

8.5 An online EAP collaboration for science graduates

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Context

Every summer English for Academic Study (EAS) at the University of Glasgow runs a subject-specific EAP course for international students seeking to study on post-graduate courses at a British HE institution. One of the disciplines offered is Science, Engineering and Technology (SET), which attracts prospective electrical, civil, mechanical and software engineers as well as geologists, statisticians and mathematicians. The students work on improving their language skills to achieve an overall IELTS 6.5 equivalent with a view to starting their master's or PhD in September. In terms of assessment, in previous years, they had to produce an individually written 1,500-word report following a situation–problem–response–evaluation structure on a discipline-related topic of their choosing and an oral presentation summarising their findings.

Challenge

Although the format worked well and the students were developing both language proficiency and a range of study skills necessary for succeeding on their future courses, we felt the learning experience could be improved to better address the expectations of the prospective engineers, namely the need to work effectively in international teams in networked environments. It was also crucial to improve engagement with content in a way that is more interactive than reading subject-specific materials. However, as the majority of pre-session courses take place when the relevant faculty staff are on leave, instituting such opportunities proved a challenge. In order to extend the outcomes to include the most desirable prerequisites, such as becoming a scholar, a lifelong learner and a global citizen (Biggs and Tang 2011), we established a partnership with the Islamic University of Gaza (IUG) and piloted an innovative English for Academic Study Telecollaboration (EAST) with Palestinian science and engineering graduates in August 2015.

EAST project

Unemployment among engineering graduates in the Palestinian Territories is high, and one way of addressing the issue could be to work remotely. In order to develop the necessary e-working skills, the project organisers agreed that the Gazan students would take on the role of mentors as this would allow them to develop and hone a number of relevant attributes, such as online communication or collaboration. To lay the foundations for such a development, EAS offered online constructive feedback training, a sequence of tasks following an exploration–integration–application framework, culminating in the students writing up feedback on a fictitious student's written sample, a task closely aligned with their future role during the pre-session course.

Next, pairs of IUG students devised a range of Gaza-related engineering problems, such as 'Groundwater salinity in Gaza' or 'Development of Arabic OCR'. On arrival in Glasgow, the pre-session SET students formed groups of three, avoiding any monolingual groupings, and chose a Gaza-related problem to research. Throughout

the next five weeks they worked closely with their Palestinian partners to develop a thorough understanding of the context and offer appropriate solutions. As planned, the Gazans acted as mentors providing content-related guidance, leaving the job of language-focused feedback to the EAP teachers in Scotland. The student groups remained in contact via social media, such as Facebook, which facilitated the sharing of relevant materials, articles, videos as well as interactions crucial for ongoing refinement and critical evaluation of ideas. While the students worked collaboratively on researching the scenarios, the final reports were produced individually in order to retain the course gate-keeping function. However, the presentations were delivered in groups with the Gazan mentors attending and providing feedback via a videoconference link.

Evaluation

The project was evaluated highly, with positive comments from both groups in regard to the development of language, team-working and problem-solving skills; and the enhancement of content knowledge, cross-cultural awareness and digital literacies. The Glasgow-based students particularly appreciated working with real-life scenarios from a country that is very much in need of sustainable solutions, while their Gazan counterparts commented on the opportunities for international collaboration to make the 'voice of Gaza' heard.

As organisers, we recognise the lack of balance in the set of outcomes for both groups and we are striving to address it in the next iteration of the project in August 2016. However, for the time being we feel that by a simple refocusing of the course towards Gaza, and the exploitation of technology for educational purposes, we helped foster 'understandings of the interrelationships of people worldwide, thereby preparing [our students] to participate meaningfully as global citizens' (Crawford and Kirby 2008: 71).

For more information, our project website is at <https://easttelecollaboration.wordpress.com>

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References

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- Crawford, E. and M. Kirby. 2008. 'Fostering students' global awareness: technology applications in social studies teaching and learning'. *Journal of Curriculum and Instruction* 2/1: 56-73.