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English Mini-Workshops

Creating an English Teaching Offer for University Staff Members

Englisch Mini-Workshops

Erstellung eines Lehrangebots für Englisch für Universitätsmitarbeiter*innen

Abstract: Immer wieder wird betont, dass unsere Hochschulen in Deutschland internationaler werden (müssen). Wir finden spannende Partnerschaften inner- und außerhalb Europas, mit denen wir interessante Projekte durchführen können, und wir bieten immer mehr Studiengänge auf Englisch an, damit ausländische Studierende die Möglichkeit haben, ihr Studium bei uns zu absolvieren. Doch dafür müssen wir an Hochschulen mit den Konsequenzen umgehen. Was ist, wenn ein Student oder eine Studentin eine Frage an das Prüfungsamt hat und das nicht auf Deutsch ausdrücken kann? Oder wenn eine Lehrperson ihre Vorlesung auf Englisch unterrichten muss, weil das ab sofort so vorgesehen ist, obwohl er oder sie bisher ausschließlich auf Deutsch unterrichtet hat? „Englisch kann ja jeder“ – nicht unbedingt. Wenn unsere Studierenden „englischer“ werden, dann müssen wir das auch. Und das ist nicht selbstverständlich. Wir müssen die Plattform dafür bieten. In diesem Artikel stellt Daniel Walker ein Lehrangebot vor, das 2022 den Preis „Gute Sprachlehre an Hochschulen“ in der Kategorie „Förderung von Handlungsorientierung und Praxisbezug“ gewonnen hat: Die English-Mini-Workshops für Hochschulangehörige.

Keywords: Englisch, Personalentwicklung, handlungsorientiert, Internationalisierung, Mitarbeitende

Abstract: It is repeated over and over again that German universities are becoming, or must become, more international. We are starting to find more and more exciting partnerships within and outside of Europe for carrying out interesting projects, and we are offering more and more degree programmes in English so that foreign students have the opportunity to study with us in Germany. But in order to do this, we have to deal with the "consequences". What if a student has a question for the examination office but can't ask it in German? Or what if a teacher has to teach their lecture in English because this is now required, even though they have only ever taught in German? It is often assumed that everyone can speak English – but that is not necessarily the case. If our students become more "English", then so must we. And that is not a given. We have to provide the platform for it. In this article, Daniel Walker writes about his most popular offer to date, which won the "Gute Sprachlehre an Hochschulen" teaching award in the category "Förderung von Handlungsorientierung und Praxisbezug": The English mini-workshops for university staff.

Keywords: English, staff development, action-orientated, internationalisation, employees

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1. Introduction

In November 2020, I began working in the Language Center (Fachsprachenzentrum) at Frankfurt University of Applied Sciences. My main goal: Create an English offer that is useful and relevant to all university staff members – professors, research assistants, administrative staff, and more (as of the year 2019, we had a total of 886 staff members at the university, so one can only assume that this number has increased since). It was already clear from day one that a survey was required to narrow down potential ideas and find out where to prioritise and what to start with.

Approximately 250 staff members participated in the survey, which asked them about their needs, wishes, and interests in learning and improving their English. One thing was confirmed: The target group is very heterogeneous. Where some expressed the need for academic English, others wanted to go “back to the basics” and learn, for example, how to write an email in English correctly. Some mentioned holding classes during the semester break would be best as they do not have the time. Others said the semester break should be avoided because that is when they go on holiday.

In search for similarities across the board, the following things became apparent: Around 50% of participants answered that they estimate their English to be at a B1-B2 level and 30% at C1-C2 (with 10% stating A1-A2 and 10% stating they

were not sure). Furthermore, participants rated various potential offers (on a scale of 1 – no interest – to 5 – very interested), including one-to-one sessions, weekly English courses, and informal offers, such as casual lunch meet-ups. The highest rated idea, with just under 70% of participants giving it a 4 or 5, was the workshop, which in the survey was defined as “single workshops on specific topics (in-person when possible), e.g. ‘Tips for presenting in English’ or ‘Writing emails in English’¹”. In addition to that, and somewhat in agreement with the idea of a workshop being a “one-off”, many staff members stated they did not have much time due to their busy work schedules. However, they are, indeed, very interested in improving their English.

