

# Effective English Support for Overseas Students in Engineering Departments

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**Abstract:** *This paper explores the extent of the problem faced by overseas students, then goes on to describe briefly two departments' initial attempts to match those problems to new English language support mechanisms. A study in the Electronic and Electrical Engineering and Automatic Control and Systems Engineering departments at the University of Sheffield attempted to define the support needed by overseas students by:*

- *surveying overseas students' perceptions of English language support,*
- *using focus groups of overseas students to find out how they think their abilities in English affected their first year in University,*
- *consulting staff on their perceptions of overseas students' need for support with the English language.*

*The findings of the surveys, focus groups and consultations are that overseas students struggle with ordinary day-to-day tasks even before they grapple with their academic work. Academic challenges for overseas students include understanding and getting help with taught material, participating in group work, and being able to present oral and written work with an acceptable standard of English.*

*The outcomes of the study informed the choice of strategic new English language support mechanisms. Initial conclusions about the success of the new mechanisms are given in the paper, and a full evaluation of the support mechanisms put in place by the two departments will form part of a future study.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

United Kingdom (UK) University engineering courses have become increasingly dominated by non-UK students, with the numbers rising from 22% in 2002 to 30% in 2006 [EngUK, 2007]. This followed a trend in UK schools for fewer pupils to study mathematics and physics to advanced level [Royal Society, 2004]. As a consequence many UK university engineering departments have chosen to bolster student numbers by active recruitment from overseas. Many departments have found the Indian sub-continent, countries of the Pacific Rim and China to be the most ready source of such recruits [HESA, 2006]. Most recently Chinese recruits have come to dominate the overseas intake at the University of Sheffield, with China being the country of domicile for 20% of all University of Sheffield overseas students as of November 2007 [University of Sheffield, 2007].

When overseas students come from countries that were part of Britain's colonial past their ability to communicate in the English language is often good, however, students coming from other countries such as China often have considerable difficulties. This difference in abilities is apparent from the relatively high uptake of English support by Chinese students compared to students from other countries, as will be shown in this paper (figures 3 and 4).

It is clearly unreasonable for departments to admit students who do not have sufficient ability in English to cope, so the Departments of Electronic and Electrical Engineering (EEE) and Automatic Control and Systems Engineering (ACSE) at the University of Sheffield have as a condition of acceptance English test performance at IELTS (International English Language Testing System) [IELTS, 2007] of 6.5 or above: 6.5 being the minimum score deemed acceptable by IELTS for engineering courses. However, despite this precaution, lecturers are conscious that some overseas students continue to struggle because of apparently weak English ability.

Informal conversations with staff in our two departments highlight the following views: a student's IELTS (and similar) entry qualification does not always match apparent English ability on arrival; weak conversational English ability often hampers an individual's contribution to group work (including disengagement); staff sometimes struggle to converse with students finding understanding hampered in both directions; staff have observed individuals regularly real-time translating for fellow nationals during lectures; poor quality written work, clumsy sentences, confusing descriptions such that meaning is obscured in reports, dissertations and exam answers; a concern that higher incidences of detected plagiarism among overseas students may be because some students so lack confidence in their written English ability that they cannot express themselves without using someone else's words or that they simply have not understood the instructions relating to, and definitions of, plagiarism; some students have an insufficiently large vocabulary of English technical terms despite otherwise adequate English ability. Staff felt that poor ability in English hampers a significant number of otherwise able students each year.

UK Higher Education (HE) institutions have a moral obligation to support all students accepted onto their courses. In accepting non-native English speakers (who often pay substantially higher fees than home students) institutions have, the authors contend, an obligation to provide adequate language support to those individuals. Although UK HE institutions make some provision for this purpose, the authors fear that such provision is at best inadequate and at worst some non-native English speaking students are simply expected to sink or swim on their own. Determining the extent of the need and the support that will be effective is a significant challenge [Ryan and Hellmundt, 2003].

The University of Sheffield has a dedicated English Language Teaching Centre (ELTC) offering a range of English language courses to international students across the University. Students may self-register to join two general or academically focused classes per semester in such topics as reading, speaking, listening and writing. Although generic in nature, some classes offered are tailored specifically for either Arts and Humanities students or Science and Technology students, recognising the different language demands of these two discipline areas. Furthermore the ELTC offers an appointment based Writing Advisory Service (WAS) offering one to one support for students who wish to obtain advice concerning particular writing problems.

