



University
of Glasgow

Evaluating the effectiveness of an EAP pre-sessional project

Rachel Elmslie and Siori Lewis

Presentation overview

- Describe a project based course innovation in context
- Describe our approach to evaluation of the project
- Discuss findings from our evaluation
- Evaluate the traditional feedback mode with respect to the project

Project ILOs:

Aid international student transition into the academic, linguistic, and cultural norms of UKHE

Develop graduate attributes

- Enhance learner autonomy
- Work in multicultural groups
- Work independently/manage time
- Engage with university + local community

Many students live together in monocultural residences, particularly on the pre-sessional course,

And other nationalities come to the UK as a family unit, and have limited opportunities to mix

Thus we wish to encourage multicultural group work

We also wanted to foster a sense of belonging to the university, the community, the city.

Students entering HE must quickly learn to navigate institution expectations (Wingate, 2007)

- Academic practices
- How knowledge is constructed in such contexts

Internationalisation policy is top-down

There is a need for local-level initiatives to support students'
transitions (Luxon and Peelo, 2009)

All students entering UKHE need to quickly learn what is expected of them as students, and what they can expect of teachers, and how academic knowledge is constructed in this context (Wingate, 2007).

But a lot of our international students come from academic cultures where student and tutor expectations, relationships, teaching and learning, and knowledge creation practices differ significantly from the UK.

Eg China – our students frequently report that lectures are not particularly important and that to pass an exam, they need to accurately reproduce ideas from the textbook.

Cf UK – different types of assessment, coping with lectures, group work / peer feedback, critical thinking, seminar participation, learner autonomy etc

Internationalisation is top-down – strategy is clearly articulated at institutional policy level but there is also a need for attention to how this process is supported at teaching and learning level as this is where it's actually experienced. (Luxon & Peelo) and one of the ways they suggest is through EAP and study skills courses.

Pre-sessional programme overview:

- 5 – 40 weeks duration
- English for General Academic Purposes
- Final 5 weeks – discipline specific course
- Demographics: Almost exclusively PG; predominantly Chinese and Middle Eastern
- Disciplines: Finance, Business, Medical and Life Sciences, Engineering, Humanities, Law, Art School

The length of course 5 – 40 weeks is dependent on students' entry level eg 5 , 6 etc

Students join the course every 5 weeks starting with 20 sts in September and over 700 by August

Project Background

Aim: to conduct simple empirical research

Topic: University of Glasgow 10 year £1billion campus development

10- week group project, April – June 2016

- 150 sts (class size c.12)
- 2 x 90 minute classes per week
- 1 – 2 hours of independent work per week
- Unassessed formative

The topics of previous projects had been quite trivial, eg which mobile phone do you prefer. Also, they were not particularly academic so the students couldn't integrate sources, and they do a project every semester and student feedback told us they felt it was repetitive – so a complete overhaul

Like many projects, it takes place over a period of time and address a real world problem and produces an artefact.

The project was based on the campus redevelopment . The development involves demolition of some buildings, design of new, innovative learning and teaching hubs and research accommodation. It will have a large impact on the city as a whole.

Typical student project topics were:

What do local people think about the development?

How do students travel across campus eg is a bike hire system popular?

The university's policy is to construct green buildings – what makes a building green?

How can the architects blend cutting edge architecture with gothic architecture?

The project was unassessed and formative, to encourage linguistic and academic experimentation

- Weeks 1 – 5 ‘flipped classroom’ approach introduced project content/research processes (prepared before class)
- Class time – deeper understanding, consolidation, with tutor support and peer feedback
- Sts selected sub-topic of campus development, eg. green energy, historic building conservation
- Constructed research questions and instruments
- Considered ethical issues in research
- Guest lecture week 2

Previously, we’ve taught smaller projects in a more traditional way, where the teacher would introduce a topic eg how to write research questions and the students would have to do them at home, with less support.

Using the Flipped classroom, students did basic preparatory reading, completed online exercises about how to write research questions, then worked with a group of 2-3 other students to write research questions for their chosen topic. They then brought this to class where they reviewed key points of the preparation and refined their questions

In class they would get feedback and complete more cognitively challenging tasks. More support and responsive to students’ output also pushed output. the following week they would find out about different types of instrument via the flipped classroom, and complete a quiz online, then start creating an instrument in class.

