

Red Guides  
Paper 46

The CEM Model  
Contextualising Insessional Language and  
Study Skills Support for International and EU  
students

Diane Sloan & Elizabeth Porter

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The author (s) of this guide:

Diane Sloan, Newcastle Business School  
Elizabeth Porter, English Language Centre

Northumbria University

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## **Abstract**

This guide is designed to present the background, research and preliminary findings relating to a key area emerging in Higher Education institutions in the UK, that of providing academic language and study skills support to international students studying in a business context. The guide is based on the experiences of staff in the English Language Centre and the postgraduate area of Newcastle Business School at Northumbria University. It presents findings which began with an analysis of existing practice, together with a critique of past practice. This led to the recognition of key issues which can influence the attendance and participation of overseas students on an insessional English Language Support Programme (ELSP). The guide identifies and discusses the role of the three key concepts of **C**ontextualisation, **E**MBEDDING and **M**apping of the ELSP, as the foundation for developing the CEM Model designed to facilitate improved provision of the ELSP in a postgraduate business context. The authors' findings show that application of the CEM Model is already demonstrating added value in the key areas of student attendance, understanding and integration with programme learning objectives and outcomes.

## **Introduction**

Statistics show that the number of international students studying in the UK during 2004/05 increased by 9% on previous years (Education Travel, 2004). Of these, China sourced 52,675, a percentage change of 10% on previous years and India, 16,685, a percentage change increase of 14% with 106,915 entering postgraduate study. As identified by Turner (2005) the internationalisation of Higher Education is now a key area within the academic sector. This guide therefore presents the findings of research which has emerged from issues and opportunities for further development in the teaching and

mapping of academic English language and study skills for international students.

The teaching of English language skills to international students in Higher Education has been informed for decades by research and practice in what has been called English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and English for Academic Purposes (EAP). More recently there has been a drift towards adopting a more specific subject-based approach to the teaching of EAP (Hyland & Hamp-Lyons 2002). Supporting this approach, Hyland (2002 p.394) argues that:

“effective language teaching in the universities involves taking specificity seriously. It means that we must go as far as we can.”

For English language teachers this means understanding the language used in specific academic contexts and organising the learning around subject specific, purposeful activities (Dudley-Evans and St John 1998). The approach suggests too that it is important that the content should be relevant to learners' goals and that this is most likely to motivate them (Flowerdew and Peacock 2001). However English language specialists have limited field specific knowledge and are not always the best judge of what will interest and motivate their students (Murray & McPherson 2004). It seems appropriate therefore for English language teachers to develop a working partnership with subject specialists. However institutional constraints and unwillingness of would-be collaborators can be major obstacles to teaching partnerships.

Acknowledging the above, this guide examines the relationship of the delivery of an ELSP within the post graduate area of Newcastle Business School (NBS) at Northumbria University. The university represents one the North East's major international Higher Education institutions with students from all over the world studying on a range of programmes, either on campuses in the city of Newcastle upon Tyne or at one of many

partner institutions worldwide. NBS has a history of recruiting overseas students and numbers are steadily growing. Currently overall postgraduate recruitment is approximately 400 students of which 75% comprise overseas students. As the international student base has grown so too has the realisation of the importance of ensuring a quality learning environment and experience to complement study programmes. Central to this is the recognition of the role of language and the need to increase staff and student understanding of the importance of integration of language skills in academic learning.

The guide presents an overview of emerging issues relating to the delivery of English language skills. This will lead to a discussion on the identification and development of the CEM Model for a working partnership between English language specialists and academic subject specialists. Underpinning the development of the model will be the aims of establishing firstly a collegiate approach to learning between staff and students, and secondly an enhancement of the learning experience of the students through induction and guidance procedures aligned to their academic development. Whilst it is acknowledged that the guide focuses on postgraduate students in NBS the authors have already demonstrated applicability at undergraduate level and believe the findings are transferable both internally and externally.

The aim of the guide:

- Will be to examine the management of the ELSP to postgraduate students and to develop the CEM Model which underpins and involves both language and subject specialists.

The objectives of the guide will be:

- To address the diverse needs of the international learning community through improving the context in which the language support programme is delivered.

The project will evaluate the appropriateness of the current method used to inform the content and timing of support and provide information as to how that could be enhanced in order to provide a more effective model for support.

