

Filling the Gap in Post-Entry English Language: Development of Conversational English Skills in Cultural Context

Marta Spes-Skrbis



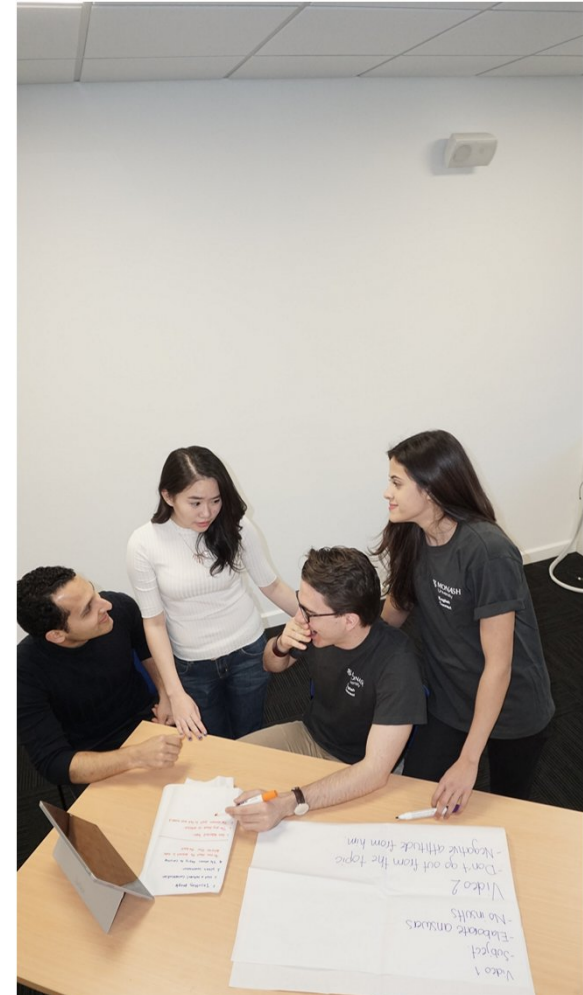
Content

1. Monash University post-entry English gap: conversational skills
2. Let's Chat Program
3. Challenges and way forward



Major issues with conversational skills

1. Struggle with conversational vocabulary and pragmatics (rules of interaction)
2. Lack of socio-cultural knowledge (mis-reading social situations)
3. Limited practice (and limited participation) in local community
4. Not sharing cultural backdrop to conversations (personal history)



Monash University

- One of Australia largest universities, over 70,000 students
- Comprehensive and research intensive
- Over 30,000 international enrolments

International students

- Richness of cultural diversity
- Different educational backgrounds with different expectations
- Post-entry English issues

Students' focus groups

'I don't know what to say to local people.'

'I don't go (to talk to the tutor), I don't know what he's saying.'

'It is scary, I am too ... embarrassing (to talk to local peers).'

'We (international students) are different, we don't want to say anything (in a tutorial), because no one will understand us.'

'I don't know what is polite.'

Academic staff

‘The student will not pass her placement, she needs to improve her English communication.’

‘They (international students) are not seeking help, however their English is very poor.’

‘They (international students) do not participate in discussions. Maybe they don’t understand what has been said?’

Employers

..are concerned that international students ‘won’t be able to communicate strongly enough’

‘students have difficulty conversing (...) in terms of small talk’

‘they only provide one word responses’ (at the interview)’

‘there is a big discrepancy between their CV and performance in the interview’

