

Balancing an innovative EAP assessment cocktail with student autonomy: Booster Week/end

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Abstract: This paper explores the ways in which academic English programmes, particularly preessional courses, can help students to prepare for their departmental studies by ensuring that their course design meets the expectations of the receiving departments and exposes learners to the types of skills that they will be assessed on during their degree courses. The main component of this article is to share an innovation in which students are exposed to a single, highly intensive, student-centred activity which targets multiple competencies. It also demonstrates a range of skills, both linguistic and academic, which can be assessed through this activity. **Note:** the innovative assessment cocktail can be used on any multi-disciplinary or discipline-specific academic English preessional course.

Klíčová slova: assessment, ESAP, departmental studies, Booster Week, academic

Abstrakt: Tento příspěvek zkoumá způsoby, kterými mohou programy akademické angličtiny, zejména kurzy před zahájením studia, pomoci studentům připravit se na své oborové studium tím, že zajistí, aby osnovy jejich kurzu splňovaly očekávání zvolených kateder a seznamovaly studenty s tím typem dovedností, které budou hodnoceny během jejich diplomových kurzů. Hlavním záměrem je podělit se o inovaci, při které jsou studenti vystaveni jedné vysoce intenzivní na studenta orientované aktivitě, která má za cíl rozvíjení vícenásobných kompetencí. Demonstruje také škálu dovedností, jak lingvistických, tak akademických, které mohou být v průběhu této aktivity hodnoceny. **Poznámka:** inovativní koktejl hodnocení může být použit v jakémkoli multi-oborovém či oborově specifickém předstudijním kurzu akademické angličtiny.

Preessional Programmes

Preessional programmes were first introduced in the UK in the late 1960s (Jordan, 2002) to help international students prepare for their undergraduate (UG) and postgraduate (PG) courses. The programmes, which are offered in different lengths, take place immediately before the start of degree studies, hence the name *pre*-sessional. They are primarily attended by conditional offer holders as an alternative route of entry to university where these students have failed to achieve a relevant English language score to secure direct entrance.

Preessionals have become tremendously popular both in the UK and overseas, as they concentrate on English language aptitude *and* the study skills needed by students to succeed in their departmental studies. Most UK Higher Education institutions offer a multidisciplinary English for Academic Purposes (EAP) preessional, while some also provide discipline-related preessionals with a focus on English for *Specific Academic Purposes* (ESAP).

The BME: A Discipline-Specific Preessional

The Business Management English (BME) Programme is a discipline-specific preessional which was established at the University of Birmingham (UoB) in 2001. Initially, it accepted both UG and PG students with conditional and unconditional offers to study a business-related degree at any UK-based university. However, as the popularity of the programme grew and numbers saw a significant increase, this preessional was restricted to PG students with offers to study at the Birmingham Business School (BBS) only.

The BME is offered in four course lengths: 20, 15, 10 and 6 weeks. Enrolment is dependent on the English level of the incoming student as evidenced by their score in a UK government-approved Secure English Language Test (SELT), and, the entry requirements for their chosen degree course. What is applicable to students across all four BME courses, is their need to improve their written and spoken English, and their awareness of academic study skills and conventions.

This paper presents a highly successful innovation by the name of *Booster Week*, and its subsequent spin-off, *Booster Weekend*, both of which were introduced on the BME Programme in 2009 and ran until 2014.

Initial Inspiration behind Booster Week

November 2006 saw the start of my affiliation with the Helsinki School of Economics (now part of Aalto University) in Finland as a Visiting Professor on their BScBA Program in International Business. To date, this undergraduate course at the Mikkeli campus is delivered entirely in English, but what makes this Mikkeli course unique, is the distinctive design of its modules: rather than being taught several concurrent modules each term, as is standard practice in Bachelor's degrees across the world, students at the Mikkeli campus of Aalto University study only one module at a time, intensively, three-hours per day over a three-week period (the entire degree course is composed of fifteen three-week modules, some compulsory, while others are electives). Each module has at least one written and one spoken assessed component and is taught entirely by international Visiting Faculty (see Section 1.1 of the Aalto University Admission Guide 2015 for further information). Despite the demands and intensity of this degree programme, the pass-rates reported for this UG course since its inception evidence that the course design is highly successful. The commitment to visiting professors and focus on high achievement in their studies by the students is undoubtedly a contributory factor.

