

Review research paper

## INCORPORATING CRUCIAL TRANSFERRABLE LIFE-LONG SKILLS IN AN UNDERGRADUATE ADVANCED ENGLISH COURSE AT SOUTH EAST EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY

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**Abstract.** *This paper gives an insight into the practical experience of designing and implementing an Advanced English course offered to first year undergraduate students from all Faculties at South East European University which included a research project as a grading component and resulted in an undergraduate student mock conference. It elaborates on the rationale behind the need for incorporating crucial, transferable, life-long skills that students can put to an immediate use during their undergraduate studies, but also skills they can use long after graduating and leaving SEEU. The paper also offers a detailed account of the practical day-to-day challenges faced by both language teachers and students. The peer- and self-evaluation completed at the end of the course reveal overlooked issues that require more attention, modifications and adaptations in the future.*

*Along the way students were made aware of the importance of choosing the most appropriate research method, meticulously citing every source used, distinguishing between editing (as a process that begins as soon as one starts writing) and proofreading (as the activity left for the very end of the writing process when one double or even triple checks that everything is the way it should be before the research report is handed in), and avoiding plagiarism by summarising, paraphrasing and quoting. The Academic skills and research conference offered students practice in giving a well-structured presentation, whereas the follow-up self-evaluation helped them identify areas of possible improvements.*

*Hopefully, thanks to this long and challenging, but also rewarding process, when asked to conduct research on a certain issue, present the results, draw conclusions and recommend a possible course of action or offer possible solutions, the students' immediate reaction will be: "A-ha, No problem! Been there-done that! I know exactly what I am supposed to do, and I know how to do it!"*

**Key words:** *Advanced English, research, transferrable skills, SEEU*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

This paper gives an insight into the practical experience of designing and implementing an Advanced English course offered to first year undergraduate students from all Faculties at South East European University in the summer semester of the academic year 2022. The

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course included a group research project as a grading component and resulted in an undergraduate student mock conference. It elaborates on the rationale behind the need for incorporating core, crucial, transferable, life-long academic skills in an otherwise General English course, skills that students can put to an immediate use during their undergraduate studies, but also skills they can use long after graduating and leaving SEEU. The paper also offers a detailed account of the practical day-to-day challenges faced by both language teachers and students. The peer- and self-evaluation completed at the end of the course reveal overlooked issues that require more attention, modifications and adaptations in the future.

## 2. ADVANCED ENGLISH COURSE SPECIFICS

Generations change, consequently we enrol undergraduate students with high proficiency level of general English, but with a grave lack of academic skills, sadly enough not only in English but in their mother tongues as well. “Graduate recruiters nowadays look for oral communication, teamwork, self-management, problem solving, leadership, etc.” (Marjanovikj-Apostolovski, 2017, p.495) which imposes the necessity for development of a variety of generic, transferrable, life-long skills in Higher education. This calls for re-examination of teaching resources and discovery of new options for engaging students (Kirovska-Simjanoska, 2022).

At the very beginning, during the Advanced English course design and creation process, the leading idea, except for improving students’ overall English proficiency, was to ensure that upon successful completion of the course the students are equipped with crucial, transferrable, life-long skills that they can put to an immediate use during their undergraduate studies, but also skills they can take with them and use long after graduating and leaving SEEU. The main idea behind this course was to ensure that when put in a similar situation - may it be while working on their next seminar paper, answering an essay like exam question, presenting and defending their MA or PhD thesis, or once they get employed - the students would know how to narrow down a broader issue to a specific question, would be able to choose the most appropriate research method, would remember to meticulously note down every single source they have used, that they would remember that editing and proofreading go hand in hand with writing, and last but not least, would develop the habit of never, ever “lifting” other people’s ideas and work and present it as theirs! One of the objectives was to help students develop the habit of using other people’s work only after summarising, paraphrasing and quoting it. Since being able to effectively present the results of a research is as important as doing the research properly, developing effective presentation skills was also included as an inevitable element of this course.