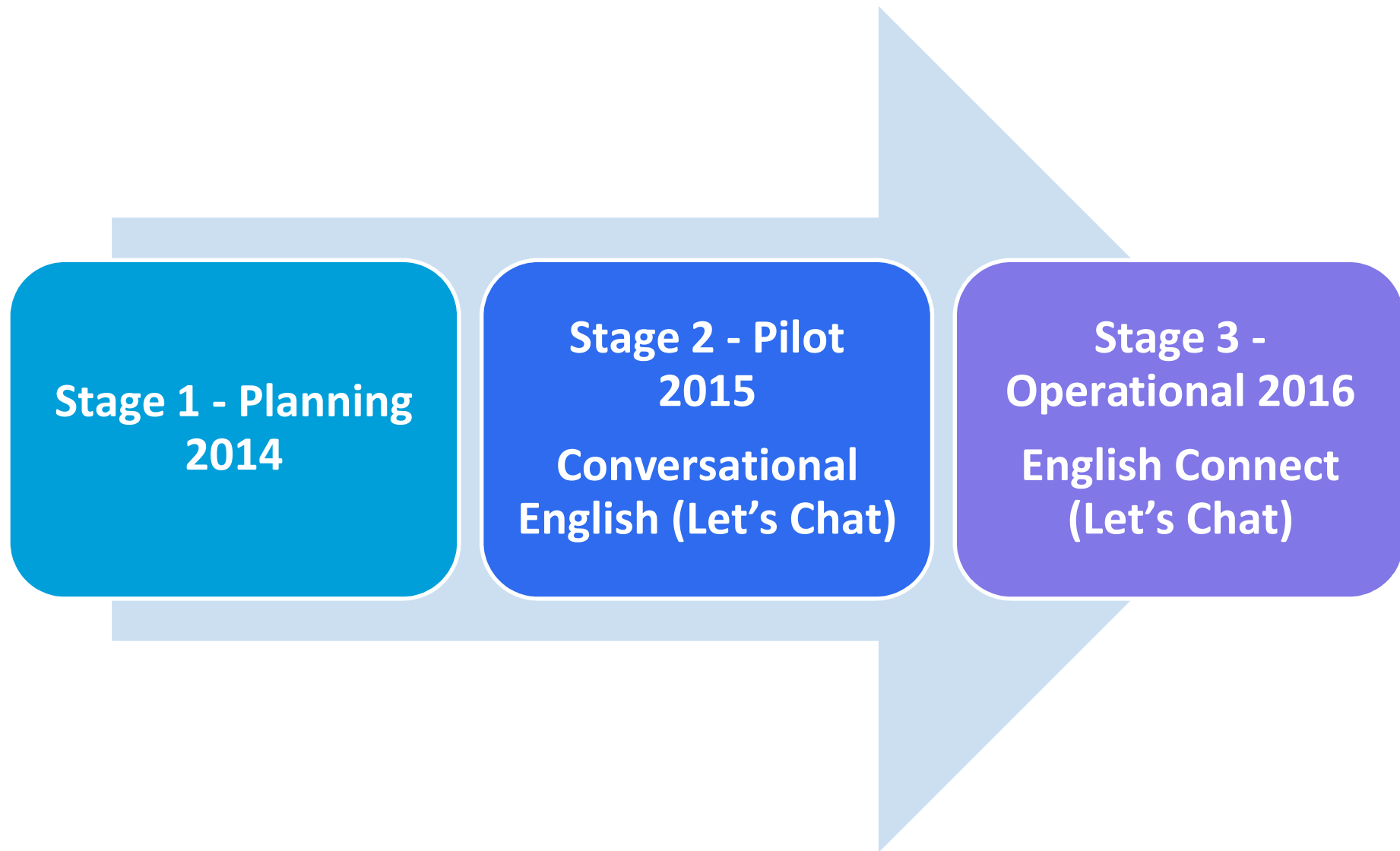
Major implications of lack of conversational skills in the literature

- Significantly depletes students' confidence
- Prevents students' full participation in academic and wider community
- Contributes to students' social isolation and creates a feeling of not belonging – leading to disengagement
- A major factor in creating a gap between international and domestic students
- Flow on effect on employability