With all of this in mind, the immediate thought was: Let’s try out these workshops to see how they go.

2. The Introduction of Mini-Workshops

2.1. The First Topics

Staff members wanted to practise and improve their English but time was limited. With that in mind, the first mini-workshops were developed. As mentioned above, these workshops had to be relevant to various people. The workshop concept offers a perfect opportunity to provide information on numerous topics, helping cover as many wishes and requirements as possible. At the start, the following workshops were created for the first rounds, which were held both during the semester (May - June 2021) and again in the lecture-free period (September 2021):

- Tips for Writing Emails in English (Level A2 and above)
- Tips for Presenting in English (Level B1 and above)
- Basic Principles of Academic English (Level B2 and above)
- Basic Differences between American and British English (Level B1 and above)
- Introduction to Speexx (our language learning program – in English and German)

One may notice the tentativeness of the titles, with “Tips for...” and “Basic...” always present. This was intentional. Each workshop was planned to last 90 minutes in total. As any (language) teacher knows, 90 minutes is great to dive into a topic, but it is not enough to look at a specific aspect in great detail. This was made clear through the titling: You will get tips, but we will not look at everything from

¹ All translations are by the author. The original read: “Einzelne Workshops zu bestimmten Themen (sobald möglich Präsenz), z. B. ‚Tips for presenting in English‘ oder ‚Writing emails in English‘”.

scratch (see section 4.4. for the offer that provides participants with more information on a given topic). After all, one must not forget that around 80% of survey participants stated they are at a B1-C2 level in English.

It is worth mentioning that all of the above workshops, bar “Basic Differences between American and British English”, were fully booked (at the time, there was a maximum of 15 participants) both times they were held – a clear sign that the workshop concept was immediately accepted by many.

2.2. The Development of Further Topics

After each workshop, participants were asked to take part in an anonymous survey to give feedback on a few aspects, such as the level of the workshop and the length (see 2.3 and the appendix for more information). Moreover, participants were asked if they had any further ideas for topics that would be useful and relevant to their work at the university. Based on that, different topics were developed or, at the time of writing, are currently in development:

- Small Talk in English (new in Winter Semester 21/22) – (Level A2 and above)
- Working with Numbers in English (new in Winter Semester 21/22) – (Level B1 and above)
- Academic English Vocabulary (new in Summer Semester 22) – (Level B2 and above)
- Working with Graphs in English (new in Summer Semester 22) – (Level B2 and above)
- Giving Advice in English (new in Summer Semester 22) – (Level A2 and above)
- Common Learner Errors (new in Summer Semester 22) – (Level B1 and above)

At the university, we make it clear: If somebody has an idea for a workshop (particularly one they think may be helpful for themselves and their colleagues), it is taken seriously and considered for the future. For example, we decided to give the workshops “Working with Numbers in English” and “Working with Graphs in English” as a few professors mentioned their needs and requirements in these areas for their work at the university.

2.3. Feedback

At the time of writing, seven different workshops have been held (all a different number of times, with 26 workshops in total). These are the five listed in 2.1. and the first two listed in 2.2. (Small Talk and Numbers). We have seen over 110 staff

members from 18 departments and faculties attend at least one workshop.

Here is a brief overview of the (combined) anonymous feedback on the two essential questions about the level and length of each workshop:

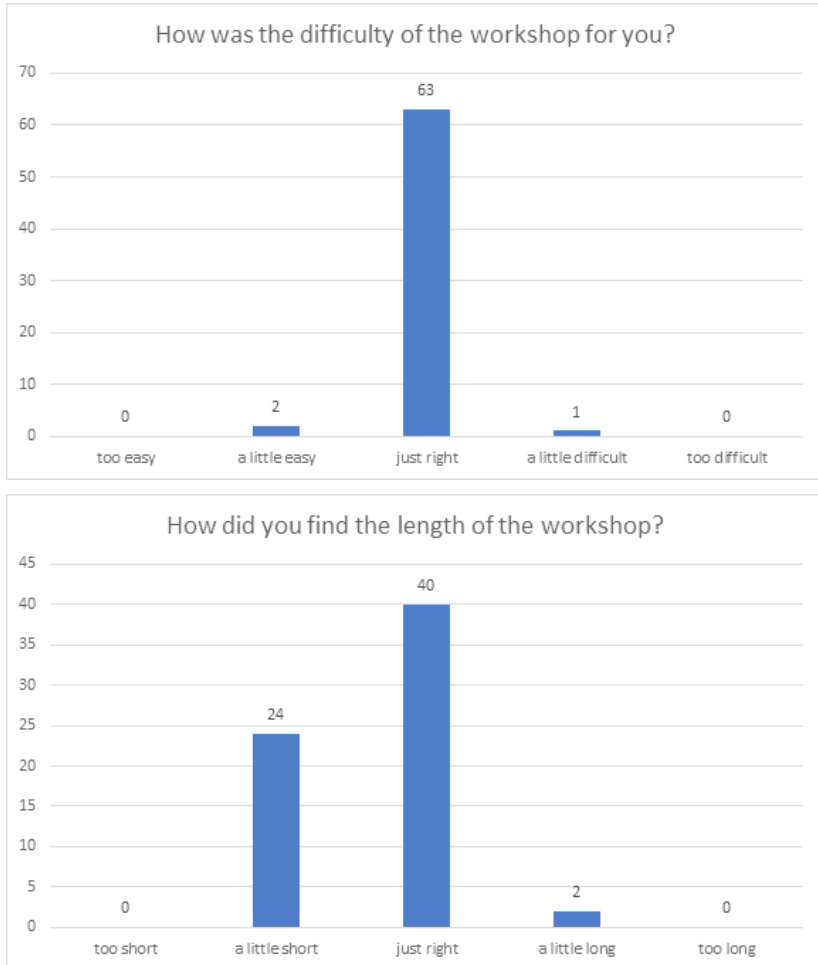


Fig. 1 and 2: Regarding the 24 comments on the workshop being “a little short”, 9 were from the first “Basic Principles of Academic English” workshop. As a result of this, the workshop was extended to 120 minutes. Furthermore, 4 of the “a little short” comments were for the workshop “Tips for Presenting in English” and 7 for “Tips for Writing Emails in English”. As a result, these topics were chosen for the first short courses, as described in section 4.4. You can find more detailed comments on the workshops in the appendix.

3. The Structure of a Mini-Workshop

Generally, where it makes sense, the workshops are divided into four parts: warm-up, presentation, over to you, and further materials. These are explained and exemplified in this section.

3.1. Warm Up

Due to the heterogeneity of the target group, it is essential first to find out what participants already know. Furthermore, as is often the case, it is nice to show participants that they, indeed, know more than they realise. Hence, a warm-up task is created to lay the foundations for the workshop and motivate participants when they realise they already know a thing or two before starting the workshop.

Example: In “Basic Principles of Academic English”, participants get to discuss what they already know about the dos and don’ts of academic writing, with a few hints to get them started (e.g. what you should avoid, such as contractions).

3.2. Presentation

In a short presentation, the instructor introduces various aspects. The instructor is open to questions and discussions throughout the presentation phase. The participants thus receive partly new input but are also provided with small reminders about things they may already know.

Example: In “Basic Differences between American and British English”, a variety of spelling differences between the two variants are presented, such as “colour” vs. “color”, as well as potentially lesser known differences like British English favouring no full stop after abbreviations, such as “Mr” or “Mrs”, and American English favouring a full stop (or, in American English, “period”).

3.3. Over to you

With the (newly learnt) information from the workshop’s presentation phase, the participants can work in small groups to test their knowledge and English skills.

Example: In “Working with Numbers in English”, participants receive a variety of mathematical equations. Not only do they have to solve the equation, but they also have to explain how they solve it – in English, of course. Meanwhile, they are asked to collect other words and phrases that can be used in a variety of different equations, such as “to expand the brackets” or “squared”/ “cubed”/ “to the power of x ”. Participants are asked to describe their method as though they were holding a lecture and explaining to students how to solve the equations.

3.4. Further Materials

According to the feedback of the further materials (as listed in the appendix), the

mini-workshops can be “perfectly integrated into my work schedule”². Nevertheless, there is only so much one can deal with in a 90-minute session. Hence, different materials are made available on our learning management system (Moodle). These materials include further tasks and/or quizzes, valuable links to websites or videos, and lists of valid words and phrases discussed in the workshop. That way, participants always have access to materials when needed or have time to revise, even months after the workshop.