During 2006 the ELTC changed its approach. Whilst continuing with generic classes and the WAS, it also invited departments to bid for provision of specific services tailored to their own needs. This invitation was the catalyst for the authors to begin to study need and devise plans for English Language support in their own departments.

This paper discusses the problems of overseas students as perceived by University staff in section 2, the problems as perceived by overseas students in section 3, the

initial steps to solve the problems in section 4, and then reflects on the way forward in section 5.

## 2. PERCEPTIONS OF UNIVERSITY STAFF

Two surveys were performed separately in each of the two departments during April 2007, one addressed to all academic staff teaching in the department and the other to all overseas students on taught courses. This section will discuss the surveys of academic staff; section 3 will discuss the survey of overseas students.

Of approximately thirty-five relevant staff EEE, ten replied to the survey, conducted by email. The email survey of staff in ACSE attracted four responses out of eighteen relevant staff. Table 1 shows the questions and responses from the staff in the two departments.

Question	EEE Staff Response	ACSE Staff Response
1. Have you had occasion to recommend the services of the ELTC to any of your overseas students recently?	6 of the 10 responders had done so: directing both undergraduates and taught postgraduates.	2 of the 4 responders had referred postgraduates (PhD or MSc) to ELTC, and no-one had referred undergraduates.
2. Have those students used ELTC as recommended?	4 of the 10 knew that students had used the service: a mixture of undergraduates and taught postgraduates.	All who had referred students knew that these students had used the ELTC services.
3. Have you had any anecdotal feedback from students about the service?	None reported.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 'they are constantly busy, but very helpful'</li> <li>• the service was 'good'</li> <li>• engineering specific vocabulary is not catered for</li> </ul>
4. Do you think there is a significant need for English language support for students?	Unanimous 'yes'	Unanimous 'yes'
5. What sort of support do you think our students should realistically expect from a language support service such as the ELTC?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Listening, oral presentation and particularly report writing / thesis writing skills.</li> <li>• The majority felt that the most serious problems lay with ability in written English.</li> <li>• One felt that it was expecting too much for students to both study to develop their English and learn about engineering at the same time.</li> <li>• It was felt that students often were either unaware of ELTC's existence or unaware of the nature of its services.</li> <li>• The importance of getting</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ACSE staff felt that support was needed in <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ thesis correction</li> <li>○ writing skills</li> <li>○ conversation skills</li> <li>○ listening and understanding</li> </ul> </li> <li>• One staff member wondered if a local drop-in centre linking English support to the specific activities on the course would be attractive to students.</li> <li>• One staff member</li> </ul>

	<p>such support early was mentioned and also the desirability of having some form of incentive or making attendance compulsory as it was felt that students presently do not make best use of opportunities.</p>	<p>suggested that some students have insufficient English to proceed properly with their studies.</p>
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**Table 1.** Results of email survey of staff in EEE and ACSE

The answers to the questions seem to indicate that many staff were aware of ELTC’s services and indeed had recommended it to students. Staff from both departments want wide-ranging support in listening, conversation, and writing.