Shortly after returning to the UK from Mikkeli, I was approached to undertake the role of Acting Deputy Director of the BME Preessional Programme in 2007. During a meeting in which BBS tutor feedback on the performance (particularly

the weaknesses) of BME students once they started their degree courses was being reviewed, I shared my recent experience of teaching in Mikkeli, suggesting something similar be introduced on the BME: ideally, this would be a week-long intensive activity that could be designed to boost student skills in set areas. However, this idea was rejected as it was felt that rigorous study around a singular activity or set skills would lead to poor and short-lived results. It was in late 2008, after I became BME Director, that the idea of a *Booster Week* was revisited.

This paper provides a general overview of Booster Events: a series of presentations on different aspects of this innovation (e.g.: developing student autonomy; creating an assessment cocktail; designing authentic ESAP courses) have been delivered at both UK and international Higher Education conferences, enabling the sharing of the best practice. This has resulted in interest and enquiry by Programme Leads from a number of UK-based and European universities about how similar activities could be introduced on academic programmes at their institutions. Consequently, a form of Booster Week has successfully been introduced at universities in the Czech Republic and Switzerland.

Departmental Expectations & Challenges

Since the aim of a Booster event was to help students to develop skills which would be beneficial to their future studies, before designing the Booster tasks, it seemed logical to start by establishing what Programme Leads at the BBS expected of their students. The dialogues which were initiated formed the start of meaningful relationships with academics in receiving departments and enabled information to be obtained that would help to enhance course and curriculum design on the discipline-specific preessional. Six subject specialists were asked to start by identifying the different genres of writing and the main study skills with which they expected their students to be familiar. The results of this investigation have been summarized in Table 1 below.

Tab. 1: Key Components of [BBS] Degree Programmes

| Academic Genres of Writing | Academic Study Skills |
|--------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Essay | Analytical & critical thinking |
| Feasibility study/report | Problem-solving & decision-making |
| Literature review | Seminar & presentation skills |
| Reflective writing | Time management |
| Academic poster | Creative thinking |
| Project | Cross-cultural teamwork |
| Critical commentary | Leadership/conflict management |
| Statistical/financial analysis | Research, reading & referencing |
| Proposal | Autonomy |
| Dissertation | Listening & note-taking |

The Programme Leads were also asked to specify the area(s) in which they felt that former preessional students often struggled: their response was *identical*, and interestingly, it also applied to direct entrants: they stated that the PGs often lacked fluency and confidence in seminar activities, and, that they needed more practice in academic writing – including citation and referencing. It then became apparent how little had changed since the large-scale study conducted by Geoghegan at Cambridge University in 1983 in which *seminar skills* and *academic writing* were identified as being the two main areas of difficulty for overseas students during their first term at a UK university. These reported areas of weakness therefore became central to the two Booster events created for the BME.

Booster Week Task

It was decided that the focus of the first event would be *teamworking, seminars and presentation skills*, while the second would centre on *academic writing and referencing*. A BME Booster Week Coordinator was appointed and tasked with developing activities using the BBC’s Dragons’ Den as inspiration (see www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b006vq92). In essence, students would need to work collaboratively – and largely independently – in small pre-defined groups to agree on a new product or service to be launched in the UK. In order to support the proposed business venture and in an attempt to secure investment from venture capitalists (aka Dragons), they would need to produce the five items listed on the left in Table 2 below, through which the students would boost the skills identified in the column on the right. Note: these were intended to reflect as many of the target areas identified by BBS staff as shown earlier in Table 1.

