# Intensive English Course for International Graduate Students: Experiences and Challenges

*Mabini DG. Dizon*
*Department of Humanities, College of Arts and Sciences*
*University of the Philippines Los Banos*

*Felino P. Lansigan*
*Institute of Statistics, College of Arts and Sciences*
*University of the Philippines Los Banos*

*Abstract: Several universities conduct different types of English programs to support non-native English speaking international students. There is a need to study and share each other's experiences to help improve these programs and make them suitable to the students' needs. The study analysed the challenges experienced by students and the staff of the University of the Philippines Los Banos (UPLB) for their intensive English course for international graduate students, from Academic Year 2010 to 2016. Results of the study showed that challenges are interdependent with each other. With the help and cooperation of all concerned stakeholders, the offering and implementation of the course can be successful.*

*There should be a change on the perception of the Intensive English Course as a mere extra subject. The course is very important in the academic life of the international student since the medium of instruction in UPLB is English. There should also be follow-up programs that will further improve the students' English proficiency level.*

*Some problems are harder to solve such as the following: enrollees' belonging to different English proficiency levels, limited number of language tutors available to teach, and difficulty of finding a common free time among tutors and students.*

*Keywords: intensive English; international students; language teaching*

## 1.Introduction

In the Philippines, it has been observed that  there is an increasing enrolment trend  of international students.  According to its  Bureau of Immigration Statistics, foreigners studying in the country have more than doubled from 26,000 in 2011 to more than  61,000  in  2012  (http://www.ateneo.edu/news/features/number-foreign-students-philippines-increases).

According to the same report,  the phenomenal increase could be partly attributed to a rise in the number of accredited institutions authorized to admit foreign students. This has risen from 104 schools and learning institutions in 2011 to 2,145 in 2012.The sampled data for 2012 (*e=±1*) showed that  the biggest number of foreign students was from Iran at 21.44%. South Korean students comprised 19.62% followed by those from China and ASEAN countries at 18.39% and 10.97%, respectively. The remaining 23.58% were students from other countries all over the globe.

But a more recent report by ICEF Monitor (http://monitor.icef.com/2016/0 3/elt-enrolment-in-the-philippines-on-the-rise/) revealed that budget-conscious Japanese and Koreans are drawn by the no-frills approach to learning English in the Philippines. An English language course lasting several weeks, including accommodation and meals, costs  between  US$800 to US$1,600, which is  less than half the cost of similar programmes in the United States of America or Europe.

There is relevance in studying the experiences of universities, such as those from the Philippines,  in helping international  students adjust or cope in using the  English language  as a medium of instruction, either in the pursuit of learning basic English proficiency (survival English) or the more challenging English programs  as a requirement for admission to   graduate degrees, e.g., master's or doctoral,  in view of the fact that English is the medium of instruction of all universities in the Philippines.  Results of such studies can be used as a springboard for the development of English programs in other universities abroad and/or as a guide in improving features of already existing English proficiency training programs.

Given the importance of international students to higher education, greater understanding of English programs and the students' adjustments and needs are critical. This study draws on qualitative and quantitative data to provide insights into the English program itself and the international students' experiences.  It answers the following research questions:

1.  What is the profile of the enrolees of the UPLB-LITE Program's Intensive  English Course for International Graduate Students?
2.  What concerns and challenges have been experienced by the stakeholders  of the English training in the following areas:  personal, academic (course content and classroom policies and requirements) and management (administration)?
3.  How were these concern addressed to better serve the graduate students' needs?

## 2.Literature Review

The Philippines has become an increasingly popular destination for English Language Training (ELT), particularly, for students from Japan and Korea. As the government ramps up efforts to market the country as an ELT destination of choice, international students from different fields are being drawn to the Philippines for its

affordable prices, superb beaches, and strong global ranking in English proficiency tables (ICEF Monitor, 2016).

English proficiency is also playing an increasingly important role in international student recruitment and enrollment management. In the US alone, approximately 38,000 international students enroll each year in intensive English programs at universities and colleges, and the total number of all international students requiring remedial courses is on the rise. Administrators and faculty are adapting to the needs of these valuable students by developing a wide range of programs(http://resources.rosettastone.com/CDN/us/pdfs/English-Proficiency-and-International-Student-Integration.pdf).

