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EAP in the Steppe: A Retrospective View

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Abstract

A retrospective reflection of one EAP foundation programme in the Central Asian steppe which has been running for sixteen years and has been externally accredited twice. It highlights three particular contextual challenges, namely geographical, cultural, and linguistic. It suggests how EAP practitioners might flourish in view of these challenges by being adaptable and upholding *esprit de corps*. It expands the context further by comparing the cohorts of students and teachers in relation to their age, gender, and nationality. The study reflects on how core EAP materials could be personalised to increase student practice with an example from the Academic Word List. Classroom management is discussed in terms of micro-strategies. The use of artificial intelligence is described with reference to writing. It concludes that EAP practitioners can flourish in such a context and that all foundation programmes have their own unique contexts in which EAP practitioners can flourish using such strategies.

Keywords: Foundation Programme, Contextual Challenges, Classroom Management, Artificial Intelligence, Esprit De Corps

Introduction

Nazarbayev University (NU) opened in 2010 on the initiative of the first president of Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev, who wanted to create a research-based university in Central Asia using English as its medium of instruction. This was perhaps surprising since a local and a regional language, namely Kazakh and Russian are widely spoken. NU started with a foundation "year" programme which had at its core English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and Mathematics. For the first five years, the EAP programme was run by University College London (UCL). From the beginning, the EAP programme practitioners were called Teaching Fellows (TFs) in 2026, just one TF remains from the opening year. The UCL EAP foundation programmes in Astana and London were identical. On successful completion of this programme, students could begin their NU undergraduate studies from a choice of sciences and humanities. After the first five years, there was a one semester oversight from Warwick University. Then, the foundation programme was run solely by Nazarbayev University. Looking back over these sixteen years, similarities can be observed with the original UCL EAP foundation programme, such as a research project and its viva.

The current nine-month Nazarbayev University Foundation Year Program (NUFYP) has been accredited twice by the British Association of Lecturers of English for Academic Purposes (BALEP) in 2020 and 2024 as BALEP institutional accreditation lasts for four years. The NUFYP course is only one of four centres outside the United Kingdom, all in Asia, which have passed the BALEP Accreditation Scheme (BAS) for institutions. Of the other three, two are in China at Xi'an Jiaotong Liverpool University and the University of Nottingham Ningbo China. The fourth is the BRIT Language Centre (Joint University of Strathclyde/BRIT Language Centre Pre-session) in Bangkok, Thailand. In both 2020 and 2024, the NUFYP course was assessed by two different BALEP accreditors over several days. These assessments included, both class observations, as well as faculty and staff meetings. Accreditations, such as BAS, have enhanced NUFYP's academic credibility.

The purpose of this retrospective reflection is to consider what might be needed for an EAP practitioner to flourish in the NUFYP geographical, cultural, and linguistic context of the Central Asian steppe. It will be argued that although there are intense challenges, it is possible to flourish by adapting to the context, striving for *esprit de corps*, creating engaging

materials, excelling in classroom management, and managing the creative use of artificial intelligence. This retrospective reflection is based on twelve years teaching the NUFYP course. In Kazakh tradition, the *mushe1*, is a significant period of twelve years [1] so, it seemed an appropriate time to reflect retrospectively.

The NUFYP Context

Geographical

One challenge is geographical. Kazakhstan is the largest landlocked country in the world although it does have two seas, one forming part of its western boundary, namely the Caspian Sea and the other internal, the remnants of the now shriveled Aral Sea in the south-west. NU is located in Astana, which means “capital” in Kazakh, in the north central region of Kazakhstan [2]. The geographical region is steppe “one of the vast usually level and treeless tracts in southeastern Europe or Asia” [3]. Looking west from the NU campus, virgin steppe is disappearing, but can still be seen. This level tract can be very windy as some students from the warmer south comment on woefully when they move to Astana. This steppe has long, cold winters with much snow and short, hot summers. Temperatures range from -30 °C in winter to +30 °C in summer. Occasionally, temperatures in these seasons may be both lower and higher respectively. The climate is referred to as being continental [4].

