

Supporting International Students' Adjustment to UK Study

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Context

The English for Academic Purposes (EAP) Pre-Sessional course at London Metropolitan University forms is offered by the European and Language Services (ELS) programme and runs for a total of twelve weeks. Each twelve-week course is divided into three, four-week sub courses. Typically students are on linked, conditional offers and, as such, are required to complete the entire pre-sessional programme in order to achieve progression onto their chosen pathway.

The majority of students come to study in the UK from abroad and do not have English as a first language. They are from a wide variety of backgrounds and tend to be aged between eighteen and thirty. The language levels of the students are ascertained by a pre-course test and they are placed in classes accordingly.

Rationale

Whilst there is a growing body of work concerning the experience of International students in the UK, there is still a long way to go before this can be considered exhaustive. Indeed it has only been over the last few years that this subject has gained any sort of academic recognition. London Met has one of the largest bodies of overseas students in the UK and, with numbers increasing yearly, it is becoming ever more important to gain insight and knowledge into their experiences.

As a lecturer in the ELS department, I teach to a wide variety of backgrounds, races and nationalities, often teaching classes with students from ten or more different countries. While it is important to recognise that there are as many differences within a particular group as there are between groups, having taught in the department for almost ten years I have come to recognise both strengths and weaknesses of particular groups of students and to what type of activities and teaching approaches they are likely to respond. In single nationality classes it is easy to adapt both material and teaching style to the students' needs, however, in classes with students from vastly different cultural and linguistic backgrounds a more

detailed strategy is needed. As such, there is clearly a need for research into the challenges that International students face with a view to making recommendations that may improve these experiences.

Methodology

Three EAP classes were chosen to participate in this small-scale, primary research study: a total of 44 students who were predominately from Asia. The vast majority were on academic pathways that would lead to them studying foundation, undergraduate or postgraduate courses at London Metropolitan University. The students came from three classes: group 1 had finished the EAP course and had moved onto their degrees, while the other two were enrolled on the EAP course as the research was being conducted. All students were aged under 30.

Students initially completed a short written questionnaire in which they gave their opinions about studying on the London Met EAP courses. From this initial feedback, combined with knowledge gained from current literature, further questions were formulated that students discussed during focus group discussions. These follow up questions were divided into the following categories:

- Cultural adjustment
- Syllabus and learning related difficulties
- Teaching style and the role of the teacher
- Mixed nationality classrooms

Results from both initial questionnaires and follow-up focus groups were then analysed in light of existing literature and knowledge.

Discussion

Cultural adjustment

The vast majority of students experienced some cultural adjustment issues on arrival in the UK, however the degree of discomfort varied widely, depending on the origin of the students. Many of the Asian students, mainly Chinese and to a lesser extent Vietnamese and Thai, experienced a degree of discomfort which could certainly be described as culture 'shock'. Student SS from China spoke of how the reality of London was completely different to what her expectations had been. Primarily, the racial and cultural mix had been unexpected. Whereas it seemed she had been expecting a scene of prim Anglo Saxon ladies and gentlemen in bowler hats, the reality of the Holloway Road could not have been further away from this image. Another Chinese student complained that due to the racial mix of London, she now didn't know what "English" meant. Such sentiments tie in with the work of Marr (2005) who also found that his cohort of Chinese students had experienced similar adjustment issues.

It was interesting that the Japanese and Taiwanese students did not have a problem with these aspects of London life, in fact they embraced it. One Japanese student talked about “going to a real reggae club, with real Jamaicans”, while a Taiwanese student spoke of the open mindedness that the cultural diversity of London brought “...people are more tolerant”. Perhaps this is because their countries are less closed and insular compared to China, and through the media and previous travel they have far more awareness of what life is like in different countries. It should be noted, however, that a willingness to embrace the local culture doesn’t mean that they students have found it easy to integrate into local life. Student S (China) found it “...difficult to make deep relationships with local people”, while Student L (Korea) said he wished he “...could meet more British students.”

Students also felt that one of the biggest problems they faced on arrival in the UK was the speed of which everything happened: arrival, meeting their homestay families and then embarking on the rigours of an academic English course, often all in the space of 24 hours. A significant number spoke of needing more time to adapt, Student E (China) stating that “Culture shock was big problem, we need to get used to London and being abroad along with adjusting to our EAP class”. Yet they were also very forthcoming in offering solutions to these problems, in particular suggesting extra “settling in” classes which could help them adapt to life in Britain.

Syllabus and learning related difficulties

A number of common themes emerged with regard to the type of learning related difficulties the students experienced. A large number of students, notably Chinese and Japanese, mentioned the different “logic” in the way essays are written in their countries and how they are required to do it in the UK. This supports the work of Koda (2007) and Watkins and Welikala (2008) who discussed the difference in thought processes between Asian and European cultures. Problems with writing were not restricted to Asian students though. Students expressed difficulty in organising essays in the required manner, particularly struggling with the concept of a thesis statement – the declaration of the main argument in the introduction, as opposed to the conclusion. In line with Watkins and Welikala’s research, the students also had difficulty with the concept of referencing and citation – “In China, we don’t need to do this”. Students expressed their gratitude at being taught these conventions, in particular the group whose feedback took place after they had embarked on their chosen pathways (group 1): “I’m so thankful that we learnt these things [citation], if we hadn’t I’d have never been able to do my essays now”, said Student H (Algeria). A number of students did complain though, that such an essential skill was only really taught in detail in the final month of the course.