It has been widely reported that international students, just like any visitors to a foreign country, must deal with cultural differences and make certain adjustments. Adjustment, an on-going process demanded by several situations, does not happen overnight (http://www.eciprograms.com/Host/cultural.php). Initially characterized by fascination, elation, and optimism, the international student later struggles with tremendous challenges presented by an unfamiliar environment, a foreign culture, and a different language. While some might be delighted with the new culture, most students may experience language difficulties. The adjustment stage follows when the student begins to relax in a new situation and begins to laugh at minor mistakes and misunderstandings, which, in the hostility stage, would have caused major headaches. Saljo and Wyndhamn (1990) a defined this as the psychological process through which people manage and cope with the demands and challenges of everyday life. But as the student gets used to the host country's ways, things that seemed like a

"crisis" may now simply be seen as different ways of doing things. Most students gradually adjust their lifestyles to be balanced with a country's own cultural norms.

International students, many of whom are non-native English speakers (NNES), are challenged by academic language demands and a new culture. Differences in educational systems and expectations, listening skills, professors' use of humor and examples, quantity of reading, direct writing styles, critical analyses, class participation, oral communication, and vocabulary present difficulties (Berman & Cheng, 2001; Holmes, 2004; Lee, 1997). Evidence shows that international students find it difficult to create friendships with their host country peers (HechanovaAlampay, Beehr, Christiansen, & Van Horn, 2002; Jacob & Greggo, 2001; Parks & Raymond, 2004), although such interactions benefit adjustments (Al-Sharideh & Goe, 1998; Hechanova-Alampay et al., 2002). As international students aim for higher education, greater understanding of their adjustment and needs is critical.

Other English language support may involve technology (Wu, Griffiths, Wisker, Waller, & Illes, 2001), supplemental courses (Beasley & Pearson, 1999), or study buddies (Mendelsohn, 2002). Peer partnership programs to aid social adjustment are also common (Abe, Talbot, & Geelhoed, 1998; Jacob & Greggo, 2001; Shigaki & Smith, 1997).

Several universities conduct varied types of English programs to support non-native English speaking international students. There is a need to share each other's experiences from the point of view of the students, the language tutors, and the program managers and administrative staff in order to help improve these programs and to make them suitable to the students' needs.

## 3.Methodology

The Intensive English Course for International Graduate Students (IECIGS) is a 150- hour English proficiency course offered by the Language Instruction Towards Excellence (LITE) Program of the College of Arts and Science (CAS), University of the

Philippines Los Banos (UPLB).  The said course is being offered in coordination with the UPLB Graduate School (GS), which identifies and requires specific admitted international students from non-English speaking countries to enrol.  If  the  admitted graduate  student obtains a Test Of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) score lower than 600 points or an International English  Language Testing System, academic  score lower than  5.5, then he/she is required to enrol in the IECIGS as one of the pre-conditions to admission in the GS.  The LITE Program has been in the forefront of UPLB's bid for internationalization for almost two decades now.

In the current study, results of the post-course evaluation instrument (self-administered questionnaire) conducted to all enrolled students shortly before the end of classes, from the First Semester, Academic Year 2010-2011 until the Second Semester, Academic Year, 2015-2016 were used as the source of data for analysis.

The current study focused on the profile of the enrolees and the challenges encountered by the students, academic (tutors) and administrative staff.

Frequency counts were used to determine the general background of the enrolees as well as determine the most frequently mentioned concerns.The researcher also conducted informal interviews since she is not only the main coordinator of the LITE program but also one of the tutors assigned to handle either the grammar or the academic writing modules. This study draws on qualitative and quantitative data to provide insights into the international student experience.

## 4.Results and Discussion
### 4.1 The Course and Language Tutors

The Intensive English Course  for International Graduate Students ( referred to as English course) aims to help UPLB international graduate students attain the required linguistic competency to hurdle academic life in the university through the following modules: Pronunciation Improvement and Oral Presentation Skills (40 hours); Reading and Vocabulary Enrichment (40 hours);  Grammar (30 hours) ; and Academic Writing (40 hours).