- To contribute to the quality of learning agenda by linking the effectiveness of the delivery of English language provision to the academic programmes.
- To develop a contextualised ELSP, in this case in a business context, to engender the development of transferable written and oral skills, including the ability to critically analyse and solve problems, both of which are inextricably linked with language.
- To investigate how students can gain maximum benefit from their specialist subjects by ensuring that they are equipped with language skills at the most appropriate times for their learning.

The primary research supporting the guide is a small scale longitudinal study using a combination of quantitative and qualitative data collection tools to explore the learning styles and experiences of the Masters students based in NBS. The guide uses preliminary findings from students and staff in 2005-06 resulting from lightly structured group interviews and attendance at key student and academic meetings. The focus of the data collection was to elicit student and staff views. This was achieved through attending formal staff and student meetings, supported by informal discussions with the relevant parties. These were recorded and analysed using a basic grounded theory approach to identify the key issues and themes as discussed in the following sections (Silverman 2001, Gill & Johnson 1991).

## **Review of past practice.**

In the past the insessional ELSP at Northumbria University has been informed firstly by the expertise of English language specialists in English for Academic Purposes and secondly by a language training needs analysis process carried out with students in the first week of the insessional programme. By contrast, the role of Newcastle Business School, reflecting practice across the University, was primarily an administrative one supporting registration of students on to the ELSP by posting group lists on notice boards and giving students directions to their sessions in the English Language Centre. Specifically NBS facilitated communication with postgraduates by inviting the language specialist to make Induction Week presentations, with the aim of encouraging students to attend the optional insessional programme. The presentations tended to be aligned with others made by satellite services to the academic programme itself, such as Student Services, offering study skills support to all university students, the Counselling Service and the Chaplaincy.

By contrast, the role of the English Language Centre was to be responsible for registration of all international students in the University approximately 3000 students, of whom approximately 850 were in the Business School. Such was the administrative burden of the registration process that teaching of the insessional ELSP was not scheduled to start until Week 3, two weeks later than formal academic programmes. The syllabus was arrived at through a process of analysing student needs and materials were developed accordingly to deliver generic academic skills. There were frequent changes to group lists since students found that the sessions clashed with their postgraduate programme seminars; attendance on the ELSP was seen as optional.

## **Preliminary findings: emerging issues.**

The previous section documents past practice relating to the delivery of insessional ELSP. A critical analysis of past practice, combined with the results of the data collection exercise, revealed some interesting findings. A key issue related to the international students' perception of the role of the ELSP in their learning agenda. As previously mentioned, the role and purpose of the ELSP were presented to the students during their initial induction week. The language specialist would normally be scheduled to present to the students within the group of presentations associated with Student Services, including the library facilities. Whilst recognising the importance of such activities this created two issues from the student perspective. Firstly, the ELSP was seen as an 'optional extra' outside their academic programme. This in turn led to the misapprehension that the key area of English language development was abstract from their overall academic programme and learning agenda.

This misapprehension was supported by a lack of involvement of any subject specialists in the analysis of students language needs. The ELSP therefore lacked direct links to learning areas which could have been identified by the subject specialist.

The delivery of the language support sessions to mixed cohorts of students used a general academic context for the teaching of language skills. As a result, the students undervalued the skills teaching and failed to recognise the transferability of the core skills. This was compounded by a lack of synergy, between the subject and language specialists.

A further issue relates to the timing of the delivery of the language support sessions started within the Semester. Specialist teaching began in Week 1. By contrast, the language support sessions began in the third week of teaching and more significantly did not appear on students' printed academic timetable. This again corroborated in the students' minds the



fact that the ELSP sat outside the academic programme and reinforced the separate nature of the English language provision.

Finally the analysis of past practice raised the issue of the dilemma for students between attending the language support sessions and meeting their submission deadlines. The cumulative effect of the issues outlined above resulted in the students opting for self exclusion from the ELSP as the semester progressed in order to complete their assignments.

### **Preliminary findings: contextualisation, embedding and mapping emerging issues.**

Three key themes emerged as pivotal both to subject and language specialists as well as to student understanding: contextualisation: relating to the context in which the academic skills were presented and communicated to the students; embedding: the position of the ELSP within the overall academic programme; and finally mapping: the identification and understanding of the post graduate student needs in relation to language learning and the appropriateness and timeliness of the ELSP throughout the academic year. These three themes, together with preliminary findings and how they were addressed in the project are discussed below.