The Academic English Course is a General English course offered to first-year undergraduate students enrolled at different study programs from all faculties at the South East European University whose proficiency level according to the European Framework of Reference for Languages is upper-intermediate and above. It is a one-semester course offered in the summer semester after students have completed a General English course in the winter semester. This Advanced English course was initially offered in the summer semester 2020, when due to the corona outbreak, the final, end product was a poster presentation from students. When the course was offered for the second time in the summer semester 2022, it was taken a level up, and apart from creating posters students were also

asked to prepare a PowerPoint Presentation and give an oral presentation at a mock student conference.

Two parallel but intertwined tracks are incorporated in this course. On one hand it is a General English C1, C1+ course for which the coursebook “*Pioneer*” C1/C1+ by MM Publishing (2017) was used, and a final exam was administered at the end. On the other hand, track 2 of this course is a semester long group Research Project with four outcomes: writing and submitting a research paper, creating a poster presentation, a PowerPoint Presentation and presenting at a student conference.

There were four classes per week or two meetings on weekly basis, one devoted to working with the book and the other focusing on the research project. Students were graded based on the following criteria:

- 30% Final exam (testing reading, grammar and vocabulary presented in the coursebook);
- 10% Debate/Discussion Forum (Think like a researcher!);
- 20% Google Classroom Assignments (summarising, paraphrasing, opinion essay writing and essay summarising two texts);
- 10% Attendance and Active Participation;
- 30% Group Research Project.

As part of the General English track of the course, the main focus was on put on:

- Vocabulary building (mainly through word formation & derivation using prefixes and suffixes);
- Grammar (more refined, context specific forms were introduced and practised, such as mixed conditional, alternative phrases to modal verbs, emphatic forms, unreal past, causative form, etc.);
- Reading (for gist and for detail, appropriate time management);
- Writing (with main focus on writing an opinion essay, essay summarising two texts, essay in which different sources are paraphrased, summarised and quoted).

All these elements covered in the General English track fed directly into Track 2 – the research project. All in all, the General English track of the course equipped students with practical test-taking strategies which is very important since many undergraduate students continue their MA studies abroad for which an official, standardised proficiency test, such as TOEFL or IELTS, is required.

The rest of the paper shall focus more closely on Track 2, the group research project and elaborate on the three main stages of it.

### 3. GROUP RESEARCH PROJECT

The research project was a group semester-long assignment and a compulsory grading component consisting of three main stages: the pre-conference stage whose main outcome was submitting a written group research paper, the mock student conference stage with three separate outcomes (poster, PPP and an oral presentation) and the post-conference stage during which students were asked to self- and peer- evaluate their learning experience. Using Google Classroom as a learning management tool made all this possible, enabling students to work together at a distance and cooperate out of class but also helping me as a teacher monitor, track and fairly assess students’ work.

### 3.1. Pre-conference stage

At the very beginning of the course students were put in groups and were asked to distribute the work load by deciding which part of the research paper they would like to work on. Group work of course has its own advantages and drawbacks. On the plus side students get to learn from each other, which promotes autonomous learning, encourages communication, enables students to practice speaking, debating, so on and so forth, and in the end divide the otherwise overwhelming workload. However, on the minus side, it is almost impossible to equally distribute the workload and make sure everyone does their part. On top of that there is the issue of regular class attendance and meeting specified deadlines.

Once the groups were formed and individual tasks assigned within the groups themselves, the very first assignment was to come up with a broad topic of shared interest and describe a problem within it, more precisely specify a still unknown and unresolved issue which requires for an investigation be conducted. Having agreed upon an umbrella topic with aspects worth investigating about, groups were instructed to brainstorm as many different questions as possible, draft a primary research question, and after a group discussion finalise and report the research question. Having formulated the research question, the students were introduced to various research methods (qualitative and quantitative) and were assisted in selecting the most appropriate data collection instrument (questionnaires, interviews, focus group, etc.) for their research question. Throughout the whole process of conducting the primary or field research, and the secondary or desk research on the research question specified, the students were encouraged to develop the habit of meticulously noting down every single source used. The students were then guided, assisted and monitored in processing the data collected and drawing conclusions, recommending solutions and proposing a possible course of action. They also practised editing from the very first draft of the research paper, as well as proofreading at the final stage of the report writing process. Paraphrasing, summarising, quoting and citing sources were also practised along the way as the best way to avoid plagiarism and intentionally or out of ignorance present other people's work as theirs. Alongside the research, students were also introduced to techniques for giving well-structured informative and persuasive speeches by employing appropriate opening techniques in order to grab the audience attention, closing techniques which nicely wrap up the speech and leave the audience with some food for thought, discourse markers which guide the listeners and help them navigate through the content of the speech. Students were also made aware of the importance of body language, use of voice, handling nerves and the audience and employing visual aids to enrich and back up the presentation.

