

11 Assessment in the English for Academic Study Telecollaboration (EAST) project – a case study

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Abstract

This case study presents and discusses the English for Academic Study Telecollaboration (EAST) project, carried out between Science, Engineering, and Technology (SET) students from different higher education institutions. In this telecollaborative project, the students work across borders and cultures on real-life SET discipline-specific scenarios and develop a number of soft skills and attributes alongside. The paper shows how the telecollaborative exchange has been set up and what changes were required to adapt the existing course, particularly its assessment procedures, to ensure the project was well integrated into the curriculum. It also attempts to evaluate the project, taking into account the differing outcomes and learning experiences of the participants from the partnering institutions. It concludes that adding the telecollaborative project to the existing course resulted in a richer educational experience for the participants and development of a number of skills but points out imbalances in the treatment of the participants from the assessment point of view and suggests how these inequalities could be addressed in the future.

Keywords: assessment, English for academic specific purposes, telecollaboration, virtual exchange (VE).

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1. Introduction

The EAST project refers to a series of collaborative projects during the years 2015-2019. It connected international students studying on a SET strand of summer pre-session courses organised by the English for Academic Studies Unit at the University of Glasgow (UoG), and students enrolled in the same disciplines at the Islamic University of Gaza (IUG) (and in years 2018 and 2019 also from three other partnering institutions)³. In terms of student numbers, the 2015 pilot saw 37 Glasgow-based students (originally from China, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, and Brazil) working for five weeks in August with 20 students from Gaza. The project grew exponentially over the years as the Glasgow course continued to attract higher numbers, with 140 students in 2018 and 171 in 2019. In regard to Gaza students, 52 joined in 2018 and 25 in 2019 (see [Guariento, 2019](#), for exact details of the iterations 2015-2018). As mentioned above, in the last two years the collaboration extended to include two universities from Chile and one from Malawi (student data no longer accessible).

The project leaders at UoG (including the first author of this paper) and IUG remained the same throughout the years, which enabled them to fine-tune the collaboration in its subsequent iterations, improving for example on its technological and logistical aspects. For instance, they were constantly looking for more effective videoconferencing tools to help the students link with each other as well as facilitate the final presentations; there was also an increased recognition of the necessity to familiarise the UoG students with the Gazan context and give them and their partners time to bond with each other. At UoG, the course was taught by a varying number of English for Specific Academic Purposes (ESAP) teachers; the core idea behind the project, however, remained the same throughout the years. This can be

3. For the sake of clarity, it is important to note and remember the difference between the EAST project (often referred to as 'project') and the pre-session course (often referred to as 'course'). While the former was embedded in the latter, they are not synonymous, and theoretically speaking any student could complete the course without engaging in the project. Another thing to note is that while at the end of the project four different overseas institutions were engaged in the collaboration with UoG, the main partner right from the beginning was IUG and that is why it is given prominence in this paper.

summarised as the students collaborating across the borders to understand and analyse responses to real-life problems related to SET disciplines in the Global South.

The motivation to start the project was to equip ESAP students with skills necessary to communicate online in the globalised and rapidly changing world with people of different educational and professional cultures (cf. [Lucena, Downey, Jesiek, & Elber, 2008](#); [White, 2007](#)). Engineering educators point to the need to develop in students “an ability to collaborate in distributed corporate settings, across countries, continents and cultures” ([Schaefer et al., 2012](#), p. 394). This entails the need to implement concrete changes in professional training – modern universities should aim not only at developing students’ theoretical knowledge, but also help them become lifelong learners and global citizens ([Biggs & Tang, 2007](#)). To this end, apart from developing communicative skills in the English language, the implementation of telecollaboration aimed to provide the students with a platform to improve their digital literacies, practise negotiation skills, and solve authentic discipline-related problems with peers from other professional, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds. Completing tasks collaboratively and cross-culturally essentially requires specific skills from students, such as the ability to engage in critical thinking, give and accept feedback, learn autonomously, and embrace ambiguity. For this reason, the course assessment included both summative and formative elements, which enabled the project leader from UoG to meet the institutional assessment-related requirements and to support the students throughout the process at the same time.

However, the students from the partnering institutions were not subject to the same assessment procedures and that imbalance was dictated by the wider context of the pre-sessional course into which the project was embedded, and the differing roles the students took on. This chapter presents how the summative and formative assessment tools in an existing course in the UK institution were adjusted to make it possible to embed the online, cross-national project into the course activities. Additionally, the role of the Gazan students as e-tutors in the assessment process will be presented and discussed.

