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Mixed-methods Approach Based on Study of the UK's successful Pre- sessional Program Experience

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1. Introduction

Today, most higher education institutions in the UK offer Pre-sessional Programs (PP) (Yu, 2016). These programs vary in entry language proficiency requirements, the linguistic gaps they aim to address, course start and end dates, program content, and even course locations (McGrath & Bailey, 2009; Seviour, 2015).

To evaluate whether individual PP are successful, it is important to assess their outcomes at various institutions. This can help understand the overall success of the PP initiative across the UK. In the next section, a research methodology will be outlined to analyze this question. The study will then conduct an empirical investigation to explore how a PP framework can be adapted and compared to similar programs in other countries, including China.

The purpose of the PP is to cultivate students with the important skills to meet the academic challenges of higher education in the UK. Students improve their communication and critical thinking abilities through interactive sessions such as seminars, presentations, and tutorials. The program includes academic lectures that promote the ability to process and summarize information through note-taking and discussion. Research and essay-writing tasks further skills in analysis and argumentation. Pre-sessional programs usually share similar elements across different universities, which facilitates the research.

2. Methodology: Mixed-methods Approach

RQ: What defines a successful PP program? If PP programs share common characteristics of success, how can an international framework for teaching based on the UK' s successful PP Course experience work?

In order to answer RQ, MMR will help research to build the framework that can be used as a reference for related programs in China or other countries.

2.1 Research Philosophy

Research questions with multiple dimensions are essential for tackling complex problems in different fields. This study highlights the significance of adopting a reflexive approach to effectively investigate such questions. According to Payne and Payne (2004, p. 191), reflexivity involves researchers critically reflecting on their own beliefs, values, and attitudes, along with the impact these may have on the research environment. Reflexivity also involves being self-critical about the methods used and their application, thereby enhancing both the researcher's and the audience's ability to evaluate and understand the findings.

This approach enables a comprehensive analysis of PP by combining the precision of quantitative data with the richness of qualitative perspectives. By placing the research within its philosophical framework and considering the interaction of axiology and reflexivity, the study establishes a solid foundation for critically understanding the diverse and dynamic nature of PP, thus contributing meaningfully to the broader academic discourse.

Based on the discussion of its philosophical stance, theory development

approach, axiology, ontology, and epistemology in ECDE7018. Examining the theoretical basis of the research design in a practical manner will deepen the understanding of the study's structure and framework within its broader academic context.

The mixed-methods research (MMR) approach has become increasingly popular among educators, especially in the field of applied linguistics (Ivankova & Creswell, 2009; Riazi et al., 2014), as it allows researchers to tackle complex, multidimensional research questions. This approach is particularly advantageous because it incorporates diverse methodologies within a single study.

2.2 Review of MMR on Related Research

To address the first key question—how to empirically determine the success of a PP and identify its contributing factors—extensive literature review and analysis were conducted before engaging in mixed-methods research. Research has shown a thorough integration of quantitative and qualitative data to elaborate on, clarify, and validate respective findings. Villegas (2021) based her study on constructivism and self-determination theory, employing interviews and questionnaires as part of a MMR to investigate how Flipped Teaching (FT) promotes autonomy and engagement through structured activities and peer collaboration within PPs. Mazgutova's (2015) doctoral dissertation examined the development of 39 students who took part in two 6-week PP programs at a UK university during 2012 and 2013. Quantitatively, the author conducted corpus analysis, systemic functional linguistic analysis, and

statistical analysis on pre- and post-course survey data. Pearson(2020) revealed that the PP significantly improved the quality of students' academic writing, with participants showing greater lexical diversity, complexity, and fluency compared to postgraduates who had not attended the program.

Through this review, it became evident that researchers investigating the effectiveness of PP commonly employ various data collection tools and academic success measures. Meanwhile, previous studies lacked follow-up assessments after the program's completion, there is a lack of understanding of the environmental factors driving students and teachers in an online or offline FT setting, especially when distinguishing between structured and "frameworked" online PPs. Building on previous research, I plan to further explore this area by incorporating evaluation results, such as **questionnaires** for academic lecturers and students, **interviews** with faculty members. The aim is to assess the predictive validity of PP evaluations while analyzing, from an educational perspective, the diverse factors contributing to the overall success of such programs.