The first major outcome of the research project was a five- to seven- page long research paper consisting of the following 5 sections:

- Introduction (stating the problem & purpose, indicating the significance of the study, the research question and hypotheses);
- Methodology (containing details for the target population & sampling method used, the main data collecting instrument, and details regarding the procedure & time frame);
- Results & findings (a summary of results and findings);
- Conclusions & recommendations (conclusions drawn and recommended course of action proposed as a possible, viable);
- References listed in APA style (at the very end of the paper, references listed in APA style).

In order to be able to compose a well-structured research paper, in the first stage of the research project the students mainly focused on the following:

- Formulating the research question;
- Selecting the most appropriate research method - quantitative vs qualitative;
- Deciding on the most appropriate data collection instrument (questionnaires, interviews, focus groups);
- Conducting field research (primary or secondary);
- Processing data;
- Drawing conclusions;
- Recommending solutions & proposing a course of action;
- Referencing using APA style (using a citation generator <https://www.scribbr.com/citation/generator/apa/>);
- Editing & proofreading;
- Avoiding plagiarism by summarising, paraphrasing & quoting.

### 3.2. Conference Stage

Teaching this course gave me a detailed insight into the exact time, effort, energy and enthusiasm that needs to be invested in this kind of a research project. Being a teacher, I witnessed the whole process, closely monitored every step students had taken from the beginning of the semester until the conference itself. However, at the conference, organized at the end of the semester, the time had come for the students themselves to present the fruits of their semester-long hard work publicly.

The student mock conference itself took place on May 27<sup>th</sup> 2022, and included an introductory, opening panel, followed up by parallel presentation session. In the parallel sessions the students delivered well-structured oral informative and persuasive presentations accompanied by a PowerPoint presentation. They were given 15 minutes for their presentation and 5-10 minutes were spent on follow up questions and discussions. Besides presenting, students were expected to attentively listen to their colleagues presentations and actively participate in the follow up discussions. We, the teachers, were positively surprised by the interaction that took place. We did not really expect any feedback from the audience, so according to the initial plan, we were going to ask some questions or ask for clarification. This, however, turned out to be absolutely not needed, as there were so many comments, questions, and real discussion after each presentation. It was a really positive surprise which gave extra weight and added extra value to the students' semester-long hard work and made the presenters really proud of themselves. The poster presentations were exhibited in the conference hall.

This link takes you to the mock student conference photo gallery: [https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/16QSYsgvaVZkOIjQAuvmMS1M46XH\\_j9ay/edit#slide=id.p7](https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/16QSYsgvaVZkOIjQAuvmMS1M46XH_j9ay/edit#slide=id.p7)

The mock student conference program can be found on the link below:  
<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1RXozzpYUeS5Yj48vwLIYzXeCa18jN9DV/edit>

### 3.3. Post-conference stage

In order to make the most of the presentation at the conference and turn it into another learning opportunity, the students were asked to do one more thing, on top of everything else they had done as part of this research project, after giving a presentation, attentively listening to their colleagues' presentations and taking an active part in the

follow up discussions, they were asked to reflect back on the conference participation experience and take a note of things that worked out exactly as planned, but also take a note of things which did not quite go according to plan, so next time they present they would know what they need to pay more attention to. The reflection on their presentation was an individual assignment guided by the following questions:

***Pre-presentation Stage:***

- How long did it take you to prepare?
- What problems did you come across while preparing?
- What did you do to try to solve the problems encountered?

***Actual Presentation at the Conference:***

- Did everything go according to plan?
- What went wrong?
- What did you do?

***Lesson Learned:***

- If asked to do the same presentation again, what would you do differently next time?
- What did you do well during the presentation that you would repeat next time you present?