2. Overview of the virtual exchange project

To discuss the assessment aspects of the EAST project at UoG, it is important to understand the gatekeeping function of the pre-sessional course during which the telecollaborative exchanges took place. In simple terms, the *raison d'être* of any pre-sessional course is to assess the international student's readiness to progress onto their postgraduate course at a UK university. This means that passing a pre-sessional course is often interpreted by admissions departments as proof of meeting the requirements of a government-accepted Secure English Language Test, such as IELTS (International English Language Testing System examination). Consequently, the pre-sessional course becomes a high stakes course that plays a decisive role in the admission process.

In relation to the EAST project, the UK-based groups consisted of international students (mostly from South East Asia and Arabic countries) who chose to complete pre-sessional ESAP, which targeted language, study skills, and subject-related content to prepare the students for their forthcoming postgraduate studies. The telecollaborative project was implemented within the existing course and had to comply with its syllabus and assessment requirements.

For the Gazan students, the participation in the EAST project was an extracurricular activity. Most of the IUG students were postgraduate students of engineering and related disciplines. The project was conducted during their summer holidays and was offered on a voluntary basis. The rationale behind the project was to help the students develop English language skills (in particular practical skills in communication, negotiation, and problem solving), digital skills, and literacies. Even though student involvement in the EAST project did not entail receiving any extra credit, it was promoted as an opportunity to cooperate in an engineering project in an international setting in English in order to strengthen their applications for prospective jobs and research grants or schemes. That was deemed as an important incentive as the unemployment rate among graduates in Palestine, particularly in the Gaza Strip, remains very high (see 'Recommended reading' for details but also a press release from

the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics⁴). It was hoped that participating in an online telecollaborative exchange would help the students improve their prospects on the job market, including online and remote work settings beyond the Palestinian borders. What is more, the Gazan students with the experience of EAST participation stood a better chance when applying for a mobility in the subsequent years⁵, which proves that the consequences of a telecollaborative project can reach far beyond the participating classrooms.

The online student meetings were devoted to discussing an engineering problem indicated as particularly pressing by the Gazan students in their region. The sample problems involved, for instance, ‘development of Arabic OCR (Optical Character Recognition) technologies’, ‘climate change adaptation and disaster risk management for a sustainable environment’, or ‘waste management’. What is important, these were genuine problems that affected real people. Being faced with a discipline-specific problem occurring in an unfamiliar context forced the students to be quite innovative and analytical in devising solutions due to the politically, economically, and socially challenging context in which Gaza finds itself. The UoG students were working together, researching that problem, trying to understand it and how it affects Palestine, whereas the IUG students served as a sounding board – they responded to the ideas and tried to direct their partners’ research and literature review. Participating in the exchange provided them with an invaluable opportunity to make their voice heard, which served as an additional motivator.

The telecollaborative component was an integral part of the five-week pre-session course and moreover was one of the threads woven into the course syllabus. It provided the basis for the research and writing project but the UK-based students had additional classes focusing on other content, knowledge, and skills. The students were expected to carry out the project mostly in their own

4. <https://www.pcbs.gov.ps/post.aspx?lang=en&ItemID=4026>

5. Due to its involvement in EAST, UoG was able to secure a total of 585,150 euro from the Erasmus International Credit Mobility Scheme, as a result of which eight Gazan students were able to undertake study at UoG in 2018 (https://www.gla.ac.uk/colleges/arts/aboutus/news/artsarchive/2018/headline_571817_cn.html).

time and they worked in groups consisting of four to six, including one or two members from Gaza. They were asked to use technologies of their preference in order to maintain contact with each other. In terms of formally set up points of contact, there was an introductory session explaining the Gazan context and the rationale for the project in Week 1, and streamed presentations and a celebratory party in Week 5. The project leaders experimented with different formats in subsequent years; for example, in Year 2 they started timetabling an afternoon in Week 1 when the students were asked to establish real time video contact with each other and were offered technical support to help them navigate video conferencing software. This was dictated by the belief that time needs to be made to help students form working relationships. In the last couple of years, some of the past students tuned into the introductory session via video conference in order to tell the students about the experience and give tips on how to overcome challenges in technology, communication, and time management. Other than those sessions, the students were responsible for maintaining contact with each other. There was also a Facebook group which was facilitated by the project leaders to help the students keep on track, outlining what should be accomplished each week. The UK-based students also shared their experiences with the local project leaders so that in case of sustained lack of contact from the Gazan partners (for various reasons, individual students did drop out each summer), some interventions could be undertaken.

