

Learning English

ELT diary

University expels Chinese students over fake tests

Newcastle University in England has expelled 49 students from China and one from Taiwan after their English-language test certificates were found to be fakes.

The undergraduate and post-graduate students had started their courses in October, but university officials became suspicious last month when some of the students failed an English language assessment test. All foreign students who do not have English as their first language are required to undergo the test.

An investigation found that the students' entry qualifications were either forged or had been altered.

The university said that the students appeared to have been the victims of bogus "agents" based in either China or the UK who had been paid to submit applications on their behalf.

A spokesman for the university said: "The forgeries, mainly certificates of English language qualifications or degrees awarded by other universities, are of such high quality that they could not have been detected by the usual checks carried out by admissions officers."

The university has said that it will not withhold the fees the stu-

dents paid and will change its admissions procedures, including publishing a list of approved agents.

It warned other institutions to be on their guard. "We would strongly advise other universities to look very carefully at the systems they have in place to detect fraudulent applications," the spokesman added.

Europe's language learners getting younger, study finds

The EU is on track to achieve its strategy for a multilingual Europe, according to research that shows more children are learning languages at school and at a younger age.

The study, by Europe-wide education information monitoring organisation Eurydice, shows that the age at which students are starting to learn foreign languages has been coming down over the past 30 years, with most now beginning lessons between the ages of eight and 10.

But the study also shows that the time devoted to language teaching in primary schools remains limited, in general less than 10% of total class time, and varies considerably between countries.

Most countries are teaching two foreign languages at secondary-school level, while English is taught to 90% of all pupils across Europe.



Mercedes signs up for conversational advertising

German auto giant Mercedes-Benz has signed up with a website in China that offers free web-based English lessons. The catch for learners is that they will be tutored in the car maker's advertising message as they engage in automated conversation practice.

Canadian education publisher Lingo Media has developed a web-based learning platform that it claims allows learners to converse with virtual characters.

The advertising campaign for Mercedes's Smart Car will launch in China in May 2009. According to Lingo Media: "The user is immersed in the brand for the full three- to five-minute duration of the lesson. The advertiser's message is actually coming out of the user's mouth."

To pathway or not to pathway is study question

Curtin University in Australia has been lambasted for publicising its new English language centre with an appeal to foreign students "who want to pathway to university".

When challenged by The Western Australian newspaper, centre director David Matthews defended the use of "pathway" as a verb. "It is what many students do," he said. "They want to do English language then go into university. So they pathway into university."

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Teen talk

How to be so last year



Lindsay Clandfield

Towards the end of the year many teachers (especially Guardian Weekly readers) like to prepare a "Year in Review" news quiz. These can provide a nice, light way to finish before the holidays. However, they are only as good as the questions they contain. And all too often, the questions are just too hard, making the whole thing a bit demotivating. Here are some alternative ways of doing a quiz that should be more successful.

First of all, questions asking about names tend to be difficult. Students just can't remember them, and they aren't really that good for language practice anyway. Better to give the name and some details as part of the question, which will produce a longer answer. For example, "Who were the vice-presidential candidates in the US election?" can be made more productive if changed to "What do the Americans Sarah Palin from Alaska and Joe Biden from Delaware have in common?"

Use photos of people, events or places that were in the news this past year (eg Benazir Bhutto, Javier Bardem, Michelle Obama). Put these up around the room with big pieces of paper underneath each one. Then write all the names on the board. Students match the names and pictures, and then walk around and write information about each subject on the paper beneath the picture.

You can also make a series of multiple choice questions, but then ask students to provide the distractors (the other "wrong" answers). For example, What record did Jamaican Usain Bolt beat at the Olympics this summer?

- a) the 100 metre dash
- b) ...
- c) ...

In groups, students get a list of these, provide the distractors and then read out the question and the possible answers to test each other.

Finally, you could get the students to make a quiz themselves. Divide them into groups, and ask each student to find one question and answer as homework to bring to the next class. The groups then prepare the questions together the next day before asking and answering.

Chris Tribble searches the words of the Guardian Weekly

What we can learn from revolting students

For better or worse, almost all of the readers of this paper will have gone to one kind of school or another. However, education is not a subject that gets into the news as often as we might expect. A search through the Guardian Weekly archive (1996-2008) for some of the major political themes shows that *trade* (10,657) is mentioned most frequently, *health* (9,213) is number two, with *defence* (7,527), *education* (6,253) and *justice* (5,895) coming some way behind.

When it comes to reporting education, the topics that get the main focus are *higher*, *primary*, *local*, *further*, *secondary*, *basic* and *state*, although *health* and *sex* education are also in this top group. Education reporting comments more on the pre-university

sector with *school/s* (12,653) at the top of the list, followed by *university/ies* (9,952) and *college/s* (2,774).

The importance of school as an institution is also reflected in the number of compounds in which school figures. The top 10 of these are *schoolchildren*, *schooling*, *schoolboy/s*, *schoolteacher/s*, *schoolgirl/s*, *schoolmaster/s*, *schoolyard*, *schoolmates*, *schooldays* and *schoolroom*.

It is sad to note that although there are a similar number of occurrences of schoolboy and schoolgirl, they occur in markedly different contexts. The strongest associates of schoolgirls are *murdering* and *sex*, and those of schoolboys are *public*, *former* (as in former public schoolboy) and *death*.

The people who study in these

institutions are most frequently referred to as *student/s* (7,189) rather than as *pupil/s* (1,270), and they are reported on for a mix of good and bad news reasons. We find *pupil/s* with *star* and *brightest*, but also with *behaviour*, *numbers*, *performance* and *disruptive*. *Student/s* are associated with *non-violent*, *radicals* and *revolutionaries* but also with *loans*, *tuition fees*, *overseas* and *grants*.

When the students aren't revolting, what happens in these institutions? Little seems to have changed; when didactic methods are commented on, *teach* (698) is more frequent than *lecture* (390). There is, however, a change in the debate on content. *Creationism* and *abstinence* were not on the curriculum when I was at school.