

Designing and Delivering an e-Preessional Course in EAP for the 21st First Century International Student

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Abstract. Summer pre-sessional courses in English for academic purposes (EAP), which prepare growing numbers of international students for degree programmes at UK universities, are facing greater challenges in how to provide the physical space and human resources for their effective and efficient delivery. The affordances of the internet now make other options available and this paper will present a possible solution: an e-presessional for the 21st century learner. At the University of Southampton, building on prior experience in the delivery of online distance learning (ODL), the repurposing of face-to-face courses and in designing courseware in the form of interactive learning objects, a tutored online pre-sessional course was developed and delivered to 60 international students holding confirmed offers of places on MSc and MBA programmes in the School of Management. Adopting a new practice in pre-sessional provision, the students undertook a five week pre-sessional preparatory online course whilst still in their home countries before arriving at the University to complete the remaining ten weeks on the face-to-face pre-sessional programme. Tutored by UK-based EAP tutors, they produced assignments and received online feedback at the same time as developing their academic writing and reading, study skills, vocabulary and grammar. The paper will present and reflect on the design and delivery of the e-presessional course, aiming to show how the adoption of a hybrid approach to pre-sessional provision can have a number of benefits. It will highlight from the student evaluation how the approach may also help develop confidence, independent learning, and prepare students for UK academic culture prior to their arrival.

Keywords: e-presessional, online distance learning, online tutoring, courseware creation, online course design, learning objects, EAP.

1. Introduction

Online distance learning is entering a new phase in the twenty first century as increasing numbers of substantive programmes of study are being developed for online delivery,

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taking advantage of the affordances of the internet and more innovative approaches to design for online learning. Online courses which include e-tutoring and assessed elements require particularly careful design. At many UK universities, summer pre-essional courses in English for academic purposes have to deal with growing numbers of international students in a conveyor belt fashion and often in a short time span in order to prepare them as well as possible for the demands of UK higher education.

This paper will present one recent foray into designing for ODL in the form of an e-preessional course. Experimenting with a hybrid approach; five weeks online from their home countries followed by ten weeks face-to-face (f2f) in the UK, two groups of thirty students undertook an extended pre-essional course in the summer of 2011. This paper will firstly introduce the design and development of the e-preessional. Then, it will discuss content delivery and the mediating role of the online tutor. Finally, an overview of the students' course evaluation will be given.

2. Course learning design

2.1. Background

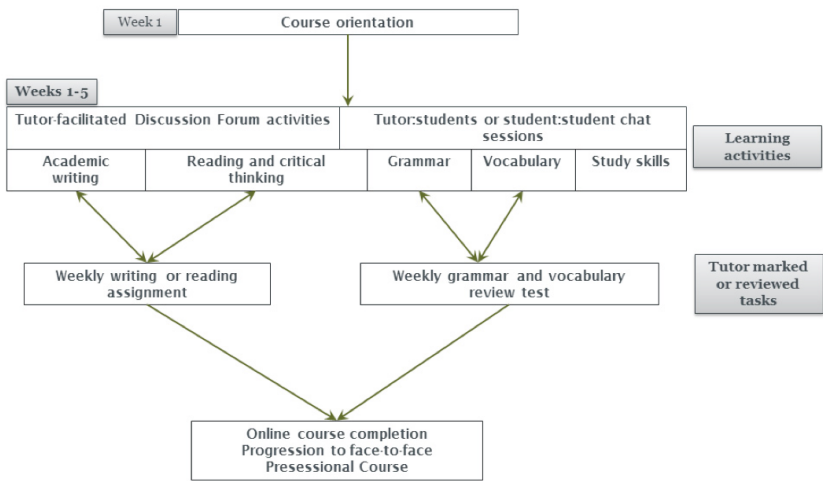
The impetus for the development of an e-preessional came from teaching colleagues in the School of Management at the authors' institution. The school has a large intake of international students on its MSc and MBA programmes and there is a recognised need to improve the level of academic preparedness of international students starting such programmes. In 2011, the school introduced a requirement for students with 5.5 international English language testing system (IELTS) to do an extended pre-essional course in EAP (15 weeks instead of 10) to better prepare for the demands of masters degree programmes. When they start face-to-face pre-essional courses, students with a lower IELTS level may present with significant gaps in key areas of reading and writing, as well as displaying weaknesses in grammar control and vocabulary range. They often also lack the necessary study skills needed for transition to UK academic culture. To extend their preparation time a blended approach was chosen, offering students the first 5 weeks of their pre-essional course online whilst still in the familiar environment of their home countries and without the adverse effect of culture shock. The focus of the online component or e-preessional was on academic writing and reading, study skills, and vocabulary and grammar development in the context of discipline-specific course content.