Further writing relating difficulties often centred on the notion of what actually constituted a ‘good essay’. While European students tended to have an understanding that matched that of their EAP teachers, a significant number of Asian

students, principally Chinese, tended to have wildly different conceptions. It would seem that in China students are encouraged by teachers to write lengthy, complicated sentences with a reliance on long words and technical vocabulary. Also the use of translation software for whole sentences, and even paragraphs, is a common convention, while wide usage of other peoples' work, often simply cut and pasted into their essays without the need for in-text citation or referencing, appears standard practice. Almost all of the Chinese students who took part in this research expressed shock, sometimes bordering on dismay at the non-alignment of Chinese and British writing conventions, and felt that they needed far more time to adapt to what is essentially a completely alien style of writing. Student W (China) felt that *"We need more time to adjust to the writing style and skills required here. Sometimes it feels everything we knew is wrong"*. It is interesting to note that these opinions were slightly more prevalent among the students on one- or two-month courses than those who had been enrolled for the full three months. Perhaps more interesting was the finding that such worries were far less of an issue for those students who had previously studied on the ELS General English course (up to six months), and as such, had previous university learning experiences.

When asked about their difficulties regarding spoken English, a number of students requested extra speaking classes to help them with seminar type activities and also pronunciation problems. The Thai and Vietnamese students in particular found that not only were they having difficulty understanding other students but that it was quite apparent that many of their classmates often had no idea what they were saying. The Thai students also expressed difficulty in taking part in discussions with their classmates, Student U stating that *"Students [are] afraid to give [their] opinion in Thailand, so need time to adjust here"*. Japanese and Chinese students also spoke of their difficulty in taking part in discussions, although the reasons given were quite different. The Japanese students were in agreement that in Japan they should respect other people's opinions and not challenge them. They also stated that they often remained quiet for fear of saying something wrong or using incorrect grammar.

It was interesting that very few students mentioned reading as a difficulty. This could be because it does not form part of the formal assessment, and therefore students are either not as aware of their shortcomings, or do not attach as much importance to this skill compared to writing and speaking. Students certainly do have reading difficulties though, as mini tests tend to show, and considering the amount of reading that they are expected to do on their degrees, it may be worth having a stronger emphasis on reading in the future.

Likewise, no student mentioned critical analysis as an area of difficulty, and even when questioned, very few thought they had a problem in this area. Again, from personal experience, coupled with the findings of other literature, overseas students tend to have great difficulty when required to demonstrate criticality (in writing). As reported by Trahar (2007) they often write descriptively; simply explaining, but not

engaging with or challenging others theories or viewpoints. Again, as critical analysis does not form a major part of the course, perhaps students are simply unaware that they might struggle with this.

One area that a significant number of students commented on was the amount of contact hours at London Met compared with universities in their countries. They were quite surprised at how much self study they were expected to undertake and thought that they should get more guidance from their teachers as to how they should tackle this independent study time. This willingness to embrace self study was surprising, as in previous years when a self study element was a prominent and compulsory feature of ELS courses, it was often met with a degree of resistance from the students. The decision had therefore been taken to remove self study as a compulsory element of the courses. Perhaps Peacock's findings that "[o]nly 30% of teachers said that students wanted teachers to encourage them to become independent learners, but in fact 77% of students said that they wanted this" (2001, p.14) could be applied to London Met too.

Teaching style and the role of the teacher

Asian students invariably said that the style of teaching on their EAP courses was vastly different to what they had experienced in their own countries. In terms of the relationship between students and teachers, it was commonly mentioned that teachers were closer to their students than in their home countries. Megumi (Japan) said that "*The distance between teachers and student here is closer than in Japan. So it's easy for the students to ask some questions to their teachers*", While a Chinese student commented that "*Students only listen to the professor [in China] to take the main points however in UK all the students can communicate with the teachers and everyone really enjoy their time while they study*".

While some students clearly had difficulty with the group work and discussion aspect of the course, this did not mean that they were not aware that this was a crucial part of the UK education system and was something that the majority were keen to embrace. A Georgian student commented that "*Teamwork is a new and enjoyable experience*", while another felt that "*one good thing in England is [that] the teachers focus on communication between students while in Latvia students pay attention to learning and memorising the language individually*". This seems to contradict other research, particularly Watkins and Welikala (2008), who found that students tended not to favour the classroom interaction and group work approach favoured in the UK. It also contradicts accepted wisdom from the likes of Peacock (2001) and other researchers whose findings suggested that most students expressed a negative preference for group learning. Even the Chinese and Japanese students seemed quite willing embrace this new style of teaching, often commenting that while they found it difficult, they understood that collaborative learning is an important aspect of education in Britain, and was something they were therefore keen to embrace. A

significant number of respondents (largely Chinese and Japanese) did however request that they be given some more preparation or thinking time, before embarking on group discussions.

