being fair and honest and felt that such dispositions characterized the British more generally.

4.2.4 Citizenship

Cairo respondents felt that a better knowledge of English allowed them to be better citizens; it enabled them to do their jobs better and when this involved international interactions gave a good impression of Egyptians and Egypt:

- SB: Does being able to speak English help you to be a better citizen of Egypt in anyway?
- C1: Of course.
- SB: Can you tell me, give me an example of how?
- C1: There is a, when I have a different language, my Arabic, French or English, this make me a good person to, in my work and when I meet another people.
- SB: Because you can do your job better?
- C1: Better yeah.
- SB: You're being a better citizen yeah and English helps you?
- C1: Yes I can handle with another nationality.
- SB: Yes you're able to talk to other people.
- C1: Talk yeah.
- SB: And maybe, you think that gives them a good impression then?
- C1: Yes, yes, good impression.

Respondents also noted that people outside Egypt often have negative attitudes about the country, and "So when you did your job perfectly and in a good manner you change your, how they think of us" (C3).

5 Rome

5.1 Profile

Table 4 summarizes the profile of respondents in Rome. Two of these were current students. 10 interviewees were recruited but two withdrew due to unforeseen circumstances.

Table 4: Rome respondents

Respondent	Level	Gender	Age	Nationality	Length of Interview (minutes)
R1	CAE	M	30s	Italian	29
R2	UPP INT	F	30s	Italian	29
R3	Proficiency	M	40s	Italian	39
R4	UPP INT	F	20s	Italian	30
R5	UPP INT	F	30s	Italian	30
R6	Proficiency	M	<20	Italian	33
R7	CAE	F	30s	Italian	32
R8	CAE	M	20s	Italian	28

CAE=Certificate in Advanced English; Proficiency = Certificate of Proficiency in English.

5.2 Impact of Studying with the British Council

Once again, respondents identified a number of ways (other than the obvious improvement in their language proficiency) in which studying with the British Council had impacted on them. None of these recurred in any outstanding way, with each individual having their own perspectives on how their courses had benefited them. In comparison to the Cairo group, one point that does not emerge here is that studying with the British Council influenced respondents' attitudes to English and UK. Generally, the Rome respondents had positive views on these issues both prior to and after their courses.

5.2.1 Better job prospects

Respondents noted that a better knowledge of English gave them improved job prospects. One, for example, explained that "if you do not speak English nowadays you are out of a lot of markets" (R8); another felt that improved English was "a good opportunity to change job ... Better fees, when you are paid a salary" (R5).

5.2.2 Greater intercultural understanding

A number of respondents commented on how a better knowledge of English enhanced their intercultural understanding. For one, this meant "a better way to understand the place[s] that you visit" (R5). For another, respect for others was a value embedded in British Council courses and this enhanced students' respect for and attitudes towards others:

Well of course there are differences between individuals and also cultural related differences. I think this was a place where learning to know differences, for example a basic rule in the course is respect, so you can, you're told, you use English, you meet different opinions. Often, or maybe your teacher has different opinion, or he lives in Italy but he thinks something about Italy ... you learn English, there is lesson, but there are, yes these kind of rules are help the lessons but also help to modificate (sic) your, to change your attitudes towards people. (R2)

Studying English also promoted intercultural understanding by making it possible for individuals from different countries to enter into dialogue. This process helped minimize potential conflicts among diverse cultural groups:

Well, obviously language can help mutual comprehension, so it can help not to exaggerate some conflicts, obviously it can help to create a world citizenship because with the English you can talk with almost every student of the world. Because nowadays almost every student of the world know a bit of English it can help peoples to know better other peoples because previously I would have never had a contact with a Arab speaking, or a Chinese speaking, while nowadays through the English I can communicate with them. (R8)

5.2.3 More international contacts

Individuals whose work involved international networking also noted that improving their English had facilitated the task of developing contacts. As one respondent explained:

if you are able to speak English you have more contacts all over the world. If you have more contacts you would be able to be part of more projects and in my, in the kind of things that I do at my work it's really important to be part of several projects because you can develop different useful things for it. (R1)

5.2.4 Better performance at work

Another positive impact of learning English was improved performance at work. One respondent, for example, noted that as a result of their studies, "now it took me about

50 minutes or half an hour to write something that [previously] took me one day, two days" (R1).