Example: In “Tips for Writing Emails in English”, participants can choose one of five fake emails on Moodle and write a reply or choose another email they would like to reply to. They then email it to the instructor, who gives feedback. That way, the knowledge gained from the workshop remains action-orientated and meaningful for the person and their work at the university.

4. Further English Offers for University Staff

As described above, the mini-workshops are the most popular English offer for staff members to date. Nevertheless, there are other offers available that help cover further requirements. This section aims to briefly summarise the different offers currently available to all staff members at our university, perhaps as inspiration to anybody reading who is currently developing an English offer for staff at their university. The offers are listed in the order they were created and introduced.

4.1. Café Lingua

In the survey mentioned at the start of this article, participants were also asked which of the skills they feel they would like to, or indeed need to, focus on reading, writing, listening, speaking in dialogues, or speaking in monologues. The clear favourite, with over 90% of participants rating it a 4 or 5, was speaking in dialogues (a close second was speaking in monologues, with around 80% rating it a 4 or 5). Hence, Café Lingua was created – an informal offer to which anybody can come along and talk about a predetermined topic in English. It has also proved to be an excellent networking platform between departments that otherwise may not have much contact with each other. Café Lingua takes place twice a month, and any tricky words or phrases we come across are summarised on a specific page on Confluence (an online tool we use for communication and collaboration at the university).

4.2. Lecture Visits

Lecture visits are theoretically the “simplest” of offers to take part in at our university because participants do not have to do anything extra outside of their busy

² The original reads: „perfekt in den Arbeitstag zu integrieren“.

work schedules. A lecture visit sees someone from the Language Center visit an English lecture, seminar, talk, or similar, sit in the corner of the room (or screen), and write down feedback on the person's English. This can be about pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, fluency, or even any used slides or materials. This idea was created with the problem in mind that staff members do not have much time to take up any English offers. They have to give the lecture anyway, so there is no extra work in the long run.

One piece of feedback from a lecture visit in 2021 read: "[...] Anyway, English lectures don't make me nervous now." This, for me, was a clear sign that sometimes we are not dealing with staff members who cannot speak English but rather who are worried and nervous about speaking English. Hence, to a certain extent, it is about building the confidence to speak English freely in a given work scenario.

4.3. Drop-In Session

Simply put, the drop-in session is an English office hour for all staff members. No matter how large or small the topic or problem is, they can come and discuss it to get feedback or advice. Examples of staff who have attended the drop-in session to date include a colleague who wanted to quickly check an automated email she had written in English for her upcoming absence and three professors who came along to practise their slides for an upcoming lecture.

4.4. Short Courses

As mentioned in section 2.3., some participants noted that the workshops "Tips for Presenting in English" and "Tips for Writing Emails in English" were a little too short and that they would have liked to have gone into more detail. From that, the idea of short courses came about. At the time of writing, a short course consists of six 60-minute sessions, either once or twice a week. The first two short courses were held in March 2022 with the topics "Presenting" and "Writing Emails" and allowed for more time to receive more input and practice. Each course had a maximum limit of 12 participants, and, respectively, each course saw 15 and 11 people sign up. It is therefore planned to offer more short courses in the future with different topics depending on the feedback from the workshops and the number of participants at each workshop which indicates which topics are of high interest to us.

4.5. Coffee Lectures

Coffee lectures were introduced in the summer semester of 2022 to give small tips about specific aspects, such as false friends and commonly mispronounced words in English. Although the didactic element, as it should be, stands at the forefront, the coffee lectures were also introduced to get more people interested in learning

and improving their English and in making them aware of our other offers. There were six coffee lectures in the first round, with an average of 10 sign-ups per workshop (“Commonly Mispronounced Words in English” was particularly well visited, with a total of 19 sign-ups). At just 20 minutes long each, the first coffee lectures were placed at times when staff members should have time (e.g. the lunch break or first thing in the morning). Further coffee lectures will therefore be planned in the future, with some staff members already suggesting additional topics.

5. Concluding Remarks

Generally speaking, the mini-workshops have been an enormous success. What makes them so unique is the “building block” structure, in that staff members can pick and choose which workshops they would like to attend depending on their needs and requirements, and work schedules. Due to the workshops being held one at a time, it is possible to edit or change something where needed quickly. One example, as previously mentioned, was realising that the workshop “Basic Principles of Academic English” was too short at a length of 90 minutes and so it was increased to 120 minutes.

