

MY EXPERIENCE OF TEACHING PRE-SESSIONAL ENGLISH FOR ACADEMIC PURPOSES COURSES FOR INTERNATIONAL OR NON-NATIVE-ENGLISH-SPEAKING STUDENTS AT SCOTTISH UNIVERSITIES

I am very grateful and also excited to be given the opportunity to share with you, my esteemed colleagues at Jagiellońskie Centrum Językowe JCJ, some thoughts on teaching pre-sessional English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses for international students at different universities in Scotland. I will write about certain similarities and differences between teaching there and here at JCJ. Hopefully, it will prove to be informative and maybe inspiring. This reflection will be preceded by some statistics and definitions.

Some numbers

First of all, it is necessary to mention that due to the high prestige of UK higher education institutions, the country attracts considerable numbers of students from abroad, more specifically, from over 200 countries, according to UK Universities International (2018, as cited in Pearson, 2020). Another significant fact is that tuition fees paid by non-native-English-speaking (NNES) individuals are a considerable contribution to the British economy – £28.9 billion in 2020 (Hillman, 2021). EAP courses are extremely important for every university and there is immense competition between the providers of that service. In some universities, there function language centres that cater for the language needs of NNES students. Elsewhere, universities cooperate with institutions such as INTO or Kaplan or Study Group, which are responsible for the provision of EAP courses to international students.

Types of English language help to international students

Perhaps now, before I proceed to share my own experiences with you, it is a good idea to first give some definitions. Pre-sessional EAP courses are offered to international students who have applied to study at UK universities (on bachelor or master programmes), but do not meet the language requirements (typically it is an IELTS 6.5 with no skill below 6.0.), but it varies depending on the subject they wish to study) These are students who were offered a place on their degree programme conditionally, but there is also another group of lucky ones who have fulfilled all the requirements to be offered a place at the university and thus hold an unconditional offer and they can also apply for a pre-sessional EAP course (in the case of some universities, it can be free of charge if the student has already paid his full tuition fees for his or her degree programme). The length of those courses varies, depending on their initial IELTS score, they will study for three, two or one month.

There are other courses offered to international students, such as foundation courses which normally last up to a full academic year, and they are offered to students who need to better their English before entering the undergraduate programme. Another position within the broad offer of any language centre or unit, are bespoke courses, tailored specifically to the needs of the individual client.

When explaining the type of work done by the language centres or units at various UK universities, it is also necessary to mention the in-sessional courses, which, as the name suggests, are offered not prior to, but during the academic year, offering an ongoing support to the NNEST students. This support covers help with General English, Academic English, specific skills such as writing etc.

Again, various universities may offer some of those services free of charge. Another, generous help for international students is offered by university libraries; *libguides*, as they are called, offer advice on all aspects of research and writing skills. Since I am particularly attached to the Strathclyde University in Glasgow (I have spent five consecutive summers working for them as an EAP tutor) I have to praise them for their phenomenal online self-study pack for students, called Support for English for Academic Studies, which is available to every Strathclyde student via the university Virtual Learning Environment called *Myplace*. and contains videos, activities and quizzes which help students to become more successful in navigating through their course and promotes learner autonomy.

Why and how I entered the EAP world

Hopefully, I have managed to shed some light on the provision of EAP to international students in the UK and now it is time to offer you my own perspective and in order to do that, let me tell you a little bit about how I entered the Scottish EAP world. In 2009 I decided to enter the MEd in ELT programme at the University of Glasgow while previously I had graduated from the TWP Language Teachers

Training College where I earned my Bachelor degree. I am aware that those institutions were somewhat controversial, but in my opinion, three years spent in college gave me a sound knowledge of the theories and practice of teaching English, as well as increasing my level of proficiency because training integrated skills was an important part of the college curriculum). There were some things though, which my Polish and English tutors did not teach me – how to write academically, how to give an academic presentation, how to function at an overseas university (not to mention, how to understand the Glaswegian accent!). My first academic essay was a disaster, my first academic presentation ended with me in tears (not the tears of joy, mind you). Then, gradually, I became better and better at grasping the fundamentals of academic writing, speaking and other skills required to be a successful student at a UK university, to the point of graduating with merits and receiving strong encouragement from the language centre director, to apply for the teaching position on a foundation EAP course for international students.