The final schedule of the English course was  set after all the  students (maximum of 20 per class) have enrolled in their regular graduate courses in the university.  For the past several  years, however, the English class met every Monday from 7:00  (AM) to 17:00 (5:00 PM) with a 5- minute break after every 1.5 hours of class activity/discussion. This was done to allow the  students  to  attend their regular  graduate classes from Tuesday to Saturday.  Usually, the said day (and  period)  is the only common free day for all students since in UPLB, there are only a few  graduate classes every Monday.

The language tutors are  faculty members from the English Division and the Speech Communication  and the Performing Arts  Division of the Department of Humanities, CAS, UPLB.

### 4.2 Profile of the Enrollees

Results of the study showed that based on the period analysed (2010-2016), more than half (60% out of a total of 156 respondents) of the enrolees belonged to the age range 26 to 35  (Table 1) with a big majority  (83%) of them coming  from countries in  Southeast Asia, namely: Cambodia,  East –Timor, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam (Table 2).

**Table1. Age distribution of international graduate students enrolled in the intensive English course (2010-2016)**

| Age Bracket | Number of Students | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| 21-25 | 26 | 17 |
| 26-30 | 47 | 30 |
| 31-35 | 47 | 30 |
| 36-40 | 22 | 14 |
| 41-45 | 12 | 8 |
| 46-50 | 2 | 1 |
| TOTAL | 156 | 100 |

**Table 2. Geographical distribution of international graduate students enrolled in the intensive English course (2010-2016)**

| Geographical Location | Total Number of Students | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| Southeast Asia | 130 | 83 |
| East Asia | 12 | 8 |
| South Asia | 5 | 3 |
| Middle East | 8 | 5 |
| Africa | 1 | 1 |
| Total | 156 | 100 |

In addition, more than half (58%) of them are single (Table 3), male (65%) (Table 4) and are pursuing a master's degree (Table 5).

**Table 3. Civil status distribution of international graduate students enrolled in the intensive English course (2010-2016)**

| Civil Status | Number of Students | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| Married | 66 | 42 |
| Single | 90 | 58 |
| Total | 156 | 100 |

**Table 4. Gender distribution of international graduate students enrolled in the intensive English course (2010-2016)**

| Sex | Number of Students | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| Male | 100 | 64 |
| Female | 57 | 37 |
| Total | 156 | 100 |

**Table 5. Degree program distribution of  international graduate students enrolled in   the intensive English course (2010-2016)**

| Degree Program | Number of Students | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| MS | 110 | 69.81 |
| PhD | 33 | 20.75 |
| Non-Degree | 13 | 9.43 |
| Total | 156 | 100 |

During the pre-course interview, most of the female, married  respondents said that they had second thoughts in pursuing  a graduate degree program outside of their home country because they worry about their  respective families, especially, their children.

Studying in a foreign country means being physically separated from their children, thus, they  planned to seriously study and finish their respective degree programs so they can go back home soonest time possible.  It also helped that by 2010, social networking sites were  already popular, hence, reconnecting with family members  in cyberspace is possible.

### 4.3. Experiences, Challenges, Solutions

While almost all of the students recognized the  help  the English course had given them to attain a certain level of linguistic competency to hurdle academic life in UPLB.

**Table 6. Summary of problems encountered by international graduate students enrolled in the intensive English course (2010-2016)**

| Stakeholder | Nature of the Problem | Frequency | Total | Percent (%) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Student | Difference in English level proficiencies | 9 | 20 | 23.1 |
|  | Class schedule | 3 |  | 7.7 |
|  | Punctuality of the students | 3 |  | 7.7 |
|  | Coping with the nature of the course | 3 |  | 7.7 |
|  | Enrollment fees | 1 |  | 2.6 |
|  | Class policies | 1 |  | 2.6 |
| Subtotal |  |  |  | **51.4** |
| Teacher | Difference in English Proficiency | 3 | 10 | 7.7 |
|  | Cultural differences | 3 |  | 7.7 |
|  | Class Schedule | 4 |  | 10.2 |
| Subtotal |  |  |  | **25.6** |
| Administration | Class Schedule | 5 | 5 | 12.7 |
|  | Delays | 4 | 4 | 10.3 |
| Subtotal |  |  |  | **23** |
| TOTAL |  |  | 39 | 100 |

Based on the post-course evaluation conducted,  there were  several  concerns encountered  not only by the students but also by the  teachers,  and the  LITE administrative staff.

