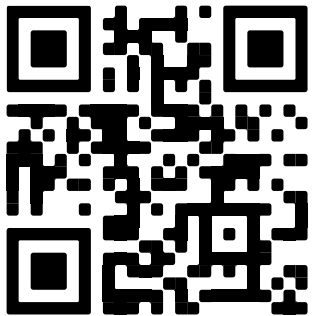


Action Research Project



Andrew Fisher
PG Cert
January 2025

Context

Pre-sessional English Summer Courses:

- duration 7 weeks or 12 weeks
- maximum 16 students per class (online)
- each class has two teachers, with one being the tutor
- assessed on the 4 language skills
- most classes are 'conditional', hence pressure to achieve

Typical student:

- aged ~20 years (undergraduate)
- vast majority are East Asian, mostly Chinese
- a handful have previously studied in the UK
- mostly highly committed, but with language weaknesses

Research Question

"How can tutors engage with Pre-sessional Students in a manner that is unlikely to induce unnecessary anxiety?"

Rationale:

- rise of mental health and wellbeing on the agenda
- admission of my own lack of knowledge
- reality of PSE being fast-paced, with pressure to achieve

Scope:

- what the tutor can do to avoid adding to levels of stress and anxiety (but not dealing with matters outside their control)

Action Plan (v2)

Reading:

- creation of a learning environment that avoids undue stress
- factors that cause anxiety in students
- teacher language, and its effect on students' wellbeing

Action:

- what the tutor can do to avoid adding to levels of stress and anxiety (but not dealing with matters outside their control)
- utilise one-to-one tutorials in a manner that allows students to express how they are feeling
- adoption of appropriate teacher language that encourages students to make maximum effort whilst not inducing unnecessary anxiety

Mental Health Data

- estimated 1 in 6 adults have experienced a 'common mental disorder' in the last week
- 3.58 million people accessed NHS mental health, learning disability and autism services in 2022/23
- around 20% of children aged 7 to 16 had a probable mental health condition in 2023

(House of Commons Research Briefing [1], 2024)

Students:

- 57% declared a mental health issue, 27% had a diagnosed mental health condition
- 30% felt that their wellbeing had worsened since beginning their current university course

(House of Commons Research Briefing [2], 2024)

Stressors & Trends

Stressors:

- academic difficulties
- financial pressure
- interpersonal relations

International students:

- language barriers (69%)
- presenting to a whole class
- having errors corrected

Trends:

- higher numbers of female students report issues, but ...
- Asian students more critical of their achievement

Questionnaire

Interviews/Focus Group vs. Questionnaire

1. How often during the 12 weeks of the course did you experience any stress or anxiety? *Choose one option*
2. Did tutorials help you to understand what you needed to work on? *Choose one option*
3. Who did you talk to when you were worried about your study? *Tick applicable options*
4. The most anxious time is when you are waiting for your results. Apart from this time, which points in the course did you feel most anxious? *Place in order, 1 to 5*
5. Which of these following items would you have most wanted more help with? *Choose one option*

Action Points

- ensure mistakes (linguistic or academic) are not judged, but are capitalised on as learning opportunities
- give sufficient time for students to work together in small groups, but having a clear objective is vital when doing so
- provide a short lesson summary after a session
- evaluate a task/assignment to judge whether there are any skills or knowledge required that may not yet be developed
- give concrete advice on how a large task can be subdivided into smaller tasks, or request students to develop a plan (individually or in small groups), with timings, and then review this with them in a tutorial
- when students are free to make a choice in regard to a task, determine whether it is appropriate to set boundaries on their choices

Conclusion

= Good Pedagogy

Success or Failure?

What has been achieved?

- gained an understanding of how prevalent mental health conditions are deemed to be amongst HE students
- furthered knowledge of environmental factors that can have a negative effect upon students' mental health
- examined how we can best interact with students in a manner that should not induce necessary stress and anxiety
- began planning changes to my teaching practice

And what hasn't been achieved?

- ineffective primary research

Key References

Hughes, G., Upsher, R., Nobili, A., Kirkman, A., Wilson, C., Bowers-Brown, T., Foster, J., Bradley, S. and Byrom, N. (2022) *Education for Mental Health: Enhancing Student Mental Health through Curriculum and Pedagogy*. Available at: <https://documents.advancedhe.ac.uk/download/file/document/10300> (Accessed: 22 November 2024).

Inada, T. (2021) 'Teachers' Strategies for Decreasing Students' Anxiety Levels to Improve Their Communicative Skills', *English Language Teaching*, vol. 14, no. 3, pp. 32-41. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.5539/elt.v14n3p32> (Accessed: 29 November 2024).

Lewis, J. and Stiebahl, S. (2024) *Student mental health in England: Statistics, policy, and guidance* (Research Briefing). House of Commons Library. Available at: <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-8593/> (Accessed: 6 December 2024).

Schifano, I. (2023) 'They made me feel invalid': Shocking new figures show scale of student mental health crisis. Available at: <https://thetab.com/2023/05/02/they-made-me-feel-invalid-shocking-new-figures-show-scale-of-student-mental-health-crisis> (Accessed: 23 November 2024).

Wang, Y., Wang, X., Wang, X., Guo, X., Yuan, L., Gao, Y. and Pan, P. (2023) 'Stressors in university life and anxiety symptoms among international students: a sequential mediation model', *BMC Psychiatry* 23, article 556. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12888-023-05046-7> (Accessed: 6 December 2024).

Full bibliography at: <https://pgcert24af.myblog.arts.ac.uk/bibliography-arp/>

Further Research

- the Mental health Toolkit (from Advance HE and partners) is an extensive document, and I have not had time to get into it all – so I should find the time to return to it
- techniques for self-efficacy improvement, and how aspects of this could be shared with students
- Takako Inada's PhD thesis *Determinants of foreign language classroom anxiety in a Japanese EFL university classroom and its relationship to native language use by students*
- learn more about how the arts, both as a creator and a consumer, can help maintain good mental health