

## **From Ivory Towers to Castles in the Air: A Case Study of the Far Transfer of EFL to the Real World by Graduates of a Higher Education Institution in Macao**

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**Abstract:** The purpose of education is the transfer of learning from the classroom to real world situations. Transfer concerns prior learning that affects new performances. The present paper explores the efficacy of the transfer of English as a Foreign Language from the classrooms of Macao Polytechnic Institute to graduates' workplace settings. The present study investigates such transfer by using a mixed methods approach involving firstly an analysis of one item on "foreign language" in an annual institutional survey questionnaire of 122 employers of MPI graduates followed by in-depth interviews of two of those employers regarding the same item. The results of the survey indicate that employers found the performance of the graduates "ordinary" and "were not satisfied" with their performance on "foreign language". Essentially, the graduates' performance in the productive language skills of speaking and writing are unsatisfactory, while their receptive language skills of listening and reading fare little better. Meanwhile, the results of the follow-up interviews provide much pause for thought on the historical roots of the extent of present-day foreign language competence. Finally, this research offers a range of suggestions for enhancing foreign language skills with a view to promoting the future employment prospects of graduates.

**Keywords:** EFL, far transfer, higher education, social work, transfer of learning

### **1. Introduction**

The purpose of formal education is the transfer of learning from the classroom to real world situations, with transfer being accepted as a precursor of competence (Billing, 2007). Such transfer is to a future time and place of unplanned tests when teachers are no longer present (Halpern & Hakel, 2003). It is therefore understandable that transfer is seen as crucial to all learning (Marini & Genereux, 1995), a key concept in formal education (Perkins & Salomon, 1992), and the foundation of learning, thinking and problem-solving (Haskell, 2001). Indeed, Ellis (1965) argued that there is perhaps no more important topic in the psychology of learning than transfer of learning. Transfer research has also been extended to a wide range of work-related situations, such as management settings (Longenecker, 2004), nursing (Wong, 1979) and legal education (Kowalski, 2000). The belief in the transfer of learning and the retention of knowledge after four years of undergraduate study, as well as the spending of a not insignificant sum of money, is therefore a state of affairs that clearly needs investigating.

Nevertheless, Day and Goldstone (2012) observe that after more than a century of research, knowledge transfer remains a very challenging and contentious issue for both psychology and

education. Almost everyone in education assumes and strongly believes that what students learn in schools and universities facilitates problem-solving in their future lives, so *far transfer* – positive transfer to a dissimilar context – is of special interest because of its direct relevance to everyday life (Eysenck & Keane, 2013). However, a troubling statistic appeared which called into question the whole enterprise of education: it has been estimated that only 10% of a student's investment in education pays off in terms of transfer of knowledge, skills and behaviour (Awoniyi, Griego, & Morgan, 2002, in Merriam & Leahy, 2005). Subedi (2004) has also observed that most training programs and courses fail to transfer. This situation has led Georghiades (2000) to claim that the inability of students to transfer the knowledge, skills and attitudes acquired within school to different contexts of wider social network indicates that education has no real meaning. Certainly, educationalists are faced with a serious challenge to their profession if the possibility of the transfer of learning is seriously undermined as a viable phenomenon. It is not surprising then that in 1999 the President of the American Educational Research Association identified transfer as one of the six most pressing areas in need of research progress (Lobato, 2006).

### 1.1. Research Aim

This review of the transfer of learning concerns tertiary education in general and Macao Polytechnic Institute in particular. No research on the efficacy of the transfer of the learning of English as a Foreign Language has been carried out in the author's place of work, a gap that should be filled. The ensuing research aim consists of two parts: first, to gauge the extent of the transfer of learning of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) amongst the graduates at Macao Polytechnic Institute to their subsequent workplaces, and second to gauge the extent of the transfer of EFL by the researcher's Social Work graduates.

The researcher wishes to point out that the present work is one of two parts of a study into the nature of learning transfer, with the other part (Davis, 2017) investigating the conditions and mechanisms of far transfer in higher education and the appropriate teaching methods required to facilitate such transfer.

