**Developing a pre-sessional English language course for international distance learning students:**

**a case of E-volution**

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**Abstract**

This paper discusses the development and piloting of an online pre-sessional English course for international students who were about to begin online distance learning Masters programmes. It describes and explains an important shift of focus during the design process, in which what was initially intended to be a ‘distance learning version’ of an existing English for Academic Purposes (EAP) course became an online course in its own right, exploiting different interaction spaces that created realistic opportunities for the students to use different styles of academic written English. The paper reports participants’ evaluations and comments, gathered during and at the end of the course. Finally, it sets out the changes planned for the next iterations of the course.

Keywords: Online learning, distance learning, academic writing, EAP.

**1 INTRODUCTION**

**1.1 Background**

In 2010 the University of Edinburgh launched a Distance Education Initiative (DEI), intended to expand its range of Online Distance Learning (ODL) Masters programmes and the number of students taking them, with the aim of achieving within 10 years approximately equal numbers of distance learning and on-campus postgraduates. DEI funding was made available to a variety of student services across the University, to enhance the support offered to ODL students and, as far as possible, to provide it on an equal basis to what is available to students studying in Edinburgh.

In March 2011 the DEI Student Experience Working Group identified English language support for international ODL students as a priority, in the form of in-session and pre-sessional English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses. Although in-session academic writing courses had been offered online for several years by the University’s English Language Teaching Centre (ELTC), in 2011 there was no opportunity for ODL students to participate in pre-sessional English tuition of the type that has run since 1979 for on-campus students who need to upgrade their English level for university entry.

In May 2012 DEI funding was awarded to pilot an online pre-sessional academic language course (OPAL) in summer 2013. The funding was to cover the costs of employing a learning technologist (part-time) to produce the OPAL materials production and three part-time tutors to staff the pilot course. The initial research and course design, development of a tutor induction course, course administration and direction, and the subsequent evaluation were carried out during my two-year secondment to the Institute for Academic Development.

**1.2 Pre-sessional EAP on campus**

ELTC’s on-campus summer EAP programme for international students involves full-time study (20 contact hours per week) for up to 10 weeks, providing tuition in the four principal language skills (listening, reading, speaking and writing) and the core academic language systems (grammar and vocabulary). Students are accepted onto the pre-sessional only if they have achieved a level within 0.5 on the IELTS scale of the English language entry requirement for their programme; 200 hours of intensive language study is generally considered sufficient to enable an ‘average’ adult learner of English to achieve an overall gain of IELTS 0.5. A central component of the EAP programme is academic writing, taught and practised in various genres over the 10 summer weeks, including short essays, critical reviews, research proposals and an extended specialist project which forms the basis for end-of-course assessment.

**1.3 OPAL**

OPAL would be markedly different from the face-to-face pre-sessional, in three main ways. Firstly, the students who chose to take OPAL would have fully met the English entry requirement for their Masters programmes and would therefore already hold unconditional offers, whereas the overwhelming majority of on-campus EAP students have language-conditional places and are required to sit a series of end-of-course assessments to provide evidence of adequate English for entry.

Secondly, the number of OPAL study hours would be much lower – 20-25 hours spread over five weeks – because ODL students tend to be in full-time work and to have family commitments, which may be why they have opted to do a Masters by distance learning, rather than a conventional degree programme.

Thirdly, OPAL would focus specifically on *written* English, as the students’ principal mode of communication in their ODL programmes. Although some of the University’s ODL Masters programmes involve oral input (online lectures) and interaction (e.g. discussion vie Skype and Collaborate), not all do, so the common factor across all programmes – and the focus for OPAL – would be the writing of academic assignments, which form the basis for assessment.