Weeks 6 – 9 data collection:

- Week 7: 15 minute Interview with campus development team members: contracted architects, planners, project managers eg: Arup
- Interviews and questionnaires administered to: public, students, staff
- Week 10 – poster presentation attended by peers, staff, members of campus development team

- Questionnaire - *Eliciting perceptions, preferences, recommendations*
- Interviews: *native speakers or native level speakers, professionals, who were working on the campus development team, not teaching staff or UG staff. They had been briefed about sts level and backgrounds*

Evaluating EAP: our approach

- Concerned – new, ambitious project
- Worried – Student engagement w/topic and w/use of flipped classroom
- **Our focus:** materials design + student engagement

We did not wish to use predetermined themes to evaluate the project

Grounded theory – inductive methodology (observations and theories produced at completion of research)

Regular Tutor meetings: to lesson plan but not to reflect (initially)

We were a Team of 5 tutors who had all taught on the course before or similar projects.

We decided that Grounded Theory was the most appropriate approach to our scholarship. We intended this to be a piece of collaborative scholarship as the ultimate product but chose this method where we would work independently and keep short reflective diaries of how effective our teaching was, the materials were, and the levels of engagement in the classroom. We decided not to confer to avoid contaminating data and not to test a hypothesis but take an agonistic view from the start, and wait for data to emerge.

Somewhat inevitably we ended up conferring anyway in week 3 where we moved from less input to more of a facilitating role which was quite different to what many of us were used to teaching. We were having to respond to what the students brought to class, rather than us being able to prepare and deliver input. Some tutors felt a bit less secure doing this and wanted to discuss with their colleagues.

.

Initial impressions/early problems

Some students – disconnect and anxiety

- Week 2 lecture was too difficult
- Unfamiliar topic + unrelated to PG programme
- Unassessed – unable to perceive immediate value
- Linguistically and cognitively challenging tasks
- BUT in week 7.....

Week 2 lecture – was meant to introduce them to background information about the development but it was far too difficult linguistically, the topic information was too local and too abstract for our students as it was still at the planning stage, and it was actually a demotivator.

Topic was semi-negotiated within parameters of campus redevelopment but often sts chose sub topic unrelated to their master and had no back ground knowledge. Eg a management student chose green energy. Found it very difficult to identify research questions and specific focus . Project was highly learner led – tutor was acting as a facilitator and students would wait for instruction when we expected them to work autonomously

Reading load was unstructured and difficult for students to identify relevant ideas, and the sources assumed an amount of local knowledge.

Feedback on flipped classrooms was mixed.

Students actually wanted more printable resources

Usual group dynamics problems

Students were focused on skills based outcomes but we were focused on graduate attributes eg soft skills

Anxiety re impending interviews, having to speak to native speakers and not having the questions ready

And the tutors were anxious too!

However, the week 7 interviews with the campus development team proved to be a pivotal moment in the course, in a completely unpredictable but very positive way

Critical Incident: Interview with campus development team

- Buzz! Effective communication and data gathering
- Marked improvement in ownership, confidence, understanding of project aims
- Focus shifted from test orientations to understanding of research process

Sts' informal feedback: research skills' improvement – interviewing, analysis and presentation of data + engagement in group work, very successful week 10 poster presentation

We suggest: Shift in self-perception from LL to PG student

The interviews were held in a suite of rooms, students were given appointment times- the atmosphere was busy and purposeful, contagious upbeat atmosphere. Buzz encapsulates the atmosphere

Noticed not only a linguistic improvement and improvement in task achievement but that students were to able to see themselves as researchers in a community of practice

From this point on, we noticed a greater awareness of broader academic literacies as a result of engagement with the topic through the authentic research encounter

Sts asking themselves – are we answering our research questions, dealing with ambiguity of the project, thinking about how to approach the research, what do the findings actually mean

Focusing on presenting evidence for claims rather than opinions or just repeating their ideas – we saw them making a connection between their readings and their findings, Not all 150 sts, but a noticeable majority.

A few engaged only at a surface level – this may have been due to a strategic focus on the assessed elements of the course, dysfunctional groups and just lack of motivation

Course/critical incident interview prompted 'visualisation of future self'

Dörnyei L2 Motivational Self System (2009)

Typical EAP course – restrictive, restricted?