### ***Contextualisation: specificity versus generic.***

Specificity implies teaching language skills in the context of the subject which is being studied. In order to provide a subject specific context for the teaching of academic skills, two modules, taken by all postgraduate students on their Masters programme were identified and analysed from a language perspective: the Dissertation module and a Human Resources module entitled “Analysing and Developing Self”. In order to arrive at a syllabus for the ELSP, meetings between the language and subject specialists took place and allowed key areas in assessment performance to be identified. This also

allowed the language specialist to understand what the students are required to demonstrate in their assessments.

The assessment tasks for “Analysing and Developing Self” focus on skills and abilities which are transferable to the workplace, involving the students in problem solving and face to face interactivity. Dovey (2006) argues that in many courses which are becoming more vocationalised, face to face interactivity is an important communicative mode, with less emphasis being placed on text mode.

Snow (1997) argues that EAP professionals can be valuable resources to subject specialists, who in this project offered their teaching and learning plans for analysis. The resulting syllabus was presented to Business School Programme Directors and Leaders for further analysis and comment. This draft syllabus was then negotiated with the Module Tutors, who are ultimately responsible for the delivery of the subject modules. A final syllabus for the ELSP was arrived at, which was informed not only by the language specialist, but also by the subject specialists and Programme Directors and specific Module Tutors.

### ***Embedding***

Embedding relates to changing the perception of specialist staff and international students from one where the ELSP is seen as abstract to their postgraduate programmes to one where it is recognised as a core part of the postgraduate academic programme.

In order for the embedding to be effective, four areas were identified of equal importance and vital to address. With respect to the presentation of the ELSP, the first step was to address its placement in the postgraduate induction programme week. In respect to the placement and targeting of the introduction to the ELSP, the decision was made to remove it from the slot associated with Student Services and place it

between the academic subject introductions. Secondly the timing of the ELSP was altered to enable it to begin in line with all other academic modules in Week 1. The students, as far as possible, were grouped by programme to support specificity. More significantly and probably of most impact on the students perception of the role of the ELSP within their academic studies was the embedding of the ELSP seminars into the printed programme timetable given to students. On the surface this would appear to be a minor change but in practice this represented a major cultural shift and recognition of the importance of the ELSP at both student and staff level.

Complementing the shift in student perception of the ELSP, there was also the need to identify and address the same issue with respect to the relationship of subject specialist staff to the language specialist. As a result of reviewing past practice, it was recognised that the perception of both engendered a culture of “them and us”. The aim was to modify this perception and to reach a more inclusive and supportive relationship. This was achieved through active invitation and participation of the language specialist in regular management meetings at Programme Director and Programme Leader levels, ensuring understanding of what the ELSP could provide and how this could be incorporated more effectively into each specific Masters programme.

The final element of embedding relates to a more generic level of management support in that none of the above could have taken place without support occurring at a number of management levels. At a macro level, key decisions relating to the central timetabling of the language support sessions were sanctioned at Associated Dean level, whilst at a micro level, the role of the Programme Directors, Programme Leaders and Module Tutors was critical. With such initiatives the role of the project ‘champion’, a senior subject specialist, cannot be underestimated. This key role is needed to promote, push and

maintain the profile of the project to key individuals and staff with the purpose of achieving visibility and co-operation.

***Mapping language support to student and subject specialists needs.***

Provisional findings indicate that students are more likely to acquire features of language as they need them, not at a time determined by a set syllabus. Thus it would seem appropriate to identify their patterns of working on their dissertation more accurately so that the ELSP can provide support in key areas at the right time. There is the need to reach a clearer understanding of how and when students work on their dissertations so that language support can be delivered at an optimum time for student learning. With this clearer understanding of how students work, the opportunity to map language support to actual need is greatly enhanced.

Traditional practice is to deliver the in-session programme across two twelve-week blocks between October and April. Postgraduate students formulate their research proposals and have approval on their research task from their dissertation tutor before the end of teaching in the first semester in December.

The in-session programme would have a focus on dissertation writing skills in the second 12 week period between January and March. Areas covered would include writing and study skills for the completion of the Literature Review chapter. It would also provide language skills for communicating research objectives and presenting and discussing research data. Topics such as quoting skills and avoiding plagiarism would also be part of the programme.