With these points in mind, we originally envisaged that OPAL would be an ‘online version’ of one of the strands of our on-campus pre-sessional, entitled *Essay Writing*, which combines readings, lectures, lab-based practical sessions and feedback from a class tutor. Its five units address the effective use of sources in academic assignments: ‘Choosing your sources’; ‘Evaluating sources’; ‘Integrating source materials into your text’; ‘Structuring an essay’; and ‘Presenting cited sources’*.*

**1.4 Background research**

During my review of online learning research in the initial phase of the OPAL project (autumn 2012), it became clear to me that what ODL students would require in terms of pre-sessional support was rather different from the needs of their on-campus counterparts. The literature I consulted as I prepared the OPAL design comprised three main areas:

* The pedagogy of online learning and teaching [1], [2], [3]
* The role of different forms of feedback in writing tuition [4], [5]
* The design of learning tasks for second language (L2) distance learning [6], [7]

Thus OPAL could be considered to sit at the intersection between those three research literatures, as shown below:

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The more I read about digital and ODL tutoring, the more convinced I became that our original idea of ‘simply’ distancising the existing *Essay Writing* course was flawed, in two ways. Firstly, and more philosophically, I was persuaded by the arguments in the pedagogical literature that online courses should not be considered a ‘version’ of something else: ‘The possibility of the “online version” is overstated. The best online courses are born digital’ [8].Secondly, research into the lived experience of L2 language learners [5], [7] brought me to the view that what beginning ODL students would benefit from is the chance to familiarise themselves with, and practise, the specific types of ‘enabling’ e-communication that ODL study will demand, such as interaction with their peers in chat and discussion and with Masters programme staff (administrative and academic).

Of course, ODL students will also benefit, at the appropriate time, from guidance and practice in writing the academic assignments they have to submit for their programmes, but – bearing in mind that OPAL students have already passed the English requirement for entry – I decided that practice in assignment writing could be provided later, through the University’s *in-session* writing courses, which are available as online tutored courses in semester time and as independent study materials all year round.

This shift of design focus, from the initial concept of a ‘distancised’ version of the face-to-face *Essay Writing* course, towards a tailored preparation for ODL on-screen communication, was a significant change of direction. For this reason I refer to it in the title of this paper as ‘e-volution’ - a move away from instruction in conventional academic writing to a course that would create opportunities for different types of digital interaction (chat, discussion, journal), on topics relevant to novice students in the online academic setting, requiring the use of different styles of written English appropriate to a university context.

**2 COURSE DESIGN**

Five topics emerged from my further research as being key elements in a course for beginning ODL students: the nature and communicative demands of online study, as opposed to conventional study; the need to adhere to local norms of student-student and student-staff interaction online; awareness of the tools now available to help students focus on academic and technical vocabulary in their specialist course readings; familiarity with local expectations about citation and referencing; and familiarity with electronic tools to assist academic writing.

These were translated into a design of five weekly units of work, each representing 4-5 hours of online study and asynchronous interaction with other OPAL participants:

1. *Introduction to e-Learning*
2. *Online Academic Communication*
3. *Exploring Academic Language in Your Field*
4. *Critical Reading and Writing*
5. *e-Tools for Academic Writing*

**2.1 Materials production**

The conversion of the design into learning materials was undertaken by my ELTC colleague Anton Elloway and took the equivalent of eight weeks’ work. The full set of materials represents seven weeks of activities:

* Pre-course week (beginning 29 July 2013) *Welcome* and *Introduction*
* Study weeks 1-5 (beginning 5, 12, 19 and 26 August, and 2 September)
* Post-course week (beginning 9 September) *Goodbye*

In the pre-course week activities, *Welcome* and *Introduction to OPAL*, students are involved in communicating with everyone else on the course. We wanted to encourage them to use a Chat area throughout the course, where they could post messages for others students, including those not in their tutorial group. From the beginning of the course proper (5 August), most interaction took place within their group – 4-6 students and their tutor – although each week’s work closed with a common Chat activity.

Unit 1, *Introduction to e-Learning*, includes readings on the role of collaboration and interaction for online learners and activities in which students introduce themselves to their group.

Unit 2, *Online Academic Communication*, outlines the notion of ‘netiquette’ and the stylistic differences between emails/postings intended for fellow students and those written to be read by a tutor or lecturer.

Unit 3, *Exploring Academic Language in Your Field*, is intended to create the opportunity for ‘personalised’ learning through analysis of reading material in their own specialism – discussed in more detail in sample unit 3, below.

