From Push to Pull: evolving EAP support in an offshore university

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ABSTRACT

With the increase of non-native English speakers undertaking degrees in English-medium universities, on-going EAP support is an important aspect of the student experience, intended to contribute to academic success. Looking specifically at the context of University of Nottingham Ningbo China, this paper charts the development of on-going EAP support and its evolution from a prescribed set of workshops to a much more flexible system, blending academic consultations and online learning solutions.

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Introduction

As David Graddol (2006) noted in his landmark *English Next* report, it is predicted that more international students will study for a UK university degree overseas than in the UK. Indeed, a report in the *Guardian* newspaper (Whitehead, 2011) estimated that 18% of students working towards obtaining a British UK degree at that time were doing so fully overseas.

In a home-based English-medium university, international students could be expected to adapt to the local learning environment through an initial foundation EAP course and immersion in the target context, perhaps with the aid of some optional in-sessional support. In an overseas environment, a foundation course alone may not be enough and the role of on-going EAP support becomes much more important since students would not have the potential language acquisition opportunities of those living in an English language environment.

The focus of this paper is the on-going EAP support offered to students in the University of Nottingham Ningbo China (UNNC) by the Academic Support Clinic (ASC) and how that support developed from academic year 2009-2010 to 2012-13. This period has seen ASC provision move from a 'push' system, where the support students needed was pre-determined, towards a 'pull' system, whereby students can select the support they want, when they need it. Although the push/pull debate stems from the business world (see Brown and Hagel, 2005), the problems of anticipating demand and providing prefabricated solutions connected to a push system and the advantages of increased flexibility and innovation within pull systems seem particularly pertinent to when considering optional student support systems. The aim of this move to a pull system was to make ASC provision more effective and relevant to student needs.

The UNNC Context

Established in 2004, Nottingham University's Ningbo campus comprises five Divisions (faculties): Nottingham University Business School, Science & Engineering, International Communications, International Studies and English. These offer a range different undergraduate and post graduate degree programmes, delivered entirely through English, and leading to the same degree students would have obtained studying at the University of Nottingham, UK.

Language support in the university is provided by the Centre for English Language Education (CELE). The first year of degree programmes is an obligatory Preliminary Year during which students follow an EAP programme. After passing the Preliminary Year students enter their second year in UNNC, called the Qualifying Year, where they begin their degree programmes in their Divisions and formal EAP support ends.

As Charles and Stewart (1991) highlight when discussing US universities, international students face problems in terms of a potentially very unfamiliar education system as well as language difficulties. The issues of academic culture shock are compounded in an offshore university context like UNNC, where students lack immersion in an English language environment and overwhelmingly share a common education background (Chinese) which differs from the institutional educational culture. While the process of academic enculturation will begin in the Preliminary Year, there can be no guarantees that all students will be fully prepared for the reality of their degree level studies when they enter the Qualifying Year. For this reason, optional on-going support is provided by the CELE Academic Support Clinic (ASC).

ASC Support - 2009-10: Determining Needs

Prior to academic year 2009-10, ASC support mainly took the form of workshops and lectures. These had been developed by ASC staff, based on observed and assumed needs of the students. Since they had been developed in an ad hoc manner, and in many ways reflected the ASC teaching team's own interests, there was no fully coherent programme of courses and workshops available. This led to a concern that the support may not actually meet the needs of the students, the lecturers or the institution.

To address this concern the team carried out an in-depth language audit of the MA programmes of the university, as outlined in Reeves & Wright (1996), interviewing students and lecturers, carrying out observations of lectures & seminars, while also reviewing student work and course requirements. This rich body of research gave us a much better idea of the skills required of the students in UNNC and helped us map out a series of workshops and courses which would provide students a complete pathway through the university (see figure 1), from entrance to exit.