The plan for this research is as follows. Firstly, two research questions will be given relating to the transfer of learning of English as a foreign language. Secondly, the key term *transfer of learning* will be analysed and defined, followed by a distinction into two types of transfer that the present study is concerned with, namely, near and far transfer. Thirdly, the research design and methodology for answering the research questions will be introduced and explored, followed by the analysis of a questionnaire survey and two short follow-up interviews. Finally, a conclusion will summarize and discuss the implications of ELT for the transfer of learning and, in the present study, in the transfer of social work concepts, values and skills to the workplace.

### 1.2 Research Questions

The research questions for this study are:

1. To what extent have the graduates at Macao Polytechnic Institute been able to transfer their English language learning (EFL knowledge and skills) to future places of

employment?

2. To what extent have the researcher's graduates in the Social Work Programme at Macao Polytechnic Institute been able to transfer their English language learning (EFL knowledge and skills) to future Social work-related institutions and situations?

## 2. Rationale

A host of definitions of *transfer of learning* have appeared in the transfer literature over many years (Ellis, 1965; Broad, 1997; Cormier & Hagman, 1987; Gick & Holyoak, 1987; Salomon & Perkins, 1989; Perkins, 1992; Perkins & Salomon, 1992; Detterman, 1993; Marini & Genereux, 1995; and Lobato, 2003). In the present study, Marini and Genereux's (1995) definition will be utilized as this one is generally accepted amongst researchers (Kowalski, 2000), that is: transfer of learning is *prior learning affecting new learning or performance*.

In addition, the author will focus on a type of transfer of learning referred to as *far transfer*. The transfer of learning has been analysed into two types: *near* and *far* (Clark & Voogel, 1985; Cree & Macaulay, 2000; Perkins & Salomon, 1988; Royer, 1986; Salomon, 1988). Near and far transfer have been given several distinctions, such as "low road", "vertical" or "specific" for the former, and "high road", "horizontal" or "general" for the latter (Bossard et al., 2008). Near transfer is the applying of knowledge and skills to contexts similar to the initial learning environment, such as an exam containing similar material to that practised in the classroom (Anderson, et al., 1996; Perkins & Salomon, 1992). Near transfer also deals with the same types of problems in the same subject domain, while far transfer covers two domains (Billing, 2007). In other words, near transfer refers to closely related contexts and performances, while far transfer relates to different contexts and performances (Perkins & Salomon, 1992). Far transfer involves knowledge and skills being applied in situations that change, one important skill being the ability of the student to make effective judgments in the new situation, involving analogical reasoning (Larsen-Freeman, 2013). Far transfer refers to generalizable skills such as reading that are applied to different contexts (Anderson, et al., 1996; Perkins & Salomon, 1992).

Most research focuses on near transfer – positive transfer to a similar context, in which the focus is on the immediate application of knowledge and skills from one situation to a similar one, although this is a situation that is far from real-world applications where people have access to texts, friends, feedback from others and, in general, a support network (Eysenck & Keane, 2013). Another weakness of near transfer is the lack of adaptation of knowledge and skills when circumstances change in the intended applied setting (Clark, 1999). Such a situation is especially relevant when one considers the claim that teachers often "teach to the test" when in fact far transfer is much more important for students' future success (Barnett & Ceci, 2002). Indeed, the educator should be concerned to take the student beyond the test and near transfer because high test scores do not guarantee enduring or transferable learning (Halpern & Hakel, 2003).

Near transfer under tightly controlled laboratory conditions which focus on superficial similarities has been verified; far transfer of deep structure is the most difficult to get and has yet to be supported by evidence (Detterman, 1993). For instance, Spencer and Weisberg (1986) discovered that even small changes in the context of learning eliminated all evidence

of transfer, despite the physical context being the same, a finding which calls into question the whole enterprise of education (Day & Goldstone, 2012). Another disadvantage of such transfer is the difficulty of instructing for such transfer to occur (Clark, 1999). In addition, for far transfer, real life matches of problems are hard to come by and, when they do, are often imprecise (Eysenck & Keane, 2013), despite the fact that real life scenarios are more important in which structural similarities are the standout feature (Blanchette & Dunbar, 2002; Dunbar & Blanchette, 2001, in Eysenck & Keane, 2013).

