

International student engagement with Student Union activities as a way to increase sense of belonging, improve cultural integration and aid language confidence

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ABSTRACT

This article will outline a project to help international students at the University of Bradford improve their sense of belonging, cultural integration and English language confidence through engagement in student union social activities. The project focussed on a group of students from Oman, helping them to engage with students outside of their ethnic group through sporting and social clubs at the students union, over a ten week period. The students rated their perceived levels of language confidence and sense of belonging over the duration of the project, with notable improvements for those most engaged.

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This article details a joint project begun in November 2012, between the Student Union and the Language Centre at the University of Bradford. The project aimed to help international students improve their sense of belonging and their English language confidence. The project saw the students engage in a series of sessions with different Student Union sporting and social clubs.

The language centre at the UoB runs year-long international foundation programmes (IFP) and pre-sessional courses for general students and special groups on request. In the year 2012/13 the centre ran an IFP programme for a group of 45 students from Oman. As a result of personal tutor meetings, problems of cultural integration were identified in the group. The group were mostly living together in one student hall. The students identified that they had very little opportunity to engage with people outside their national group. Wider engagement, perhaps with the Student Union (University of Bradford Union –UBU) was suggested as a solution, however this was not happening for a variety of reasons (UBU seemed culturally distant since they did not have Student Unions in Oman and the students had identified the union as being primarily for home students).

UBU agreed that every Friday afternoon for 10 weeks, a student club or society would provide a taster session for the Omani students in an effort to persuade them to engage with others outside their cultural group. Not all the students attended the events, indeed some did not attend any, and some students only came once. The programme is shown in the Table 1.

Table 1: UoB social activities programme

Period	Activities
Week 1	Badminton Club
Week 2	Hiking Club
Week 3	Video Games Society
Week 4	Radio Club
Week 5	Cycling Club
Week 6	Judo Club
Week 7	International Students Club
Week 8	Sustrans – Cycling / Walking tourist trip
Week 9	Female only hiking
Week 10	Football Club

A number of commentators suggest that social interaction, in various forms, can aid language confidence and achievement (Lowes, 2013, Tinto, 1993, Harmer, 1983). Ellis (1994) asserts that language learners who make the best of opportunities for social interaction in English show the greatest gains in language proficiency. Little (1997) conducted research which found that by being exposed to the target language in social situations learners developed confidence, as well as improved their language use. Johnson (2012) also found that when she put learners with natives for a period of time, this increased their vocabulary comprehension. Schumann's (1978) acculturation theory suggests that a learner's language achievement is strongly related to social integration and the psychological openness of the learner to the second-language community, or in other words, their sense of belonging and friendship relationships. Zhou et al (2008) looked at how friendships with local students can improve language confidence, have emotional benefits and lower stress levels for international students. Our project will attempt to improve language confidence and sense of belonging, both key factors in acculturation theory, through social interaction.

Allwright (1990) and Montgomery & McDowell (2009) found that even though many students recognised that social interaction in English developed confidence and vocabulary comprehension, engaging in such social situations was still a struggle for many international students. Lowes (2013) detailed the need for institutions to help initiate first contacts and reported on a project which helped create contact between international students and native speakers through schemes such as peer mentors and a languages café. Our project recognises the difficulties of initiating contact with other ethnic groups, and uses the existing friendship networks and shared interests of student union groups as a way to overcome these difficulties and instigate social interaction.

Our project sought to measure its success through self-assessment research criteria; measuring the students' perceived sense of belonging to the UK, Bradford and the UoB, and their confidence in English, over the duration of the 10 weeks, asking them to fill out a self-assessment questionnaire on three occasions (week 0 – before the project started, week 4, and week 8 – towards the end of the project).

In our study students were asked to rate their feelings on a scale of 1-10, where 10 is the highest. Students were asked to rate their perceived score in 7 questions: Three of the questions related to their perceived sense of belonging – whether to the city, the UK or the university (Figure 1). The results of these questions were gathered together to measure sense

of belonging. Three of the questions related to perceived English confidence (academically, for everyday use and general improvement), and were grouped together as a measure of confidence in English. One question asks how confident the students feel about making friends with people of different mother tongues.