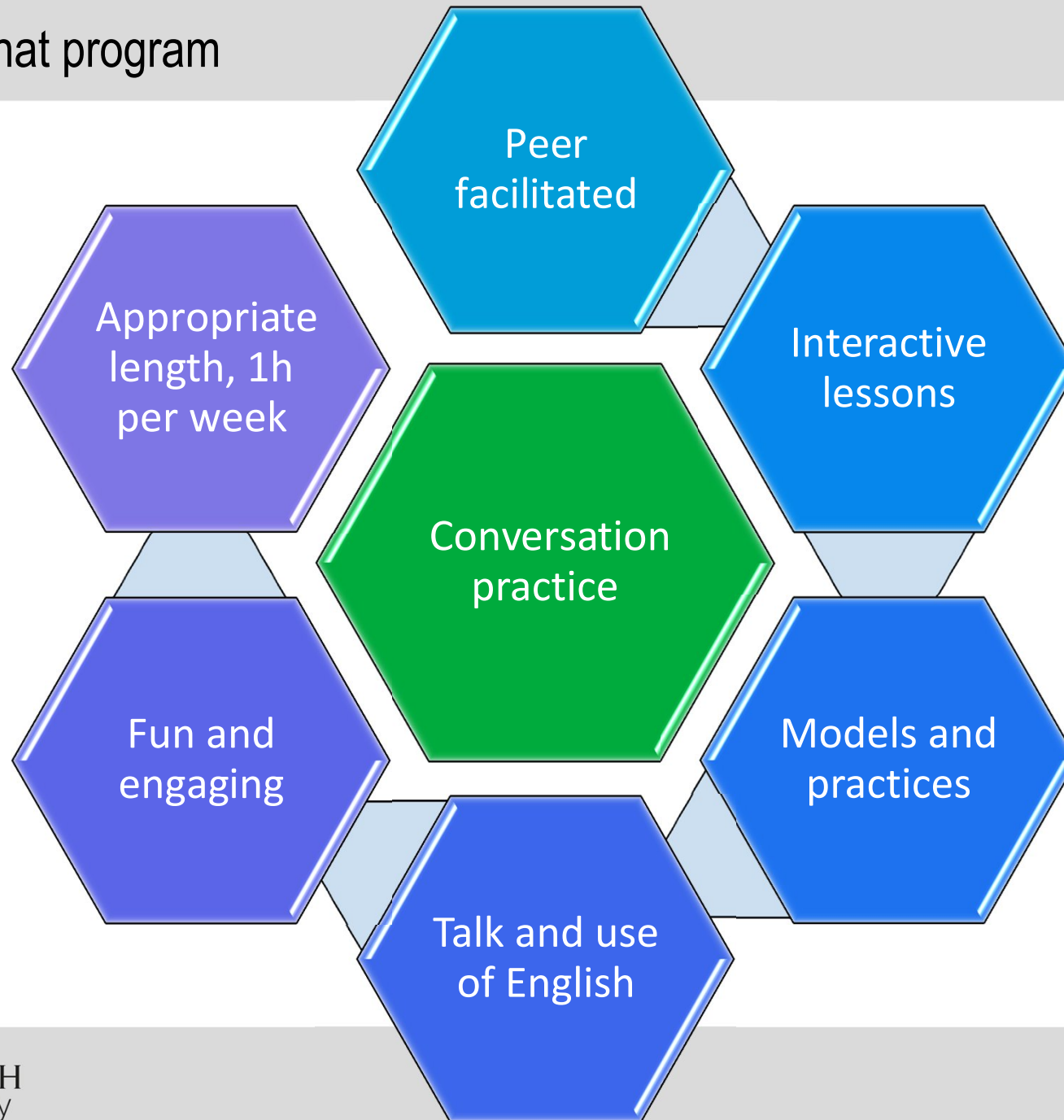
Addressing the Gap: Conversational Skills (Objectives)

- High-impact co-curricular program
- Addressing conversational skills
- Modelling, practicing and using language in context
- Engaging students in social and cultural context
- Providing necessary safe environment
- Facilitating unique social connectedness

Addressing the Gap: Project Conversational English



Let's Chat program



Let's Chat (2016)