As mentioned above in relation to near and far transfer, Salomon and Perkins (1988, 1989) introduced another distinction in describing and understanding the transfer of learning with the coining of the terms *low-road transfer* and *high-road transfer*, the former being the developing of some knowledge and skill to a high level of automaticity via extensive and varied practice (such as car driving) involving modeling and reinforcement, the latter involving cognitive understanding and purposeful and conscious analysis, abstraction and application that cuts across disciplines, that is, the mindful or intentional abstraction of an idea for transfer, followed by the conscious and intentional application of the idea when faced by a problem. Learning to read, involving extensive practice with diverse materials, is an example in education of low road transfer (Perkins & Salomon, 1992). Other examples of low-road transfer activities are the processes of socialization, acculturation, the acquisition of habitual behavior patterns, response tendencies based on stimulus cues contained in the memory, personality traits, cognitive strategies and styles, expectations, and belief systems (Salomon & Perkins, 1989).

While both low and high-road transfer can go together, low-road transfer can be inhibited by high-road transfer, as seen in driving a car (Salomon & Perkins, 1989). But sometimes the mindful awareness characterising high-road transfer is necessary when required to drive on the opposite side of the road in a new country, like Americans have to do in England; another example is when doing the Stroop Color-Word Test (Stroop, 1929, in Salomon & Perkins, 1989).

Yet another distinction in the transfer of learning is *positive* and *negative transfer*. An example of the former can be seen in language acquisition, that is, the ability to generalize from one syntactic structure to another (Larsen-Freeman, 2013). On the other hand, negative transfer is the solving of a problem in the past that sometimes disrupts one's ability to solve a similar current problem (Eysenck & Keane, 2013). In a second language setting, negative transfer refers to cross-linguistic influence (Larsen-Freeman, 2013). Transfer of learning has another application in what is known as inter-language transfer, where the learning of one language (L1) facilitates or interferes with the acquisition and proficiency in a second language (L2) (Weinreich, 1953). In the context of teaching English as a foreign language, unsuccessful transfer can be seen when successful attainment of classroom-based grammar knowledge is not utilized by the same learner when communicating outside the classroom (Larsen-Freeman, 2013). James (2009) also found that L2 transfer, as aimed for on an English for Academic Purposes writing course, was rare.

Much research on positive and negative transfer has involved *analogical problem solving*, which is where a person uses similarities between the current problem and previous problems, a classic example from the history of science being Rutherford's solar system analogy to understand atomic structure (Eysenck & Keane, 2013). Analogical reasoning stems from symbolic cognitive approaches (Gentner & Gentner, 1983; Hummel & Holyoak, 1997, 2003).

Such an approach requires the use of similarities between present and past problems, of which Chen (2002, in Eysenck & Keane, 2013) has identified three types: *superficial*, involving some detail of specific objects common to both problems; *structural*, where causal relations among some of the main components are shared by both problems; and *procedural*, that is, procedures for turning the solution principle into concrete operations that are common to both problems. An example is a skilled chess player using their strategic game skills to help them run a business (Perkins & Salomon, 1992). In relation to academic achievement, Alexander and Murphy (1999) identified three main ingredients, namely, *domain knowledge*, *motivation*, and *strategic ability* (cognitive and meta-cognitive), and in doing so they argue that transfer is nurtured by promoting principled understanding and the teaching of analogical thinking.