2.3 Quantitative Method (Set Whole-cohort Questionnaires as an Example)

Supposing that the research will be ready after ethical approval and focus on the PP in July 2025, a total of approx.100 Chinese students, including both male and female participants, which may consists of all students from the 6-week offline PP program in 2025, will take part in this study by completing a pre-PP

and post-PP questionnaire. The participants are aged between 22 and 24 years, with a mean age of 22.2 years ($SD = 0.86$). All participants are enrolled in the pre-session language course offered by the English Language Teaching Centre (ELTC) and are allocated to various language classes at the University of Southampton, each led by a different instructor.

Out of this group, 20 students will be selected through convenience sampling to engage in semi-structured interviews mentioned in Section 2.4.1. Although all participants share a common Chinese cultural background, they come from diverse regions within China, resulting in variations in their language learning experiences. Specific details regarding the interview participants are provided within the research.

2.4 Qualitative Method (Set Interview as an Example)

For this study, interviews will be adopted as the primary research method to allow for an in-depth exploration of participants' responses, emotions, and motivations, as well as to delve deeper into their perspectives and ideas (Bell, 2010). In contrast to questionnaires, interviews offer greater flexibility to explore participants' viewpoints in more detail, making them particularly well-suited for the objectives of this research. Semi-structured interviews are specifically employed to provide participants with the freedom to navigate the conversation at their own pace (Silverman, 2010).

2.4.1 The Most Important Method: Semi-structured Interview (approx. 20 participants)

With the ethical approval, the most important interview will first be piloted with groups of international Chinese students (18+) enrolled in PP programs at a UK university to evaluate the reliability of the interview questions, and then will be conducted twice, before participants enroll PP and after participants receive their PP final results in 2025, with each session lasting approximately one hour. To help participants feel at ease, they will have the freedom to choose the location and language for the interview. Regarding the language choice, it is anticipated that most participants will opt to use Chinese. This preference may stem from a desire to avoid having their English proficiency evaluated or allowing language barriers to hinder effective communication.

2.4.2 A small sample size interview with lecturers (approx. 7 participants)

To gather qualitative data from lecturers—specifically those implementing the 6-week offline pre-sessional program (PP) in 2025 or similar programs in China—I will conduct semi-structured interviews. This approach provides an opportunity to examine the issue from the teachers' perspectives, enabling a deeper understanding of their experiences and insights. The focus is on examining how implementing the FT approach supported the academic team in delivering PP or related course remotely and offline. Additionally, the study aims to understand the rationale behind the teachers' decision to adopt this method

and to evaluate whether they perceive it as both effective and practical for remote PP instruction.

2.5 Other Methods

MMR will incorporate additional research methods alongside the primary approach above. These supplementary methods will allow both the researcher and participants to transcend the limitations of predefined core questions, facilitating a broader and more in-depth exploration of their perspectives, insights, and experiences. Through the adoption of a varied research methodology, the study seeks to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of the topic under investigation.

3. Overview of Sampling Methods

To investigate the language environment of PP, this study utilizes both convenience sampling and cluster sampling to select participants. This combined sampling approach ensures a diverse yet practical group of participants, balancing accessibility, and representativeness (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018). The target population includes students enrolled in PP preparing for university studies, such as those offered by the University of Southampton and similar institutions.

The chosen sampling strategies are designed to support the collection of both qualitative and quantitative data, offering a deeper understanding of students'

linguistic experiences, perspectives, and challenges within PP contexts (Dörnyei, 2007).

3.1 Qualitative Sampling

The qualitative sampling process aims to collect in-depth data from a subset of the pre-sessional program student population. Convenience sampling will be employed initially, as it allows for easy access to willing participants, making it practical within the limited timeframe of the PP (Creswell, 2014). For instance, students attending orientation sessions or workshops may be invited, ensuring efficiency and minimal disruption to their schedules (Cohen et al., 2018).