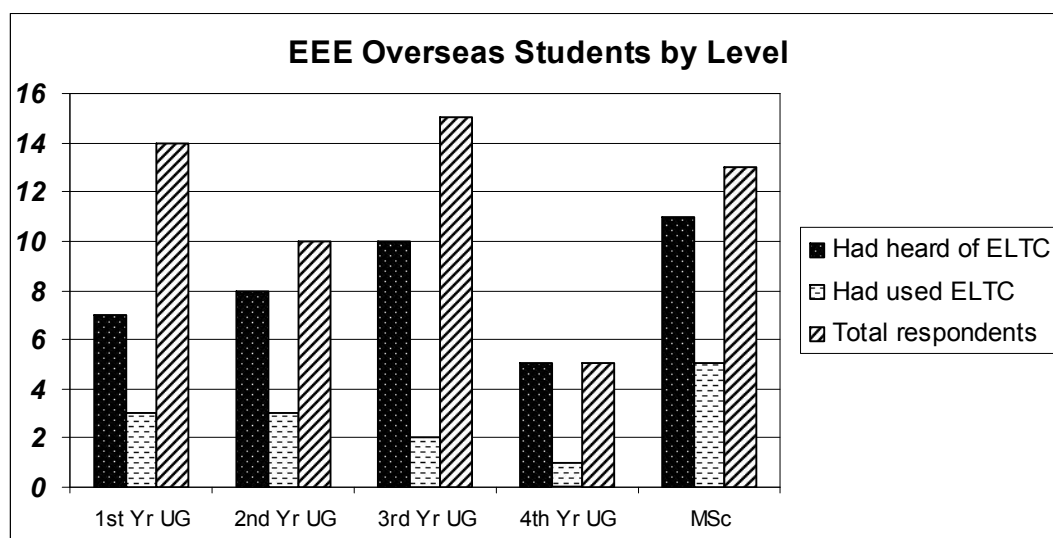
**3. PERCEPTIONS OF OVERSEAS STUDENTS**

This section will report on the perceptions of overseas students, revealed in on-line surveys and in focus group interviews.

**3.1 On-line survey of overseas students**

In April 2007, an on-line survey of all overseas undergraduates and taught postgraduates in EEE and all overseas undergraduates and postgraduates in ACSE was conducted. These overseas students were invited to respond to a web-based questionnaire about ELTC; of the 150 students invited to respond in EEE there were 57 responses; of the 70 students invited to respond in ACSE there were 25 responses.

The survey sought to discover whether or not students were aware of the English language support in ELTC, and if so, whether or not they had made use of it. Figures 1 and 2 show the level of awareness and uptake of support.



**Figure 1.** EEE student awareness and uptake of ELTC, from the April 2007 survey

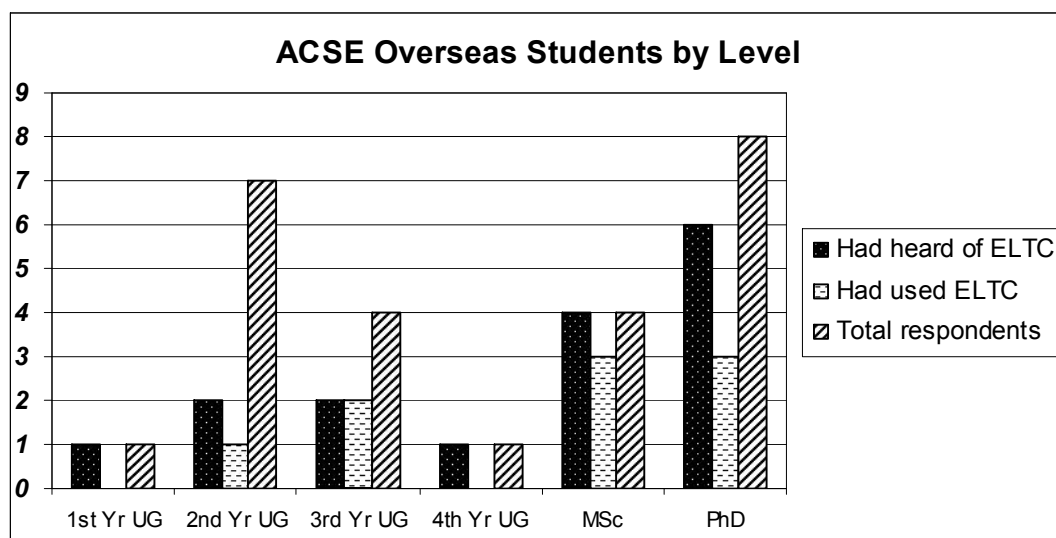


Figure 2. ACSE student awareness and uptake of ELTC, from the April 2007 survey

Table 2 shows the first languages claimed by the students surveyed in both departments, with Chinese being the largest group in both departments.

	EEE	ACSE
Chinese	18	14
Malay	12	5
Indian	16	2
African	2	
Arab	2	2
Thai		1
Vietnamese		1
Other	2	

Table 2. Table of first languages in surveyed groups

Figures 3 and 4 show the awareness and uptake of ELTC by the largest nationality groupings.

