Creative Language Development Report

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CLD 1 – The End of the Day

Introduction:

The Creative Language Development (CLD) workshops are a SLAS initiative aimed at addressing some of the English language needs of non-native speakers at the University of Kent. The goal is to deliver creative and innovative ways to help students engage with English in less formal and original contexts.

The first CLD day was advertised to all international students, although the target audience was mainly post-graduates. The original intention was to run a ‘stand-alone’ pilot event consisting of three workshops delivered over a single day and which would include a shared lunch. However, the success of the first session led to many requests for a follow-up.

One criterion of the course design was that the workshops should not impact on the students’ wider academic programme. The aim was to devise a language development provision which did not involve any pre-course preparation on the part of the students, such as that required by a traditional seminar, and that it should generate no additional study commitments. It was also intended to deliver to small groups, 10 students or less, in order to facilitate a communicative approach to learning with particular emphasis placed on the productive language skill of speaking. This was to be achieved through discussion, pair work and reading aloud. However, because speaking skills do not exist in isolation from other aspects of language acquisition, the underlying aim of the CLD
workshops is to enable students to become increasingly independent in all aspects of their academic work, as writers, listeners, readers and researchers.

The content of the course was drawn from a variety of areas and includes music, drama, literature and the wider media. Each workshop incorporates opportunities for debate as a means of developing presentation and listening skills as well as building vocabulary.

One of the aims was to allow students to move out of the formal setting of the classroom and into wider environs of the campus. The use of the labyrinth was intended to facilitate this.

**Timing and Delivery:**

The workshops were intended to offer a provision for international students during recognised ‘quiet periods’ outside of term time. However, after the resounding success of the first session it was decided to run a repeat of this to allow a different cohort of students to attend. From these two ‘pilot’ groups, a stage two group was formed from those wishing to attend additional workshops organised along the same lines. These two days were followed by a half day ‘stage three’ in order to facilitate a ‘closure’ of the work started in the preceding sessions. Attendance figures for all sessions are shown in Table 1 below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>CLD Stage</th>
<th>Number of Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>30th April</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd June</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11th June</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25th June</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total new</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>19</strong></td>
</tr>
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</table>

Table 1. Attendance at CLD workshops.

N.B. All but one student attending workshop 3 had attended workshops 1 & 2.

**Content:**

The first day began with a Q&A interview (from the Guardian) with a famous singer. Students read the questions and one of the teachers answered in the role of the singer. This gave every student the chance to read aloud and raise questions regarding unfamiliar vocabulary, which was discussed and noted on the board. The students then listened to a piece of music by the same artist, a lyric sheet was provided, and there followed a discussion regarding content and meaning.

Next, the students went outside to walk the labyrinth. Fortunately the weather was beautiful. The sun was shining warmly, the birds were singing and there was not a breath of wind. It genuinely felt like the first day of spring.

While the students waited for their turn to walk the labyrinth, they sat on picnic blankets and worked in pairs, interviewing each other using a selection of questions based on the Guardian interview with which they were now familiar. The students were given a brief overview of the history and purpose of the labyrinth and then they walked the path. Their responses to their ‘journeys’ were extremely positive.

The group then returned to the UELT Seminar Room where students and staff shared lunch.

In the afternoon the group read most of act one of Animal Farm which had been adapted into a play. Each student had at least one role. This practised skills of reading aloud, following text, vocabulary
building and, in particular, pronunciation. It generated many questions about vocabulary as well as a good deal of laughter.

The aim of the workshops was to offer students a different approach to learning and developing their English skills. It was also hoped that students would enjoy themselves and build their confidence in using spoken English.

At the end of each day, feedback was provided by the students. We did not use a lengthy evaluation form or one which relied on tick boxes to quantify their opinions, but simply asked them what they had expected of the day, what they had actually experienced and how the workshops might be improved. The feedback was comprehensive and complimentary, with the following areas emphasised and repeated by many students.