Tab. 2: *Outputs of Booster Week & Skills Developed*

| Required Outputs of Booster Week | Skills Targeted |
|--|---|
| 1. Product Specification Leaflet | creative thinking; 4Ps business tool; writing |
| 2. Business Plan & Financial Forecast | research skills; financial analysis |
| 3. 1-Minute Promotional Video | technological aptitude; creativity |
| 4. Pitch/Presentation (no PowerPoint) | presentation skills; conflict management |
| 5. Reflective Writing Task (i.e.: PDP) | review & reflection; action planning |

In a regular week on the BME, students would have contact with staff from 09.30 to 16.30, most days of the week. They would also be expected to complete two to three hours of homework after lessons. During Booster Week, staff–student contact would end mid-morning, and as the timetable in Figure 1 below shows, a considerable amount of autonomy and independent work was required of the students. In successive years, students reported working together in their sub-groups until as late as midnight from Monday to Thursday, in order to be ready to deliver the required outputs on Friday morning.

| | Session 1 | Session 2 | Session 3 |
|-----------|---|--------------------------|-----------|
| Monday | 09.30–10.00 Booster Briefing in Lecture Theatre 10.15–11.45 Booster Class | Independent Booster Work | |
| Tuesday | 09.30–10.30 Booster Review Class | Independent Booster Work | |
| Wednesday | 09.30–10.30 Booster Review Class | Independent Booster Work | |
| Thursday | 09.30–10.30 Booster Review Class | Independent Booster Work | |
| Friday | 09.30–12.30 Booster Pitches with the BME Dragons 13.30–14.30 Booster De-Briefing | Independent Booster Work | |

Fig. 1: BME Booster Week Timetable

It is also worth highlighting here, that the BME Dragons’ Den Task was designed to prepare the 20-, 15- and 10-week students for an independent assignment which they would need to undertake immediately after Booster Week: this was the creation of a 3,000-word Feasibility Report, worth up to 30% of their final mark on the programme, in which they also had to launch a new product or service, but in a country of their choice. Students were not permitted to repeat any product/service ideas from Booster Week in this research-oriented assignment, and so it was imperative that all Booster sub-group ideas were accurately recorded in an Excel spreadsheet for cross-referencing purposes at a later stage, if necessary.

Booster Weekend Task

The second Booster event of the BME Programme was positioned to take place a few weeks before the end of the summer: the rationale behind this was, a) to allow the 6-week students to partake in the event, and b) to ensure that all students had received sufficient input and instruction through the curriculum prior to being set this intensive writing task, as they would receive little, if any, guidance and input from teaching staff during the Booster event itself to aid completion.

The Booster Weekend task¹ essentially required student groups to analyse a business case study and to demonstrate their understanding of a business tool (e.g.: SWOT, PESTEL, Porter’s Five Forces) by applying this to the given case. Their analysis would then need to be presented in the form of an A1-sized academic poster, complete with Harvard-style citations and references. Each of the 50 sub-groups across the BME Programme were given a different case study from the *Times 100 Business Case Studies* collection so as to eradicate any possibility of cross-class collusion or plagiarism.

Booster Weekend would culminate in a Booster Poster Event in which all A1-sized colour posters were displayed in an open atrium, where BME staff and students,

¹ Concept – Hasan Shikoh

plus invited guests, could view the posters and question group members about the analysis that they had undertaken. The required outputs for Booster Weekend and their corresponding skills can be seen in Table 3 below, which, again, were designed to mirror as many items as possible from Table 1.

Tab. 3: *Outputs of Booster Weekend & Skills Developed*

| Required Outputs of Booster Weekend | Skills Targeted |
|---------------------------------------|--|
| 1. Case study analysis | critical thinking; problem-solving; research |
| 2. Analysis using a business tool | decision-making; application of tools |
| 3. Academic A1-sized poster | academic writing; creativity |
| 4. Evidence of Harvard referencing | referencing & citation conventions |
| 5. Presentation (no PowerPoint) & PDP | confidence; public speaking; reflection |

Learning Objectives

Booster Week was launched on the BME Preessional in the summer of 2009. From 2009 to 2012 inclusive, the BME saw two Booster Weeks each summer: the first took place in week 12 of the 20-week course and involved the 20-, 15- and 10-week cohorts (approximately 200 students), whilst the second was held in week 17, once the 6-week groups had arrived and settled in (circa 300 students). However, as the 6-week students were already limited in terms of their contact hours/instruction in class, where week 1 of their course consisted of induction activities and week 6 their final exams, it was decided that while Booster Week was undeniably beneficial in terms of skills development, an entire week dedicated to this activity was further limiting valuable class time for the 6-week students. Therefore, it was in 2013 and 2014 that Booster Week 2 was changed to a **Booster Weekend**. The key learning objectives of the Booster Events applied largely to both events and can be seen in Figure 2 below.

