

Student Success In A Pre-Sessional Course For Postgraduate International Students: implications for practice

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Introduction

This paper summarises a recent review of the pre-sessional English for Academic Purposes (EAP) programme for preparing international students for foundation undergraduate and postgraduate study at London Metropolitan University. While on the EAP course, students have an opportunity to improve their level of English, develop appropriate study skills, get used to university life and the different teaching and learning style here in the UK, well before starting their degree. They also have time to prepare themselves more for their particular subject area by reading in advance.

The EAP programme has grown quickly since its creation in September 2001 (over 1000% increase in enrolled students) and has had to confront the need to make changes in the course structure, its delivery, and improve links with other departments, in order to cope with the ever-growing numbers of international students on the course.

However, it was also important not to lose sight of the fact that the course so far has been largely successful and has prepared many students well for their degree study. Hence, in-depth interviews were conducted with two students who had completed the EAP course and moved successfully onto their postgraduate studies. By looking at their experience on the pre-sessional EAP course and their adaptation to living in the UK and the university system, the hope was to come up with findings that would inform curricular changes. In addition, these findings may prove useful for other departments and higher education institutions involved in teaching and dealing with international students.

The desire to focus on the positive aspects of the teaching and learning is also due to the fact that little attention seems to have been paid in the educational literature to successful students' integration into the University and community as a whole. More often than not the focus is on the problems caused by and experienced by growing numbers of international students in HE institutions worldwide.

In addition, it is essential to take all factors into consideration before making curricular changes, as Stoller (2001) argues:

".....curriculum renewal (of EAP programmes) represents one effective way of responding to the evolving needs of students and faculty, to the shifting circumstances of the educational programmes themselves, and to new insights from the professional literature. Curriculum renewal that is grounded in sound decision making and a thoughtful consideration of the factors impacted by reform can ensure programme integrity, viability, responsiveness and competitiveness".

Despite strong external factors driving forward the need for curricular change (for example, accreditation), it was also of utmost importance to pay heed to the students' needs.

The two success stories

Both interviewees were Chinese males and mature students paying their own fees. Charles was in his early 30's, an engineering graduate who had worked for over 10 years as a manager in various companies but had reached a plateau in his career. He realised he lacked knowledge of business theory to move forward in his role, so decided to come to the UK to study an MBA. Having too low a level of English for direct entry, he was made a conditional offer on our 9-month pre-sessional English course by the representatives in our Beijing office.

John, then aged 28, had worked in marketing in China but wanted to update his knowledge and prepare himself for working more with international companies in the future. He too was interviewed and tested by our China office and made a linked conditional offer on our 6-month pre-sessional English course prior to MA Marketing.

When interviewed, both were doing very well on their Masters and have since graduated with good grades, having had A's and B's all the way through their postgraduate study. As they both arrived with very limited knowledge of English, their achievements are all the more interesting to study. Questions asked were about their reasons for coming to the UK and their arrival, their interpretation of their experience so far of the teaching in the UK, of their own learning and how they managed to adapt to a very different life in the UK. Many of their comments are illuminating about the problems international students in general face during the process of adaptation to life and study in the UK.

It could be contended that as both Charles and John are mature students, they were more likely to be successful. Ramsay *et al* (1998) discuss theories on adult learning that suggest mature-age students will readily adapt and learn in a new student role. They also note that many international students are mature because they are on postgraduate courses and have worked before. These factors together with the high levels of personal motivation and family pressure on them to succeed should be taken into consideration when looking at the success rates on courses such as the pre-sessional English programme.

Adapting to the UK and university life

On arrival in the UK they were surprised to find that things were not always as they expected, despite doing prior research. But Charles felt confident about his ability "to communicate with different people" and saw this as a major tool for his acceptance of this new life. He explained how other students he knew well on the EAP course had a more difficult time in adjusting to the change in lifestyle and learning styles, and suggested a lack of a desire to understand and communicate as a possible reason for other students' problems in adjusting:

"Lots of things didn't meet their expectations, how they communicated, London, the way they had to learn... (these) people need other skills not just language skills. They need to improve their opinions, their mind and their way of thinking".

Ramsay *et al* (1998) describe how both negative and positive "critical incidents" can hinder or help a student adapt academically and adjust culturally. John said his adaptation to UK life was made easier by living with a homestay family for the first month, which, he claims, gave him a very good impression of British people. As well as making friends with the homestay family, John joined a

local church and engaging with the community he met through it enabled him to settle more quickly.