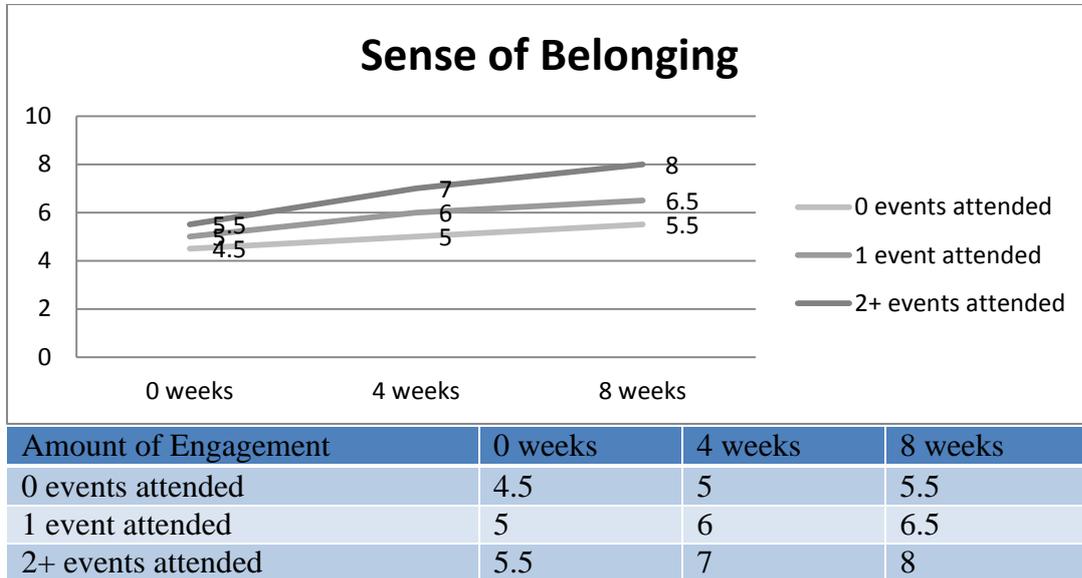


Figure 1: sense of belonging

Students rated their feeling of belonging from 1 to 10 on the three different occasions. The results show that those students who attended more activities were likely to report a greater sense of belonging to the University, Bradford, and the UK.

The results show that those students who attended more activities were likely to report a greater confidence in English, both for casual conversation and academic use (Figure 2).

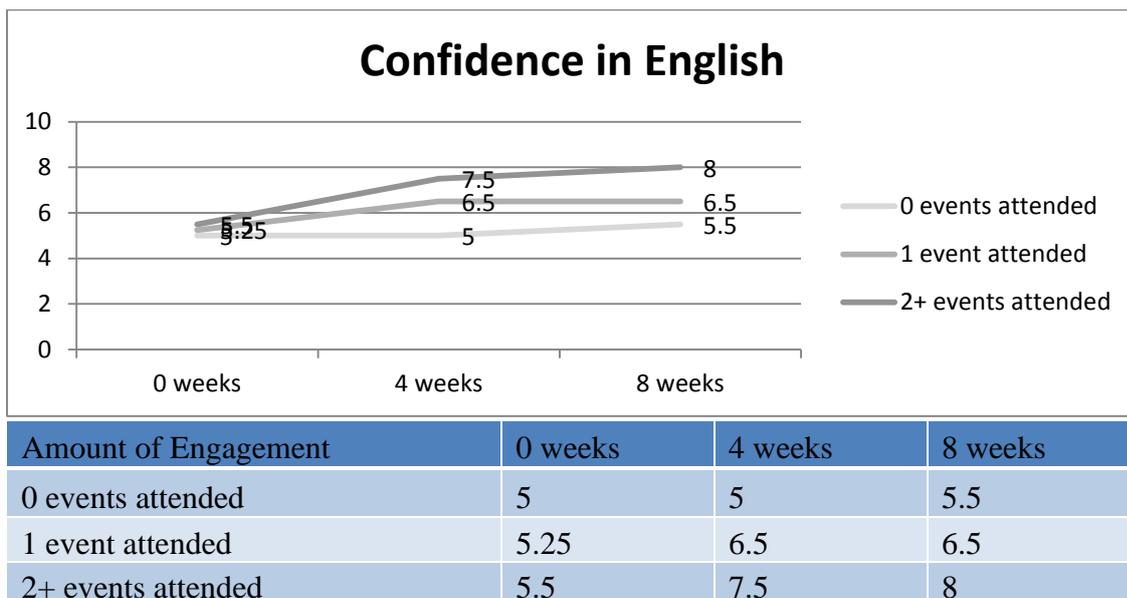


Figure 2: confidence in using the language

The results also show that those students who attended more activities were likely to report a greater confidence when it comes to making friends outside of their language group (Figure 3). The ten students who were most engaged with the project were asked to attend a focus group after its completion. During the focus group the students reported that they felt that informal social interaction was beneficial as part of their studies. The students also confirmed that involvement in the activities had resulted in them feeling more at home in Bradford.