Informal investigation in 2006 to identify student patterns of working indicate that many students do not begin collecting data and even the writing of the initial chapters of the dissertation until later in the academic year. In the period

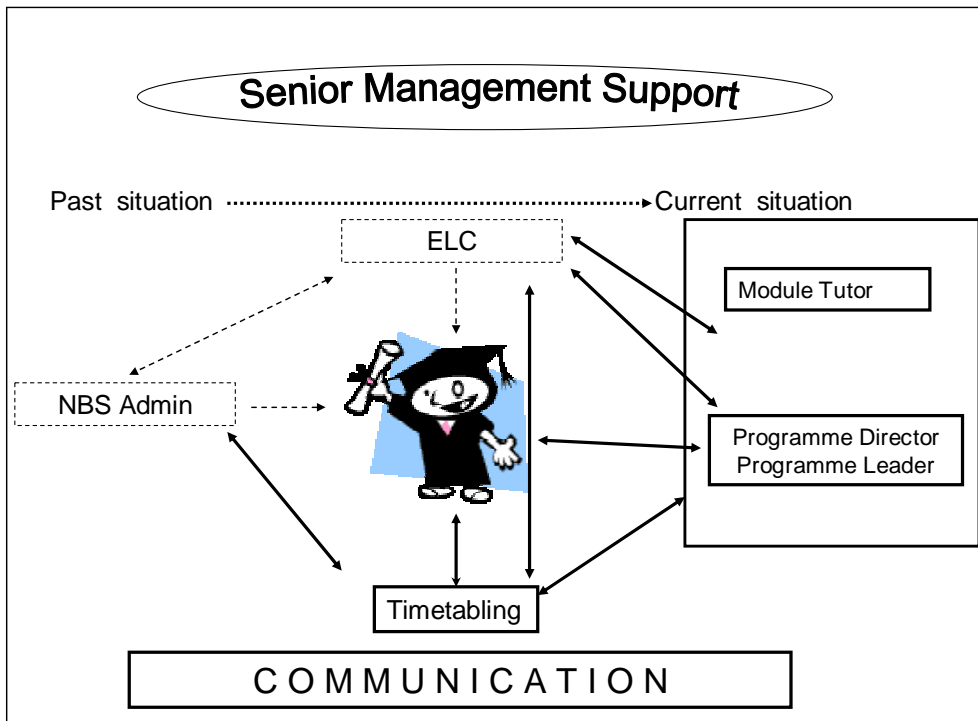
January – April in the Business School, students appear to be still working exclusively on assignments for other modules. Some modules are assessed in examinations and research indicates that many students do not focus on their dissertation until the beginning of the summer, by which time, the insessional programme of language support has ceased.

It is important that we address the language difficulties of students not only from the language specialists' perspective and from the students' perspective but also from the perspective of the expert informant, the subject specialist. Therefore the process of mapping also involves a two way process of communicating needs between the language and the subject specialists. To facilitate good communication the practise of producing regular updates has been adopted reporting on the content of the language sessions and the responses of the international students to their teaching and learning. The language specialist presents these to the Programme Directors and Programme Leaders and the specific Module Tutors. The subject specialists are able to respond to the reports, commenting on the focus of the insessional programme and raise issues for further consideration when the language and academic skills syllabus is evaluated.

## Development and discussion of the CEM Model

Figure 1 identifies a pictorial representation of the approach to insessional ELSP delivery before and after the introduction of the new CEM Model.

**Figure 1. The CEM Model.**



In the past only two key actors have been involved, NBS administration and the language specialists from the English Language Centre. Represented on the left hand side by the dotted lines, the model captures the limited number of participants and communication channels involved in identifying and formulating insessional support. More importantly the lines of communication demonstrate the lack of inclusion of all the key elements identified in the previous discussions as critical to obtaining synergy and cohesiveness of overall delivery.

The resulting CEM Model depicted by the additional elements on the right and in the entire model shows how, as a result of

the research, the key issues emerging have been addressed. The addition of the bold arrows represent additional and improved lines of communication and bold boxes denoting additional participants, with the model capturing the enhanced level of explicit communication and understanding.

Critically the CEM Model depicts the necessary participation of all the 'actors' and in particular the increased lines of communication at all levels. The explicit inclusion of the Module Tutor directly addresses the issue of contextualisation, in particular the argument of specificity versus generic contexts. It also ensures that the content of the language support sessions are relevant to the programme and furthermore appear relevant to the student.

The inclusion of Senior Management Support, Programme Director (PD) and Programme Leader (PL) address the issue of embedding. Without the support of Senior Management, the physical placement of the language support sessions on the student timetable, an indirect, but subtle signposting of the importance of the sessions within the overall academic programme would not have been possible. This latter point was re-enforced more explicitly through the involvement of the PDs and PLs and their ongoing involvement in the content and promotion of the language sessions.