2.1.1. Pedagogic approach

The development of the e-preessional builds on a successful model for online course design, which has recently included the repurposing of a full masters degree programme for online delivery (Baker & Watson, 2012). A key element of the online course design is the use of an activity-based framework based on a dialogic learning approach which aims to retain the interactive features of f2f learning. The dialogic

perspective on e-learning draws on recognition of the crucial role of the e-tutor (Salmon, 2011) and also on the iterative aspect of the ‘conversational framework’ within which learner and teacher interaction takes place (Laurillard, 2002, 2012). This perspective highlights the need for learning to be ‘scaffolded’ both in terms of content and also in relation to the e-learning environment. In our approach to online course design, scaffolding of learning is offered through the role of the e-tutor and through the design of the core content itself (activity-based learning objects). For these, an explicit pedagogic design is adopted, which includes the sequencing of activities, scaffolded with optional help and feedback – answers and further explanation (Watson, 2010). Students engage in the activities which are designed to challenge and encourage reflection. Through this interaction the teaching point (e.g., how to write a paraphrase) is ‘unpacked’ and the included feedback allows evaluation of student’s answer, review and development of their understanding through additional explanation. Moreover, the online tutor has a role in scaffolding students’ understanding of content through online discussion and feedback on course assignments, checking, clarifying and consolidating, students’ learning (see Section 3). A model of the course learning design can be seen in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Model of course learning design



3. Course delivery and online tutoring

The e-precessional course was delivered through Moodle (v.1.9) over a five week period in May/June 2011 to two student cohorts, each with their own online tutor. Tutors had three main areas of responsibility:

- Guiding students through the course and demonstrating the workspace;
- Bridging between themes of learning resources, assessment tasks, and overall course aims;
- Facilitating and monitoring student learning activity, recording students' progress and providing personalised feedback.

Initially, there was a need to provide course orientation for students, explain workspace functions, and highlight key aspects of course structure. Each week was structured to provide learning objects (LOs) linked with thematic forum discussions and live chat sessions, leading to an assessed reading of writing task (with personalised tutor feedback), and a formative grammar/vocabulary review test with automatic feedback (see [Figure 1](#)).

LOs relating to specific skills and topics were chosen and sequenced each week to develop students' understanding of key academic skills and in relation to the weekly assessed task. Tutors helped facilitate students' learning through forum discussions on themes and points arising from LOs, and through direct interaction with students during synchronous chat sessions. Questions which were too complex to be dealt with through live chat were addressed through a forum discussion, which allowed for greater visibility and could continue to be developed.

Students were also encouraged to interact directly with each other to share ideas and develop their understanding collaboratively, with the tutor only adding detail/clarification as necessary. Weekly assignments led towards a final writing task which demanded use of all skills covered on the course, along with a requisite level of language development in terms of accuracy and appropriateness of use.

Tutors engaged in practical tasks such as monitoring to ensure all students were participating fully in the course by checking use of LOs, contributions to chats/forum discussions, and punctual online submission of assignments. General announcements were made regularly to inform/remind students of the weekly subject/skill focus, upcoming assignment deadlines, and expectations in terms of their participation.

Tutors also marked assignments and sent personalised feedback, kept records, and produced final reports on each student. These reports contained grades, comments on performance/progress, and noted areas for further work. Students and teaching staff on the f2f pre-session course received copies.

4. Student evaluation

At the end of the e-preessional, students were asked to complete an online course evaluation form anonymously. 61 students responded. Questions investigated satisfaction levels with aspects of the course using a 5 point Likert scale (see [Table 1](#)) and invited further comments.

Table 1. Summary of student satisfaction levels of aspects of course

Aspect of e-preessional course	% of students rating highly
Course learning materials	Excellent or very good (88.5%)
Course overall	Excellent or very good (79%)
Weekly assignments, grammar and review tests	Excellent or very good (70.5%)
Tutoring and tutor feedback	Excellent or very good (92%)
Moodle learning environment	Excellent or very good (61%)
Info received before the course	Excellent or very good (57%)
Progress you have made	Very pleased (38%); satisfied (57%); dissatisfied (5%)

Students mentioned benefits regarding course learning outcomes (reading, writing, grammar and vocabulary development), expressing particular appreciation of the formative grammar and vocabulary weekly review tests and tutor help and feedback on assignments. Their comments also highlighted some interesting perceived gains in important areas such as metacognitive skills; confidence building; time management and independent study skills:

- *The course showed me a lot of basic knowledge of the language, and **taught me the study skills to improve my learning ability.***
- *I think (an) online course is a good way to prepare the international students before arrival in the UK. **This course made me confident to communicate with many people and I made friends.***
- *I think this online course **can help me to manage my time overall, it's really helpful for us to manage our time to study.***
- *This course helped me improve in English language and also **guides me in self learning.***

A few felt unable to participate as much as they would have liked in the course due to work commitments and other factors. This may have impacted on perceptions of their own progress (see [Table 1](#)).

5. Conclusion

Overall, the model adopted was felt to have been successful both in terms of building these students’ key skills and in bolstering their confidence for the face-to-face pre-sessional. Interestingly, an analysis of the final pre-sessional grades (beyond the scope of the current paper) suggested that students who had taken the e-preessional may have progressed further overall, compared with those who only took the face-to-face pre-sessional course but who had higher IELTS entry grades at start. Following refreshment and enhancement, the e-preessional course is being delivered again in 2012 and it is expected that more online courses will be developed based on this model.

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