Preparing Learners for the Academic World – Post 1

Robert McLarty

Our youngest son graduated from his American university this year and what was very striking at the commencement ceremony was how many students from all over the world had spent four years studying for a wide range of degrees with all of the classes, tutorials, seminars, online modules and the rest delivered in English. As if studying in Higher Education weren’t enough, they had done it all in a foreign language. They had arrived in a new country, coped with the administration, got to know a new culture, attended classes, submitted assignments and taken tests and exams on a regular basis. All of this in English. On top of that they had socialised, shopped, travelled and probably partied.

This got me thinking about how they had prepared for this huge step and what we, as English language teachers, need to be doing to give students like them as much help as possible. Over the last twenty years the globalization of the education market has meant that the number of international students is increasing at universities all over the world and not just in English-speaking countries. Knowing that the international language of most professions is English, the logical first step to getting a good job is mastery not only of the language but of a subject studied in that language. This has motivated parents all over the world to decide that investing in this sort of education for their children is a sound move.

Schools and publishers have entered the market with courses and materials specifically designed to help learners acquire the skills necessary to study at university level. Teachers have been asked to move from teaching general English, with no specific purpose, to the much more specialised EAP. This also raises the very important question of how much training do teachers need to take on this sort of course or is it just another form of ESP? How different is EAP and can any teacher take it on? Are there actually enough qualified teachers around to deal with this huge increase in students? I doubt it, particularly if not enough time is taken to train them properly.

Schools often have the students before they have trained the teachers so inevitably what happens is that the specific nature of the course gets watered down to a more basic language course with academic add-ons such as essay-writing, critical thinking and note-taking. I will argue that this is not satisfactory. The materials published for this field inevitably have to use specific texts from a wide range of academic fields with the view that academic skills can be practised irrespective of the content. I will look at this topic in a later article. An alternative approach is to prepare the students to take an exam, with the assumption being that having the right score or level has automatically prepared them for a degree course delivered in English. Again I would doubt that this is sufficient preparation.
So if learners’ main objective is to be able to study for a degree on an English-medium course how do they prepare and when do they start? What do they actually need to be able to do before they arrive at their first freshman class? Are there other aspects of academic life which also need to be looked at and considered? All the soft skills search as collaborating, active listening, speaking in public, doing research have to be transferred from their mother tongue to English. They will also need to be prepared to study in a different way, to be more independent, to have their own ideas and to challenge what they hear and read. All of the above takes a lot of care and attention and needs to be carefully planned and delivered by the institution and teaching staff responsible for it.

Over the next three articles I will talk in more detail how we can prepare them linguistically, culturally and mentally.

Robert McLarty runs his own consultancy, McLarty Languages Ltd. He is a coursebook writer, an EAP teacher and is the Senior Tutor for the Oxford Teachers’ Academy. He is Editor of Modern English Teacher. He has run language schools in Paris and Oxford and worked for Oxford University Press for ten years.