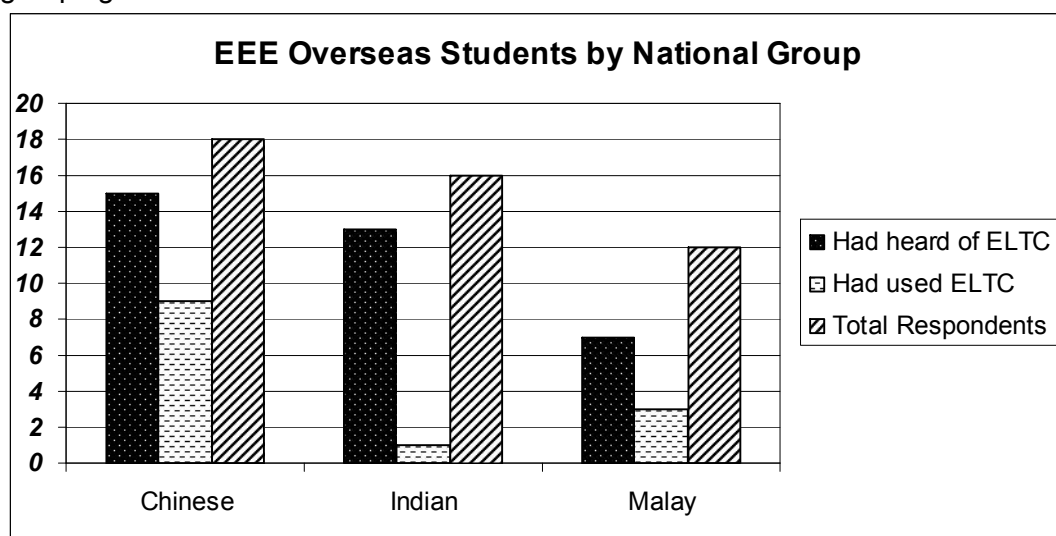
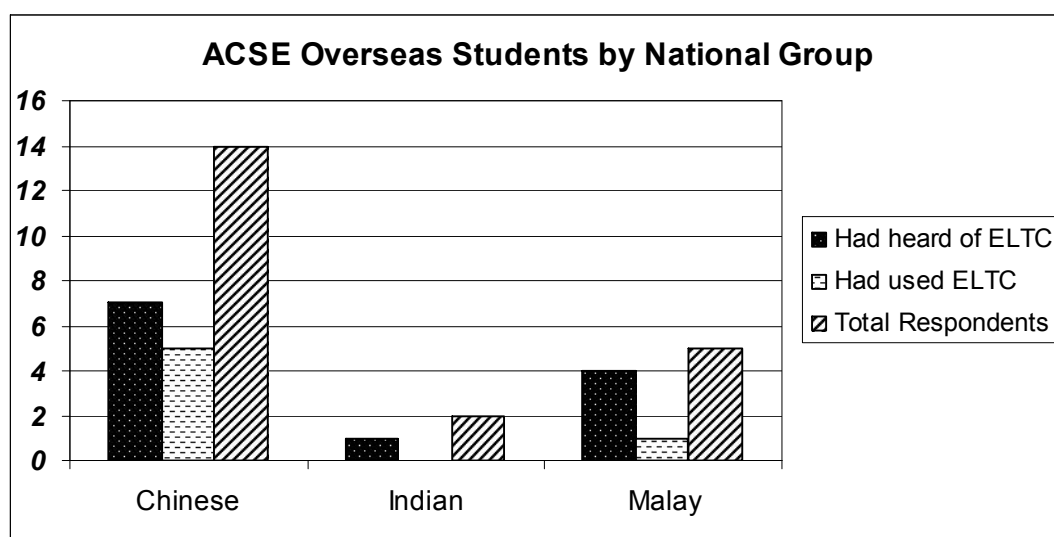


Figure 3. EEE student awareness and uptake of ELTC across the largest national groups



**Figure 4.** ACSE student awareness and uptake of ELTC across the largest national groups

The results in Figures 3 and 4 show that the proportion having heard of the ELTC is similar in each group but that the Chinese speakers have felt most need of the ELTC.

Various services had been used in both departments, including writing, reading and speaking classes and the ELTC summer school.