Charles had advice for students arriving in the UK on how to cope with the inevitable culture shock. "There are some positive and negative things in the UK culture but the most important thing is to balance them, don't refuse or accept them in total, just pick out some positive things and throw away some negative things". These words almost mirror Storti's (1990) remarks, in discussing cross-cultural competence, on the need for give and take when adapting to a new cultural situation:

"The adjustments we must make to a new culture are invariably of two kinds: we have to adjust of get used to behaviour on the part of the local people which annoys, confuses, or otherwise unsettles us; and we have to adjust our own behaviour so that it doesn't annoy, confuse, or otherwise unsettle the local people".

Similarly, in her study of postgraduate Japanese students in the UK, Akazaki [2002] found that students who had gained "perspective transformation" (a notion from Mezirow's adult learning theory) become interculturally competent.

Skills development on the pre-sessional course

Language proficiency

To pass the EAP course students need to make continuous improvement in all language and study skills. Monthly mock IELTS tests are used to indicate whether students are making progress. Those who do so, do not need to take the official IELTS exam at the end of the course, for proceeding to their degree programme. However, a student who has not progressed sufficiently, due to poor attendance, failing coursework or poor class participation, will be asked to take the official IELTS in the last month of the course, as proof of the required level of English for their path of study. However, although the IELTS exam is the preferred language qualification for entry, an international student with high scores is not necessarily guaranteed academic success on the chosen course of study – as corroborated by the survey by Cownie and Addison (1996): "English language proficiency as measured by standard tests does not always correlate with academic success". Likewise, Charles concluded that "...correct language level is more complex, it's not just about your points in IELTS".

Reading and writing skills

John found the language skills development on the pre-sessional course very useful preparation for his MA. But he was still shocked by the amount of reading required on the Masters course. A common complaint among international students is about the vocabulary load of academic texts and the time consumed by having to look up unknown words in a dictionary, which in turn slows down the whole process and can be frustrating, as new words are not learnt easily by doing this. Citing research that showed that students' recognition of vocabulary correlated to their reading comprehension scores, Cobb and Horst (2001) suggest that formal academic vocabulary is taught to foreign-language students at lower levels, together with the vocabulary usually seen in general English courses. This should be introduced by corpora based word lists throughout the course and regularly reviewed and tested.

Charles also felt his language skills had developed a great deal on the pre-sessional course, especially academic reading and writing. He appreciated that when there was a lesson on some sub-skill of writing, he was shown how to do it and then made to practice it and then expected to

include the new skill in the next piece of writing. One of the main challenges for a pre-sessional curriculum is to cover writing skills for wide the range of text formats required in different subject areas. Separating reading and writing skills and teaching them discretely is often seen on EAP courses. However, Hirvela (2001) observes that "...reading can be, and in academic settings nearly always is, the basis for writing" and recommends that reading and writing skills be taught together. This will allow students to become familiar with different kinds of texts and respond in a variety of writing formats.

Listening and speaking skills

Charles pointed out the progress he made in listening and speaking was slower and put this down to two factors. Firstly, he was weaker in these two skills to begin with and, secondly, there were too many other Chinese students in many of his English classes. Both he and John commented that on the pre-sessional course they had complete understanding and their confidence in their own listening skills by the end of the course was high. This may be due to the fact English language teachers tend to speak clearly and slowly and moderate their language for international students. Once on the Masters courses, John and Charles were both were shocked by the variety of regional accents, and unprepared for having lecturers whose first language was not English and the speed and poor quality of delivery of some lectures. Their confidence was lost and adapting their listening strategies took up a lot of time and energy in their first semester. Both felt they had not been properly prepared for this difference on the pre-sessional course.

These comments are seemingly backed up by research reported by Robertson *et al* (2001) which indicated that students with relatively high TOEFL/IELTS scores felt that their oral and listening skills were inadequate for the academic tasks they faced at University. Equally, tutors more often complained about international students' speaking skills in presentations, participation in seminars and their understanding of lectures and input sessions.

Changing learning styles

John described the change in his learning style as "learning by doing and (discussing) different topics everyday ... totally different". He compared this to the rote learning he was used to in China. This new learning style slowly became second nature, and he came to the conclusion that learning by heart was not the best way to learn.

Charles discussed how he developed awareness of what critical thinking was. On the pre-sessional course, the idea was introduced to him in skills classes, but he struggled with the concept. He became fully aware of its meaning much later on his MBA, "because I was doing a lot of critical thinking with my tutor, when I was reading and in the lectures. It's the way to get opinions from the theories and... how to link them with your own working ideas". Charles here is aware of the changes that have taken place in his conception of knowledge and has, in Tynjala's (1998) the definition of constructivism, "moved from memorising and reciting information to an emphasis on understanding, conceptual change and the development of metacognitive and critical thinking skills".