5.2.5 Increased access to information

An enhanced knowledge of English also provided respondents with increased access to information. One explained that "English can help you because you can know better a lot of things with the internet" (R8). Another respondent elaborated on this theme:

English is, represents a sort of freedom for me. I didn't study English at school I studied French so I started learning English when I was 15 and then I was more than 25, I think I was maybe 27 when I came to British Council. And I felt also a need to access more information, more news, more, and yes I now have these opportunities so I feel very free and it depends on English courses probably ... now I can read newspapers in English, I can read websites and this is very important to me. (R2)

5.2.6 Ability to read original English books

Three respondents mentioned how improving their English had given them access to original literature in English (as opposed to reading translations or simplified versions). One said that "now I read one Italian book I will read four or five [in English], I like to read, the reading in my speciality, and I like to read fiction or an essay or something in English yes" (R3). Another described the pleasure he derived from reading a book about mathematics in its original:

For example last year I read the Fermat's Last Theorem in English because the author is English and the mathematician who demonstrate this theorem is Andrew Wiles and he's an English. I was able to read the book and I enjoyed it really, because well I, it was a great emotion to read this book in [English] (R1).

5.2.7 Greater ability to travel

A number of respondents commented on how improving their English had given them the confidence to travel. One explained that "two years ago I went to the United States and I had this sort of, I felt new to this place, I didn't know a lot of things but I had the confidence that I could ask and understand" (R2). English made it possible for them to travel to places which they did not feel they could have otherwise gone: "this summer I went to India ... I went with a friend of mine, OK? So we were two girls in India alone, and without English it would be impossible" (R7)

6 Madrid

6.1 Profile

Table 5 summarizes the profile of respondents in Madrid. Here, too, 10 interviews had been lined up; two advised in advance they could not attend while there was one no-show.

6.2 Impact of Studying with the British Council

A range of impacts are presented below. Attitudes towards English and UK did not once again seem to have been affected by respondents' courses; they generally held prior positive views on these issues which remained unchanged by their time at the British Council.

6.2.1 Work-related benefits

Several respondents stressed the increasing importance of English in the workplace in Spain. Not knowing English was seen as a disadvantage and respondents felt that their courses with the British Council had given them enhanced job prospects:

SB: Is this true for your field, for, or for jobs generally in Madrid now, you must have English?

R5: Well, it's a bit curious because English is supposed to be very important for all jobs because everybody has decided here that everybody has to speak English so when they are searching for somebody they'll always write in their requirements, English, so it's not clear that English is always required for that particular work but

SB: They say it is?

R5: Yes, and there is always an interview in English.

SB: Really?

R5: Yes.

SB: For any job? Yeah, for most jobs, yeah?

R5: Practically, for most jobs.

SB: That's interesting. So English is becoming more and more important then?

R5: Yes.

SB: In Spain, yes.

R5: Because employers want to ensure that if English is needed in a particular moment, they have a person there able to speak English.

Amongst the Madrid respondents, the biochemist who worked as a patent attorney said she could not do her job without a knowledge of English, while the translator working for the rail company also used English regularly. The nurse who was about to take up a job in Saudi Arabia also depended on a knowledge of English to get this job. The patent attorney also noted that English allowed her to keep abreast of her field – "Scientifically, you lag behind if you don't know English" (M4).

Table 5: Madrid respondents

Respondent	Level	Gender	Age	Nationality	Length of Interview (minutes)
M1	Proficiency	M	20s	Spanish	29
M2	UPP INT	F	20s	Venezuelan	32
M3	Proficiency	F	20s	Spanish	28
M4	Proficiency	F	30s	Spanish	21
M5	Proficiency	F	40s	Spanish	34
M6	Proficiency	F	30s	Spanish	31
M7	Pre-Proficiency	F	50s	Spanish	39

6.2.2 Intercultural communication

Respondents referred to the added ability to communicate with people around the world that their knowledge of English gave them. In one case such communication was work-related:

now every day more and more people speak English and that's a positive thing because for example for my work now when I have to speak with someone from Portugal I speak with him in English, we don't speak in Spanish even though I think maybe for someone in Portugal it would be easier to learn Spanish than to learn English, but it's for sure that the chosen language now it's English. (M3)