As shown in Table 6, these problems can be categorized as follows:
(1) students' differences in English language proficiency,
(2) class schedule,
(3) punctuality in attending classes,
(4) coping with the  nature of the course,
(5) enrollment fees,
(6)  class policies,
(7)  cultural  differences,
(8) class schedule,
(9) delays.

### 4.3.1 Differences in English Level Proficiencies

Feedback from the students revealed that they had difficulty understanding some of the  lessons due to their different English  proficiency levels.  It was, however, observed that complaining students are those who were less attentive in the class, may be due to the fact that they lost interest in the lessons  since they had  difficulty understanding them.

While a pre-course English Proficiency Exam was  conducted  to students,  and the lessons  were  adjusted  to  the  average  proficiency level,  still,  some student  had difficulty, especially,  those with limited  exposure  to the English language.  Some were capable but   felt shy to express themselves for fear of committing  mistakes.

A suggestion was made to further breakdown the class size into smaller groups catering  to specific English proficiency levels.  However,  not many language tutors are available to accept such additional teaching loads.

### 4.3.2 Class Schedule

Since the priority courses to  be enrolled were the regular graduate courses which were  held from Tuesday to Saturday, the   LITE Program staff  had no recourse but to schedule  all the modules on a  Monday, the only common free time.  No class was held on  weekends because  offices are closed. The students, however, were not happy with these schedules because they were already tired in the  afternoon or evening  due to their morning classes and they  became sleepy.  Thus,  for the last several years, the Course was  held every Monday, from 7:00 (AM) to 17:00) (5:00 PM) , with a 5-minute break after every 1.5 hours of class. Still, the  schedule was not very popular among the graduate students  because they complained that this resulted to information overload for them.

There had been suggestions on asking the enrollees to fly to the Philippines at least two months earlier than the expected start of classes so they can undergo English training before the  start  of  the  semester.  This, however,  was  not  supported by their sponsoring/funding    agencies   as   this   would   mean   additional   two   months stipend/honorarium for each graduate student enjoying a scholarship or additional personal expenses for students with no sponsors.

There were also times that the student failed to  access the website of the Graduate School, thus, they discovered too late the specified class schedule (all Mondays) resulting to their enlistment in another course, which was in conflict with the English course.  When  this happened,  the LITE Program staff, in coordination with the GS, helped the student arrange with the academic adviser    choose another graduate course that  was  not  in conflict  with the English course.

In  spite  of  the  announced  all-Monday classes ,  some  graduate  faculty  still

scheduled   activities that were in conflict with the English class.  To solve this, the manager of the LITE Program  sent an official communication to all graduate faculty informing them of the enrollment of the student in the English class.

The unexpected suspension of classes due to typhoons  during the rainy months of June to October also resulted to some delays in lesson planning. During these occasions, make-up classes  were held, though difficult to schedule,   in view of the  other academic load  of the graduate students.

### 4.3.3 Coping with the Nature of the Course

Since the enrollees came from non-English speaking countries, all of them had limited exposure to the English language.  Most of them thought that 150 hours was not enough for them to  be proficient in the use of the English.  The course  content had already taken many revisions over the years  to cater to the needs of the  international graduate students.   In fact, supplementary manuals had been developed for each of the four (4) modules with  summarized  lecture notes, supplementary reading materials, and drills to help the students  study even after the formal class sessions. Based on the feedback gathered, the use of these manuals had been a lot of  help in their  in their attempt to improve their English language proficiency.

The tutors, however,  emphasized to  students to always practice speaking the English language because "practice makes perfect."  To further help the students practice the use of the English language in regular interactions, the  tutors made a seatplan where a student was not be seated beside, in front or at the back of his/her countrymate so they can avoid speaking their native language.  This plan forced them to speak  English.