In EEE, of the fourteen people who used the ELTC, only three found it very useful, five found it of limited use and five found it to be of no real use at all. In ACSE, of the nine people who used the ELTC, four thought it was very useful, two found it useful but timetable conflicts made attendance difficult, and one found it not very useful. Those finding it most useful spoke of valuing support with writing and reading skills whilst speaking skills support was more often spoken of as having not met expectations.

Those finding ELTC less useful spoke of the level being too low, the pace too slow, of boredom, lack of good English speakers present to speak with, no feedback, testing or incentive to attend.

It seems from the above that generic classes lack the individual tailoring needed to meet expectations.

### 3.2 Focus group interviews of overseas students

In order to gain a better appreciation of the experience of non-native English speakers coming to study in UK HE engineering departments the authors held focus groups in their departments. Students in their second year of study were chosen as they have had one full year of UK HE experience. Invitations to participate were emailed to all second year overseas students in EEE and ACSE. An incentive was offered: a book token of value £10 paid to each participant.

The demographic mix of the groups was: EEE group – three Chinese, two Malay, one Indian; ACSE group – three Chinese, one Dubaiian, one Iranian. In the hope of encouraging the participants to talk more freely authors hosted the focus group belonging to the other author's department. Participants were shown and signed a consent form. Meetings were video-recorded and fully transcribed later.

### 3.2.1 Focus group of ACSE students

A summary of some of the key points noted is presented as follows.

#### 3.2.1.1 Where do they get help with life in Sheffield and about English?

- More than one individual spoke of the value of the media: T.V. newspapers, radio and films.
- Friends (of the same nationality) were of particular value, because they can provide advice in their own language. When asked: '...are friends a useful source of information about life in Sheffield?' one of the Chinese males said: 'I think they're most important' and the Dubaiian male said: 'I think the most important source to get information was our friends. They gave us our information in our language'. He went on to point out that information provided for students on the Web (by the University and others) was often difficult to penetrate, saying:

'... they couldn't err imagine what's going on exactly in the web site I mean where they ... give us some information we couldn't realise what's, what's that. Especially some special word, we weren't familiar with that. Maybe they aren't so unfamiliar with the British People but they are for us.'

- Friends also give practical advice on day-to-day living such as the nature and location of shopping outlets. However, one student pointed out that using friends can be over done: '...you cannot ask some people questions always like that ... what is that , what is that ...yeah too much, you can't ask too much.'
- International students from other countries were also seen as useful because of their common struggle with English and adapting to studying abroad. One of the Chinese males explained:

'...but I find it easy to talk with some foreign people like international students in the lecture or something. Um yes, it's more easy, I think it's more easy maybe err some international students, the English level is approximately same and the British people speak the more hard English we can't understand or something like that.'

So, whilst British people are seen as helpful in general, their wider vocabulary can prove a hindrance in allowing effective communication.

#### 3.2.1.2 Challenges faced

Asked about the challenges presented by arrival in a foreign country, the following points were made.

- Even simple things are a considerable challenge at first. One of the Chinese males described one of his initial difficulties as:
- 'Struggle with, err, maybe I could first go to Sainsbury, buy a sandwich ... Yeah, maybe I don't know how to, how to buy the sandwich!'
- Regional accents can also be a barrier. The Iranian male student, when speaking of the differences between accents heard in university and those in the local area said:

'...and they speaking local accent, and I, when I came to England I mean and settled down the house, I completely didn't understand what they are going, what they are saying and ah, I think I was ah living here, I was an alien from another planet because I couldn't understand anything!'

### 3.2.1.3 Cultural barriers

Conversations with colleagues have indicated that academics view non-native English speaking students living in accommodation with a mix of nationalities including native English speakers as a good thing: this should promote speedy improvements in a non-native speakers' English. All of this focus group's Chinese students spent their first year at University living in accommodation with students from a wide range of other nationalities. However they have all chosen to re-locate into accommodation with just fellow nationals, suggesting that such mixing is not entirely successful. Some related comments:

- When asked: '...did you spend much time with the people in your flat?' one Chinese male replied: 'No I think the err England, err English much more like go to like Bar or club but I don' like go there...' Then when asked: '...you would prefer to stay at home and study?' he replied: 'No, but I don' like go to there, that place ... so you will very get a lot of people in the flat and party there, or something, actually I don' like that. Too noisy!' This was one of his reasons for deciding to live with Chinese, rather than Europeans, this year.
- The other Chinese male explained why he got on better with a Spanish fellow flat member rather than with the British students:

'Um probably because we are in the same situation, we are all internationals student so we can, we have to some err common topic to talk about: so why do British students go to bar every night and err why there are so many girls dressed so they ... they're so cold, yeah something like that.'