In another case, though, the respondent felt that studying English allowed her to feel a stronger connection with the world generally:

Yeah, English is like, it connects people from all over the world, it's a link between different cultures, different people, different countries So it gets you, it gives you the feeling that you're more connected to the rest of the world and I think it's very positive, yeah. (M6)

This respondent had friends around the world and her knowledge of English, combined with technology, enabled her to communicate with them; she said that "I communicate by e-mail with other different people in English and I think I write more in English than in Spanish" (M6).

6.2.3 Access to higher education

Higher Education in Spain is not generally heavily dependent on a knowledge of English. One of the respondents here, though, was going to do an MA in France, and to access this programme she needed to supply evidence of proficiency in English. Her courses with the British Council allowed her to obtain the certificate she needed and thus facilitated access to postgraduate studies for her. She did not study in the UK because the language requirements there were beyond those she possessed.

6.2.4 Entertainment

For one of the respondents in particular, knowing English impacted on her life in a significant way by giving her access to English language movies and music. As she explained:

English connects me with the things that I love, which is music, movies, everything that is entertaining outside of Spain, because I don't, I'm not into Spanish music or things like that. I need English to enjoy them" (M6)

I asked her if her life would be the same without English:

No, not at all because ... if I didn't know English that would be very difficult, it will be very, it wouldn't be so comfortable to, for me to do the things that I want and maybe I would have felt more distance to the things that I like because English is, it makes you, in my case it makes my life easier or it makes me, easier for me, it makes it easier for me to enjoy life. (M6)

Another respondent noted his improved ability to listen to the radio in English following his studies at the British Council.

6.2.5 Reading

The way a knowledge of English provided access to original literature in English surfaced again here. One respondent explained that "I have found it useful to know English because I have found that translated books are not always very well translated so it's simpler then to read in the original language in order to know exactly what the writer wanted to say" (M5); another expressed her views in this way:

M4: I like literature, and I like to read, I don't know, Robert Graves or Fitzgerald, or I don't know, Henry James.

SB: And you like to read these in the original?

M4: Yes.

SB: That gives you a certain pleasure?

M4: Yeah, yeah. I like to fight with them.

6.2.6 Travel

The impact a knowledge of English had on respondents' ability to travel recurred in the Madrid interviews. One said "I try to go to an English speaking country at least once a year" (M4) and acknowledged that knowing English facilitated this. For another, travel was the main reason why she learned English; she expressed satisfaction that as a result of her studies she was able to visit the UK and "we have been able to understand and to be, everybody understood us, me and my husband" (M7).

6.2.7 Respect for others

One respondent recounted an experience where he was asked quite firmly (but politely) by a British Council teacher to “put your cell phone on silent because they, because if not the other students are not going to be able to follow the class” (M1). He said that the respect shown by the teacher both for rules and for others (the other students in this case) had an impact on him. It made him more aware of the importance of rules and of the need to be considerate to those around us. Once again, we see here how teachers’ behaviours may have an impact on students which extends beyond linguistic development.

7 Kuala Lumpur

7.1 Profile

Table 6 summarizes the profile of respondents in Kuala Lumpur. All the participants from this centre were current students. It was not possible to gain access to former students because they lived a considerable distance from the British Council centre in Kuala Lumpur. This centre was also by far the most diverse in terms of respondents’ nationalities – only 50% were from Malaysia (more generally, Malaysian students were in the minority in this British Council centre).

Table 6: Kuala Lumpur respondents

Respondent	Level	Gender	Age	Nationality	Length of Interview (minutes)
KL1	UPP INT	M	<20	Malaysian	23
KL2	UPP INT	F	20s	Iranian	25
KL3	UPP INT	F	<20	Malaysian	22
KL4	UPP INT	F	20s	Polish	27
KL5	INT	F	20s	Korean	28
KL6	UPP INT	F	<20	Malaysian	29
KL7	INT	M	20s	Malaysian	27
KL8	INT	M	20s	Iranian	27
KL9	UPP INT	F	30s	Japanese	26
KL10	UPP INT	F	30s	Malaysian	30

7.2 Impact of Studying with the British Council

English is a second language in Malaysia and, particularly in Kuala Lumpur, is widely used in the media, for service encounters and for everyday communication. In this context a knowledge of English is also essential for study and professional purposes. This is clear from the range of themes below which emerged from the Kuala Lumpur respondents’ comments on the impact of learning English on their lives.

