Calls for assistance: An analysis of students' requests for help in practical writing sessions during a pre-sessional English programme

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Introduction

SLIDE 3 the developments I'll be talking about today were in five 'stages.

(Listening to students)

Since 1996 ELTC has employed UGs as Course Assitants (CAs) on our summer pre-sessional.

Originally, in response to recommendations from Ss on 1995 programme: felt they'd have benefited from the chance to talk to native speakers other than their teacher - 'a normal person', to quote a number of them.

SLIDE 4 The CAs play four key roles for the students (and also carry out routine ad min tasks when not working with students)

(Reading the Research Literature)

Key debate in classroom-focused SLA research: whether S-S interaction assists language development more or less than S-T talk.

SLIDE 5: The arguments have tended to be based on the three principal hypotheses about language learning: Input, Interaction and Output.

Pica and colleagues investigated learner interaction in both advanced EFL classes (Garcia Mayo and Pica, 2000) and low-intermediate EFL classes (Pica, Lincoln-Porter, Paninos and Linnell 1996).

Their conclusion: SLIDE 6

They did not specify what they meant by 'heterogeneous' classrooms. But one possible variant is a class in which Ss have access to more than one native speaker – a teacher and a course assistant.

(Doing some classroom research) (Lynch and Anderson 2003)

During first summer with a course assistant, we carried out a study of the possible effects on classroom interaction of bringing in a non-teacher. In particular, we wanted to test the assumption that interaction with a non-teacher CA would provide a different type of speaking opportunity.

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Data took two forms:

- group work recordings

- S questionnaires

The Scenario recordings were made in parallel, of the two halves of the class: one group interacting with the teacher and the other with 'Helen' (CA). We transcribed the parallel recordings and then analysed them into *topical episodes*.

We had expected language-focused talk to be more frequent in interaction with Ts than with the CA, but that turned out not to be the case. However, we actually found that Helen initiated relatively **more** talk about language (36.6%) than Dennis (33.3%) and, particularly, Gail (26.3%).

The area in which students' interaction with Helen was most unlike talking to the Ts was the opportunity to talk about their real lives. We recorded twice as many 'real-life' topic episodes with Helen as with the teachers combined. Strikingly, there was not a single case of a student initiating such an episode with a teacher, perhaps because they regarded such talk as 'off-limits'.

The second type of data came from the questionnaires on students' perceptions of talking to Gail, Dennis and Helen. What we found was ... SLIDE 8

Since 1996 we have gradually expanded the role of the CA – see Lynch & Anderson (2003) for further details.

(Reflection)

Over the years I had become aware of a divergence between the learning experiences that students are offered in university pre-sessionals and what they encounter in their academic degree programmes. This has various aspects. SLIDE 9

- One is the simple difference in <mark>class size</mark> between EAP and degree classes. At ELTC our classes have a normal maximum of 15 students and I think that is typical ofBALEAP institutions.
- Another is the relative <mark>shortness of the practice texts</mark> the students dealt with in listening and reading lessons.
- More generally, there is the broad communicative assumption about the <mark>need for variety</mark> in class work.

At ELTC the format, procedures and length of our pre-sessional EAP lessons had always been the same as those in our general English, ESP and teacher education courses: 90 minutes long, with a substantial amount of group work, and feedback from a teacher.

The lessons in these various courses tended to comprise four main eleme<mark>nts: SLIDE 10</mark>

- a *teacher-led reading* of an introduction/explanation of the teaching point (e.g. the elements of a critical review)
- task(s) in which students *analyse and discuss* the language in a sample
- task(s) in which they *produce* a text of their own
- *correction/feedback* by peers and then tutor.

All these elements can occur within a single lesson. Underlying this approach – and, I assume, at other BALEAP institutions – is a broad assumption that we promote second language learning through interaction among the students, to provide an opportunity for them to negotiate meaning in sample texts and then to produce English.

Two unintended effects: <mark>SLIDE 11</mark>

- students who come from more teacher-fronted educational cultures may find that their EAP lessons are rather undifferentiated. "We do the same in every class" would be a paraphrase of comments in end-of-course evaluations
- the pre-sessional provides a supportive, but also more sheltered, learning environment than the students will find in their degree programmes.

With these thoughts in mind, I had begun to think about ways of restructuring our pre-sessional programme that would make the experience more like their programme of study in Semester 1.

The thing that finally convinced me that change was needed was a conversation with a Masters programme director. He told me that the greatest problem for his international students, including those who had done our pre-sessional, was not their written English and not their ability to understand him and his colleagues in lectures. The main difficulty was that they did not understand

the advice and instructions they received **one-to-one**, from PG tutors in their tutorials and practical classes. I thought this was a particular interesting observation, because from the SLA theoretical perspective one would assume that negotiation of meaning is most straightforward in one-to-one interaction.