Finally, a distinction can be made between *transfer of learning* and *transfer of training*. Transfer of learning is the generation of knowledge and information through education leading to a knowledge base and generic competencies, whereas transfer of training focuses on specific competencies that may be derived from the generic competencies (Subedi, 2004), or as Bossard et al. (2008) state, transfer of training enables a target task to be performed while transfer of learning leads to a general base of knowledge. In the context of adult education as well as vocational, professional training and workplace education, Subedi (2004) defines transfer of training as the degree to which trainees effectively apply knowledge, skills, and attitudes gained in a training context to the job environment. Another way of looking at this is that training focuses on procedural knowledge and near transfer rather than on declarative knowledge and far transfer (Subedi, 2004). The above types of transfer have been collated and presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Types of Transfer and Their Characteristics

Type of Transfer	Characteristics
<b>Near Transfer/ Low-road/ Vertical/ Specific/ Training</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Similarity of context of learning and context of application.</li> <li>2. Similar types of problems between single subject domains.</li> <li>3. Similar performances expected.</li> <li>4. Learned specific competencies and procedural knowledge base do not reflect the real world.</li> <li>5. Learner may not be able to adapt procedural knowledge and skills to new circumstances.</li> <li>6. Strong evidence base.</li> <li>7. Instruction is based upon well-founded behavioural principles of classical conditioning.</li> <li>8. Learning is based upon matching but superficial similarities.</li> <li>9. Practice, modeling and reinforcement produces automaticity.</li> <li>10. Examples include: reading (for contextualised classroom use), driving, socialization, acculturation, acquisition of habits, response tendencies, personality traits, cognitive strategies and styles, expectations, and belief systems.</li> </ol>

<b>Far Transfer/ High Road/ Horizontal/ General/ Learning</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Dissimilarity of contexts of learning and application.</li> <li>2. Different types of problems between two subject domains.</li> <li>3. Dissimilar performances expected.</li> <li>4. Learned skills and generic declarative knowledge base and competencies are generalizable to real world.</li> <li>5. Learner should be able to adapt to new situation using analogical reasoning.</li> <li>6. Lack of research evidence.</li> <li>7. How to instruct for such transfer?</li> <li>8. Learning is of structural similarities, so real life matches are imprecise.</li> <li>9. Understanding is conscious, purposeful, based upon abstraction and able to be applied across disciplines.</li> <li>10. Examples include: reading (for use outside the classroom setting), learning mathematics helps the learning of physics; learning to drive a car helps in learning how to drive a truck; a skilled chess player can use their strategic game skills to help them run a business (Perkins &amp; Salomon, 1992).</li> </ol>
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### 3. Research Design and Methodology

The research design and methodology for answering the two research questions made use of mixed methods: first, a quantitative approach that utilized statistical data gleaned from a questionnaire survey of employers of MPI graduates and, second, a qualitative approach that employed two in-depth interviews to investigate one selected question on “foreign language” from the questionnaire survey.

#### 3.1. Sampling and Design

The sample for the survey provides useful insights into the extent of learning transfer of English for 971 (35.12%) of the total 2765 graduates of Macao Polytechnic Institute during the academic years 2011-2015. These students graduated from six Schools of the Institute, namely: Arts (ESA), Public Administration (ESAP), Business (ESCE), Physical Education and Sports (ESEFD), Languages and Translation (ESLT), and Health Sciences (ESS). Information on these graduates, their 42 Programmes of study (Higher Diplomas and Bachelor Degrees), and related English courses during the above time period has been taken from the website of MPI.<sup>1</sup>

The 971 subjects of the sample in this study are analyzed at two levels: first, the graduates of Macao Polytechnic Institute during the four academic years 2011-2015 and, second, 144 graduates of the Social Work Programme in the School of Public Administration over the same period. To answer the first research question on the extent to which the graduates at

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.ipm.edu.mo/en/annual\\_report\\_overview.php](http://www.ipm.edu.mo/en/annual_report_overview.php)

Macao Polytechnic Institute have been able to transfer their English language learning (EFL knowledge and skills) to future places of employment, data was drawn from the *Report of Employer Satisfaction Survey* that is available on the MPI website.<sup>2</sup> In order to provide an overall picture of the teaching of English at MPI, the following features are deemed relevant. Five out of six Schools included compulsory English courses in their Programmes with the exception of ESEFD, with English I-III being offered as an elective over a period of three years together with Putonghua and Portuguese, of which the students must choose one. It should also be noted that the requirements of English teaching are different according to the nature of each Programme. Thus, out of a total of 42 Programmes studied during 2011-2015, 11 were taught in English only, namely, Computing (ESAP); Accounting, Accounting and Finance, Business Administration in Marketing, E-Commerce, Management, Public Relations (ESCE); and Chinese-English Translation and Interpretation (ESLT).