7.2.1 Intercultural communication

A common theme in the Kuala Lumpur interviews was the impact that learning English had on respondents’ ability to interact with, understand, and develop relationships with others. Such benefits occurred in the language classroom itself:

But I think it’s good when you know, because you see I’m in a class, there are a lot of people from different places, so when we are speaking we can use the same language, we understand each other, so there will be less misunderstanding, you know, so. (KL3)

They also occurred in Malaysia more generally:

SB: Now because Malaysia has got many different ethnic groups, does that mean that sometimes you need to speak English, because you have different mother tongues?
KL1: Yeah, yeah, to me, yeah, because most people that I have known just speaks English, yeah, so it's like the language that unites us.

Another respondent gave the example of having Tamil-speaking friends with whom English was the language of communication.

There were also references to intercultural communication on a global scale:

KL6: English yeah has changed my life, and English also helps me to get to know other people, and English also helps me to communicate and, yeah communicate with people yeah.

SB: So it's changed your life because?

KL6: Because I can get to know other people using English language ... if I want to get to know people from other countries I have to use English.

Several respondents said they had friends overseas (e.g. in Australia) and that English allowed them to communicate with them (especially via e-mail and the internet).

One respondent felt that English allowed her to overcome feelings of isolation and loneliness she experienced before they knew the language. Knowing English, she said, "make me happy, because last time when I came to Malaysia, I couldn't communicate with anyone, so I feel lonely". (KL2)

7.2.2 Access to Higher Education

The role that English played in allowing access to higher education was also mentioned by several respondents. This was true both for those studying in Malaysia as well as for those who had studied or were planning to study overseas. One respondent felt that studying at the British Council developed in her the knowledge of language she needed to cope at university:

being in British Council, the teachers English Council teach me the complicated tenses and everything, so I prepare myself in the basic rules in English so that when I step up from British Council I can use everything that I learn here in the university. (KL6)

Another had completed pre-university studies in Australia and without a knowledge of English that would not have been possible.

7.2.3 Opportunities at work

The Kuala Lumpur respondents generally had limited work experience; one who did have a job, though, did explain how studying English had given her opportunities she would not have had and had increased her value to her organization:

The opportunity to be here is not that easy ... my company has put up all the money staying here, not everyone get this opportunity. You have to have a good grade or at working and you have some score in English, yeah it is English is a huge part of becoming this worker, this kind of worker so it [knowing English] actually helped me a lot. (KL5)

7.2.4 Greater confidence

An enhanced knowledge of English also affected respondents' confidence, particularly in situations where they needed to use English. One respondent explained this impact in this way:

KL4: I think I made a big progress but I had to speak, I want to speak very fluently and very fast. And it's like you need sometimes some time to speak very well or to write very well and a lot of people from outside said me oh you speak very good now, and before I

was very stress when I have to tell something in English, I was scared that I made mistakes or something like this, but now in the school I have to speak English with my classmate so I'm more open.

SB: And you're more relaxed about it?

KL4: Yes, yes.

SB: And more confident too?

KL4: Yes as you said I am more confidence now.

7.2.5 Cultural awareness

Respondents also noted how studying in mixed nationality groups with the British Council gave them opportunities to learn more about different cultures; Iran was a particular place that several respondents mentioned in this context given that there were a high number of Iranian students studying English with the British Council in Kuala Lumpur:

because before here I didn't actually know the difference between Iran and Iraq, I'm not very interested in politics or other nations around me. But because I have friend from here, I have friend from Iran and I have friend from Iraq. So from the moment I was I mean can I have a question oh how different Iran and Iraq. So last weekend I tried to search what's different from I mean between Iran and Iraq and what's their country like, what's the weather like and what's the people like? What is the religion they believe, so it was quite weird. (KL5)

One result of these opportunities for cultural awareness-raising was that respondents' attitudes to certain countries did change. As one explained, "Now I know a lot about Iran ... I change my mind before I felt that they are really strange people but they are just normal people" (KL4).