- One of the Chinese students clearly sees cultural differences as an obstacle to communication saying: 'The thing is the background and the different culture'. Asked to say more he said:

'Yeah, when ... when I talk to some British and you can couple of topics but after that, I dunno what I'm trying to say next, I dunno what shall we talk about 'cos something, they talk about anything else but ... they talk about their own culture. That's a big problem when we're communicating with British people.'

He felt that British people only talk about soccer and also expressed confusion about British humour.

The lack of common interests, the differences in culture, especially around ways of socialising, put serious barriers between British students and some overseas students. Hence there were fewer opportunities for students to develop their conversational English skills than might have been hoped for. Despite these observations, all students indicated that they found British students essentially friendly.

### 3.2.1.4 The University's English Language Teaching Centre

The students were asked whether they had made use of any of the generic services offered by the ELTC.

- The Iranian had used ELTC generic services and found them useful, praising the teachers: '...they had some err, good teachers, very clever, I mean err very experienced. ... err they speak so clearly and completely understand what they say...' This clear speaking gave him confidence to converse, something he found he did not have in other circumstances: 'but when I speak to other people in the street I lose my confidence!' Despite contact with, and this good experience of, ELTC this student still harboured a misunderstanding that the WAS was only

available to Master of Science level students, rather than to all students wanting one-to-one advice.

- Of the two Chinese students, both of whom were aware of the service, one had not attended feeling that ‘...we have done enough in China.’ The other had only attended one session of one class: ‘I think that it’s same were as what happened in China, how to note taking and something like that.’ Clearly these two students felt that, on the basis of little evidence, the service had little new to offer them.
- The Chinese female was aware of the service, but admitted: ‘...but I’m too lazy um to go to it...’ However, a recommendation from her personal tutor changed her mind: ‘...she told me it very useful and this semester err since Wednesday, I go to English class...’ This student went on to say how valuable she now found the classes, considering the tutor to be very helpful with a clear speaking style. She felt it helped with her pronunciation and ability to communicate with others.
- The Dubaiian student was unique among this group in that he claimed not to be aware of the services ELTC provided and was encouraged to hear of them, particularly about the WAS.

### 3.2.1.5 Motivation

The students were asked about the priority they put on learning English compared to learning about their chosen technical discipline. The students considered:

- learning English to be the primary reason for being in Britain.
- English was so important because it was seen as the primary language of international business and science.
- it was particularly important to enhance their English skills by studying in a country where English is the native tongue.

### 3.2.1.6 What they say they want

Students were asked to indicate what the University might provide in terms of support.

- Assistance with report writing in particular is an area where support is desirable.
- Grammar assistance was mentioned by two students. One Chinese male explained why: ‘...because um my grammar is very poor! Err because err, might be, I don’t like the learning grammar or something! Err when I learned the grammar then I forgot it!’
- The other Chinese male student asked that he be allowed to hand his written work in for grammar checking and have his grammatical mistakes explained to him.
- Others asked for assistance with the practicalities of day-to-day life. More than one student said advice on courses and academic study was easy to come by and understand but not so advice about living in England and Sheffield.
- One student asked that overseas students be invited to a pre-week before Intro Week where such practical advice could be offered.

Students were also asked about advice they might offer to students following in their footsteps.

- One student urged his followers to check out the services offered by the ELTC.
- One of the Chinese males recommended that Chinese students needed to be brave, to persist in trying to talk to other people in English, despite their natural reserve.
- The Iranian student asked that British students receive some training in interacting with overseas students saying:  
 ‘...the department should err explain to British student, to get them a view with how they have to deal with the foreign student because in the mixed group it’s difficult to make communication err um, have a compromise or err.....They have to know, but err, if they, sometimes they don’t know how they can make a

interaction to overseas student. Sometimes it makes some difficulties for a foreign student.'

### 3.2.2 Focus group of EEE students

A summary of some of the key points noted is presented as follows.