As for the qualitative sample, two research-informed case studies and in-depth interviews were carried out face-to-face with two residents and employers of Social work graduates in Macao in order to explore their authentic experiences of MPI graduates in relevant workplace settings. The two employers were chosen on an opportunistic basis, being well-known known to the researcher, on close terms as friends in the Social work field, and therefore easily accessible. Ethical concerns were adhered to with relevant procedures including informed consent, the right to withdraw, and the assuring of anonymity.

### **3.2. Reliability and Validity of the Questionnaire and Follow-up Interviews**

The research methodology that resulted in the above Report involved a survey of 122 employers of MPI graduates using mailed questionnaires, while telephone follow-up calls were made to those respondents who had not returned the questionnaires by the deadline given. This questionnaire can be found in Appendix A of the above *Report*. A total of 261 questionnaires were sent out, and 169 valid questionnaires were returned, constituting a response rate of 64.75%. The top four industry sectors that employed MPI graduates were: public administration, medical and public health or social services, education, and gaming and entertainment. Among the 122 institutions who responded, 47.5% were from the public sector, while respondents from the private sector accounted for 52.5%.

Questionnaire items to evaluate the work performance of graduates in the workplace were divided into two parts. The first part was categorized as “professional and job-related knowledge and skills.” There were eight items in total: (1) professional knowledge and skills, (2) written and oral ability, (3) analytical and critical thinking, (4) problem solving ability, (5) learning ability, (6) foreign language, (7) computer and information technology, and (8) communication skills. The second part of the questionnaire was categorized as “work ethic.” There were five items in total: (1) ethical practices, (2) dedication and responsibility, (3) creativity and innovation, (4) emotional intelligence, and (5) teamwork. Cronbach’s alpha was used to calculate the internal reliability between the topics found in Parts 1 and 2 (13 items in total), and the result of 0.93 indicates strong reliability.

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<sup>2</sup> [www.ipm.edu.mo/student\\_corner/en/gsl1115.php](http://www.ipm.edu.mo/student_corner/en/gsl1115.php)

Regarding quality controls for the two follow up interviews, the first concern is internal reliability, which required consistency of data collection, analysis, and interpretations as well as the seeking of disconfirming evidence. The second control involved external reliability – where an independent researcher, on replicating the study, would come to the same results and conclusions – and this was boosted by identifying and discussing the data analysis processes of examination and synthesis with the respondents. Thirdly, internal validity must be buttressed, particularly when using questionnaires and interviews because social desirability bias (the tendency of respondents to give socially approved answers) can easily afflict the validity of responses, which was preempted by ensuring respondent anonymity. Internal validity was bolstered by correctness of interpretation using reflexivity, use of participants’ categories and respondent validation. Finally, the ethics of the study are supported by the honouring of informed participant consent, anonymity, and avoidance of harm.

#### 4. Results and Discussion

The overall satisfaction rating of “professional and job-related knowledge and skills” was 3.82 out of 5 (5 being the maximum score), while “professional knowledge and skills” and “learning ability” received the highest rating of 3.96 and 3.95 respectively. “Foreign language” received the lowest rating of 3.61. Meanwhile, the overall satisfaction rating of “work ethic” was 3.9, while “ethical practices” received the highest rating of 4.08. “Creativity and Innovation” received the lowest rating of 3.66. The employers’ overall satisfaction rating of MPI’s graduates was 4.03 out of 5. The overall satisfaction rating of 3.61 for “foreign languages ability” reveals that the far transfer of language skills taught at MPI – English, Mandarin Chinese and Portuguese – has clear room for improvement. All of these results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Report of Employer Satisfaction Survey, 2011-2015.