In respect to mapping, the current schedule of the ELSP has attempted to address patterns of learning emerging from current informal feedback from both staff and students. As discussed earlier, this exercise is ongoing but, as will be discussed below, earlier indicators show that the approach depicted in the model is already revealing highly informative findings.

### **Use of the CEM Model: current findings.**

International students on Masters Programmes face many challenges linked to language and academic skills. Students with borderline English proficiency levels can face considerable difficulties in the four language skills areas of listening, speaking, reading and writing. The language specialist's reports from the seminars have also revealed some interesting issues related to student learning.

#### ***Teaching and learning platform: Blackboard***

One example of this was the related to the international students' use of the e-learning platform. The platform allows them access to the Teaching and Learning Plans for each module. The lecture notes and handouts are made available on the platform, as are the module assignment briefs and Directed Study texts.

In language development sessions, it had become clear that the majority of international students had been unable to locate the Plans, which were located after several pages of lexically dense text explaining the aims and objectives and learning outcomes of the module. Faced with a considerable text to process and understand, few students had ventured further, unknowingly missing the Teaching and Learning Plans. The language specialist was able to report back, to the e-learning Director, of the student difficulties and changes to the order of material within both the Teaching and Learning plans and the e-learning platform have been successfully implemented.

#### ***Language use***

In analysing the context of modules for the language and academic skills development, it has become clear that the lexically dense nature of assessment briefs presents a real problem for international students. Examples of good practice through use of splitting briefs into distinct sections, use of bullet points etc. quite clearly helps the international student.



However, there appears to be a distinctive vocabulary of written academic discourse in such briefs. The language specialist was able to draw this to the attention of the subject specialists and whilst there is no wish to address the overall standard of the assessments ongoing research is now looking at the consistency of language across assessments and the possibility of creating a glossary of assessment language for students to access on-line.

## **Summary and conclusions.**

To summarise the developments to date, the guide presents the rationale and development of the CEM Model as a tool to support in-session language support within the context of student study. The guide presents a critique of an approach to the design and delivery of English language support programmes in response to the increasing number of international students entering both NBS and the University. In the current climate of expanding the numbers of international students in the university we need to respond to varying language and learning skills. The critique of past practice and preliminary fieldwork identified the key areas of **C**ontextualisation, **E**mbedding and **M**apping as emerging issues in providing quality of provision at an academic level, whilst ensuring participation and 'added value' for the student. From the associated definition and discussion on how to incorporate these into the academic experience the resulting CEM Model identified these three areas emerged as critical in the future planning and development of language support sessions. The results, illustrated in Figure 1, depict the chronological development of the CEM Model over time, and the introduction of the key 'actors' and lines of communication to ensure current and ongoing success. As the provisional findings have indicated the new approach is already demonstrating areas of improvement from both the student and staff experience.

This can be evidenced:

- by the increased channels of communication between the subject and language specialists.
- this has led to a better and shared understanding of how they can work together to effectively link subject to language in order to promote increased learning opportunities for the students.
- the students now have a clearer understanding of the link between their language support programme and their subject specific modules.
- focusing on the language required, for example, to demonstrate analytical skills in the context of a specific module motivates the students to attend the language support programme and increases attendance figures significantly.
- transferability of the CEM Model to support other added value activities.
- identification of key issues in areas of language used in assessment.

Quite clearly this early research has already demonstrated the importance of the CEM Model by linking subject content to English language support. Further research is ongoing in the key areas of contextualisation, embedding and mapping and how the CEM Model can be used to support the teaching and learning agenda ie. assessment and other value added activities ie. information literacy. The effort to embed the language support programme into the postgraduate programme area has met with considerable success. The language specialists are now perceived as part of the Business School academic team. Finally mapping the language support programme to students needs involves delivering the language support at the best time in the academic year to meet the needs of international students. Within NBS a quantitative review of

the data using a larger sample size is informing the relevancy of mapping delivery.

This guide therefore outlines the three key areas of contextualisation, embedding and mapping, the CEM Model, as critical in understanding and informing the delivery of English language support to NBS postgraduate international students. As stated in the introduction whilst the material is based on postgraduate level the findings are also applicable and being implemented at undergraduate level. The early findings have already successfully informed current debate of postgraduate curriculum design in NBS and are contributing to a critical area of educational development.

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