1929 students

96% international
students

38 countries
29 languages

62.6% of students
in their first year
in Australia

70% students new
to the program,
30% returning

41 student
facilitators

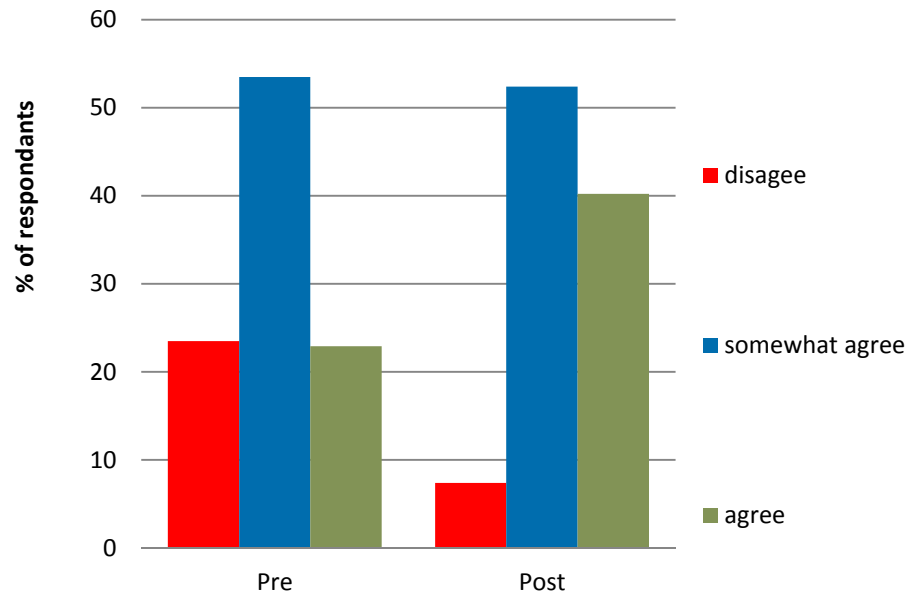
41 contact hours
each week

6 campuses
10 faculties

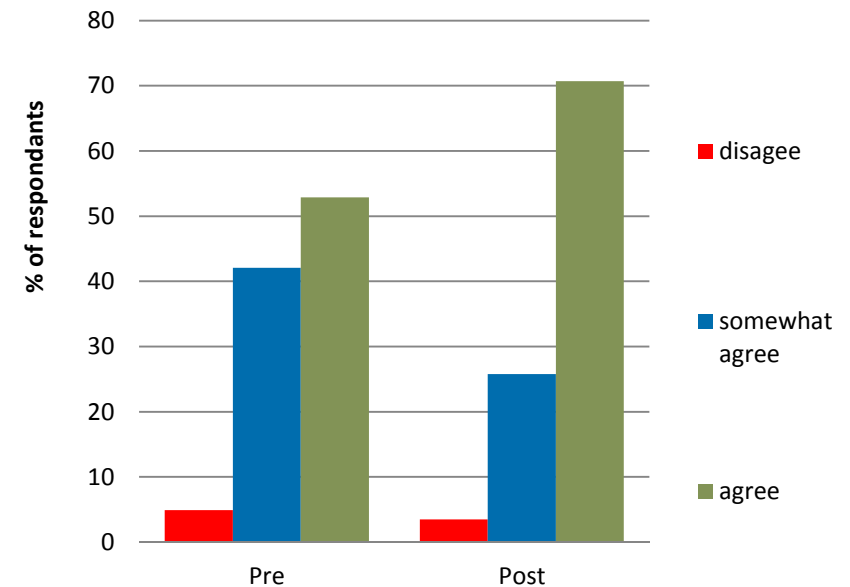
7 different Let's
Chat Modules

Survey Results (n=859 pre-survey, 61% response post-survey) Sem. 1 2016

I am confident when speaking English

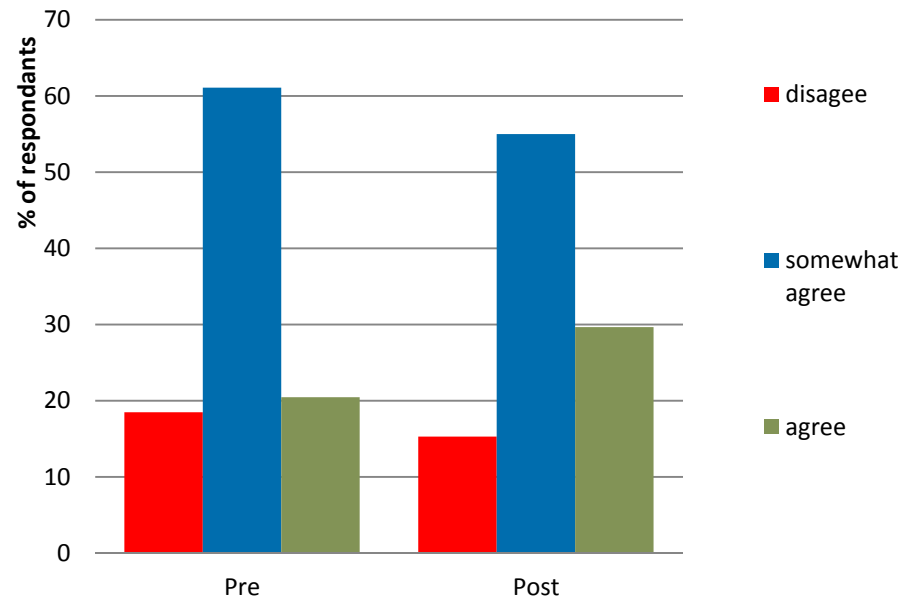


I can understand lectures and presentations at university

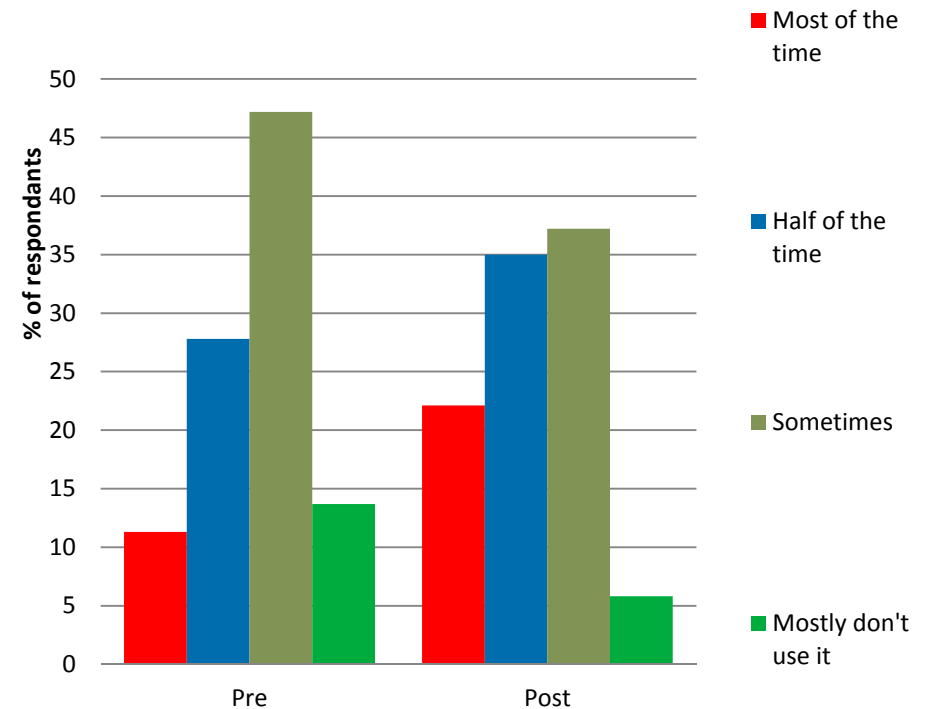


Survey Results

I can understand native speakers of Australian English

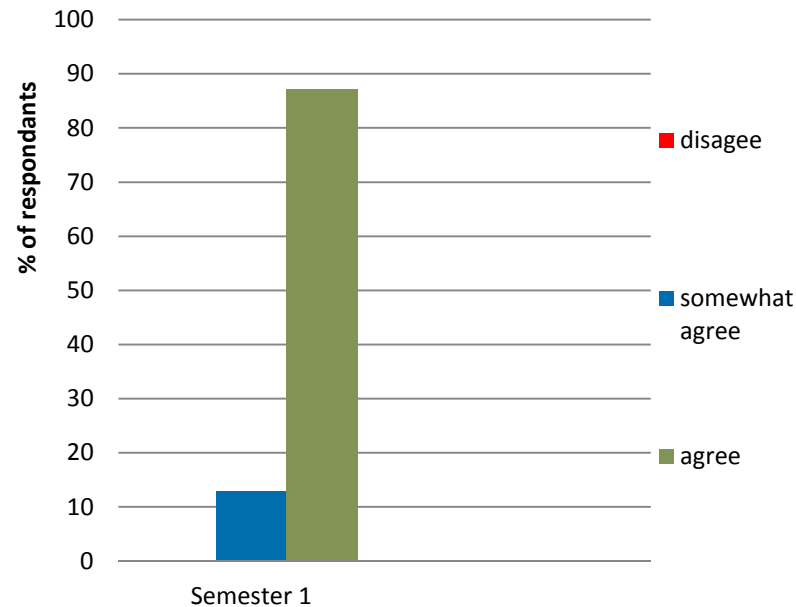


I use English in my day-to-day life

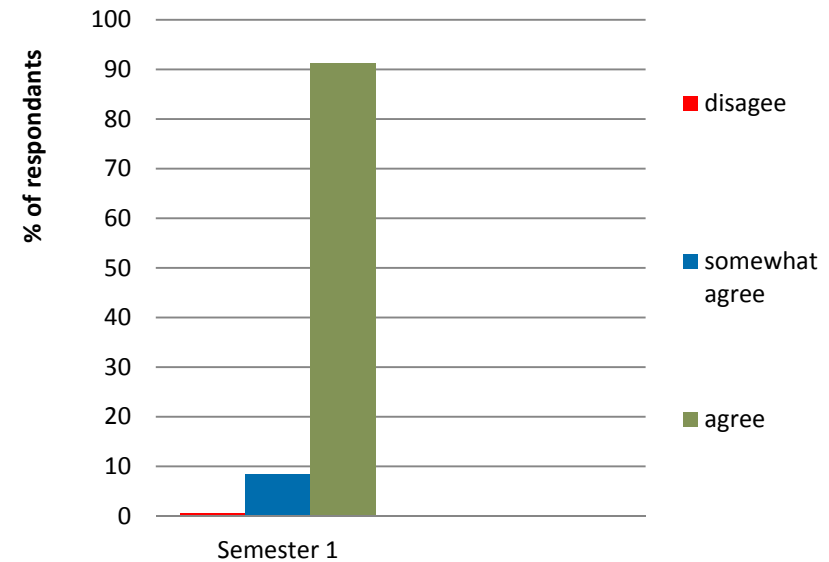


Post-program survey

Let's Chat has helped me to make social connections