To ensure representativeness within the constraints of qualitative research, purposive sampling will be integrated into the convenience sampling process, focusing on participants with varied linguistic backgrounds, study objectives, and prior exposure to English (Creswell, 2014; Cohen et al., 2018). This approach aims to capture a broad spectrum of perspectives, enhancing the richness of the qualitative data for thematic analysis. A sample size of approximately 20 participants will be selected, allowing for in-depth exploration while remaining feasible for detailed analysis. The sampling approaches are intended to enable the gathering of both qualitative and quantitative data, thereby shedding light on the linguistic experiences, perceptions, and difficulties encountered by students in PP contexts (Dörnyei, 2007).

3.2 Quantitative Sampling

For the quantitative component, cluster sampling will be utilized to access a broader population of pre-sessional program students, as it is particularly effective when participants are naturally grouped into clusters, such as class cohorts or proficiency levels (Fraenkel, Wallen & Hyun, 2019; Bryman, 2016). A list of clusters will be obtained from program administrators, and several clusters will be randomly selected to minimize selection bias. Questionnaires will subsequently be administered to all students within the chosen clusters to gather quantitative data regarding their language learning experiences, perceptions of the program's effectiveness, and their interaction with the English language environment. A target sample size of approximately 100 participants will be set, balancing the need for statistical power and the practical constraints of the study (Cohen et al., 2018).

3.3 Combining Qualitative and Quantitative Sampling

The combination of convenience sampling for qualitative data and cluster sampling for quantitative data ensures a complementary approach to exploring the research questions. While the qualitative sampling focuses on capturing depth and nuance, the quantitative sampling aims to provide a broader perspective and identify patterns or trends across the larger population. Together, these methods allow for a comprehensive understanding of the pre-sessional program language environment.

4. Ethics

This part outlines ethical considerations, addressing my insider researcher role, minimizing impacts, ensuring voluntary participation, and reflecting on ethical engagement with findings and responsibilities.

4.1 Ethical Consideration

The initial challenge lies in the self-selecting nature of the sample, which consisted of individuals who were willing to engage in both quantitative and qualitative methods. Cockburn (2013) emphasizes the challenges associated with studying less effective educators, as they are often less likely to volunteer for participation in research. This highlights a critical point when interpreting self-reported data, as the absence of objective validation, as noted by Duff (2008), adds to the complexity of addressing this issue. Nevertheless, the ability to compare quantitative and qualitative findings in this study enhances trustworthiness and provides a means to evaluate the results.

The limited sample size also warrants caution, as it restricts the generalizability of the findings. As Cohen et al. (2017) emphasize, case study results may not be broadly applicable to larger populations. Similarly, while the approach to thematic analysis was documented, only one researcher conducted this process, as noted by Deat et al. (2018). This limitation could influence the findings' reliability.

4.2 Conducting Ethical Research as an Insider

Humphrey (2012) emphasizes the complexities associated with insider research, particularly the potential risks of data distortion or the exposure of sensitive information. To mitigate these risks and protect both participants and data, several precautionary measures were adopted, as previously outlined.

Importantly, while I was employed at a university, I was not affiliated with the Pre-sessional Team, which constituted the focus of this study. This separation ensured that students did not perceive participation as an extension of their academic obligations. Likewise, teachers were not in a direct professional relationship with me, allowing them greater autonomy in deciding whether to take part in the research.