<b>Research Methodology</b>	Questionnaire
<b>Institutions Involved</b>	122
<b>Top Four Employment Sectors Represented</b>	Public administration Medical and public health or social services Education Gaming and entertainment
<b>Questionnaires Mailed</b>	261
<b>Responses Received</b>	169
<b>Response Rate</b>	64.75%, of which 47.5% were from the Public sector, and 52.5% were from the Private sector
<b>Students Involved</b>	971 (35.12% of 2765)

<b>Employers' Overall Satisfaction Rating of MPI Graduates</b>	4.03 out of a maximum of 5
<b>Evaluation Criteria, Part 1. Professional and Job-related Knowledge and Skills:</b> (1) professional knowledge and skills (2) written and oral ability (3) analytical and critical thinking (4) problem solving ability (5) learning ability (6) foreign language (7) computer and information technology (8) communication skills	Overall employer satisfaction rating = 3.82 out of 5. Highest ratings for: (1) "professional knowledge and skills" = 3.96 and (5) "learning ability" = 3.95 Lowest rating for: (6) "foreign language" = 3.61 (SD = 0.79)
<b>Evaluation Criteria, Part 2. Work Ethic:</b> (1) ethical practices (2) dedication and responsibility (3) creativity and innovation (4) emotional intelligence (5) teamwork	Overall employer satisfaction rating = 3.9 out of 5. Highest rating for: (1) "ethical practices" = 4.08 Lowest rating for: (3) "creativity and innovation" = 3.66.

In order to examine if there were any significant differences between the public and private sectors with respect to the satisfaction rating of graduates in the workplaces, a one-way ANOVA was used. The results show that the public sector and private sector had significant differences in mean value in three aspects: "writing and oral communication skills," "analytic and critical thinking ability" and "foreign language" ability. These results indicate that private companies had higher requirements of the graduates in these three aspects.

The above item of "foreign language" (mean rating 3.61) under the variable "Professional and job-related knowledge and skills" needs further elaboration. Table 9 and Table 25 of the Graduate Employer Report reveal the levels of satisfaction that employers gave to the job performances of MPI graduates in their workplaces. For the item "foreign language", the ratings (as percentages) were divided into five levels as follows: very satisfied = 9.84; satisfied = 47.54; neither satisfied nor dissatisfied = 38.52; dissatisfied = 1.64, and very dissatisfied = 2.46.

For the purposes of comparison, Table 26 of the Graduate Employer Report presents a mean comparison of the "foreign language" of each *School*. This data is presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Mean Comparison of the “Foreign Language” of Each School.

School	Mean	SD
Languages and Translation (ESLT)	3.87	0.57
Business (ESCE)	3.66	0.57
Public Administration (ESAP)	3.54	0.84
Arts (ESA)	3.54	0.73
Health Sciences (ESS)	3.50	0.51
Physical Education and Sports (ESEFD)	3.46	0.83

The Report observes that while the School of Languages and Translation received “a relatively high rating of 3.87”, the School of Physical Education and Sports received “a relatively low rating of 3.46”, while the researcher’s School received a rating of 3.54. Overall, employers found the performance of graduates “ordinary” on “foreign language.”

Table 27 of the Report provides a further comparison of satisfaction ratings on “foreign language” between *Programmes* of study at MPI, as seen in Table 5.

Table 5. Mean Comparison of “Foreign Language” of Each Programme

Programme	Mean	SD
E-Commerce	3.93	0.27
Chinese-English Translation	3.91	0.61
Public Relations	3.85	0.56
Chinese-Portuguese Translation	3.75	0.55
Management	3.71	0.59
Design	3.64	0.79
Accounting	3.62	0.51
Public Administration	3.62	0.49
Pharmacy	3.56	0.53
Computing	3.52	0.92
Medical Lab	3.50	0.53
Visual Arts	3.47	0.61
Physical Education	3.46	0.83
Music	3.45	0.69
Nursing	3.45	0.52
Social Work	3.44	0.87
Marketing	3.42	0.52
Gaming and Recreation	3.40	0.55

The Report observes that the Programme of E-Commerce “received a relatively high rating of 3.93”, while the Programme of Gaming and Recreation Management received “a relatively low rating of 3.4.” The researcher’s English language teaching occurs in the Social Work Programme, which received a rating of 3.44. Overall, the Report continues, employers “were not satisfied” with the performance of graduates on “foreign language.”