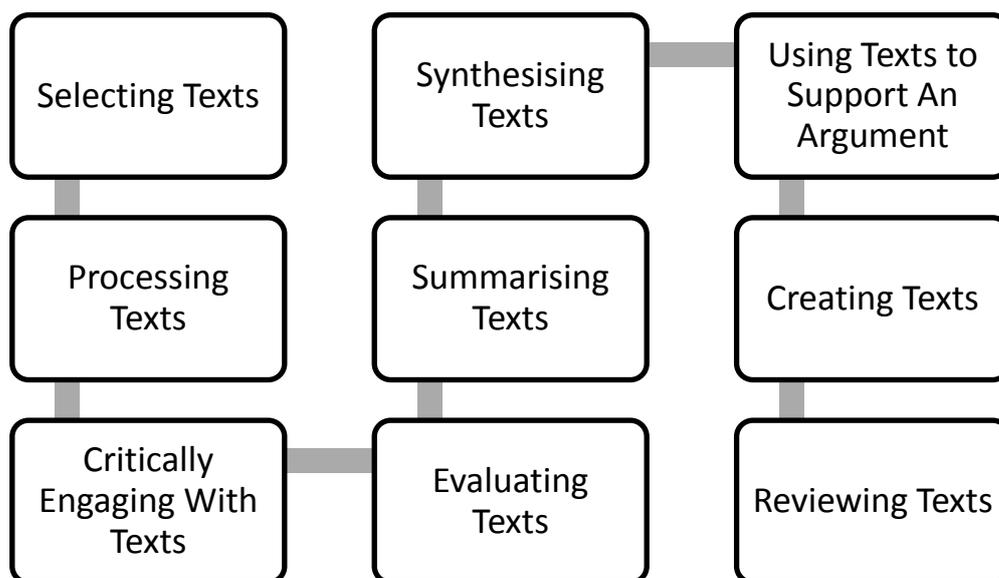|		
Selecting Texts	Synthesising Texts	Using Texts to Support An Argument
Processing Texts	Summarising Texts	Creating Texts
Critically Engaging With Texts	Evaluating Texts	Reviewing Texts

Fig 1: Student Pathway (from Levrai, 2010)

Each step in the path would require different workshops to help students deal with that task. For example, when thinking about Processing Texts students would need support with aspects such as reading speed, vocabulary strategies, genre awareness, evaluative note-making etc.

While the audit revealed nothing fully unexpected, it was invaluable in terms of helping prioritise future course development. For instance, argumentation was identified across Divisions as a key academic skill the students needed help with, both in their written and oral assignments, and as such material for this went into development much earlier than might otherwise have been the case.

ASC Support: 2010-11 – Developing Taught Provision

2010-11 saw the development of a portfolio of courses designed to meet the key issues the audit had highlighted. There was considerable debate during the process of materials development as to how subject specific the material should be, with the ultimate decision being to make the material generic. While the EGAP/ESAP debate as outlined in Hyland (2006) was discussed, ultimately the rationale for choosing an EGAP approach was not so much pedagogical as practical – the voluntary nature of ASC course enrolment meant that most workshops would be attended by students from a mix of degree programmes and, consequently, materials had to be accessible to students from different disciplines. Nevertheless, topic selection was still carefully considered, with workshops being built around issues such as multi-national business ethics, which could be of interest to students from a variety of academic backgrounds.

As well as the consideration of what to teach, it was also important to determine when to teach. To enable this planning, ASC also generated a central calendar for the university, collating deadlines for assignments across the university. This proved valuable in terms of

helping map ASC provision so that we could try to deliver workshops at the most useful time for students. For instance, it brought to light the need for greater sophistication in our support for dissertation students. In UNNC 4th Year undergraduate students have the option of taking a dissertation module; similarly, a dissertation is an essential part of 1st Year MA programmes. Traditionally, ASC support for dissertations started early in the Spring semester, which is when MA students generally start thinking about their dissertations. However, in some degree programmes they may have to submit their proposals towards the end of the Autumn semester, in which case the help could be coming too late. Moreover, by the start of the Spring semester 4th Year students are already well into writing their dissertation, highlighting the need for dissertation support earlier in the academic year than we had anticipated.