Role of the teacher

John found that studying "wasn't so difficult" because "my teachers were warm-hearted and helped me to improve and gave me good advice". But he also said it was very easy to spot teachers and lecturers who "did not pay much attention (to him) and don't use their heart in class". Discussing the change he made in his student behaviour because of the different teaching style, he explained: "In China we follow the teacher's way (of thinking), the teachers put things into

our mind. Give us things to memorise... Here I must use my head more and express myself better".

Charles also saw many differences between the teacher-student relationship in the UK and in China. "Here the relationship is friendly, they are equals. But in China there is a long tradition and there is a relationship of [the] superior and his subordinates. Here, for instance, we can interrupt the tutor at any time to challenge him with questions, but in China it's quite rude". He added, "Here lecturers will try and help you learn what you want to learn from him, he will encourage you to improve your ability little by little".

Charles and John were keen to emphasise the good relationship they had developed with their pre-sessional English teachers and how they had been encouraged greatly. On moving onto degrees, both had built up similar relationships with their tutors. This is one of the strengths of the pre-sessional course. Because of small class numbers (fifteen maximum), teachers get to know students well and can help them almost on a very personal level with specific problems pastoral and educational alike. It is a scenario that corresponds to the educational ideal. An aspect of a good learning environment is that it has to be "emotionally safe". According to Dwyer (2002), "[w]hen setting the learning climate special care must be made to ensure a caring attitude, where every learner is respected and considered important, each bringing to the learning experience unique talents". Drawing on Bahktin's theories, Gravett and Henning (1998) propose that teaching should become "dialogic mediation", implying the teacher, student and knowledge united in a dynamic and reciprocal co-learning process. Teaching as dialogic mediation is not teacher- or learner-centred, but *learning-centred*, with the teacher serving the agreed upon mediational role.

Implications for curricular changes

In the light of the above findings, there are several issues that need to be addressed.

Language monitoring: preparation for language test-taking strategies uses up valuable time for postgraduate students in particular. That time is probably better spent on helping students prepare for postgraduate study, by introducing them to study skills and giving them practice in these skills, alongside remedial language support. This implies a different means of ongoing course assessment than the current reliance on language tests. We need to be able to indicate to students whether or not they are "on target" for successful engagement with subsequent courses.

Listening skills: it is crucial to prepare students for understanding lectures and note taking and coping with the different accents of lecturers.

Speaking skills: pronunciation work is needed to improve the students' own speaking skills in academic contexts and build up their awareness of the differing pronunciation of accents. Seminar skills at Masters level are far more demanding than the kind of group discussions currently held on pre-sessional courses. Videos of an MBA seminar may be useful to show students what will be expected of them.

Reading skills: texts from the reading lists from various subject areas should be exploited in classroom activities. This will help students by giving them a truer picture of the amount of reading to be done and also help them start on the subject-specific vocabulary they need to acquire prior to their course starting.

Writing skills: there is a need to work more with models of essays from different subjects, and to practice different kinds of writing. Computing students, for example, do not have to produce long

pieces of work, but at undergraduate level they have to keep a learning log. Reading skills should be linked in with writing skills and model essays from a selection of texts.

Research skills: should also be included in the pre-sessional course, in particular for all postgraduate students.

Induction: both interviewees stressed how confident they felt at the beginning of their degree compared to newly arrived students who had not been asked to complete a pre-sessional course, because they already had the minimum language entry requirement. Such students would stand to benefit from a shorter pre-sessional course of two weeks as part of induction and designed to give them a flying start on their postgraduate courses – as Charles and John experienced.

Staff development: consideration should be given to offering workshops for staff and lecturers who deal with international students, on topics such as delivery of lectures, cultural issues (such as "loss of face") and how to make seminar groups and lectures inter-cultural and "emotionally safe" (see De Vita (2001) and Hellmundt (1998) for ideas about teaching multicultural groups).

Internationalisation of the university: there should be greater exploitation of the benefits of cultural and national diversity (as Violet and Ang (1998) also argue) via, for example, student societies, social programmes suitable for all nationalities and religions, and events and buddy schemes aimed at creating intercultural understanding and opportunities for international and home students to mix.

Conclusion

This study has shown that from in-depth interviews with successful students many insights can be drawn about the teaching and learning experience of international students and their adaptation to life and study in the UK. The implications for curricular change can apply not only to pre-sessional courses, but all university teaching contexts that are facing the challenge of student diversity.

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