The UCL interview process included an online psychological assessment that questioned a prospective EAP teacher’s ability and willingness to endure the long, cold Astana winters. The cold brings ice on pavements and roads which requires geisha-like steps for safe walking. In spite of careful walking, falls happen, bones are broken, surgery is required, and teaching cover is needed. Some departing EAP colleagues have commented they will not miss the long, cold Astana winters. However, local clothing is extremely effective in keeping cold out and warmth in. In very cold weather, a coat with a hood, a hat, a scarf, gloves, and boots are essential. So, the geographical context of NUFYP may be a challenge to an EAP teacher.

Cultural

A second challenge for a NUFYP EAP teacher is understanding Kazakhstan’s rich and varied cultural history. This richness includes, but is not limited to, nomadic, Persian, Islamic, Russian, Turkic, and “Western” influences. Pastoral nomadism is traced back thousands of years, based on yurt villages, which could be assembled, disassembled, and reassembled due to the collapsible nature of a yurt’s light, but strong wooden frame, and transported, for instance on camels, as their herds, perhaps horses, were moved from one new pasture to another. According to Olcott [5], this nomadic way of life had finished by 1917. Some NUFYP students from outside Astana, may have already experienced educational nomadism by moving from their homes for their secondary schooling, living in school dormitories, either during the week, or termly. For example, a student born in Balkash, in the south-east, a city on the shores of Lake Balkash, moves north-west to Karaganda, for her secondary school before moving northwest again to Astana to start NUFYP.

From the fifth century, a Persian New Year tradition of celebrating the vernal equinox, continues to this day in Kazakhstan in the festival of Nauryz. It is celebrated as public holidays each year in Kazakhstan on March 21 and 22 [6]. irrespective of where these dates fall in the spring semester.

Islamic influence may be traced back to 751 AD, and the battle of Talas, near Taraz, in southern Kazakhstan. In that battle, Arabs defeated the Chinese (R. Iskakov, personal communication, April 01, 2025). Some NUFYP students fast during Ramadan, so EAP teachers can consider that such students might feel more tired in classes during that month.

Russian influence in Kazakhstan may be traced back to 1731, when a Kazakh khan, comparable to a monarch or a president, sought protection from Russia against invading tribes from the east [7]. Russian influence has continued in Kazakhstan for close to 300 years up to the present day, enduring the breakup of the Soviet Union when Kazakhstan became an independent country in 1991. One small example of this current Russian influence is the Orthodox Christmas which is a public holiday in Kazakhstan on January 7 at the beginning of the spring semester. A further cultural presence is Turkic. This is reflected in the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) with five member countries, including Kazakhstan and Türkiye. The OTS traces its origins back to 1992. A current example of Turkic influence in Kazakhstan is the single-sex education of the Kazakh-Turkish Lyceums (KTLs). In 2016, the KTLs were renamed Bilim-Innovation Lyceums (BILs) [8,9]. Bilim means “knowledge” in Kazakh. There are 32 single-sex BILs in Kazakhstan, one quarter for girls [10]. Some NUFYP students are BIL alumni.

Moreover, “Western” influence in Kazakhstan comes in many forms including books, films, music, and sport. For instance, Harry Potter has been translated into Kazakh and European football clubs are supported by wearing their team colours. Thus, EAP teachers have a cultural challenge to understand Kazakhstan’s varied cultural heritage as it affects how students think, speak, and act.

Linguistic

A third challenge is linguistic. The first president of Kazakhstan introduced a trilingual language policy in 2007 [11]. This policy confirmed Kazakh as the official language, Russian, as the language between different Kazakhstani ethnic groups, and English, as the language of global communication. Kazakh may be differentiated from Kazakhstani in that the former is both a language and an ethnicity while the latter is a citizenship, for example Ukrainian Kazakhstani or Korean

Kazakhstani. The trilingual language policy is challenging for NUFYP students since Kazakh is a Turkic language while Russian and English belong to the Indo-European language family. A further difference is the script. Russian and Kazakh use Cyrillic script. However, there is a government-led movement to write Kazakh in Roman script making it similar to English script [12]. There are also differences in language proficiency distribution revealed in the 2021 Population Census of Kazakhstan that broadly showed there is a higher percentage of Russian speakers in the north and centre of the country and a higher percentage of Kazakh speakers in the south and west [13]. The same census also revealed that the percentage of the population speaking English started increasing after independence from the Soviet Union [13].