So I looked for ways of increasing the amount of individual interaction that our EAP students have with the CAs, and try to simulate the individual advice episodes they might engage in with their postgraduate tutors. This led to our decision to bring in writing Practicals in 2012.

Assistance in Practical writing classes

You may be familiar with the current trend to de-construct classic dishes and present them in revised form, with some of their ingredients intact rather than blended.

SLIDE 12: Fat Duck version of a Black Forest gateau.

We did something similar in redesigning our summer EAP courses in summer 2012. We deconstructed two of the written language strands of our programme – *Academic Language* and *Writing* – from the previous 'communicative' format and 90-minute lessons into four separate learning events, which are more like the study sequences that students encounter on their degree programme: SLIDE 13

- Preparation
- Lecture
- Practical
- Feedback

Preparation is done in advance – usually, reading and analysis tasks on the Net, to be completed outside class the day before a lecture.

Next day they have a **Lecture**, at which they are expected to take notes and ask questions. If we give them handouts, they are not merely PowerPoint printouts of the lecture slides; they might be a worksheet that they complete during the lecture. The lectures are also interactive, in that they contain some paired discussion tasks and question pauses for students to ask the lecturer questions.

The third element is the **Practical**. This is a session in which they work, in a computer lab, on tasks following up points covered in the lecture. In Practicals five classes of students (75 students) work alongside each other. They work on the practical writing tasks, normally individually but sometimes in pairs. It is during the Practicals that the students have the support of the CAs. In some sessions both the class tutors and CAs are available, in some just the CAs.

The CAs' role is to help in any way the students request, short of proofreading and editing their written work. At the end of the Practical, the students hand in their written texts to the tutor.

Finally, the tutor reads the students' work overnight and provides **Feedback** the next day.

To accommodate these changes, we also shifted from our previous timetable of 20 contact hours per week of 90-minute lessons, involving 10 morning lessons and three afternoon lessons, and adopted the University of Edinburgh's normal schedule of 20 shorter (50-minute) teaching sessions, which ran in the mornings and left the students with afternoons free for Preparation tasks and independent study.

With this change of course design in 2012, we took on more CAs than before; our teaching was on two campuses and we employed six CAs on each campus. They were asked to take on an additional role. From 1996 to 2011, the CAs had essentially acted as helpers with students' spoken English.

SLIDE 14 In the new Practical lab sessions of the 2012 summer programme that was being extended to face-to-face advice and guidance on written English as students asked for it.

(Doing some more classroom research)

The CA log study

Given these changes, I was interested to see how the 2012 EAP students would make use of the opportunity to ask CAs for help, and to see what forms of support they requested. Finding out how the innovation worked out could help us in two ways: (1) improve the CA induction course for 2013; (2) provide pointers for the online presessional academic language course (OPAL) that we are piloting this summer for distance learning Masters students. (If you would like details of the OPAL, feel free to email A.J.Lynch@ed.ac.uk).

So I gave each CA with a notebook, in which I asked them to write down all the questions they were asked by the EAP students over the next 10 weeks. This – together with students' comments in routine end-of-course evaluations – comprises the data for the study that I am reporting today.

At the end of the summer programme I received notebooks from nine of the CAs, containing a total was 642 questions – an average of 70 questions per CA. The actual number of questions will have been higher, because I did not have access to three notebooks and I assume there will have been occasions on which a CA did not have time, or did not remember, to make a note of a question. Also, in Practical sessions where tutors were also on hand, they may well have dealt with some questions that would otherwise have been asked of the CAs.

SLIDE 15 I found they broke down into three broad categories: Task-related, Programme-related, and Beyond the Programme.

So roughly 80 per cent of the questions the students raised with the CAs were to do with the task in hand or with the EAP programme as a whole. Putting it another way, as many as one question in five was about issues beyond the immediate concerns of the Programme. This suggests that, even within the context of a Practical writing session, the learners were using the CAs as expert informants on wider matters – just as we had found in our 2003 study.

Let's have a look in more detail at how the three broad categories broke down.

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The *Process* type of question is focused on how to do the specific current task. *IT* questions relate to practical problems of word processing and accessing the task materials, which were on WebCT; this summer we will be using Learn. *Meaning* questions are clarification requests about words and expressions they have encountered in the task materials. *Language* are students' questions about the English they have used in their draft answers. The subtype *Writing* is connected with issues to do with style or structure or format of academic writing. And the final type, *Academic culture*, refers to occasions on which students raised questions that related to expectations or conventions.

The second group of requests for help and information were the **Programme-related** questions. The subcategories that emerged from the data were these: SLIDE 17

The next SLIDE 18 shows the balance among those subcategories.