3. Assessment

Customarily, the UoG pre-sessional students have to submit summatively assessed work which, if passed, would open the gates for them onto the prospective postgraduate courses. In pre-EAST times, it used to be a 1,500-word written academic report researching a discipline-specific problem selected by the student and an accompanying oral presentation on the same topic. Such tasks created better opportunities for students to think more critically and more analytically. Additionally, formative feedback provided by the teachers on the first drafts of the reports helped students finalise the task.

With the introduction of EAST, the format of the summative assessment had to remain relatively unchanged to include both oral and written student output. Again, the UK-based students were supposed to write an academic report on an engineering problem and then summarise it during an oral presentation; however, this time the specific discipline-related topic that constituted the basis of the subsequent written and oral assignment was devised by the Gazan partners. Although the UK-based students worked in groups, each member had to prepare an individual written report. Gazan students would provide mentoring and feedback when it came to the subject-specific content of the reports, especially during the initial stages of the research process. For example, the UK-based students could discuss their report outlines as well as parts of the first drafts with their IUG colleagues but those discussions were concerned with the content, for example, whether a proposed solution was feasible in the Gazan context. The writing students also received formative feedback from their ESAP teachers at UoG which focused more on the language, academic style, and organisation.

There was still a presentation at the end of the course but, unlike before, it was delivered in groups, including the Gazan partner who was responsible for outlining the background to the scenario. Because of the involvement of the overseas partners, the presentations were streamed first via video conference software and then via Facebook in order to allow both parties to meet in real time. Apart from contributing to the presentation, the Gazan students would also ask questions and provide comments on the feasibility of the solutions suggested by their Glasgow-based colleagues.

As the course was taught and assessed by ESAP teachers, the assessment criteria were predominately language-oriented, e.g. language use, style, and appropriateness. As regards the content and form, the teachers also paid attention to task achievement, organisation and the use of sources, and interaction with the audience during presentations. They provided formative and summative feedback via a bespoke feedback form with the criteria listed and descriptive grades: needs work, on track, strong. This was because there was also coursework taken into account when awarding the final grade and we did not want the students to falsely believe that the grade for the presentation is the final grade for speaking,

for example. The feedback form featured a box for a commentary too, in which the marker could provide more detail about what is being done well and what could be improved. There was a strong push for developmental feedback and feedforward. Each year the project leaders offered standardisation sessions to ensure parity in the feedback provided as well as fairness in grading.

For the Gazan partners, the assessment design was different and closely related to the role that they were taking on during the telecollaborative exchange as well as their unique context. Their main task was to devise a highly contextualised scenario related to SET, which included an overview of the local problem as well as the presentation of the political, economic, social and environmental issues in the region, and provide constructive content-related feedback to their partners in the UK. In other words, their role was to act as mentors or e-tutors, which was different from telecollaboration based on equal partnering and was deemed more likely to result in effective peer exchanges.

With this mentoring role in mind, the UoG designed a constructive feedback course⁶ which focused on the knowledge and skills that are prerequisite for the mentoring role, such as giving effective feedback that is specific, timely, developmental, and polite. As part of that course, the Gazan students discussed the significance and principles of constructive feedback and after evaluating samples of feedback, they applied the knowledge and skills by writing up formative feedback on a sample of writing, on which they then received formative feedback from the project leaders (for details cf. [Guariento, Rolińska, & Al-Masri, 2018](#); [Rolińska & Guariento, 2017](#)). This was not only to help them develop their understanding of their role and support their Glasgow-based counterparts efficiently and effectively, but it was also meant to help them develop a number of soft skills, such as teamwork, communication, problem solving, etc. to strengthen their position when applying for online and/or international jobs and, in the long turn, address the issue of youth unemployment on the domestic market within Gaza. Based on the feedback from the participating students, the constructive feedback course was effective and let the Gazan students develop

6. The course is an open-access resource under CC licence accessible at <https://goo.gl/ifxdh7>.

a number of skills. Self-selected individuals wrote reflections on the topic, with one of them providing an elaborate analysis of how the mentoring training and experience during the EAST allowed her to hone in on her teaching skills (see [Rolińska, Guariento, Abouda, & Nakprada, 2020](#) for details).