4.3 Follow ETHICAL APPROVAL UWTSD

As I fill in the form, I will provide as much information as I can for my UWTSD , the participants, the investigator and the environment, such as answering their questions (e.g. Why has the person been invited to participate? What are the possible benefits of taking part? What information will be collected? etc.), to confirm participants are aged 18 or over and agree to take part in this questionnaire; to ensure that this research to be anonymous; not have to answer

Participants have the right to skip any question they do not wish to answer. All data collected for this study will be securely stored on a password-protected computer and backed up on a secure server. Except for free-text responses,

which may be directly quoted in the final project, all other data will be aggregated and presented only in the form of summaries or reports. Access to the data will be restricted to the researcher and their supervisor. The collected information will be analyzed and included as part of the researcher's final project but will not be published elsewhere. Additionally, participants must confirm that they are 18 years of age or older and voluntarily consent to take part in this questionnaire. The University of Wales Trinity Saint David (UWTSD) adheres to the highest ethical and research integrity standards in all its studies. Participants will be asked to provide informed consent prior to the commencement of any data collection. Furthermore, strict measures will be taken to uphold anonymity and confidentiality, fostering an environment where participants can freely share their experiences and viewpoints. In accordance with our Data Management Policy, all data will be securely disposed of following the completion and conferment of the EdD degree or equivalent qualifications.

5. Research Tools

5.1 Semi-structured Interviews

The interview and data collection process focuses on assessing the program's effectiveness and supplying guidance for constructing a Framework of PP.

These interviews will be semi-structured, target key stakeholders, including teachers, program coordinators, and students, to gain diverse perspectives on the PP program's implementation and outcomes.

Pre–Program Interviews will establish a baseline understanding of students’ language proficiency and academic preparedness. E.g., “What challenges do you anticipate in adapting to English academic and cultural practices?”

Post–Program Interviews will evaluate progress, focusing on how the program addressed identified gaps. Both stages will use a blend of open–ended and structured questions to gather qualitative data. E.g., “How has the program prepared you to actively participate in academic discussions and written assignments?”

Interviews will be conducted individually to ensure in–depth insights and will last approximately 1 hour. All recordings and transcriptions will be securely stored and anonymized before analysis to maintain confidentiality and anonymity.

Thematic coding will be applied to identify recurring patterns and areas for program improvement.

5.2 Questionnaires

As outlined earlier, questionnaires will serve as a tool for collecting quantitative data from a larger pool of participants, including both students and faculty teachers. Through regression analysis, the data obtained will provide measurable insights into the program’s success.

Step	Details
Define Objectives	– Clarify the research purpose, such as understanding student learning experiences, satisfaction, or suggestions for

and Questionnaire Content	improvement. – Determine the goal of the questionnaire (e.g., evaluate teaching methods or language progress in a PP to define a successful PP program). – Include closed-ended for regression analysis: Use a 5-point Likert scale where appropriate (e.g., from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree). Closed-ended : e.g., To what extent are you satisfied with the materials provided in the PP course? – Ensure that the questions are straightforward, precise, and free from ambiguity to support the requirements of Linear Regression analysis.
Determine Distribution Method	– Online Questionnaires: Distribute via tools like Google Forms. – Distribute during or after key activities to capture fresh experiences. Allow sufficient time for completion (typically 1–2 weeks). – Example: Use dedicated email to send online questionnaire links; responses collected and organized through Google Forms.
Check Reliability of the Questionnaire	– Evaluate the reliability of the questionnaire by applying the Cronbach's alpha coefficient test. – Ensure internal consistency of the data before analysis. – Adjust or refine questions based on reliability outcomes if necessary.

Table 1 Example of Questionnaires Design

5.3 Document Analysis (Important for the PP Framework)

To supplement primary data, document analysis and comparison will involve reviewing existing program curricula from different universities, evaluation reports, and policy documents. This will provide the contextual understanding and additional evidence for evaluating the program's design and its alignment with institutional goals, e.g:

PP Framework	Questions, Analysis & Critical Thinking
Duration	Ranges from a few weeks to multiple months? Critical Thinking: It might challenge standardisation of outcomes and consistency in delivery.
Focus	Academic language skills, intercultural competence, and practical experience or more? Critical Thinking: A broad focus ensures a well-rounded program, but might dilute emphasis on specific skills critical for academic success.
Setting	University or online learning environment? Critical Thinking: Blended learning provides accessibility, but may introduce challenges in maintaining engagement and ensuring equal access to resources.
Modules	– Listening: Emphasises lecture comprehension and active listening through note-taking and authentic practice. Critical Thinking: Authentic materials enhance practical skills but may lack real-time feedback opportunities. – Speaking: Focuses on academic presentations, pronunciation, and critical thinking. Critical Thinking: Builds confidence but may not fully address

	anxiety in real-world contexts. – Writing & Reading: Develops foundational academic skills like essay writing and critical thinking. Critical Thinking: Strong foundational approach but might overlook discipline-specific writing needs.
Assessment	Combination of timed online tasks and ongoing coursework? Critical Thinking: Timed tasks test application under pressure, but may disadvantage students unfamiliar with online assessments or those needing additional support.