Apart from the post-presentation self-evaluation, at the very end of the semester but prior to the final exam, the students were asked to carry out one more round of self-evaluation and peer-evaluation, but this time focusing on the overall research project using google classroom forms.

When evaluating their peers, the students were asked to specify the following for each group member individually:

- Rate the communication with each group member;
- Elaborate on the communication they were involved in;
- Rate their cooperation;
- Elaborate on the cooperation;
- Evaluate their overall work and engagement;
- Estimate the willingness for future collaboration;
- Rate their contribution based on the time and effort invested in the project;
- Give any other remarks and comments.

In order to self-evaluate students were asked to:

- List the tasks performed;
- Rate their own work based on the time and effort invested in the project;
- Specify the success achieved when meeting deadlines for various assignments;
- Describe the lesson learned about working in a group;
- Elaborate on the best lesson learned about doing research.

The Google form questionnaire for self- and peer-evaluation can be found on this link:

<https://drive.google.com/drive/u/0/folders/1rMKYAMqh9ID2iNeSUnlQNgO00OgyM1K>

The purpose of the end-of-course self- and peer- evaluations of the overall experience of conducting a research project was multifold. It enabled me as a teacher to grade the students more fairly and get ideas of how to improve the course when offered again in the future. At the same time, it hopefully helped student learn about themselves as learners and team-members.

#### 4. RECOMMENDATIONS

Just as with the mixed overall abilities and writing skills, for some of the students this was the very first experience of being involved in a group project and presenting publicly in front of an audience, while others had already had some experience presenting. However, for all it was a learning experience and that always should be the end goal: turning every possible situation into a teaching moment and a memorable learning experience. This definitely requires reconsidering the decision made at the beginning of the semester to give student the liberty to choose who they would prefer to work with. The rationale behind this decision was the fact that students would understandably choose to work with peers sharing their interests, as well as peers they are studying or commuting with. Fortunately, the endless options for out of class cooperation at a distance Google Classroom, Google Forms and Google Docs offer, compensate for almost all objections students might have when not being given the chance to choose their group mates.

Luckily, throughout the entire semester there was only one major conflict between students within a group which somehow went unnoticed until the penultimate stage of the project, i.e. prior to the presentation at the conference, which was successfully resolved. With an intervention on my part, in the form of an open talk with all group members present discussing the misunderstandings and obvious lack of open communication, luckily the group project was put back on track and finished successfully on time. Students demonstrated maturity and rose above the misunderstandings but also clearly indicated that they would never ever agree to work together on any other similar projects. This made me realise that a single, end-of-course peer-evaluation, regardless how well structured, is not enough for dealing with and solving issues along the way. It is, however, invaluable for offering the course in the future.

Regardless of the fact that the course with the mock student conference as its main outcome had made me as a teacher super-proud, reflecting back on the entire experience and taking into consideration the summary of the results from student evaluations I would propose the following recommendations for possible improvement of this Advanced English Course:

- Conduct a survey at the beginning of the semester and form the groups myself based on students' previous high school experience with writing essays, doing research, working in group projects and presenting in public;
- Perform at least two peer-evaluations (in the middle and at the end of the semester) for improved monitoring of group dynamics, ensuring equal participation and contribution, evaluating cooperation between group members and if required, intervene timely, as well as for more objective and fair assessment;
- Minimise or possibly completely eliminate the General English track of the course and the use of a coursebook in order to focus on the research project only and consequently grade students exclusively on the outcomes of the research project itself.

#### 5. CONCLUSION

Teaching this Advanced English course has been a long and challenging, but at the same time also a rewarding process. All the grades the students got at the end were definitely hard earned ones. The students' hard work, enthusiasm and dedication to the research project have really made me a proud teacher, motivated to offer an improved, upgraded version of the course to the new generation of undergraduate students. It was

and in fact still is, my biggest hope that when these students go out there in the real world and are asked to conduct research on a certain issue, present results, draw conclusions based on those results and recommend a possible course of action or offer possible solutions, their immediate reaction will be: “A-ha, No problem! Been there-done that! Thanks to the Advanced English course I took in semester 2, I know exactly what I am supposed to do, I know what is expected of me and I know how to do it!”

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