What are we to make of a Likert Scale rating between 3 and 4? One problem is the nature of the scale, that is, the ranking of ordinal data gives no idea of the actual distance between the ratings, only the order. Secondly, there is the risk of Response set, that is, answering ‘Yes’ or ‘No’ unrelated to the content of the questions. Certainly, the lower two outliers of 1.64% “dissatisfied” and 2.46% “very dissatisfied” respondents are tantalizing and need closer scrutiny – hence the intent of conducting follow-up in-depth interviews of two employers of some of the Social Work graduates.

The second group of students being researched in this study are the graduates of the Social Work Programme for the same years, 2011-2015. Over these four years the number of these graduates represented in the *Employer Satisfaction Survey* was 144, constituting the largest group in the Report. In the Social Work Programme, Chinese is the medium of instruction for all subjects, with English being assigned as a taught subject. English language instruction takes place during the first five of the students’ eight semesters of study. The final exit level standard is an Intermediate level of English language competency. The aim of all English courses in the Social Work Programme of study, as given in the course outlines, is “to enable them to cope better with their other Social Work Studies subjects.”

To answer the second research question on the extent to which the Social Work graduates have been able to transfer their English language learning (knowledge and skills) to future Social work-related institutions and situations, the research methodology involved the use of a mixed methods design: an initial quantitative approach made use of the item on “foreign language” from Part 1 of the *Employer Satisfaction Survey* questionnaire to uncover data and gain insights in a statistical format, while a qualitative approach involved two in-depth face-to-face interviews with two employers of Social Work graduates, each at separate social welfare institutions in Macao. Follow-up questions invited the respondents to explain their reasoning behind the ratings and judgments made in Part 1, with the employers’ responses then investigated further.

The results of the two in-depth interviews will now be reported. The first employer interviewed (hereafter referred to as E1) was “dissatisfied” with the “foreign language” skills of the Social Work graduates in general, while the second employer interviewed (hereafter referred to as E2) provided a range of judgments according to each individual, from “Satisfied” to “Very Dissatisfied”. In particular, E1 said the graduates’ foreign language skills were “very poor” in general, while listening comprehension was “not good”, reading was “weak”, and speaking and writing were “very weak”. For E2, the Social Work graduates all “feel more comfortable” with reading rather than writing and speaking because it is easier to translate unknown words.

Both E1 and E2 were asked how they accounted for such judgments: E1 believed the graduates’ “basic foundation” in English was “weak” because Macau did not have a suitable environment to learn English. This situation was compared to the employer’s experience in

Hong Kong where the speaking of English could be found “anywhere”. An analogy was then drawn – if Hong Kong’s ex-colonial administration could foster the use of English that is a feature of life up to this day, why is Portuguese not likewise a feature of daily life now in Macau? E1 went on to hypothesize that certain historical roots explained the ease of hearing English spoken in modern day Hong Kong, such as “enlightened” British colonial rulers who established an educational system for the widespread learning and development of English for business and trade, while the dearth of Portuguese (and English) on the streets in Macau was due to the Portuguese rulers being “not keen to teach local people Portuguese” and, *a fortiori*, English.