As for the future of the mini-workshops: As mentioned above, other topics are currently under development, and the list of other wishes from staff members for more topics is slowly growing (“Working with Statistics in English” is the most recent addition to the list). Due to their flexibility, the mini-workshops could appear in other contexts, for different target groups like students, or even for other languages (I have already received a couple of requests about whether we could offer them in Spanish).

What we must remember: English is not a given. Although internationalisation at universities is indeed interesting and exciting, we cannot forget that we need to support all aspects that need support – including supporting our staff members when it comes to learning, improving, and maintaining their English skills. This ultimately reflects on our students’ experiences as they will be the ones who have problems if they cannot get the information they require in English, whether that be knowledge from a lecture or a simple organisational question from the examination office.

To conclude, I hope this paper has inspired those reading to at least start to consider ways in which their university can provide support when it comes to their staff members and their English skills, particularly as the demand for English rises with each passing semester.

Daniel Walker, originally from the north of England, is the coordinator of English offers for staff members at Frankfurt University of Applied Sciences, which he started after completing his master's degree in Language Technology and Foreign Language Teaching at JLU Gießen. His main task is to create and implement a variety of English offers that are useful and relevant to all staff members, including professors, research assistants and administrative staff. Alongside his role at the Frankfurt UAS, Daniel works as a freelance editor, proofreader and English teacher. His main interest lies in the creation of teaching materials, including writing tasks and texts, designing appealing layouts and taking part in recordings for listening exercises as an English native speaker. As for teaching, he has taught at JLU Gießen and the University of Kassel, and he currently teaches English at the Goethe University in Frankfurt.

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Appendix

Here is a collection of feedback received for the workshops that have taken place so far. None of have been translated and any typing or grammatical errors have not been corrected:

Tips for Presenting in English:

- thank you so much, I enjoyed the workshop
- war gut und hat einige Tips gegeben
- Eigentlich habe ich kaum Zeit für einen Kurs, aber die Session gerade war so kurzweilig, unterhaltsam und hat richtig Spaß gemacht, dass ich davon mehr brauche: D
- it was very interesting, maybe other topics like advisement would be possible

Basic Differences between American and British English:

- Unterhaltsam, gutes Tempo, perfekt in den Arbeitstag zu integrieren
- Sehr relevantes Thema mit vielen Fallstricken, daher gerne mehr davon!
- das Angebot sollte erweitert werden
- an regelmäßige Workshops bin ich sehr interessiert, aber mit unterschiedlichen Themen
- Es war super! Kurz und Hilfreich! Die Materialien in Moodle sind top vorbereitet!

Basic Principles of Academic English:

- sehr schön mit den kleinen Übungen!
- It was really energising (in the early morning :)), funny and very helpful session!
- Really great content
- Die Lehrperson hat den Kurs interaktiv und mit wichtigen Inhalten gestaltet (Grammar Input highly appreciated!)
- Ein absolut hervorragendes Angebot mit einem hervorragenden Lehrer!

Tips for Writing Emails in English:

- wunderbar interaktiv, tolle Aufbereitung des Materials auf Moodle, ansprechender Kurs und humorvoller und gut verständlicher Kursleiter
- Ich finde es gut, dass wir die Beispielsätze/Material mitnehmen können
- Der Workshop hat viel Spaß gemacht und war sehr informativ
- Gut vorbereitet und klar strukturiert. Wichtig wäre, dass uns die Inhalte des Moodlekurses längerfristig zur Verfügung stehen. Zur Vertiefung und zum Nachschlagen bei Bedarf.

Small Talk in English (created by our freelance teacher, William Christopher McCullen):

- sehr angenehme Atmosphäre; da der Workshop wegen Corona online stattfand, würde ich gern zu einem späteren Zeitpunkt einen weiteren in Präsenz machen
- Sehr guter Kurs und sehr gute Begleitmaterialien!

Working with Numbers in English:

- Mal wieder ein sehr guter Kurs eines sehr guten Dozenten!
- Tolles Format, toller Lehrender. Es hat Spaß gemacht! Danke dafür.