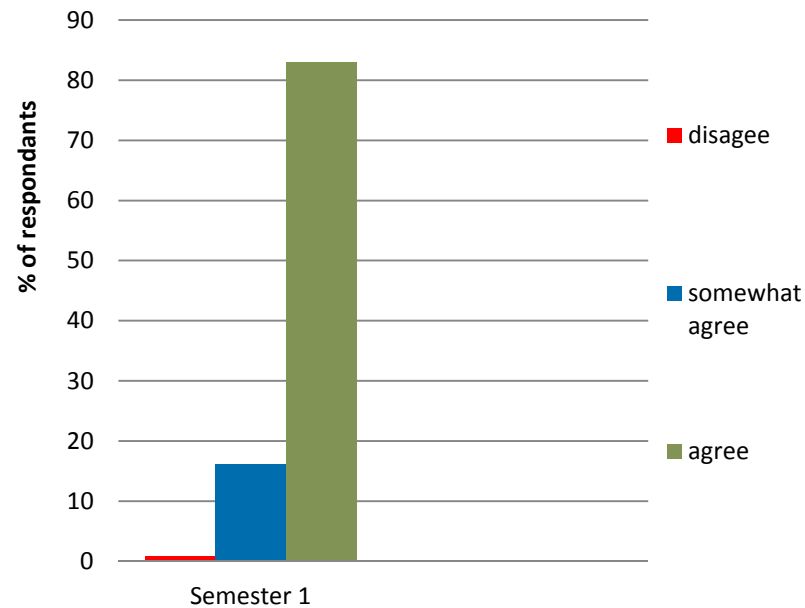


Let's Chat has helped me better understand the Australian culture

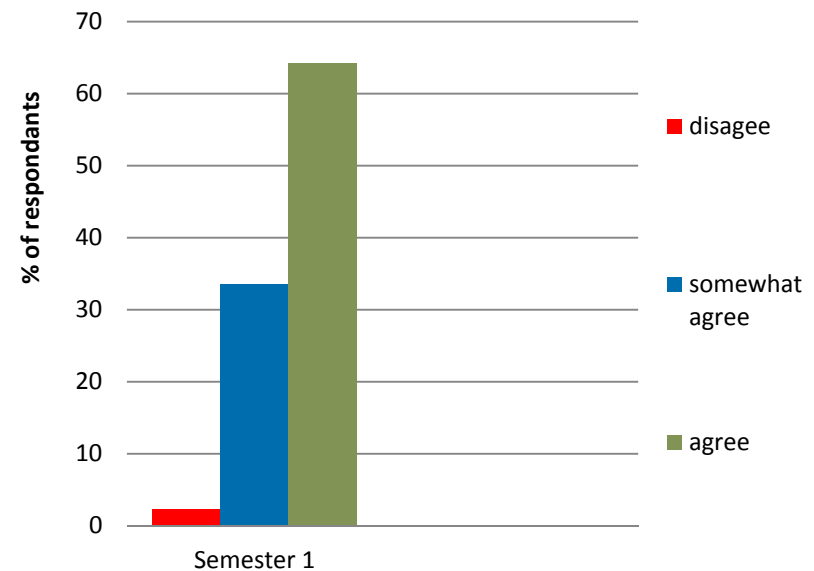


Post-program survey

Let's Chat has helped me feel more confident in spoken English

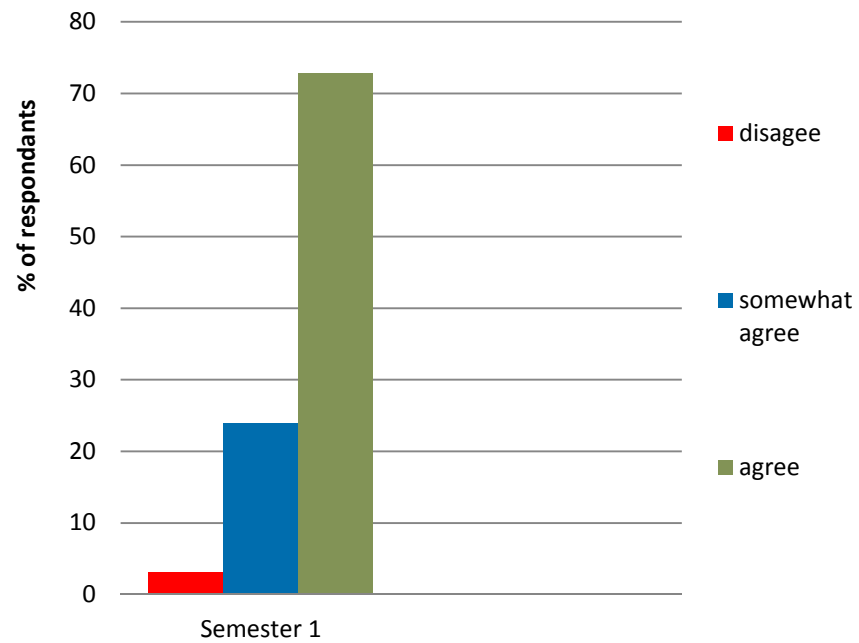


Let's Chat has helped me understand what is expected of me at Monash



Post-program survey

Let's Chat has encouraged me to participate in other university programs



Targeted content

- Conversation starters
- Social conventions
- Voicing opinion
- Request
- Complaints and apologies
- Small talk
- Workplace communication
- Communication with medical professionals



Careful planning and monitored outcomes

Lesson plan

- Three foci: linguistic, socio-cultural and student engagement
- Pedagogically well structured plans

Detailed instructions

- Detailed facilitator's instructions
