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## PTAS Project Report (for REGULAR PROJECT GRANTS)

**Project Title:** "More engagement means more good memories": do international students participate less in class discussion in the first semester of their Masters programmes than during their pre-sessional English for Academic English course, and if so, why?

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**Project type** (delete as appropriate) :

**A Research Project** (research focus on particular dimension of teaching, learning, assessment)

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**Principal Investigator :** Cathy Benson  
**Schools/department :** COL

**Team members (including Schools and Departments) :**

**Cathy Benson (COL)**

**Cathy Holden (COL)**

**Camilla Green (COL)**

**Joan Cutting (MHSES)**

**Seongsook Choi (MHSES)**

**For further details, please contact: Cathy Benson**

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Project teams must submit a report within 4 months of the conclusion of their project.

Copies of dissemination material (eg journals/newsletter articles, conference papers, posters should be listed and attached (separate to the word count). The brief report will be published on the IAD web pages.

**Report (maximum 1500 words)**

**What did you do?**

We piloted the research instruments in June 2018, by recording a group of pre-sessional *English for Academic Purposes* (EAP) students, on a day when their lesson involved participating in a seminar; we then conducted a focus group, in which the students talked about how they felt about their experience.

We recruited volunteers from the 2018 *English Language Education* pre-sessional EAP summer programme who were willing to be recorded participating in EAP classes over the summer, and again later in workshops on their Masters programmes. They were also informed that they would be asked to take part in interviews in which they would be asked about various aspects of the classes and their perceptions of their own participation.

Although the level of attrition was quite high, five stayed "on board" for the duration of the study. We had originally hoped to recruit students from across a range of Schools, but of the volunteers who stayed with the project, all but one were from MHSES (and specifically from one or other of the Language Masters programmes). Given the very large numbers of Masters students on these programmes, this was not necessarily a disadvantage, as it has enabled us to focus on specific recommendations for MHSES classes.



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We were able to video-record the volunteers in one of their EAP classes, and in one or two MSc workshops. Not all MSc workshop tutors or course organisers responded to our request; hence, we were unable to record two workshops in the case of every student. In one case, unfortunately, the recording equipment in the workshop failed to record.

Clearly, we would not have been able to pursue our recording, had **all** workshop participants not agreed, so we were very fortunate in receiving consent from every participant. The recording was carried out by Holyrood campus Digital Services; this was paid for from the PTAS grant.

Following the workshops, we interviewed our volunteers about their participation, using an adapted “stimulated recall” technique. We asked them about their views on classroom participation in general, and their experiences thereof, after which we showed them selected clips from the recordings, and asked them to comment.

Our two research assistants conducted some of the observations as well as transcribing the EAP classes, the Masters programme workshops, and the interviews, and helping with the coding. Seongsook Choi used her own analytical tool for analysing interaction, to complement the conversational analysis she carried out with the collaboration of one of the research assistants.

The original intention had been to seek participants of various nationalities, but due to the population of the EAP courses, all of our volunteers were Chinese. However, given the high preponderance of students of this nationality among University of Edinburgh international students, and certainly in Moray House School of Education and Sport, we did not regard this as a disadvantage.

### **What did you find out?**

Our findings largely confirmed findings already published in the literature regarding Chinese students’ participation in UK university classes; for example, that students’ own previous academic context did not necessarily encourage active participation; that they can feel inhibited by the presence of fellow nationals, as they do not want to appear to stand out from the group; that they feel more comfortable interacting in a smaller group. Interestingly, though, at least one volunteer conceptualised participation in a broader way, to include non-verbal forms of participation, which led us to question the traditional idea of participation as verbal interaction, and ask ourselves whether the latter should no longer be an automatic assumption / expectation.

Where this study differed from previous studies was in investigating the comparison between pre-sessional EAP classes, and classes on students’ academic programmes. In purely numerical terms (number of contributions, length of contributions) our volunteers all participated more in their EAP classes than in their academic classes. They attributed this to the greater level of difficulty of the Masters content, and also in some cases to differing teaching methodology.

Participants had various suggestions about classroom management and tutor behaviour which they felt would promote participation. These included setting up very small break-out groups; allowing students to rehearse their contributions in small groups before asking them to speak in plenary mode; nominating students to respond; asking students to relate the content of the workshop to their own context; questioning in non-threatening ways; providing encouraging feedback; structuring discussion more tightly; not allowing laptops to be open as these can present a barrier to communication. There were also recommendations for fellow students, such as to prepare the topic thoroughly before workshops, and to seek friendships with “western” students outside class in order to increase confidence in speaking.



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From the point of view of research design, we concluded that the combination of observing students' behaviour and seeking their perceptions is essential to obtain a rounded view of student participation. In particular, we found that our own biases and assumptions were often not borne out by what students told us, which was a valuable lesson to us as researchers. To cite one example, two researchers, on viewing a workshop in which a volunteer did not actively contribute at all, assumed that this lack of participation was due to the behaviour of the tutor (specifically his use of highly idiomatic language) and of the students whose first language was English, (who appeared to dominate the interaction), but the volunteer assured us that she did not feel inhibited by either of these factors and that she in fact felt she learned a great deal from listening to them; she maintained she did not always feel the need to contribute herself.

### **How did you disseminate your findings?**

We have not yet done so, but we intend to present our findings (if our paper is accepted) at the biennial BALEAP *English for Academic Purposes* conference in Glasgow, in April 2021.

More immediately, we intend to deliver workshops to colleagues, in COL/English Language Education, and in Moray House School of Education and Sport, about Chinese students' participation in workshops: how do they conceptualise participation, what factors encourage them to participate, and what factors they find inhibiting. We will provide suggestions arising from observations and student interviews eg around group size, nomination/elicitation, use of mobile devices, and so on.

We had originally planned to submit a proposal for presentation or poster for the Learning and Teaching Conference this year, but we did not feel that it would fit the theme of "Curriculum Futures". If our work is more relevant to the 2021 conference theme, we will submit a proposal then.

Finally, we would hope to publish a paper in a journal related to English for Academic Purposes or Higher Education; or ideally both, as these would be for different audiences

### **What have been the benefits to student learning?**

1) Our intention is to feed into our summer pre-sessional courses, now that we have a greater awareness of what is expected of students in terms of workshop participation once they embark on their Masters programmes. Our pre-sessional courses are all being reviewed in 2020-21, so this is an ideal opportunity to include insights gained from this study.

2) A second aim is that we hope to raise awareness among MSc tutors of factors that might inhibit participation among their students, and of strategies and techniques which might enhance participation.

### **How could these benefits be extended to other parts of the university?**

We would also like to offer the IAD a "Practical Strategies Workshop" on the subject, in order to reach an audience beyond our two Schools. We hope that IAD will be interested!

We would be really interested in extending the study to other Schools in future.

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**Financial statement (please delete as appropriate):**

**Either**

~~This project has utilised the funding awarded to it by the PTAS adjudication committee and the Principal Investigator or School Administrator appropriate can provide financial statements showing the funding usage as and when required by the UoE Development Trusts who may require it for auditing purposes.~~

**Or**

This project has remaining funds unused and we require details of how to return the balance. The Principal Investigator or School Administrator appropriate can provide financial statements showing the funding usage as and when required by the UoE Development Trusts who may require it for auditing purposes.

**Please send an electronic PDF copy of this report to:**

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