But at the end of the day, it has to be pointed out, the project leaders were unable to offer any assessment procedure that would give the Gazan students what the UK partners were getting – an open door to the next step of study or at least some form of validation of their learning. In one of the iterations of the project, in 2016, thanks to the ELTRA (English Language Teaching Research Awards) funding from the British Council, teaching assistants from the relevant graduate school were hired to provide content feedback on presentations and short reports delivered by Gazan students. However, without the funding from an external body, there were insufficient resources to repeat this in the subsequent years. Also for reasons related to quality assurance, the project leaders were not even able to offer an official certificate of project completion – instead an informal certificate of participation was sent to the Gazan students by post.

4. Conclusions and lessons learnt

In regard to the quality of student engagement and outputs, the project leaders' observations seemed to be pointing to analytically stronger assignments, which translated into higher final grades, as compared to the results obtained by students in earlier courses before telecollaboration had been introduced. The telecollaborative component could have been a contributing factor – some students reported on feeling more motivated to read more widely and think more deeply as they were dealing with genuine problems. The same stood for the presentation which in the previous years had had to be delivered individually, whereas with the EAST project it was a group effort. Because of the collaborative aspect, apart from the content knowledge, the students were getting more informal opportunities for practising spoken English, as well as teamwork, task and time management, negotiating, problem solving, and a wealth of other soft skills, which are all competencies and attributes

sought after by prospective employers. The results of a student survey conducted after the completion of the EAST project indicate that the students found this experience as “particularly gratifying in terms of general academic development and cross-cultural awareness, but also clear as regards problem-solving and teamwork” (Rolińska, Guariento, & Al-Masri, 2017, p. 35). Even though the UK-based students worked on solving the same problem in groups, their individual reports and presentations offered different insights, depending on each student’s field of expertise – a computer scientist and a statistician naturally would have a different take on the problem of devising Arabic OCR software and would look into different solutions.

In summary, despite an increased workload due to logistics of the project, e.g. having to stay in touch with partners in Gaza, organising group work, and looking for sources in English on under-researched topics, the telecollaborative exchange proved to be a success. This was mainly because the pre-sessional students from the UoG were tasked with researching an authentic SET problem, which went ‘beyond the textbook’, as one student articulated the benefit of being involved in the project in the post-project survey. In other words, from the students’ point of view, EAST meant an enriched syllabus involving content-based discussions and assessment design which catered for *assessment OF learning* but also and more importantly *assessment FOR learning*. This enrichment was possible due to the fact that the students received formative feedback on their written reports from their ESAP teachers (to ensure they were developing their language skills, and they were fairly graded at the end of the course) as well as their Gazan mentors (to warrant that the solutions and responses they offered in their reports were relevant and realistic).

The imbalance in the assessment procedures in the partner institutions resulted in unequal commitment and involvement on the part of some students. The participation of the Gazan students in the EAST project was voluntary and based on good will, particularly as the project took place during a summer holiday time. Some of the students from the partnering institution were participating less actively or even dropped out half way through the project and that was factored into the project design. Different assessment and feedback mechanisms were

interwoven into the project in response to differing needs of the partners and, unfortunately, also reflecting the context and the imbalance of power between the Global South and North (please refer to further reading for more detail, especially [Guariento, 2020](#)). Ideally, both sets of students would be getting comparable teaching and learning in the form of the learning outcomes. The project leaders envisage that a telecollaborative project between international students already on their postgraduate courses and their counterparts in other countries, with oversight from both language and content specialists for the whole cohort, and credit in recognition of the participation would be most effective. Pairing up such a credit-bearing telecollaborative course with a showcase of projects to prospective employers would be another step forward in levelling up opportunities for students from the Global South and North.

The project leaders are aware that even though the students are engaged in a task involving content subject knowledge, the assessment criteria do not necessarily promote engagement with knowledge as the language teachers sometimes do not possess adequate discipline-related expertise. It needs to be pointed out, however, that the EAST project takes place as a part of ESAP course that aims not as much at developing students' content knowledge as at preparing students to undertake a postgraduate course in English in terms of communicative skills, study skills, and subject-specific language skills that would enable the students to pursue postgraduate studies in their chosen field. The objectives of the EAST project are consonant with what the project teachers value in language education – it is more about lifelong learning and developing as a reflective learner, and becoming an analytical, critical, and creative thinker.

Recommended readings

Project website: www.easttelecollaboration.wordpress.com

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