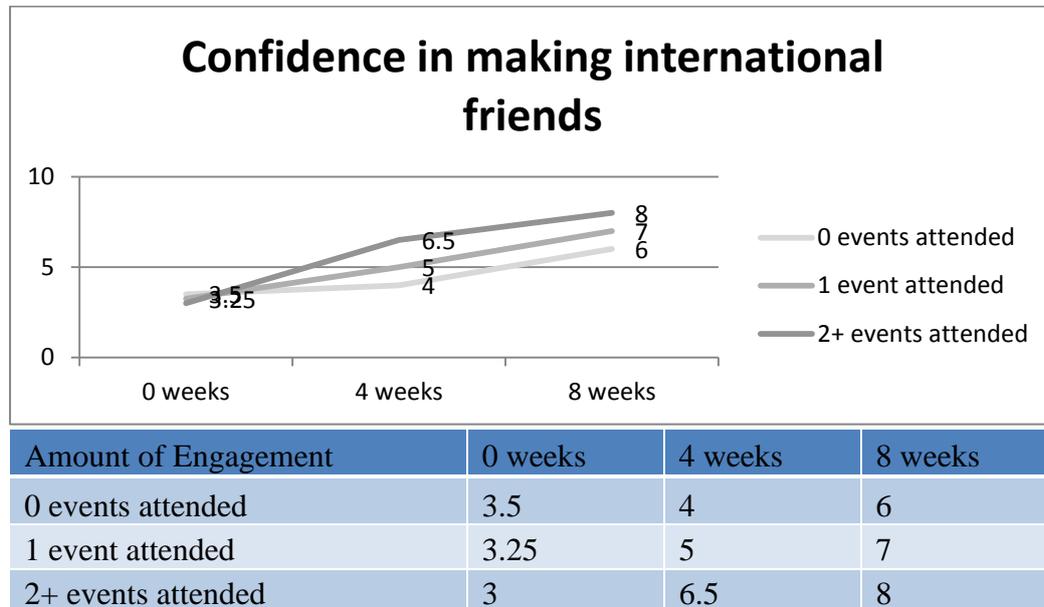


Figure 3: Confidence in making friends

All the students of the Omani IFP group were given an English language test at the end of the course. The test results of the ten students who engaged the most with the project were compared to an average score for the whole course and were found to be a little higher, but not dramatically so. However, students who had not attended any of the activities were found to have scores much lower than the average. So, whilst in this project social engagement seems to have improved acculturation (in the form of sense of belonging, language confidence and confidence in making friends) it seems that this has led to only minor improvements in language achievement for those most acculturated. For those students who are arguably least acculturated there was a more noticeable lack of achievement.

Students who engaged most with the project reported a greater sense of belonging and greater confidence in English, but is this as a result of the project, or are these students those who would have improved most anyway? It is difficult to eliminate all other variables, as of course, the project’s interventions are not the only experiences the students had, but at the very least the project provided them with valuable opportunities which they might have struggled to find otherwise. This leads us to recommendations for further research such as a longitudinal study which looks at this group of students over a longer period, or a study that looks at a similar group which engages more deeply with a students’ union.

The results show that as sense of belonging increases, so does language confidence, so, to the extent that we have been able to measure, this supports acculturation theory (Schumann, 1978), and the idea that the closer the learner feels to the language community, and the more socially engaged they are, the better their language confidence.

This article agrees with Zhou et al (2008), Montgomery & McDowell (2009), Johnson (2012), and Lowes (2013) that by being exposed to English in social situations, learners improve their sense of belonging and language confidence. The article suggests that developing links between language centres and Student Unions (with their existing friend networks, revolving around shared interests) is an excellent way to do this. The language centre at the UoB has continued to develop activities with UBU, Friday afternoons being UBU activities days for all pre-sessional students. Feedback so far has been very positive and we hope to continue to develop this relationship.

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