Unit 4, *Critical Reading and Writing*, addresses an area in which most students – whether on-campus or online, and whether native or non-native users of English – tend to fall short of what is expected at postgraduate level. The unit both emphasises the importance of being a critical consumer of academic material as well as providing practice in using the *language* of critical evaluation – with the students being asked to critically compare two texts about the avoidance of plagiarism.

Unit 5 *e-Tools for Academic Writing*, provides instructions on using software packages, such as Referencing in MS Word, which should help them record and marshal the sources they will use in written assignments for their Masters programme, and also provides practice in using Turnitin to submit their final Writing text to their tutor. Finally, in a **post-course** activity, *Goodbye*, the students are encouraged to post closing message to the other OPAL participants.

*2.1.1 Unit structure*

Each of the five weekly study units comprises a range of study tasks:

* reading – linked to existing web texts, or adapted versions of ELTC in-house texts
* listening/viewing – of one in-house Welcome video and existing web videos
* quizzes for self-checking
* Chat involving all the students
* Discussion within the (three) tutorial groups
* Writing Journal – a text submitted privately to the tutor

*2.1.2 The writing task: input, output and feedback*

The Discussion and Writing tasks are linked, so that the topics discussed within the group promote an exchange of ideas and perceptions of the current week’s topic. That discussion provides input for the weekly Writing task, in which individual students compose a short reflective text about their learning that week and send it in to the tutor, via the Writing Journal, for correction and feedback. In this sense, the Discussion tasks provide scaffolding for individuals’ work in the Journal [9]. For example, in week 3 the course focuses on the *Academic Word List*, which is the outcome of linguistic research across disciplines by Dr Averil Coxhead [10]. OPAL unit 3 provides students with first-hand experience of working with various software items which exploit the *Academic Word List,* in order to identify and explore the technical vocabulary in their various fields. By way of summary, here is an outline of the students’ and tutors’ work in a sample unit:

**Week 3 - Exploring academic language in your field**

 **What students do… Tutor’s role**

Test 15 a test of their academic vocabulary

Read 5 an article about the *Academic Word List (AWL)*

Activity 15 compare three websites using the *AWL*

Read 10 advice from Prof. Coxhead

Discuss 30 respond to Coxhead’s advice (100 words) Monitor/facilitate

Read 10 University of Nottingham materials on *AWL*

Activity 15 try out *AWL Gapmaker* software

Watch 15 video on using *Vocabulary Profiler* software

Activity 30 analyse specialist texts using *VP*

Info how to access the Writing Journal for next task

Writing Journal 60 write reflection on week’s work (200 words) Individual feedback

Discussion 15 respond to two Qs about this unit Monitor/facilitate

Chat 10 interact with students in group about week 3

 Group feedback on Writing

Feedback is a key element of OPAL. In the context of L2 instruction, the term ‘feedback’ is used to refer to comments on the accuracy and appropriateness of a student’s spoken or written output, intended to help the learner notice the difference between their performance and their target. No single type of feedback has been shown to be more effective than others, and the consensus is that teachers should be tailored to different circumstances and learner preferences [11], [12]. For this reason, the principles and techniques of L2 feedback form a major element in the Tutor Induction (see below).

**2.2 Tutor induction**

The three OPAL group tutors were from Canada, the USA and France, respectively; all were PhD students at the University of Edinburgh with experience of face-to-face academic tutoring, copy editing/proofreading and/or English language tutoring. The induction was designed to introduce them to general notions of second language communication and tuition, as well as the specific OPAL study materials and tasks. On each of three induction days, activities were divided into three morning hours in face-to-face mode with me, and two afternoon hours spent online, getting familiar with the activities the students would be working on. The schedule and topics covered are summarised below.