#### 3.2.2.1 Where do they get help with English?

The group agreed that much of their help with English came from people they lived or worked with closely, with one Malaysian female saying:

'It was good because then I can understand a bit more than if I was staying just on my own because you have to be with them because you are all living with them. I mean you don't have to, if they want to go out, but you can.'

A Chinese female went on to say 'I lived with two British girls. I learned lots from them. How to spend weekends. We eat together, and maybe cook food together...'

They clearly felt they needed help with English, with a Malaysian male stating 'So what I did was I took English class, and it improved me well.' Five of the six students interviewed had taken classes from the ELTC.

#### 3.2.2.2 Challenges faced

The group struggled with accents: of local people, of lecturers and of students from a wide variety of backgrounds, a Malaysian male stating 'Because for a couple of people with their accent, especially if they are Scottish, it's very hard to understand what they say.'

They were all agreed that they had difficulties because they thought in their mother tongue, so they needed to interpret lectures into their mother tongue in order to understand them. They needed extra time to study and to do coursework because that also entailed a double translation. Also, when participating in group discussions their need to translate in and out of their mother tongue when formulating questions and answers meant that the discussion had moved on before they had finished the process. One Indian female said

'So it's very difficult when you think in your mind, to think of what to say. When they ask questions in tutorials and lectures, I have to make sentences in my mind before I can say it... and it takes time, so.... I think in my language.'

The group also struggled to understand lecturers who talk too fast or who do not speak clearly, and they found scientific vocabulary in English difficult: a Chinese male said that it was '...hard to understand the scientific words in the lectures ... I have to catch up with lectures from the handout.' This issue applied to writing and speaking, as well as listening, with lab reports particularly cited as difficult. All were shy of telling lecturers that they hadn't understood, and reluctant to ask for frequent clarification.

Social interactions were problematic as they did not understand the customs, with one Chinese male stating, 'I can remember the first time when I went to a bar I stand there for two hours and no one talked to me. I couldn't understand what they were talking about.' Also, they had problems in arrival and settling in, for example at airport customs and immigration. One Indian female said

'I remember when I came for the first time to this country, at the airport the immigration officer you know they asked me some questions I was struggling to tell him you know I'm trying to tell you this but he doesn't understand what I am saying, it was just hilarious. One hour standing at the desk.'

The English they had studied in their home country had been English as a theoretical subject; they had little chance to practice speaking English even though some of them had studied English from the age of seven. The Chinese in particular felt that in order to practice speaking English, they had to leave China.

### **3.2.2.3 What they say they want**

The group agreed that it was helpful to have mixed demographic groups when doing groupwork in classes and labs.

They felt lecturers had a responsibility to speak clearly and not too fast, and to explain things in more than one way, using diagrams/drawings to illustrate points, and using examples. One Malaysian female stated 'I think we also need more examples. I think they [the lecturers] just talk about the course. I think they need to ... I don't know... draw something... to explain it.'

The group felt that it was helpful to have printed lecture notes/handouts to supplement spoken lectures and to refer to at the time of the spoken lecture, with a Chinese male stating 'It's easier if notes printed out so we don't need to copy. It's easy to follow the notes.'

They also wanted support with writing, listening, speaking, pronunciation, and they wanted the support sessions to be timetabled at convenient times. Support classes should not be late in the evening (e.g. dinner time), or at a time when they would like to participate in sports or other activities.

### **3.2.2.4 Motivation**

For this group, learning English (language and culture) is as much a part of their long term plans as learning Engineering.

### **3.2.2.5 The University's English Language Teaching Centre**

This group had attended ELTC classes on pronunciation and speaking. They felt that the classes emphasised social English, with not enough help with Engineering vocabulary. One Malaysian female gave most credit to help with academic English to her British classmates, saying the ELTC merely taught social English: 'it's social English I think, it's not really much help for me but I think just meeting with other British people... I'm improved because in engineering class I have to meet up with British people.'

## **3.2.3 Summary of findings from focus groups**

It is clear that these overseas students face considerable hurdles in tackling ordinary day-to-day tasks even before they grapple with their technical education. Obstacles include unfamiliarity with the facilities and services that British people take for granted, exacerbated by their unfamiliarity with the language. Communication with British people is hampered by overseas students' lack of a sufficient English vocabulary and the cultural differences they see as existing between them, which in turn lead to them finding little in common to help them relate to their British student counterparts.