There is a further complexity that relates to Kazakhs who were born in and grew up in China, and then immigrated to Kazakhstan. These Kazakhs are referred to as *Kandas* ("same blood"). Such NUFYP students, may be fluent in Kazakh as they spoke it at home in China. They may also be fluent in Mandarin (adding a third language family, Sino-Tibetan, to their linguistic repertoire) and English since they studied these latter two languages at school in China. In contrast, their knowledge of Russian may be minimal and this might disadvantage them socially on the NUFYP course among their classmates some of whom may communicate with each other more easily and more commonly in Russian.

Russian language influence can also be seen in EAP writing. One example is long Russian-style sentences. Another example is seen in grammatical "transfers", such as the use of "year" after a digital year, for instance "2025 year" (р6д). A further example is with respect to punctuation. In Russian, a comma is always used before "because". Thus, EAP teachers need to be aware of the linguistic challenge to NUFYP students of languages which come from different families and use different scripts.

Cohorts

The cohorts of students and teachers have some notable differences in terms of age range, gender ratio, and nationality.

Students

NUFYP students come from all over Kazakhstan. A map showing their home "towns" would illustrate this, with clusters in Astana and Almaty ("apple" in Kazakh), the newer northern, and older southern capitals, respectively. NUFYP entrance requirements include passing the International English Testing System (IELTS) exam and the Nazarbayev University Entrance Test (NUET). NUET is a test unique to NU and consists of two one-hour exams, first, Mathematics, second, Critical Thinking and Problem Solving both written by Cambridge University Press and Assessment and administered in English. In 2025, NUETs were conducted primarily by NUFYP EAP TFs in 18 cities in Kazakhstan over four consecutive Sundays in February and March.

The general age of NUFYP students ranges from between 16 and 19 with many celebrating their eighteenth birthdays during the course. Most NUFYP students live on the campus, but some prefer to live at home or rent apartments off campus. For those who live in Astana and want to live on the campus, there is a waiting list. The majority of NUFYP students receive a government scholarship that includes a monthly stipend. These scholarships align with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal [14]. Quality Education, Target 4.b, to greatly increase scholarship numbers for admission to tertiary education for majors in technology, engineering, and science [14]. Those who do not secure a scholarship for NUFYP, but have the required test scores, may be admitted as fee-paying students.

In terms of gender, there are more male than female NUFYP students. This would seem not to support the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 5, Gender Equality [15]. Indeed, the UNSDG 5 global forecast is that gender equality will not be reached by 2030. However, in the case of NUFYP, the discrepancy between higher male and lower female numbers is accounted for by there being more direct entry female than male students to the NU undergraduate programmes. So, in the classroom, EAP TFs need to assimilate these differences among their students of age, home, income, accommodation, and ability.

Teaching Fellows

In contrast, to NUFYP students, EAP TFs come from many different countries. A native speaker is not an EAP TF job description requirement. For instance, non-native English-speaking NUFYP EAP TFs have come from, in addition to Kazakhstan, Bulgaria, France, Lebanon, Morocco, Poland, Romania, and Russia. A relevant postgraduate teaching qualification is required as the NUFYP EAP TF role is a teaching one. Although research is not required, it is welcomed. Also, there is no discrimination on the basis of age. Old age is respected in Kazakh culture. The key criteria are the ability to excel in teaching and to be in good health. Teaching is observed once a year and health is checked in a local annual medical examination. Currently, in comparison to the student cohort, there is a reverse gender imbalance in EAP TFs, with more females than males [16].

EAP TFs share open plan offices with Mathematics TFs. Such an office might have up to eleven TFs of several nationalities, for example Kazakh, Russian, American, and British. In order for *esprit de corps* to flourish in this context, adaptability is needed. Different personal preferences may seem trivial, but may be exacerbated by tiredness or stress, whether door open or door closed, window open or window closed, radiator on or radiator off, lights on or lights off, and silence or long conversations, or somewhere in-between. However, while all NUFYP EAP TFs have an office desk, they are free to work from home. Working from home became more common after the end of the pandemic as TFs had become used

to working from home during that period. In fact, in the post-pandemic period, this has led to a dichotomy of working practice between those who prefer to work from home and those who prefer to work from the office. Arguably, *esprit de corps* feels stronger among those who prefer to work from the office since they are seen and heard more often. Thus, NUFYP EAP TFs may be challenged by sharing an office with others of different nationalities, different ages, different languages, and different preferences. However, with compromise, *esprit de corps* can flourish.