**Day 1 (31 July 2013)**

Morning (face to face)

* Introduction to OPAL
* Intercultural communication
* Learning spaces and tutor roles
* Encouraging student contributions

Afternoon (online)

* Welcome unit and using
* Unit 1: Introduction to e-learning

**Day 2 (1 August 2013)**

Morning (face to face)

* Unit 2: Online Academic Communication
* Feedback in language learning 1: Principles

Afternoon (online)

* Unit 3: Exploring academic language
* Commenting on students’ postings

**Day 3 (2 August 2013)**

Morning (face to face)

* Unit 4: Critical reading and critical writing
* Feedback in language learning 2: Techniques

Afternoon (online)

* Unit 5: e-Tools for academic writing
* Review: Questions and answers

**3 PILOT COURSE**

**3.1 Enrolments**

A total of 21 students enrolled, of whom 16 participated in course activities. Of the five students who did not take up their OPAL places, three gave reasons: one had not been successful in her application for a scholarship and was unable to do her Master’s programme in 2013-14; a second was waiting for the results of a TOEFL test; and one had had a bereavement.

**3.2 Participation**

The table below tallies individual students’ contributions over the five study weeks to the main study tasks in each weekly unit – **D**(iscussion) and **W**(riting) – as well as to pre- and post-course Chat (**Intro** and **Bye**) and two written evaluations of the course (the Mid-course Questionnaire **MQ** and the final Writing task **W5**).

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **INTRO** | **D1** | **W1** | **D2** | **W2** | **MQ** | **D3** | **W3** | **D4** | **W4** | **D5** | **W5** | **Bye** | **Tot** |
| **Student 1** | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | **11** |
| **Student 2** | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | **9** |
| **Student 3** | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | **2** |
| **Student 4** | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | **10** |
| **Student 5** | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | **8** |
| **Student 6** | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 | **10** |
| **Student 7** | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | **11** |
| **Student 8** | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | **1** |
| **Student 9** | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | **4** |
| **Student 10** | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | **12** |
| **Student 11** | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | **6** |
| **Student 12** | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | **11** |
| **Student 13** | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | **11** |
| **Student 14** | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | **9** |
| **Student 15** | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | **12** |
| **Student 16** | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | **5** |
|  | **15** | **15** | **12** | **12** | **12** | **12** | **11** | **12** | **8** | **10** | **8** | **12** | **5** |  |

As the table shows, two participants (students 3 and 8) contributed only to the opening *Welcome* and *Introduction* ‘social’ activities and played no further part in the course. Students 9 and 11 contributed regularly during the first three weeks and then dropped out. The remaining 12 students participated in virtually all the interactive Discussions and individual Writing tasks over the five study weeks.

The reason for the low uptake of the post-course Chat activity (‘Bye’) seems to have been that it was scheduled for Induction Week, when the students were busy with the introductory activities of the pre-semester week on their various ODL programmes.

**3.3 Evaluation by students**

The students were asked to submit two written evaluations of the course: first, a questionnaire halfway through the course, which involved 10 open questions and the opportunity to provide open comments; and secondly, the Unit 5 Writing task, asking for their assessment of the OPAL experience as a whole.

*3.3.1 Mid-course questionnaire*

The questionnaire was completed by 12 of the 14 core participants, whose responses to the 10 questionnaire items I summarise below.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Questionnaire item** | **YES** | **NO** | **Other** |
| 1. Are you enjoying OPAL? + reasons | 11 | 0 |  |
| 2. Have you had any difficulties so far? + details |  | 4 | Connectivity 3Getting to know Learn 3Lack of time 1 |
| 3. Did you complete all the Essential tasks in weeks 1 and 2? + details | 6 |  | *Not yet* 4*Not the video* 1 |
| 4. Did you find the topics/tasks intellectually stimulating? + reasons | 11 | 0 |  |
| 5. Does the course structure make sense? | 11 | 0 |  |
| 6. Are you satisfied with your own performance? | 6 |  | *I should be more active* 5 |
| 7. Are the task instructions clear? | 10 |  | *Not Week 2 Writing* 1 |
| 8. Do you find the tutor feedback helpful? | 9 |  | *Did not receive any* 1 *Should be earlier* 1 |
| 9. Is there anything about OPAL you would like changed?  |  | 4 | *More students in each group*  1*More time for tasks* 3*Video summary of each week*  1*Flag to show which tasks I have completed* 2 |
| 10. Do you have any questions? | 3\*\* | 8 |  |
|  |  |  |  |

In their reasons and supporting comments, six of the students explicitly contrasted the doubts and concerns they had expressed in the pre-course self-introduction Chat postings (nervousness and lack of confidence about the prospect of beginning an online Masters programme) with their much more positive feelings by the end of week 2 (e.g. *more relaxed, less worried*).