- Associated activities (dialogues, scenarios, games, simulations, videos)
- Specified desired outcomes and steps to attain these

Evaluation

- Students' feedback (wrap-up activity)
- Facilitators' feedback (Google forms)
- Anecdotal feedback (case studies)

Authentic material

- Scripts and role plays
- Games
- Short videos
- Scenarios

Example:

You did not understand the assignment topic but did not approach the tutor. You now realise that you cannot finish your assignment by the due date. Approach your course coordinator to discuss the possibility of an extension for your work.

Evaluation and ongoing monitoring

- Pre-program self-assessment survey
- Post-program self-assessment survey
- Registration data
- Attendance data (weekly updates)
- Facilitators' weekly feedback (qualitative)



Challenges and questions

- Co-curricular programs – less impact than in curriculum
- Sustainability
- Attrition rates
- Locations (multiple campuses) and space (lack of suitable rooms)
- Facilitators' recruitment and training
- Peer facilitators vs professional staff ?
- Accompanying online resources?
- Discipline-specific content?



Major impacts of Let's Chat – Summary

1. Significantly raised confidence in students' abilities in spoken communication
1. Significantly improved understanding (linguistic and cultural decoding) of (Australian English speaking) academic staff and peers
2. Increased use of English outside the curriculum
3. Significantly better understanding of university expectations
5. Significantly increased student engagement on campus

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Thank you

Monash University
English Connect

Marta Spes-Skrbis

Marta.skrbis@monash.edu

Accompanying video resources