EAP Materials

The NUFYP EAP course is primarily skill and task-based. That is, the content of the materials is not tested as if they were part of a geography or history course, apart from two exceptions. The first exception is the use of the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association Seventh Edition [17]. This citation and referencing style are directly assessed in a research project. The second exception is the Academic Word List (AWL) [18]. that is indirectly assessed in the same project. Furthermore, no published coursebooks are used on the NUFYP EAP course.

All the NUFYP EAP core materials are written, updated, and added to by an in-house team that draws upon open access materials that include academic journals as well as video recordings available on platforms, such as YouTube or Vimeo. These core materials are considered essential especially for new EAP TFs and adjunct EAP teachers. However, there is scope to modify these materials as long as the course objectives and learning outcomes are met. Moreover, other materials can be used with the same proviso as the modified core materials. These “other materials” give teaching fellows an opportunity to build up a personalised portfolio of their own varied reading and listening materials in the same way as professors might who are all teaching the same civil engineering or computer science course. With respect to academic reading text sources, Google Scholar Alerts ensure quick notification of recently published journal articles on varied scientific themes. With reference to listening, UCL Lunch Hour Lectures, Royal Society Lectures, and Darwin College, Cambridge Lectures are just examples of a plethora of sources of lectures presented to general audiences that are neither conference presentations to specialists nor especially written for learners needing to improve their listening and notetaking skills. The choice of a wide range of current, scientific topics enhances the likelihood that on each occasion at least some of the texts and lectures will be of interest to some NUFYP students.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the NUFYP course was taught and assessed completely online using Zoom for two academic years between 2020 and 2022. As a result of paperless lessons during the pandemic, on return to the classroom, lessons continued to be almost paperless. Exceptions included the use of hard copies of previously unseen reading texts for reading assessments. The paperless classroom is facilitated in at least two ways. First, by group emailing reading texts and questions direct to students for them to open on their laptops. By using the split screen feature, both the text and the questions can be conveniently viewed at the same time. Second, by sharing interactively both group and individual tasks through Google Docs. Both of these ways lend themselves to easy projection. Thus, a common core of NUFYP EAP materials is provided, but can be modified or even supplemented, providing that the course and learning objectives are maintained. This provision is beneficial for both new TFs and also allows longer serving TFs to build up a portfolio of individualised materials. This flexibility allows for the healthily critical preferences of NUFYP EAP TFs.

An Example

One example of how NUFYP EAP core materials might be personalised relates to the AWL. The 570 words divided into ten sub-lists might be covered over ten weeks. Supporting the Ministry of Education’s trilingual language policy, each sub-list can be divided into four columns and shared in class as a Google Doc. The first column has the English word. The second column is left blank for the word in Russian Cyrillic script. The third column is left blank for the word in Kazakh Roman script. The last column is for any form of the English word in an academic sentence. Students choose any box to work on until all 180 boxes are filled. On the eleventh week, the AWL sub-lists can be recycled by removing the English words, apart from the first letters, in the first and fourth columns. The reason for keeping the first letters is to decrease the likelihood of synonyms.

Each AWL sub-list can then be reinforced by the use of 60 flashcards divided into four sets of 15 which have Russian and Kazakh on one side and English on the other. These sets of cards are rotated round each of the four table groups of students working from Russian and Kazakh into English. A further AWL sub-list reinforcement can be done with online Kahoot!s in the public domain which test each sub-list in multiple choice format, for example [19]. Thus, AWL core materials can be personalised to increase student practice.