As group work is an important feature of higher education today, the difficulty in overseas and home students interacting effectively suggests support in this area is necessary. This difficulty in interaction also has the consequence that they do not perhaps take the opportunities we might expect them to take to develop their language skills through conversations with native English speakers.

Not all students were sufficiently well aware of the services the ELTC has to offer, suggesting a need for better and more targeted promotion. Although some of those that did have contact with ELTC appreciated the service provided, there was some general evidence of English class fatigue which supports anecdotal comments among academic colleagues that students have enough to cope with learning about their chosen technical discipline without also having to develop their English skills at the same time! The students themselves see written work, grammar skills and vocabulary as being in most need of support. This fact supports decisions made by the departments concerned to bring report writing teaching and WAS type facilities closer to the students both geographically and by offering department specific classes. It also suggests a need to promote these services more strongly.

#### **4. INITIAL STEPS TAKEN TO SOLVE THE PROBLEM**

Prompted by the opportunity to bid for services from ELTC for '07-'08 EEE and ACSE chose to request dedicated activities. In EEE:

- ELTC designed and produced an English language ability assessment administered to all incoming undergraduate and taught postgraduate students at the beginning of the academic year.
- ELTC provided dedicated class sessions giving support to the weakest of the taught postgraduate students (tackling single year MSc degrees therefore being in most urgent need) as identified by the assessment described above. These classes focused on listening, note taking and writing skills.

In ACSE,

- ELTC administered a diagnostic test in listening and writing for overseas students (mix of MSc, 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> year undergraduates) in the first week of the new academic year. Using the test results, the group was divided into two based on ability.
- ELTC delivered two concurrent weekly classes. The classes were one and one half hours long for the more needy group, and one hour long for the less needy group. The ELTC teachers were informed of the 1<sup>st</sup> year and the MSc syllabi, so were able to make reference to topics and assignments that were current at the time.

The outcome of this first semester of testing and dedicated classes has been mixed. Some overseas students who needed support did not attend the classes at all. Numbers of those who did attend tailed off towards the end of the semester, either because the students were too busy with other coursework, or because they no longer found the classes useful. Feedback from those who attended the classes indicated that although the classes were dedicated to engineering students, they did not help enough with engineering vocabulary. In addition, they said they wanted more help with academic reading and writing and more help with oral and written presentations.

At the time of writing EEE and ACSE plan a slightly more focussed approach to semester 2 English support. EEE will have taught literature review and report writing classes for MSc and final year project students, to help with dissertation writing. In addition EEE plans to strongly market an ELTC provided department specific WAS appointment system for EEE project students, again to help with dissertation writing. ACSE's more focused support for semester 2 will involve ELTC classes providing support for the material in specific core modules for 1<sup>st</sup> year undergraduates, and will offer research and writing skills classes for MSc students; in each case this support will be strongly and specifically marketed.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS AND THE WAY FORWARD

Many overseas students have significant difficulties in their University experience because of their lack of ability in the English language. At University level, concepts and experiences require a deep understanding of language and a sophisticated level of expressive ability if the students are to master and prove mastery of their subject. Perhaps universities should raise their English ability entry level thresholds even higher? Falling home student numbers make such an argument hard to sustain. If therefore universities are to depend on such students then they must do more to support them. Having admitted overseas students onto their courses, engineering departments must be aware of the nature and extent of the problems faced by these students, and then must provide effective support.

EEE and ACSE at the University of Sheffield have attempted to describe the problems faced by overseas students, and thus hope to raise awareness of these problems in their own departments as well as in the wider academic community.

EEE and ACSE at the University of Sheffield have taken initial steps in providing effective support, with a first semester of dedicated English support. The outcomes were mixed, so in the second semester the support will be made more targeted to the needs of particular student groups, and will be marketed to emphasise this new focus.

At the end of the 2007-08 academic year, perceptions of EEE and ACSE staff and overseas student uptake of ELTC services will be re-evaluated. In addition, focus groups will be run again to update EEE and ACSE understanding of the overseas student experience and to discover whether the changes made have had impact.

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