7.2.6 Attitudes to English

There were also examples here of how studying English with the British Council had strengthened respondents' already positive attitudes to English. One, for example, explained that she felt that the course, "by helping the way I speak ... made me feel a lot better" (KL1) about English. There was evidence from many respondents that they felt their English was improving as a result of their studies with the British Council and these feelings would have thus impacted positively on their attitudes to English generally.

7.2.7 Leisure activities

Another impact of learning English was that it enabled participants to engage in leisure activities where English was needed. One, for example, explained how English enabled her to attend a scuba diving course where the instructor was an English speaker. For several others, English gave them access to the internet, movies, television and music. One explained the pleasure that watching movies in English provided:

Yeah, yeah, because every day I watch one movie in my home, so actually English is so important, because I'm tired of watching TV in Persian, so now I can enjoy, it is enjoyable, yeah. (KL2)

Regarding how English provided access to information on the internet, another explained:

For my leisure, I'm really interested to searching the internet about news, or some other things, especially regards sport, or sport event, or something else. And as I told you, it's, nowadays ... it's really good for me because I can search about for example real Chelsea website, and I don't need to wait to Iran, some Iranian site translated him and put them in news. Or I can find some, many different comments for some fans up in special club, I really like it." (KL8)

This same individual stressed the importance of access to the internet by saying that “nowadays without internet the life is I think not useless or meaningless” (KL8).

7.2.8 Travel

The role English plays in facilitating international travel was also mentioned a number of times here. As one respondent put it, “when you travel to another country you have to use English as, when you want to ask for direction and everything, so that’s the importance of English” (KL6).

7.2.9 Access to unbiased information

Finally, one Iranian respondent reflected on the impact which English had on him by facilitating access to unbiased information about the world:

in my country if you don’t know English you have to listen only Iranian channel or can read only about Iranian newspapers, and then you know only things that the government wants you know. And when you know English you can search on the internet, then you can find more real things, more than the Iranian government wants to tell you about it, maybe for a problem, especially about Israel and Palestine, that’s where you could find every time in Iranian TV programme they are talking about, all the time they are talking now the Israelian, or why Israelian, or it’s unfair the Israelian. And on the other hand sometimes I have seen in BBC or some other ... embassy, or somewhere, they showed about Iran, it’s Palestinian, stupid bombing or terrorist acting, and that’s why I’m really interested to know about another languages, that it can help, helps me to find more truths about my life and about my world. (KL8)

8 Ho Chi Minh City

8.1 Profile

Table 7 summarizes the profile of respondents in Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC).

8.2 Impact of Studying with the British Council

English in Vietnam is very much a foreign language with growing importance in the field of higher education and particularly employment. The professional and economic advantages provided by English were dominant themes here, with much less evidence of the importance of English for social purposes. The various impacts on respondents of studying English are presented below.

8.2.1 Employability

A strong link was suggested by the HCMC respondents between knowing English and employability. As one of them explained, “in Ho Chi Minh City, regardless of your knowledge, regardless of your experience, the most important thing is that you have good English” (V8). Another expressed the same sentiment: “Actually people say that you don’t need to be a good worker, you don’t have to need a lot of experiences, you just, English is the most important requirement at present” (V9). Those respondents who were currently seeking employment were confident that their knowledge of English would give them an advantage in the job market.

8.2.2 Performance at work

Several respondents who were already employed added that knowing English was a basic requirement for them to do their job. This was particularly the case where they worked for an international company – something that was very desirable from an economic point of view. One, for example, explained that “we use English in whole day from reading the document, write in reply, the email in English” (V5); another noted

that her course with the British Council affected “all my ways of doing business because the lesson, because of the lesson ... It’s more professional way to speaking English in business, better than before.” (V3). In another case, the respondent’s job involved corresponding with foreign clients who were looking for investment opportunities in Vietnam. English was essential for this job.