Reflective Writing Tasks

At the end of their Booster events, students were required to produce a reflective assignment. In the case of Booster Week, this was an *individual* Personal Development Portfolio (PDP), while for Booster Weekend, this involved *collective* reflection in the form of a Group Role Summary. These reflective pieces of writing reinforced the theme of student autonomy and were worth 10% of the students' final mark on the BME. The learners were advised to set personal targets and action plans using Kolb's (1984) Learning Cycle as a guiding tool, as shown in Figure 3:

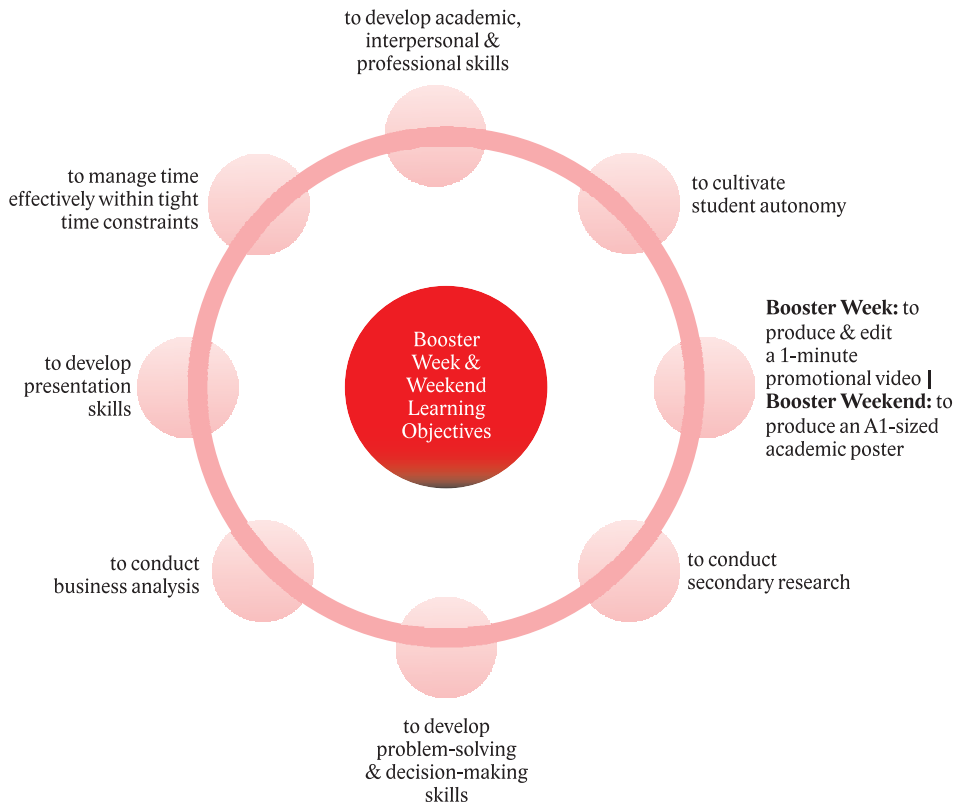


Fig. 2: Learning Objectives for Booster Events

Staff Role

As the schedule for Booster events involved a different timetable to the standard curriculum, regular classes were not taught while the events were underway. Instead, Teaching Staff were assigned the role of either Booster Lead or Booster Facilitator: each Lead had up to four Facilitators to assist with monitoring and/or trouble-shooting in the Booster Class. The BME Management Team and all Teaching Staff acted as ‘Dragons’ on Friday in Booster Week; one student was also asked to join the Panel for each pitch. All staff were involved in the Booster Poster Presentation event following Booster Weekend.