ASC workshops and lectures were very well received and generated positive feedback from students through course evaluation questionnaires (with 90% of students finding ASC provision '*useful*' or '*very useful*' in the academic year 2009-10). There was a tension between our courses and student workload, particularly given the voluntary nature of our provision. While our courses became more targeted on specific needs and skill development, they also became more demanding of students, requiring them to do some preparation or homework. It is hard, for example, to develop students' synthesising skills without requiring them to do reading around a question. Even though we provided the texts, which eliminated the need for students to do research, there was still the issue of adding to the students' already heavy reading load.

This issue of student workload also had wider implications. Attendance for ASC workshops was generally better in the first half of a semester, when the student's workload in their degree studies was not as heavy, with ASC workshops in the Autumn semester attracting more students than in the Spring semester. As students became busy with their studies and coursework assignments their willingness to take on extra study diminished, as did attendance to ASC taught provision. Even early in the Autumn semester when workshops were oversubscribed we could only reach a relatively small proportion of students, when considering the total university population. This led us to question alternatives to taught provision to try and meet the needs we had identified in a more efficient way.

ASC Support: 2011-12 – The Move to Advising

The main measure taken in 2011-12 to make ASC support more effective was the launch of an academic advising service. While academic advising differs from university to university (Mozzon-McPherson, 2006) within the UNNC context it is similar to the concept of language advising, as outlined by Reinders (2008). However, rather than a student bringing a piece of work to an advisor and receiving feedback on a language related issue, ASC academic advising provides feedback to the student on higher level task achievement. In order to address the needs identified in the language audit feedback revolves around task achievement, considering issues like strength of argument, use of support, organisation and logical progression.

This advising service proved highly popular with students, both domestic and international, receiving overwhelmingly positive feedback, with 93.4% of students finding

the service '*useful*' or '*very useful*' and 95.6% intending to use the service again (Levrai, 2012). Being able to work through an actual assignment with a student, as opposed to their taking a generic workshop not directly related to any particular assignment, meant that the effectiveness and impact of tutor-student contact time greatly increased.

Student support was not limited to advising. ASC staff also worked closely with faculty staff and developed some bespoke training workshops for particular groups of learners. This enabled the previously generic training workshops we had generated to become much more relevant to the learners. An illustration of this is a series of reading workshops requested by Environmental Engineering, which helped develop students' search strategies in order to answer a question. By developing these skills around the question of soil erosion and directing students to the preferred databases of their discipline we could ensure that students were developing skills and strategies that would be directly related to their current and future studies.

ASC Support: 2012-13 – Implementing A Pull System

2011-12 demonstrated the appetite in the university for support which worked hand in hand with students' divisional studies and this is something which should expand. In terms of taught provision there has been greater co-operation with faculty to continue the development of bespoke training courses and for this provision to be delivered at the optimal time. The advising service has also expanded and, to help keep up with demand, the use of student peer advisors is being investigated, taking into account the advantages of peer tutoring outlined in Topping (1996).

Online student support is also being developed. In the Autumn semester of 2012-13 the ASC ran regular lectures and the materials for these were then made available on Moodle, the online learning platform of the university. This meant students were able to review these materials at their convenience, as well as participate in forum discussions on the topic. It is also planned to turn the materials developed in 2010-11 into online self-access materials, turning the inputs in a workshop into highly targeted mini-lectures which students can access at any time. For example, within the context of academic presentation skills, short videos will be generated around different topics such as:

• starting a research presentation
• starting a recommendation presentation
• strategies for dealing with questions
• animation in PPT.

These mini lectures mean that, crucially, students will be able to select the support they need, when they need it. Coupled with the advising service and requested workshops this should see ASC able to provide a comprehensive system of EAP support.

Conclusion

On-going support is valued by students and their feedback suggests it is valuable to them in terms of their academic skill development. The experiences of ASC would also suggest that in-sessional support needs to be as flexible and responsive as possible, as well as available to students through a variety of avenues. Rather than having a rigid support programme which is 'pushed' on the students it is preferable to have a 'pull' system whereby students can find the support they need, when they need it, addressing very specific concerns directly related to the assignments they are working on. While this kind of flexible on-going support has been discussed in the context of an offshore university it could also be highly beneficial in home campuses. Studying in university is going to present any student with new and unfamiliar tasks and a sophisticated pull system of options would help them deal with these ongoing challenges successfully.

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