1. **Improved reading skills**

Many students remarked on how the exercises during the workshops had improved their skills and confidence in reading. Reading is a key skill at university and many international students struggle with the volume of reading that is expected of them. In SLAS, international students often request help with improving their reading speed.

The skills needed for reading aloud differ substantially from those used in silent reading, particularly for non-native speakers. This is especially true with regard to pronunciation. Reading aloud highlighted issues that many of the students had with pronunciation and fluency. Furthermore, the use of a script meant that students were obliged to use words that they may have otherwise avoided or might have found confusing. They all welcomed feedback on their pronunciation.

“It enhanced my fast reading skills and pronunciation”

“Reading loudly technique really helps to improve the reading skills and pronunciation & I start use it with myself especially when there is difficult words.”

2. **Building Vocabulary**

A significant element of fluent reading is vocabulary knowledge. Many international students find that they can spend hours looking up the exact meaning of many hundreds of words per text. The exercises during the day included the incidental learning of new vocabulary and opportunities were created for its revision and practice. Idiomatic expressions were clarified and the students began to use some of these with immediate effect.

“I learnt new words and how to use them perfectly”

3. **Building confidence**

Lecturers and international students themselves often remark that it is difficult for students who are not native speakers of English to fully participate in seminar discussions; this is often due to a lack of self-confidence in speaking English. The activities of the day ensured that all students had the opportunity to speak with each other, with tutors and in front of the class. This was done in a supportive atmosphere so students did not feel intimidated.

This increase in confidence manifested itself during the second and third CLD sessions with the students’ willingness to ask questions relating to their wider studies, such as how to improve their research strategies and their presentation skills. They commented that they had found it difficult to address these concerns in their subject seminar groups.
“I found the new way is more funny, interesting and beautiful. I prefer this way it is so encouraging and improve our self-confidence.”

4. Cultural and social learning

International students often report that they are disappointed by the lack of integration that is readily available to them to meet and talk with others in English. On a large campus, students often stick closely to their national group because of the ease of speaking together. However they often say that they would like more facilitated opportunities to mix outside of their national groups. Many students share accommodation with non-native speakers. As a consequence, opportunities to develop their English in conversation with native speakers are somewhat limited. This can be a source of surprise and frustration for international students.

The fact that this event took place over 3 sessions and included time outside the classroom as well as shared meals meant that students could mix with people outside of their usual social groups. This was encouraged by the teachers who made sure that students did not partner with others of the same nationality and also promoted a friendly environment.

“I’ve found that English is my excuse to get to know the world it is the perfect motivation to open my mind and understand the English and global culture”

“Gathering students from different areas is fascinating... it brings different culture and expands the view of learning.”

“I had fun, merged with new people, had the opportunity to learn about cultures... the healing powers of a labyrinth and the chance to connect with the English language in a different and creative way.”

“Meet with new people; I have not done that since I came to the UK.”

“Thanks to this experience I could get to know some international students that share the same language concerns and that are willing to break the barriers of language to create a learning and cultural environment.”

5. Enjoyment of the material

One of the concerns when planning the day was which material to use. There was no intention to use any formal English language textbook or any other conventional language learning techniques such as grammar games or traditional vocabulary building exercises. The activities were chosen because of their intrinsic quality and universal interest. This was a very successful element of the day and all students responded well to the variety of activities and the changes in location for each part of the session.

“Being part of a real play and making a role was fantastic”

“Animal farm is much more interesting than an English textbook”

“It is a good course which I have ever attended before for language learning. I do not feel boring and sleepy during the course which I always feel in other language courses.”

“Animal Farm reading was awesome.”

6. Teacher’s enthusiasm

A further element of the day which many students commented on was the enthusiasm and personality of the teachers. This seems to be a key factor in students’ engagement and challenges
some of the current thinking that much of what teachers do can be replaced by technology. The human contact and interactions were crucial on the day. For example Wenger (2014) identifies the importance of teachers making themselves visible as human beings in their teaching.