Preparing for the job interview was nerve-wracking because, on the one hand, I knew exactly what skills I would have to pass on to my future students, but I did not know much about how to do it. We all know that teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and teaching EAP are two very different things. I started reading whatever I could find about teaching Academic English and I got the job which I kept for two years.

How is teaching EAP in the UK different?

My first students were a group of young secondary school leavers entirely from China (normally on these programmes Chinese constitute the vast majority, followed by students from other South-East Asian countries, the Middle East and Africa) Those were students with a 4.0 IELTS score, but it was not their level which I struggled with. The main issue was the culture shock that the students were experiencing.

First of all, the education system in China is totally different from the western one and it took me some time to convince students to interact with me, to interact with their peers, to be critical of the material they were learning. At that time, I was responsible not only for delivering classes, but I also held the role of Learning Support Tutor, which meant that I was assigned a group of students whom I was scheduled to meet individually once a week, for a period of 15 minutes and they could talk to me about any aspect of studying (and living) in Glasgow which they were struggling with – interestingly enough, outside the classroom, the students were very open, which I really appreciated. This aspect of a teacher's job is called *pastoral care* and it was the first time I was introduced to the concept. But I suppose that we also practice the same in Poland, at JCJ, but we do not give it a name and it is less formalised.

But returning to the technical aspects of the course I taught, there were two of us assigned to the group – my colleague was leading modules of Academic Speaking and Listening and I was responsible for Reading, Writing and Study skills. It is the most common situation that there are two teachers working with one group on a pre-sessional or foundation course. I think it is a good solution especially when marking time is approaching, but not everyone enjoys it, especially when there is no communication between the co-teachers. When the pandemic happened and teaching moved to the online mode, some universities (including the one I work for) moved away from that practice and for three consecutive summers, I was the only tutor of the groups I taught, so I was responsible for delivering all the modules.

But as I mentioned before, each university has its own way of doing things, so when I moved, briefly to Caledonian University, I was assigned to teach a 4-week-long, bespoke course of seminar skills to three Bahraini engineers. Now, I recall in my mind a discussion in one of the most recent meetings of our English Section, here at JCJ, when some colleagues expressed concern that they do not feel competent enough when they have to work with their students on a highly specialised text. When I heard that, I thought that one of the principles of teaching Academic English is to prepare students to deal with written and spoken texts across the disciplines, through teaching them various strategies and techniques. We do not need to be experts in the fields our students are studying, in order to teach them well. Again, I can illustrate it with my own, very recent experience of the past summer – in my group I had students who were going to study Mathematics and Statistics, Forensic Chemistry, History and even Art. Needless to say, I have no knowledge in any of those fields, but we were all working on the same texts, listening to the same lectures and only in the genre analysis classes, and of course in their assignments, do students demonstrate their subject-specific knowledge.

Another key concept in EAP is critical thinking and fostering that skill in our learners. That can be a difficult task when, as I have just mentioned, the majority of students come from different educational backgrounds and for them to question what they read in a book not to mention questioning the teacher is practically unimaginable. But I have to say that over the years, I was fortunate to work with really open-minded and curious students, who might have been sceptical and cautious at the beginning of the course, but became critical readers and listeners, eager to cooperate with their classmates towards the end. It can be best seen in the self-reflective journals that all the pre-sessional students have to keep throughout the course; it is always a great pleasure for me to read them because they reflect the journey and the progress my students make.

The experience of studying and teaching in the UK, has shown me the importance of mastering the skill of writing academically. When I think of my master programme, there was only one oral exam and the rest of the assignments were written; we were writing a lot. The same is true for other undergraduate and post-graduate programmes at British universities. But to write, first you need to read

and so reading for research is a crucial module in every EAP course. Students learn where to look for the sources, how to evaluate them; there is this extremely valuable strand of genre analysis, which I mentioned, where students bring scientific articles from their individual fields of study and discuss the academic value of publications.

Conclusion

I mentioned at the beginning of this article that I hope it will inspire because although the reality of working abroad and working at a Polish university differ significantly, I believe there are still some ideas and good practices we can adopt. Also, I would like to encourage you to try teaching a pre-sessional EAP course abroad. I think it can add so much to the professional experience we all have already, giving us the opportunity to see how others *do it*. Also, working in a multicultural environment is extremely enriching.

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