Table 7: Ho Chi Minh City respondents

Respondent	Level	Gender	Age	Nationality	Length of Interview (minutes)
V1	INT	M	20s	Vietnamese	26
V2	INT	M	20s	Vietnamese	31
V3	INT	F	30s	Vietnamese	35
V4	UPP INT	M	50s	Vietnamese	35
V5	UPP INT	M	20s	Vietnamese	34
V6	UPP INT	F	40s	Vietnamese	30
V7	UPP INT	M	20s	Vietnamese	30
V8	UPP INT	F	20s	Vietnamese	35
V9	UPP INT	M	20s	Vietnamese	26
V10	UPP INT	M	20s	Vietnamese	40

8.2.3 Promotion at work

A knowledge of English not only enabled respondents to get and do their jobs, it was also the key to promotion:

my company, if your English is good, it is easier for you to be promoted, yeah, because of your communication. If you’ve got a clear communication, so you can communicate with your managers, your director, and your colleagues, you’ve got a good way to express. If you’ve got a good experience, technical experience, or something like that, but your English is not good, so they won’t appreciate your ability of communicating and management skill. (V3)

One of the more senior individuals in this group of respondents also attributed her promotions over time in her company to her knowledge of English – as she said, “I got promoted time to time this because of English” (V6).

8.2.4 International communication

There were not many references in the HCMC interviews to international communication, but some of the respondents did acknowledge the way that studying English had better enabled them to interact with people from other countries. One felt that English is “a good language because it connect, we can connect to another people, so it’s very helpful language” (V10). Another added that

people around the world can talk together, each other in the best way ... when one person know how to explain in English, very easy to go around the world. They can read and write, and can speak anywhere in the world ... I think it’s the best language to communicate in the world. (V4)

For another, English allowed her to “open my knowledge” and provided “a connection between people and culture” (V3) without which her experience of the world would not extend beyond the boundaries of Vietnam.

8.2.5 Minimizing intercultural conflict

Related to the previous point, one of the respondents also expressed the view that English as an international language could also reduce conflicts that arise from misunderstandings:

V5: I think that when the people can speak in the same language, they can make the world more simple.
 SB: Simple?
 V5: Because they can let the people, they understand the other people clearly then. Maybe you know, we had a lot of conflict because we don't understand the other. Maybe because we using the different language, maybe because we come from different culture. So if we can make something like using the same language or we forget about the border of the nature.
 SB: The borders?
 V5: Yeah. Because I don't mind about where you come from, just because we are human and we're using the same language, it's better, and yeah.
 SB: It brings people together?
 V5: Yeah.

8.2.6 Improved confidence

Another benefit of studying English with the British Council was increased confidence. One respondent noted that his increased ability to understand spoken English gave him "more confidence when we face to face with the foreigner" (V2). Another explained that "after I finish my study in British Council, I'm more confident when I speak English with foreigner, and I go around the world very easy, very confident to go anywhere in the world" (V7).

8.2.7 Access to continuing education

English also provided access to continuing education. In one case, a respondent explained how her knowledge of English made it possible for her to take a subsequent professional course in international accountancy which was taught in English by lecturers from overseas – "I could be in these courses because I have enough English to" (V6) was what she said. Another studied with the British Council before engaging in higher education in Thailand; again, without English this would not have been possible. And a third respondent was a scientist who was about to embark on a PhD in the USA; English was essential in making it possible to secure the scholarship for the PhD.

8.2.8 Leisure

Several respondents noted that English gave them access to music, the internet and movies in English. One noted that "I watch TV, like HBO, or cinemas, or listening to music," (V3) while another explained that "many of my favourite songs are in English" (V8). The use of English for leisure was not a powerful theme here, but it was clear that, for those respondents who enjoyed these activities, studying English had enhanced their ability to engage in them. Travel was another leisure activity mentioned by a small number of respondents and which English allowed them to engage more in.

9 Overall Themes

This study addressed two questions:

1. To what extent do British Council EFL courses impact on students' lives?
2. What kinds of impact are most powerfully experienced by students?