The students also found difficulty in  coping up with the intensive nature of the course (whole day, Monday).  Thus,  part of the class hours was spent on one-on-one consultation with the language tutors, focused on the  specific needs of the students. Based on the interviews conducted with the tutors, this move helped the slow-learner students cope with the academic requirements of the course.

While some say that the allotted time  per  module  was too short,  more students think that the  length per module was just enough.

### 4.3.4 Enrollment Fees

Some delays in payment of fees had also been experienced due to a delay in the release of  students' monthly stipends. Thus, for those  under scholarship, a new  payment scheme  had been made where the LITE Program  directly issued a statement of account (SOA)  to the funding agency to help the student cope  with the  registration fees.  An additional measure established to provide prior advice to the student regarding fees and other requirements of the course is the publication of a  Frequently-Asked Question handout in the website of the  LITE Program  and the GS for the students'  information and  guidance. This move  resulted to up-to-date payment of registration fees by the enrollees.

### 4.3.5 Class Policies

It is best that students are repeatedly advised  not only of the course  policies but also of  the university policies on tardiness, absences, and other relevant rules.  Since they came from different universities and countries,  they may have been exposed to different policies  and they may bring the latter policies  with them in UPLB.  Examples of these policies included the  following:  (1) on maximum  number of absences,  (2) the need to

secure a  medical certificate if one is absent due to sickness, (3)   talking with a seatmate while a graded seatwork is on- going is prohibited, and  (4) prohibition on using a cellular phone  during class discussions or  exams for taking a call or texting, to name a few, which may result to problems between the students and the language tutor.Based on the feedback from tutors, more patience was  needed  to constantly remind students of  class rules  as well  as those specific to the UPLB campus , e.g., no smoking and drinking alcohol inside the university  at all times.

### 4.3.6 Differences in English Proficiency Levels of Students

Meanwhile**,** the language teachers also expressed some concerns which the LITE Program staff took care of to ensure a successful conduct of the Intensive English Course. While the differences in the students' English proficiency levels appeared as a concern of the students, the same was  actually an issue on the part of the teachers as well.

 Based on their feedback,  they  found it difficult to conduct the same set of activities to all students, thus, they made the following  adjustments in the conduct of the drills and graded seatworks: (1) divided the class into small groups and assigned different activities, (2) provided various assignments where students can choose which one they feel they can tackle, and (3) encouraged students to come for  one-on
-one consultation for further tutorial or help in coping up with the lessons.  Integrative discussion of all these  topics proved to be challenging.

All the  four (4)   tutors also   periodically coordinated with one another to exchange notes  and discuss specific  needs  of  specific students  with the aim of determining how to better help students who were encountering difficulties in the classroom requirements.

### 4.3.7 Students' Cultural  Differences

Since the students came from different countries and were  therefore bringing into the classroom different cultural backgrounds, some problems were expected.  Based on the period  of study, the most often cited concern were the following: (1) some Muslim students only ate  *halal* food (prayed over food following Muslim religious rites) and, therefore,  did not enjoy  the food festival activities where most  students  can eat anything;  (2) non-Muslim students did not enjoy  their favourite pork viands since the management prohibited the  bringing of any  pork-based viands/food  out of respect to the Muslim members of the class; (3)  lack of a room where Muslim students can do their prayer ritual before 12:00 noon.  Thus, when the management was informed of the said concern, they  immediately acted on it by providing the needed room;  (4)   required adjustments in the toilet   facilities since Muslim students wash their feet before performing the prayer rites. Earlier some  non-Muslim students complained that the toilet is  flooded due to the washing of the feet on the floor of the Muslim students; (5) avoidance of some  sensitive  issues   as a topic for discussion  such as the conflict of China  with other Asian countries (its citizens were members of the class),  homosexuality, marital fidelity, and superiority of men over women (in the Islam faith).

### 4.3.8 Class Schedule

Similar to  students,  teachers were also concerned  when regular  classes were suspended  due to inclement  weather or other reasons, and   make-up classes were conducted during weekends.