*3.3.2 Evaluation: Final writing task*

The instructions for the Unit 5 task were as follows:

*In your final piece of writing, we want you to evaluate the OPAL Pre-sessional course in about 200 words. You should include the following:*

* *a summary of what you did and learned during the course*
* *an evaluation of the course (your positive and negative comments)*
* *a recommendation for future years (would you suggest any changes?)*

We have found, in other ELTC online courses, that it is helpful to use an end-of-course Writing task to gather evaluations in this way: firstly, it practises critical writing, (a key academic skill and the focus of Unit 4); and, secondly, its ‘open comment’ format elicit students’ perceptions more effectively than a box-ticking questionnaire, allowing the students’ voices to come through.

As with the mid-course questionnaires, evaluations were submitted by 12 of the 14 regular OPAL participants. They were overwhelmingly positive; below are two (typical) examples of the sort of comments the students volunteered.

*Student MH*

*‘I have had the most educative journey with OPAL. When it started, I did not think much of it. The first week was simple and it did not appear like there was any academic work. However, as the weeks progressed, it became more challenging and it involved thinking at an intellectual level. I am glad it was designed that way because it got me acquainted to the programme before more technical academic work was introduced.*

*The best weeks I have had were the last two (fourth and fifth). The tasks in these weeks brought out so many important lessons which I have greatly benefited from especially on critical reading and writing, and plagiarism. My perspective towards online learning has completely changed after this’.*

*Student AY*

*‘What we had here was a vibrant academic discussion forum, and it was fun indeed. On a personal level, it helped to sharpen my analytical and critical thinking skills. I also discovered how to read critically. In all, I found these aspects more interesting because they challenged my intellect and also recognized my individuality as not just a student among multitudes of students; but more like a student with a voice, who is capable of having and expressing his opinions to the entire academic community’.*

**4 CONCLUSIONS**

On the evidence of the participants’ comments during and after the course, the OPAL pilot seems to have gone a good way to addressing students’ felt needs and concerns as they were about to enter distance learning Masters programmes at the University of Edinburgh, and in particular it appears to have helped reduce their concerns about their imminent experience of online study. In this sense, the decision to shift the focus of the course, away from practice in conventional academic writing and towards the communicative needs of beginning online students, was appropriate and apparently successful.

From my perspective as course designer and director, there was an issue over the timing of the course. The fact that the students received their final language feedback from the tutors in the ‘post-course week’, which coincided with Induction Week at Edinburgh, meant that there was competition for the students’ time and attention from various introductory events for the Masters programme. To prevent that conflict in summer 2014, we have decided to start OPAL one week earlier, so as to allow the students more time and space to process the tutors’ feedback on their final Writing assignment and to leave them free to participate in OPAL’s ‘Goodbye’ activities.

For ODL students preparing to begin a Masters in September 2014, we have decided to offer OPAL in two versions. One will be a tutored course, running from the end of July to the beginning of September, on the same lines the 2013 pilot. The second will be an independent study version (OPAL-IS), offered as a self-enrol course on Learn from May 2014, where it can be accessed by (all) students on the University’s MyEd portal. In place of the peer interaction and tutor feedback on the tutored OPAL course, OPAL-IS will offer students ‘comparator’ answers to Comment and Writing tasks, in the form of the texts submitted by 2013 pilot students (with, of course, their individual consent). By offering OPAL in these two formats we hope to make pre-sessional language preparation available to a much wider ODL student population, and at any time of year, thus increasing the reach of ELTC support in areas, including language, which ODL students will find useful for their Masters programmes.

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