When not engaged in Booster-related activities, staff had time to mark and double-mark coursework assignments with submission dates that were set to coincide with the start of each Booster event. Additionally, during Booster Week, the practitioners were invited to share their expertise and knowledge through

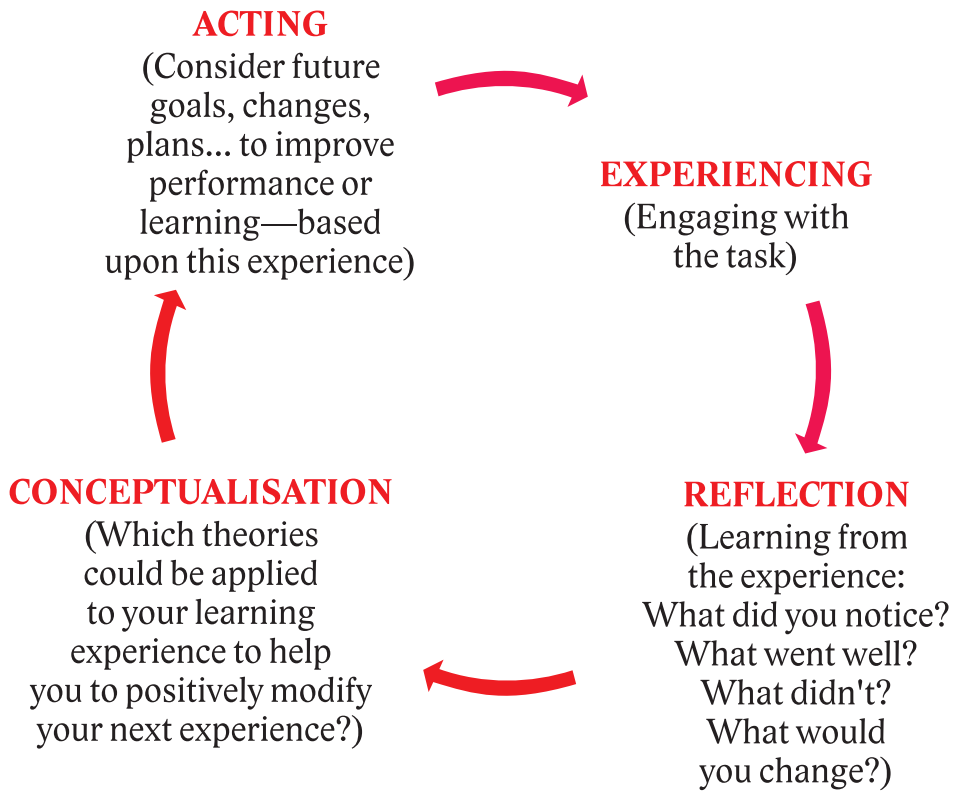


Fig. 3: Kolb's Learning Cycle (1984)

a series of Professional Development Workshops to take advantage of what was a significantly less-intensive teaching time.

Those assigned the role of Booster Coordinators² were also responsible for grouping the students; instructing the Booster Leads (i.e.: Staff) on their responsibilities regarding how to facilitate student learning during the week; and for delivering the Booster Briefing and De-Briefing in large lecture theatres with the full cohort of staff and students in attendance.

Student Grouping

In order to sufficiently challenge students to develop their interpersonal skills and overcome their inhibitions about speaking up in seminar classes – something

² Booster Week Coordinator – Dave McHale | Booster Weekend Coordinators – Alice May & Calum Lambie

central to degree-level studies, students were taken out of their comfort zone and re-grouped for Booster events. The division of approximately 200 BME students in Booster Week was done by creating six large Booster Classes, each containing between 30–36 students, further sub-divided into five to six sub-groups of six students from different BME groups/cohorts. In Booster Weekend, these numbers increased to 300 students with ten Booster Classes.

Each sub-group (a total of approximately 30 for Booster Week, and 50 for Booster Weekend) was given only one folder containing their task: this necessitated immediate communication with group members at the onset so as to share information about the set tasks. Students were expected to elect a Leader, and identify other roles to ensure that the tasks could be completed through a team effort, by the set deadline. They were also responsible for managing any conflict or other problems that arose during their temporary grouping.