Regarding the role of the teacher, there were mixed responses. Students commented favorably on the more relaxed atmosphere and friendly approach of the teachers; *“The shape of the teaching is free. We don’t feel nervous. But in my country we just follow teacher and agree with their opinion. We can’t query the teachers words”* (Chinese) and *“I’ve lost my inhibitions to express myself [in English] and I think my teachers have been the key because all of them have good relations with the students”* (Venezuelan). However, in terms of the teacher as an authority figure seen as all knowledgeable, some of the students were critical. One Chinese student remembered an occasion when he *“was told different things by different teachers [this meant] one teacher was wrong”*, while another stated that *“sometimes when we ask questions, the teachers just ask the question back to the other students. I think the teacher should know the answers themselves”*. This corroborates the work of numerous academics such as Trahar (2007) and Ryan (1999) who have emphasised the different roles of the teacher from country to country: particularly Asian and African students who are often used to seeing their teachers as ‘gurus’ in place to dispense information.

Mixed nationality classrooms

Contrary to expectations, despite early misgivings, students largely expressed positive opinions regarding studying with students from different countries and cultures. The one common complaint that there were too many Asian students came exclusively from the Asian students themselves. Indeed One Japanese student felt that this was a major drawback: *“there are a lot of Asians who tend to stick together and speak their own language”* - although she was keen to suggest a solution, *“to avoid this we should make friends with other nationalities students and try and speak English even when talking to students from the same country”*. Other worries were connected to not being able to understand different accents, while other students spoke of their initial shock of working with people who thought in completely different ways to themselves. To counter this, students spoke of their increasing knowledge and understanding of different cultures and were keen to emphasise that the benefits of mixed nationality groups far outweighed the drawbacks; *“I really love the fact that we can share with different cultures and learn a piece about them while you’re taking the English course”* (Venezuelan) and *“[mixed nationality classes] help you expand your outlook”* (Chinese).

Conclusion and recommendations

The most important finding is that from the three groups who took part in this research, it would seem that the students are very satisfied with the EAP course.

However a number of areas could be considered with a view to improving the students' experience of the course.

Firstly, perhaps a self study element could be (re)introduced. In the past students had one whole morning a week allocated to self study, with a self study mark incorporated into their monthly grade. Students in this study clearly struggled with their independent study and it was commonly mentioned that they did not know how to spend their free time in the afternoon usefully. Consequently, there were many requests for more teacher guidance with respect to helping them exploit the amount of non contact time they had.

Many students mentioned the need for a greater adjustment period, both to British cultural life, and UK educational conventions. One way to address this would be to provide extra "settling in" classes where students could learn both about UK culture and also how to best equip themselves for academic life in the UK. Core components such as essay structure, critical analysis, citation and avoiding plagiarism could be covered. An add-on course before embarking on EAP would also give them the opportunity to get used to interacting with students from different countries and cultures in a more relaxed, and stress-free environment.

While the students were invariably happy with the course content, there were calls for more academic vocabulary to be taught, along with speaking and pronunciation. It may be a good idea to incorporate some AWL (Academic Word List) exercises from month one. This supports Bradshaw's (2004) conclusion, from her study in the same department, that

[vocabulary] should be introduced by corpora based word lists throughout the course and regularly reviewed and tested (2004, p.7)

While the course does place a great emphasis on speaking, it is of a very communicative nature. Perhaps the students do not specifically recognise this as speaking practice. It could therefore be useful to introduce more explicit exercises based on improving their speaking skills. A majority of the students, notably Asian, felt that they have fairly major pronunciation issues and were able to recognise that students from different countries were often unable to understand them. This tended to cause understandable anxiety, and as such, perhaps a pronunciation element could be incorporated into the syllabus, or offered as an extra class.

Finally, more reading work could also be incorporated. While most of the students in this study did not mention reading as one of their weaknesses, this could be down to the fact that they are not really given the opportunity to measure their ability and therefore do not recognise the problems that clearly do exist. Student also may not have an awareness of the amount of reading that will be required of them on their degrees and as such do not place as great an emphasis on this skill. Building on the

work of Hirvela (2001) who highlights the benefits of teaching reading and writing together, Bradshaw recommended this approach for EAP, stating that this will

...allow students to become familiar with different kinds of texts and respond in a variety of writing formats” (Bradshaw, 2004, p8).

While there certainly is a reading element in the course, particularly in month three, it may be worth looking at building on Bradshaw’s suggestion.

Essentially the main purpose of our EAP courses is to prepare students for further academic study. It would therefore seem logical that the main focus of future research should be students who have completed the course and embarked on their pathways. Any future research would need to be planned accordingly and recognise that obtaining a sample of students who have left EAP and embarked on their degrees, is a challenge in itself. Certainly, there is room for further, more detailed and perhaps longitudinal, research allowing a greater understanding of international students’ experiences of studying EAP at London Metropolitan University.

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Biographical note

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