E2 also hypothesized about the historical factors responsible for the generally unsatisfactory English language performance of the graduates, going even further in an analysis of the historical precursors of the lack of foreign language skills in Macau, arguing first that Macau society is a “closed community” in which everyone is aware of the many cultural and ethnic groups around them while there being little contact between them – indeed, contact is actively avoided. E2 then made an analogy about the separateness seen in social reality: Macau is like a “Dalmatian dog”, there being a common background colour on which the many separate black spots do not touch. E2 believes that this separateness is due to a closed mindset that is first seen in the family, in which children grow up being discouraged to talk to strangers, with unknown people arousing insecurity and fear. E2 argued that such a climate of insecurity arose from a history of “exploitation” by the ruling Portuguese who were “arrogant” and “abused their power”, quoting the infamous Prison experiment by Zimbardo (Haney, Banks & Zimbardo, 1973) to explain the situational forces and exploitative social roles that a colonial power engendered in settings of inequality. The sense of entitlement that the Portuguese colonial rulers expected from the local population also led to a belief that English was superfluous to requirements. These historical roots of language incompetency also meant that there was little reason to learn Chinese, in contrast to the British in Hong Kong who wanted to both share English and learn the local language.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusion

In English language terms, the graduates’ performance in the productive language skills of speaking and writing are unsatisfactory, while their receptive language skills of listening and reading fare little better.

The above research has also lifted the lid on an unsavoury and oppressive hangover from an exploitative colonial past during which a climate of insecurity spawned an environment that was antithetical to the learning of foreign languages. Such an unhelpful history of colonial rule did little in the way of promoting an education system in which the learning of foreign languages could be an important feature in opening up Macao to foreign businesses and trade.

Despite such adverse historical circumstances, what recommendations can be made to improve the far transfer of English from the ivory towers of Macao Polytechnic Institute to the real world of work today in order to provide better employment prospects for future generations of graduates in Macau? The first set of answers is provided by the *Employer Satisfaction Survey Report* itself, which recommends that a common Institute-wide framework of English courses

be considered, including a common curriculum, textbooks, and examinations. Furthermore, depending on their English level, students from different Programmes are suggested to join one class, so that their communication and learning environment will be enriched. Other suggestions include organizing an “English Corner” on campus, as well as arranging foreign instructors to help students practice their oral English skills.

Another obvious focus for facilitating the far transfer of English language learning is the methods used in the delivery of knowledge. For instance, while lectures support information recognition and examination preparation, Halpern and Hakel (2003) warn of their limits, such as limiting in-depth understanding of a topic and therefore transfer to new situations. Furthermore, Ramsden (2003) argues, since understanding is built upon an interpretive process, so the promotion of understanding requires an active participatory process. In this regard, and to consolidate the gains and enhance far transfer, the author has also attempted to motivate his Social Work students via the use of content-based instruction (Davis, 2016). Lightbown (2014, p. 3) defines content-based language teaching as “an approach to instruction in which students are taught academic content in a language they are still learning”. Such an instructional approach is known as “content and language integrated learning” (CLIL). Further research is also proposed, with the author intending to conduct a single case study of a typical Social Work graduate to explore how EFL instruction can be improved to better equip the student for social work in the real world.

In conclusion, the aim of this mixed methods research was to ascertain the extent to which MPI’s graduates, and in particular, the author’s Social Work graduates, have retained and used their knowledge of English after graduating from their four-year programme of studies. The validity of the far transfer of learning is of central importance to education, teaching and learning since without it there would be no linkage between the classroom and places of employment. According to the findings in the present research, we cannot conclude that the far transfer of learning of EFL has taken place between the ivory towers of MPI and the real world of work. The overall picture is discouraging, with the far transfer of English as a Foreign Language from the MPI classroom to the workplace proving to be limited. As the *Employer Satisfaction Survey Report* states, employers were “not satisfied with the foreign language skill of graduates”, describing their skills as “ordinary”.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, even though historical factors played a significant role in handicapping the acquisition and consolidation of English for the local population in Macau, there is a pressing need for further investigation of appropriate and relevant policies and teaching methodologies that can be instituted forthwith in order to enhance the nurturing of a multilingual environment at a societal level.

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<sup>3</sup> [http://www.ipm.edu.mo/intranet/student\\_corner/graduate\\_employer\\_report\\_e\\_1115.pdf](http://www.ipm.edu.mo/intranet/student_corner/graduate_employer_report_e_1115.pdf)

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