The third and broadest category was Beyond the Programme, which I broke down into... SLIDE 19

Of those the broadest category was the one I called 'Other': SLIDE 20

> Can I use your PC to find my password?
> Did you find a blue pencil in the lab yesterday?
> **How do I improve my pronunciation?**
> If I move to that chair is the air conditioning cold?
> My chair is broken. Can I swap it for a different one?
> This chair is too high
> Where is the toilet? (x3)

Notice that the one in red was the only example recorded over the 10 weeks of a student addressing a CA as someone with expertise in language *learning* (as opposed to being proficient in English). I assume the students normally direct that sort of question to their teachers.

Implications of the findings

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SLIDE 22 Materials and tasks

A key issue for self-paced practical writing work is the linguistic accessibility of the reading materials used in the course. The number of *Meaning* questions in the logs was relatively low (45), and that might suggest that the students had little difficulty with the vocabulary they encountered in the materials. But, given the overall level of our pre-sessional students (around IELTS 6.5), I think it's more likely that the logs under-reflect their actual need for lexical help. The students will probably have used bilingual dictionaries and their fellow L1 speakers.

So one thing we could do is alert the CAs (and OPAL e-tutors) to the variety of online reference resources available, so they can point students to them. That way the students should be familiar with them by the time their Masters programme begins.

A second essential aspect of materials design is the need for clarity in task instructions. As we have seen, 98 questions were asked about task process – roughly a quarter of all the Task-related questions to the CAs. This could point to some confusion about the rubrics of the tasks the students were set for Practical sessions.

So a second lesson I take from the data is that it is worth spending more time at the end of the Lecture to help ensure that students are clear about what they are to do in the subsequent Practical.

Another might be the value of having students work collaboratively on tasks (both f2f and online), to reduce the risk that students working on their own will misconstrue what they are being asked to do.

Role of the CA (and the online tutor)

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Here, the main outcome of the log study is the sheer range of questions the students asked of the CAs. This data could be used in this summer's CA induction, particularly the questions asked that went beyond the immediate concerns of the current task. As we have seen, roughly one in five questions asked of the CAs referred to wider concerns.

As far as the online OPAL tutors are concerned, the data suggests to me that they need to be prepared – in both senses, 'trained' and 'willing' – to deal with their distance learning students' questions about issues beyond the immediate concerns of the current task or the OPAL course.

As we have seen, one in five questions asked of the CAs referred to wider concerns; arguably OPAL e-tutors are more likely to be asked about these issues, because they will be the student's main contact with the University during the OPAL course and until they begin the induction for their Masters programme.

In the f2f pre-sessional, CAs either answer from their own experience or pass questions on to the class teacher or course director. The OPAL tutors will need to filter such questions and make clear which topics the students will need to take up with the relevant School staff – programme director or administrator.

Feedback

<mark>SLIDE 24</mark>

In the literature on online learning and teaching, it is generally agreed that feedback is a crucial factor in success - whether that is the success of individual learners or that of the programme as a whole.

Thirty years' experience of EAP at Edinburgh have taught me that, whatever the type and quantity of feedback that students receive on their performance in English, they will always want more. Distance learners are likely to have even higher expectations than conventional learners, because their physical remoteness from an English-speaking environment may well make them more demanding of prompt, authoritative and clear feedback than their counterparts on a conventional EAP course.

However, OPAL will be a part-time course and the e-tutors will have less time available to give individual feedback than f2f teachers have. That makes it essential to maximise the opportunities for students to get process feedback from peers *en route* to their final text, so that the e-tutor is free to focus on product feedback. Building in opportunities for peer comments on drafts will be important.

One final lesson, for both the f2f pre-sessional courses and OPAL, comes from post-course evaluations in summer 2012. Several Ts and quite a number of Ss said they would have liked more class time spent on 'plenary' feedback - in other words, on areas of their written English that were common mistakes or weaknesses - in addition to the feedback they gave to individuals.

With that in mind, we have adjusted the f2f timetable to allow a number of 'open' sessions, where the Ts can pick up on issues that have arisen in the class's speaking and writing. Similarly, in the OPAL course, we are also building a weekly review of common problems arising in the work the students have submitted for that week.

Summary

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The CA logs have provided insights into the topics on which last summer's students wanted help or information (or reassurance).

We have seen that having the opportunity to interact with the CAs allowed them to ask many questions that a teacher might have considered 'off the point'. In that sense, the new role we have given the assistants has been shown to be valuable.

Lastly I have outlined the ways in which the data from the log study has pointed to adjustments we should make to materials and task instruction, both in the conventional f2f pre-sessional and the new online pre-sessional in August 2013.

References SLIDE 26

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