In the Philippines,  there were several national holidays which coincided with the Monday class, hence, the need to conduct such make-up classes on weekends. In some instances,  even when the Monday class falls on a holiday, the  English  class still continued  to meet  so as not to disrupt the preset  schedule. In instances like this, the university requires the Program Coordinator to formally request for the conduct of such classes and the students signs an agreement form.

The Program's administrative staff's also  experienced a problem with the class schedule. Since the class needed to start at 7:00 AM, the office administrative staff needed to be around as well  to prepare the needs of the tutors  and students (regular office hours  in the university starts at 8:00 AM).

In instances when  class suspensions occurred and there was a need to conduct make-up classes during weekends, this, again, required overtime work  beyond the usual weekday rendering of work, resulting to adjustments again on the personal schedule of the administrative staff.

### 4.3.9 Delays

Initially, there were  some concerns beyond the control of the LITE Program staff, e.g.,  the uncertainty of the number of students required to attend the Intensive English Course and  the specific names due to the a delay in the   release of the GS of the admission notices.  This, however, had been  solved since the GS had, since then,  issued the admission notices much earlier allowing both the admitted graduate students and the LITE Program to prepare for the course needs.

Together with the GS, the LITE Program staff helped in  notifying the students who were still in their respective countries the need to enroll  in the Intensive English Course. This showed that a close coordination among the stakeholders of the Program was  necessary for the course's  successful implementation.

The administrative staff was also concerned about  issues on delay in the arrival of the graduate student in the country resulting to  subsequent delay in their enrollment and participation in the subsequent activities of the Program.  Their reasons included the following: (1) personal and/or workplace issues (the wife just gave birth and the  student-husband can not immediately leave the home ; (2) the superior in the office had not signed yet the official study leave documents; and  (3)
visa had not yet been released by the local Philippines embassy.

Students also  reported for class late because either their previous professor happened to require them to stay beyond their class time or the venue or location of their previous class was far from  the English course classroom.  Often times, this resulted to the student missing out  part of the class activities (lecture or graded seatworks). Considering the class met only once a week, such failure to participate in some activities due to tardiness was  a  serious matter of concern.

### 5.Conclusion and Recommendations

For an  intensive English course for  international  students to be conducted, several  challenges from all  stakeholders: students, teachers,  administrative officers and staff   were encountered.  With the help and cooperation of  all concerned, including institutional support, its implementation was  improved.

Some problems were easily solved as they were within the control of either the academic (tutors) or the administrative   staff.  However, some concerns like the limited

time available  for the conduct of the English classes or a time   more convenient to everyone was difficult to solve since one considered the class schedule of at least 20 students and 4 language tutors.

There should be a change in the notion of the enrollment in the intensive English course as just an extra course or  precondition for admission, not a regular graduate course, like their major subjects.  The fact that their enrollment in the  English course was not reflected on their registration form, showed the lower importance given to it.   In reality, since the medium of instruction in UPLB is English, to a great extent, their passing their major graduate courses depended on  how fast they can improve their English facility.

Thus, it is recommended that  the said English course be considered as a  regular graduate course and be given a credit load inasmuch as it is a requirement for their admission.  This will also solve the  problem on marathon scheduling of classes which causes  information overload on the part of  the students.

Another concern which was difficult  to solve was the students' belonging to different English proficiency levels. While this was addressed by  dividing the class into smaller groups and assigning different language tutors per group,  it was difficult at times since there were not   enough teachers who can handle those classes because they were also  assigned regular teaching loads in the university. Currently, this concern is attended to by the conduct of extra tutorial classes on a one-on-one basis.

The above two  concerns which by far are the most serious, can be solved if only the host institution recognized the importance of the English class and included it in the students' regular graduate enrolment.   In addition,   the graduate students can be acclimatized well ( English as a foreign language, food, accommodation, social interactions, etc.) in the new university environment if their sponsoring/funding  agencies can send them two (2) months in advance.   There had been earlier efforts to persuade the sponsors but to no avail.

Further study is recommended focusing on the effect of the English training on the students' academic performance in their regular graduate courses.   It should be interesting to    study if indeed their English training helped them "*attain the required linguistic competency to hurdle academic life in the university*."  Feedback
from their respective graduate course professors may also be obtained.

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