Table 2 Element Analysis and Framework Construction

5.4 Focus Groups (Optional)

To explore collective perceptions and shared experiences, focus groups may be conducted with students and instructors. This tool will encourage interaction and discussion, potentially revealing insights that individual interviews might not uncover.

5.5 Observations (Optional)

Whenever possible, direct observations of PP program sessions will be carried out. This approach offers real-time, contextually grounded insights into the dynamics of teaching and learning, instructor–student interactions, and the practical application of flipped teaching methods. Observations will also play a crucial role in corroborating the self-reported experiences shared by participants.

5.6 Other Tools(E.g. Case Study between Different PPs & Programs in China)

By combining these tools above and coding to help researchers organize, condense, and make sense of large volumes of information, the study will address the primary research question: how can PP programs be evaluated for success, and what framework can be developed to adapt them to other contexts, such as China? This multi-faceted approach draws on subjective experiences and objective measures, providing actionable insights for improving and adapting PP programs internationally. As advocated by Creswell and Plano Clark (2017), this approach ensures the research not only quantifies general trends but also explains them through qualitative insights. The use of these tools thus enhances the validity, reliability, and depth of the findings, contributing to actionable recommendations for improving the PP and helping to identify key components, find relationships, and visualize the Framework.

6. Data Analysis

Following the review of data collection instruments, this section elaborates on the methodologies adopted for analyzing the diverse datasets in this study. The analysis framework is designed to systematically address the research questions (RQs) by synthesizing findings from multiple sources, as advocated by Creswell (2014). This multi-faceted approach ensures a comprehensive exploration of the

investigated phenomena and uncovers interactions among various datasets, thereby facilitating deeper insights (Bryman, 2016).

In addition to analyzing survey and interview data, direct observations of PP sessions will be conducted, which provide real-time insights into the dynamics of teaching and learning, including instructor–student interactions and the practical implementation of flipped teaching methods (Dörnyei, 2007). Such observations offer perspectives through self-reported data alone, enabling contextually grounded analysis (Silverman, 2010).

Moreover, direct observation serves as a critical tool for validating participants' self-reported experiences. It bridges the potential gap between perceived and actual classroom practices, thus enhancing the robustness of the findings (Patton, 2002). By triangulating observational data with survey and interview findings, this study aims to provide a nuanced and holistic evaluation of flipped teaching efficacy within the PP context (Ivankova & Creswell, 2009).

The principles underpinning the analysis of questionnaire and semi-structured interview data were rigorously examined. The analytical process emphasizes identifying, analyzing, and interpreting recurring themes and patterns in participants' responses, consistent with Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework. The qualitative data obtained through semi-structured interviews offers rich, in-depth insights, facilitating a deeper understanding of participants' experiences and perspectives (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2018).

These qualitative findings are triangulated with quantitative data from questionnaires to uncover connections between recurring themes and the broader research questions.

For quantitative data, descriptive statistical methods will be employed to summarize responses and assessment data. This process will identify patterns, measure participant agreement on key factors, and validate qualitative findings (Field, 2013). By integrating qualitative and quantitative approaches, the study employs a triangulated methodology, strengthening the reliability and validity of its conclusions (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010).

7. Conclusion

This study employs a mixed-methods approach to examine the success of the UK' s pre-sessional programs. By integrating quantitative and qualitative methods, including questionnaires and semi-structured interviews etc., it explores key factors contributing to their effectiveness, offering insights into best practices and their potential application in other educational contexts.

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