Or fails to enable identity formulation/reformulation?
need for more than basic 'bolt-on language courses'

Salter-Dvorak (2014: 857)

We speculate that what we were seeing was the students visualizing their future selves, their future post graduate researcher selves.

Original ILOs – learner autonomy, time management- but **the experiential nature of the project was open-ended, and allowed the students to experiment and learn from mistakes, deal with peer pressure and be accountable for their own inactivity in some cases.**

We had a misperception that the students would regard this unassessed project as low stakes; however, we were wrong because the students were on 'show' for the interviews and for the final week 10 poster presentation. They treated it as a proper research project.

By "**doing**" sts can develop identity and develop ideal future selves as PG researchers.

Traditional aspects of EAP courses – are often just skills and language based, focus on a 'number' eg 6.5 at the end of the course to progress to faculty. Are we developing the potential PG who **can thrive** in academic communities of practice? The learning we saw from our project suggests a need for more than just basic language courses.

Weaknesses of our existing feedback systems

Mass quantitative student feedback, pre-determined categories = partial evaluation

Does not capture valuable subjective + unexpected learning outcomes

- *eg future 'selves' emerging academic identity/personal/graduate attributes/soft skills – hard to express*
- *Particularly for a new course - Which used innovative methods in experiential learning rather than language/4 skills outcomes*

On this course, email to students penultimate day of course with online link, mainly tick box for ease for analysis of mass feedback. Completed in class, **15 minutes only usually allowed** but students are more focused on getting reports the next day and their holidays. The students **don't often articulate** what they have learnt as they don't have time, and the form is misleading. Where students were invited to comment in a box, they often gave one word answers such as 'process' with no further explanation.

Mass quantitative feedback – tend to only evaluate some aspects of learning eg the 4 skills.

But learning was much wider than we expected and much wider than original ILOs.

.

Evidence

- Observation, informal feedback sts and tutors
- Produced rich, elaborated + contextualised data
- Having the course writer as a tutor in the team meant that syllabus was negotiated and more responsive to st needs while still focused on ILOs

Because it was a new project, we used grounded theory. We felt it was very successful in that our informal observations allowed a more detailed and immediate evaluation

We captured feedback in st responses and behaviours . Our data captured how they were learning, how they responded to tasks at a micro lesson by lesson level over the 10 weeks, not just the final end of term response. So it showed the curve in motivation.

Using our regular reflection enabled the course writer and tutor team to adapt materials and teaching in response to the problems the students were having.

This project is going to be evaluated this year on a more formal basis; this time students will be interviewed.

Conclusion

- Project is a successful example of a local level initiative, supporting student transitions (Wingate, 2007)
- Achieved its ILOs and **beyond**
- Appeared to provide a channel for visualisation of future PG selves
- Identified a need for an appropriate feedback system
- Project based learning is an essential component of EAP

Teachers' reflections offer fine-grained complement to mass student feedback – we suggest a combination of these two formats in order to fully assess the effectiveness of this course. Even though teacher reflection isn't a complete way of evaluating this course we believe that from what we have seen, project based learning should be an essential component of our future EAP courses.

Bibliography:

- Dörnyei, Z. (2009) The L2 motivational self-system. In Dörnyei Z, Ushioda, E. editors. *Motivation, Language Identity and the L2 self. Multilingual Matters*. p.9 – 42
- Henwood, K.L. and Pidgeon, N.F. (2006) *Grounded theory*. In G. Breakwell, C. Fife-Schaw, S. Hammond and J. Smith (eds.) *Research Methods in Psychology, 3rd Edn*, (London: Sage), pp. 342-364.
- Kingston, E. and Forland, H., 2008. Bridging the gap in expectations between international students and academic staff. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 12 (2), pp. 204-221
- Lave, J. and Wenger, E. (1991) *Situated Learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Luxon, T., and Peel, M. (2009). Internationalisation: Its implications for curriculum design and course development in UK higher education. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 46 (10), pp51 – 60.
- Salter-Dvorkak, H., 2014. 'I've never done a dissertation before please help me': accommodating L2 students through course design. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 19(8). pp.847-859.
- Swain, M. (2005) The output hypothesis: Theory and research. *Handbook of research in second language teaching and learning*, 1, pp.471-483
- Wingate, U. (2007) A framework for transition: supporting 'Learning to Learn' in Higher Education. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 61(3) pp391-405