Briefings & De-Briefings

On Monday morning of Booster Week and Friday morning of Booster Weekend, all staff and students were required to attend a 30-minute Briefing. The purpose of these Briefings was to inform students of the Booster learning objectives and to advise them that they were about to embark on a heavily student-centred activity through which they would need to develop a multitude of skills. The Booster Coordinator(s) would then instruct students, a few rows at a time, to locate their name on lists displayed in alphabetical order around the lecture theatre, detailing their class name and room number. The students were given 15 minutes to find their Booster classroom where they would meet their new classmates and Booster Staff.

A 60-minute De-Briefing was then held on the afternoon of Friday in Booster Week, and Tuesday* for Booster Weekend (*the first day back after the UK August Bank Holiday weekend). During these sessions, the Coordinator(s) would encourage a series of reflective activities, before prompting the students to share what they had learnt about themselves and one another during their Booster event. In the Booster Weekend De-Briefing, all participants were given Personal Response Systems (or clickers) as they entered the lecture theatre: they were asked to use these to vote for the best academic poster, against set criteria, when they were displayed again – this time electronically – through a slideshow towards the end of the De-Briefing session. Prizes were then awarded for the position of 1st, 2nd and 3rd.

Staff & Student Feedback

In their anonymous mid-course and course-end evaluations, staff and students on the BME were asked to evaluate Booster Events in terms of their organization,

usefulness and success – or otherwise. The questions posed to them took the form of Yes/No answers; Likert scale responses and free comments. From 2009 to 2014, a total of 1,492 BME students were questioned, and more than 96% voted favourably when evaluating Booster Week/Weekend. Students typically reported having developed a vast array of skills together with a deeper understanding of their personal strengths and weaknesses. They commented on how they had learnt to manage time and to work to tight deadlines. They also fondly recalled having formed new friendships, and in some cases, having developed conflict management skills. Equally, the vast majority also remarked on the immense work involved in successfully completing the Booster tasks, and the fatigue associated with this.

What was perhaps most encouraging about these events in terms of feedback, was when students *voluntarily* mentioned their Booster experiences in a positive light when asked to complete a BME Reunion Questionnaire after their first term at the BBS. Many students stated that the Booster Tasks had thoroughly prepared them for activities that they had been set in their degree courses which also required independent and autonomous work, and how they had met these challenges with a degree of confidence due to having experienced BME Boosters.

Concluding Comments

Whilst the purpose of preessional courses is undeniably to provide students with guided learning and instruction that will prepare them for their departmental studies, it is also fair to say that it is the responsibility of ESP/EAP practitioners to ensure that they enable their students to develop autonomy. In 2002, Jordan reported that “...the majority [of preessional students] would suffer some disappointment and frustration as their expectations would not match the reality of their [future] study situations...” (p. 74). This is largely because during their preparatory preessional courses, they become accustomed to individualized support; detailed feedback and correction of grammatical mistakes; and being a part of a close-knit student community with highly supportive staff. This rarely equates to the realities of PG study at degree level, and so, to some extent, E(S)AP courses can create false expectations of integration and future success. The aim of the Booster innovations was to give students highly intensive, autonomous training in English and study skills which could be transferred to their departmental studies.

In general, irrespective of their cultural background or learning style, most students respond well to challenging, autonomous tasks. Those lacking confidence or prior exposure to student-centred learning can be set group-based Booster activities with minimal teacher input to provide them with the security and scaffolding they need before embarking on fully independent tasks. Students on the BME Programme repeatedly rose to the challenges they had been set in order to achieve the high standards expected of them. Mini Booster &/or autonomous

activities at frequent intervals of the curriculum together with regular reflective assignments can offer an effective way of encouraging students to take ownership of their learning.

Finally, to see examples of Booster work produced by BME students, please visit <https://vimeo.com/50249887> [promotional 1-minute videos to launch a new product or service] and <https://vimeo.com/64725928> [academic posters analysing a business case study].

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Bionote

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