“The teachers were enthusiastic and passionate”

“The tutors were very friendly and I never felt afraid to speak or ask questions.”

“It was the most enjoyed workshop I have ever attended at this university.”

“The teacher was very well known in his vocabulary skills.”

7. Introduction to New Concepts

The Canterbury campus includes one of the few permanent labyrinths to be found at a U.K. university. The use of this facility in the first sessions of the CLD programme encouraged students to engage with language in a creative and original way. It provided them with new linguistic frameworks aimed at self-expression and personal reflection. It also served to raise awareness of the existence of the labyrinth as a facility available to all students.

“I learned new things... although I lived on campus, I did not know the labyrinth.”

“I picked up the fact that in life’s journey, there are many people on similar paths – but there is room enough for everyone.”

“I had... the chance to connect with the English language in a different and creative way.”

Follow-up Contact

After each CLD session, a list of the new vocabulary identified in the session, including word classification and definitions, was forwarded to the students in table form. (See Table 2) The aim was to provide students with a formalised framework within which they could place language learnt in the less formal setting of the CLD sessions. Students were encouraged to memorise, articulate and use the vocabulary from each session in order to nurture their language skills beyond the textbook context.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>debut</th>
<th>noun</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a first public appearance on a stage, on television, etc.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the first appearance of something, as a new product.</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>trait</th>
<th>noun</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a distinguishing characteristic or quality, especially of one’s personal nature: bad traits of character.</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>rhubarb</th>
<th>noun</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>any of several plants belonging to the genus Rheum, of the buckwheat family, having edible leafstalks.</td>
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</table>

Table 2. Extract from the vocabulary table sent to students after the workshops

Conclusion

Overall the workshops have been a great success. Students not only increased their confidence in using English, they also enjoyed themselves and requested and returned for further sessions. From the point of view of SLAS, this kind of enhancement activity is extremely productive as it develops students’ skills and gives them a positive attitude to learning as well as making them aware of the Student Learning Advisory Service. None of the 19 students who attended the CLD programme had previously requested 1:1 advice sessions and many of them had not been aware of SLAS. However, since the CLD workshops, 4 students, 20% of attendees, have made use of this facility.
It was noted by the students that the mix of participants, with regard to gender, nationality and course background, was part of the strength of the workshops. Therefore, when developing and promoting this work these elements should be borne in mind.

**Recommendations**

To begin each workshop by revisiting the vocabulary lists from the preceding session. This will consolidate new language whilst creating a more gradual introduction to the session to accommodate any late-comers.

The reading aloud aspect was a successful part of the workshops but it might be preferable to incorporate shorter stories that can be read in a single session. The play version of *Animal Farm* was an excellent resource, but it is quite a lengthy undertaking for non-native speakers. However, it does not have to be read in its entirety and can be used to facilitate additional language work.

There is always a temptation to return to the familiar ground of formal English language tuition. Nevertheless, in order to maintain a sense of originality, the CLD workshops should continue their emphasis on the creative aspects of language learning in order to avoid becoming a repetition of programmes available elsewhere.

Students at the end of CLD 3
Appendix 1

Extracts from Student Feedback

Thank you for the wonderful day.

Today I definitely had a good time.

An engaging session where everyone participated.

It’s a very interesting and unique experience to study English and I find it more joyful than the others.

I felt so welcomed and respected.

I’ve never had experience similar to this and I am now totally in this.

Before I came to the programme, I thought it would be face-to face conversations between students and native speakers. When I arrived I found out that this programme was more than conversations. It also includes a field trip and role playing and story-telling. I think learning from native speakers is crucial to English learning.

It was enjoyable and make you feel free to ask any kind of question.

I would like to stress out, the members of stuff of the CLD were very helpful towards my academic concerns and dealt with them in a manner that impacted effectively.

Reading loudly technique really helps to improve the reading skills and pronunciation & I start use it with myself especially when there is difficult words.

The next time, could you please tea/coffee and some biscuits opportunities! 😊