In relation to the first question, it is abundantly clear that studying English with the British Council impacted on respondents' lives in a range of ways. There is clear evidence here, then, that EFL courses run by the British Council do make a difference to the lives of their students. The precise nature of these impacts varied from context to context and indeed across individuals in the same context; this complicates the task of ranking impacts in the way that the second research question here implies. Table 8

lists the range of impacts identified in this study and their order attempts to capture (in descending order) their significance (qualitatively more than quantitatively); as noted above, though, the significance of different impacts will vary across contexts and individuals. Also, impacts which surfaced less frequently here – such as the effect courses have on countering negative political attitudes to the UK and on enabling access to unbiased information about the world – might be considered (e.g. by the British Council and the British government) at least as important of other impacts which were more visible in the data here.

10 Conclusions

Drawing on over 22 hours of interviews with 47 respondents in six countries, this study has highlighted the range of ways in which British Council EFL courses impact on students' lives; impact here has been viewed throughout as an effect that goes beyond the obvious linguistic goals of enabling students to become better (e.g. more accurate and fluent) at speaking, listening, reading and writing in English. There is clear evidence here that the British Council's courses do have significant impact in this broader sense of the term. These impacts commonly related to respondents' professional and academic goals and to their access to technology, but there was considerable evidence too of enhancements in respondents' intercultural communication and understanding, self-confidence, and attitudes to others, to English and to the UK. There was also some evidence here of the emancipatory dimension of learning English.

One question which merits further attention is: what is the relative significance or weight of different impacts on students' lives? It would be valuable to address this question in more precise quantitative terms via, for example, a survey of former British Council students. This study has highlighted a range of potential impacts which could provide the basis of an instrument which investigated impacts in more quantitative terms. Administering this to larger scale random sample of former students would generate findings having more generalizability (though of course they would lack the depth of insight provided by qualitative studies of this kind). The use of qualitative research to prepare for larger-scale quantitative analyses is an established model in social science research.

In a follow-up survey of the kind being suggested here, a more precise measure of impact would also be obtained through a more tightly controlled sampling procedure. Criteria for participation in this study were established but not always enforced due to reasons explained above; thus respondents varied in how long prior to this study they had completed their studies with the British Council; in one centre, all respondents were current students (and thus it was not possible to separate specific impacts of British Council courses from the impacts of learning English generally). A survey with greater control over key sample variables would allow responses from different British Council centres to be compared and aggregated with greater confidence.

These suggestions for a quantitative follow up to this work should not obscure the value of the qualitative approach adopted here. The detailed insights provided by this study into the impact on individuals of studying English could not be achieved quantitatively. Thus another suggestion for further research would be to replicate this qualitative study in a different set of British Council teaching centres (the impacts identified here may not necessarily reflect those in other contexts where the British Council operates).

Table 8: Summary of impacts of EFL courses

Impact on	Description
Employment prospects, performance and promotion	Studying English allowed respondents to be competitive in the job market, to fulfil their duties more effectively, and to move up the career ladder.
Access to education and professional development	Studying English provided respondents with access to undergraduate and postgraduate courses, either in their countries or overseas. English also facilitated respondents' participation in work-related professional development courses.
Use of technology	Studying English enhanced respondents' ability to engage with the internet, e-mail and social networking sites; this in turn benefited their ability to access information, work more efficiently, and cultivate friendships with people around the world.
Leisure activities	Studying English enabled respondents to enjoy TV, cinema, music, reading and travel. For some, access to such activities in English (e.g. reading original literature or understanding songs and movies) was powerfully rewarding.
Intercultural communication	Studying English allowed respondents to communicate with and establish social relationships with people from other countries.
Intercultural understanding	Studying English enabled respondents to appreciate other cultures and to develop more positive attitudes to them. Such understanding was seen to be way of minimizing intercultural conflict.
Confidence	Studying English (and doing well) enhanced respondents' confidence in their ability to use English which made them more willing to engage in activities previously seen to be threatening, such as speaking in English to visitors from overseas, socially or at work.
Attitudes towards English and the UK	Studying English generally consolidated and in some cases improved respondents' attitudes towards English and UK; particularly where on a political level attitudes to the UK were not positive, good experiences at the British Council engendered positive feelings towards British people (as opposed to its government).
Access to information	The access to technology already noted allowed enhanced access to unbiased information about world events (e.g. of a political nature). English in this sense was a liberating force.
Service encounters	A knowledge of English allowed respondents to participate more effectively in service encounters (e.g. speaking to doctors, shopping) where the service provider did not speak the students' L1.
Citizenship	Studying English allowed respondents (e.g. through enhanced fluency and accuracy in using the language or greater professionalism at work) to give a good impression of themselves and their country to people from other countries.