Classroom Management

Classroom management may be considered as the skillful ability to engage students’ interest, attention, and motivation over the whole course. A variety of micro-strategies may encourage the realisation of this challenge. Learning student names can be challenging for foreign EAP teachers. Many names will be unfamiliar and their pronunciation may not be obvious. Cardboard desk name cards may help TFs who find it difficult to learn many new names quickly. Some names may differ by only one letter, for example Adina, Amina, Alina, and Alisa. A name starting with “Zh”, for instance Zhuldyz or Zhanerke, is pronounced “j” /dʒ/. Other names have common shortened forms, for example Dinmukhamet becomes Dimash, and Sanzhar may become Sanzhik. Also, students who have longer names, such as Tanirbergen or Batyrgerey, may choose to shorten them to just Tanir and Batyr (“warrior” in Kazakh) respectively. Another advantage of the desk

name card is that students can write the name they would like to be used in class. With respect to the arrangement of moveable tables and chairs, there seems to be a consensus among NUFYP EAP TFs to arrange them in clusters of four or five with students facing each other while at the same time being able to see the projector screen and teacher. This seating arrangement facilitates small group work, for instance working on reading texts together or group notetaking of a lecture.

Attendance is included in assessment. One way of encouraging student attendance is for signatures to be taken. This also facilitates the completion of the online attendance register. Students who are absent due to illness may obtain a spravka (Russian for "health certificate") from the campus or external health center to be excused. Students are expected to have laptops. The Center for Preparatory Studies (CPS) can loan laptops for the duration of the NUFYP course. Even during the pandemic, ways were found to deliver laptops to NUFYP students in distant cities. Mobile phones can distract students in class. Telegram, Instagram, or chess apps are notably popular. Collecting phones at the beginning of class is accepted, unless a laptop is not working, or a phone needs charging, or required for some class activity, such as a Kahoot!.

A further detail is how students address their TF either in speech or by email. Some are comfortable using their teacher's first name. Others, feel more at ease with preceding the first name with a title. So, the learning of preferred names, the seating arrangement, attendance checking, laptop use, temporary phone collection, and address preferences may all contribute towards the challenge of classroom micro-management and help EAP students and TFs to flourish.

Artificial Intelligence

In the NUFYP course, artificial intelligence (AI) is being used in different ways. Two examples are the fine tuning of the research project title and checking for plagiarism. First, in the choice of research project titles, AI, such as ChatGPT or DeepSeek helps students to refine their titles. For example, a cue "create ten academic yes/no questions on the benefits and disadvantages of using AI in healthcare" provides enough choices for students to select just one more refined and focused question which itself may be further modified and agreed upon by both tutor and student. With such cues, students can search for evidence of possible benefits, for instance the use of AI to quickly analyse large quantities of medical results as well as possible AI limitations, for example the lack of empathy and human touch. Such AI application helps students to transform their titles from general to specific.

Second, AI is being used to check for plagiarism, especially in the research project. The Draftback Google Chrome Extension can be used as a preliminary plagiarism checker. This is especially useful for showing the sudden appearance of sentence chunks in the Online Writing Environment (OWE) on Moodle [20]. The number of key touches shown in Draftback is also a helpful indicator as to how much students have been working on their project. Turnitin is used as the official first plagiarism checker. If Turnitin suggests plagiarism, the current NUFYP policy is for it to be "triangulated" with two other AI websites, such as ZeroGPT or GPTZero. If there is "triangulation" in percentage plagiarism probability, students' TFs can also be consulted. Vallor [21]. referred to Sherlock Holmes and Alan Turing as examples of code breakers. Perhaps the detection of student plagiarism may be considered as a type of AI-assisted codebreaking. Vallor contends that AI is "human", not "alien", but needs to be "well-governed". Thus, the NUFYP course is trying to incorporate AI in plagiarism checking in a well-governed, human, and arguably humane, way.

Conclusion

This retrospective reflection of one Central Asian EAP foundation course highlighted its geographical, cultural, and linguistic challenges. It was reasoned that by understanding and adapting to the context, it is possible for EAP practitioners to flourish by striving for esprit de corps, personalising core materials, bringing together micro-strategies in the classroom, and channeling the creative use of AI in the genesis and completion of writing. In fact, it can be argued that these contextual challenges exist in different forms on all foundation courses and EAP practitioners can engage these and their own unique strategies to flourish.

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