

Confidence booster – English Conversation Groups

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English proficiency can be a barrier to the quality of international students' life and study experience in Australia. It is not only connected to academic learning, but more deeply linked to International Students' social interaction and adjustment issues. Because they are not confident, they shy away from opportunities like making friends with local students, working with people across cultures, or participating in other programs or events.

International Students have expressed their desire to engage with local people, including local students. "My English is not good enough", is a very common response from International Students when asked why they do not. Although they are expected to have a certain level of English proficiency to study at an Australian University, it is more realistic to say most of them do not feel confident in conversing or writing in English. Thus, those students tend to restrict their social lives to same-culture peers, which exacerbates their social isolation and further separates international students and local students.

The UWS Student Welfare Service worked in collaboration with the Academic Staff from the School of Humanities and Communication Arts to provide an opportunity for international students to practice their English conversation skills in a low risk environment, building confidence and connecting with their peers from different cultural backgrounds. This partnership enabled Welfare Service staff to utilise Academic staff's language teaching expertise, adding more value to existing training materials developed by Welfare Service staff. The collaboration with students studying Master of TESOL was also mutually beneficial as they developed their communication and leadership skills, but also gained work experience and received credit towards their unit.

By participating in a weekly conversation session with peers, international students get to share their opinions on current affairs and their cultures without feeling pressured or embarrassed. They are exposed to many different accents, including Australian accent, gain local knowledge and learn how to have respectful conversation with people from different backgrounds. Student facilitators are provided with training prior to the program commencement to have cross-cultural understanding and strategies on facilitating English conversation as a foreign language.

Feedback from both volunteers and participants shows English conversation groups help develop skills in organisation/prioritisation, interpersonal communication, and cultural awareness. Not only is English the means of study but is also an important tool that could make International Students' experience of University and Australia a lot better. Having confidence in speaking English enables international students to ask important questions when they need to, to understand regulatory requirements of universities and government agencies, to broaden their social network, to deal with their personal issues more effectively in Australia. Furthermore, peer-led learning environment brings mutual benefits to all students involved in the program, contributing to their global mindset.