Another question that merits closer attention is: which features of British Council EFL courses affect their impact on students? An awareness of the kinds of impact their courses can have on students is valuable for the British Council; in terms of

maximizing these impacts, though, it would be valuable to have some understanding of those features of courses which were influential in determining impact. Caution would be required here as this study suggests that the impact of British Council courses on students was not only determined by the courses themselves; students' personal characteristics (e.g. motivation), family backgrounds, economic situation and socio-cultural context, for example, may all impact on the ultimate impact of an EFL course (in such a way that the same course delivered to 20 students will impact on individuals in very different ways). However, mindful of this proviso, there may be value in trying to understand those aspects of British Council courses in different global contexts which enhance the impact they have on students' learning, motivation, attitudes and goals. Another complicating factor that cannot be ignored is that many individuals who opt to study with the British Council have already identified clear professional, academic or more general life goals; they also already have positive attitudes to learning English and clear reasons for wanting to do so. With such individuals, British Council courses may not actually have a major impact on students' goals and motivations - though this is certainly an interesting hypothesis to research. Another particularly interesting issue to emerge here in relation to the characteristics of British Council courses, is the role that the courses, and in particular, teachers' behaviours and attitudes, have in shaping students' perceptions of the UK. Links between these variables were suggested in some of the data reported in this study. Additionally, as noted earlier, this study suggests that research into learners' views about native and non-native teachers might inform the British Council's position on this delicate issue.

One final point to discuss is how the British Council could use these findings. Firstly, they should reassure those to whom the British Council is accountable that their language teaching operation has impact which extends beyond its immediate goal of enhancing a mastery of English. Secondly, these findings can feed into discussions - among directors, teaching centre managers, and teachers - of the broader goals of British Council EFL courses and how explicitly addressing some of the issues emerging here might enhance the impact of the courses. For example, to what extent do courses explicitly create opportunities for students to develop intercultural awareness, and if not, how might they do so? To what extent are courses sensitive to issues of students' self-confidence, and what measures are built into courses to facilitate student growth in this respect? How, for example, is access to information via technology linked to the learning of English and what can be done for the two to be linked more explicitly? Exploring how courses currently try to support the kinds of impact listed in Table 8 may be a useful review exercise in all British Council teaching centres.

In conclusion, then, this study has provided evidence of the varied ways in which British Council EFL courses impact on the lives of their students. A set of recurring dimensions of impact were identified, together with issues which, on the basis of this study, merit further empirical attention.

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16 July 2009

Appendix: Final Interview Schedule

This list served as a series of prompts rather than as a structured list of questions; not all questions were asked in the same order to all respondents.

1. First experience of learning English?
2. Do your family members speak English?
3. Which course(s) did you take with the British Council?
4. When did you finish your course(s)?
5. Why did you decide to take an English course?
6. Why did you decide to study with the British Council?
7. Did the course affect your views of the British Council?
8. Was it a positive experience?
9. Working in groups? Nationalities?
10. Are you currently studying or working?
11. How important is English in your current studies/work?.
12. What for you were the main benefits of studying English with the British Council?
13. Particular ways in which studying English with the British Council might have affected you:
 - Do you feel that as a result of studying English with the British Council you are better at your job/studies?
 - Do you feel that improving your English has given you more opportunities for work/study?
 - What about your use of the internet? Has better English had any effect on that?
 - Has studying with the British Council improved your ability to interact in English with people from other countries?
 - Have you been to the UK? Would you like to?
 - How do you feel about the UK and British people? How are they portrayed in the media? How do you feel about that?
 - Do you feel that improving your English allows you to be a better citizen of your country?
 - Has studying with the British Council changed the way you view the world?
 - Did studying with the British Council increase your awareness of important global issues such as climate change?
14. Does English language learning make the world a better place?
15. Would your life be the same without English?
16. In the future, what role do you think English will play in your life?

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