

PRELIM 2

Belarus: BeINATE (Belarusian National Association of Teachers of English) with **Norwich Study Centre**

August 2022

Project background

Partnership overview		
Course overview	ETA partner	BeINATE Belarus
	UKI partner	Norwich Study centre
	Course length	9 weeks
	Number of groups/cohorts	2
Participant profile	Total number of CPs	113
	Language level(s)	B2 – C1 / A2 – B1
	CPs' teaching context	Secondary / Primary
Mode of delivery	Synchronous platforms used	Zoom
	Synchronous session length	1.5 hours
	Synchronous session frequency	Weekly
	Asynchronous workload	1 hour per week
Course content	Language development focus	Classroom instructions / scaffolding / modelling
	Methodology focus	Motivation and creativity
	Technology focus	N/A

Description of the partners

The Belarusian National Association of Teachers of English (BeINATE) was founded in 1994 by the teachers of Minsk State Linguistic University and UK partners. It is a non-profit organization uniting teachers of English throughout Belarus. Currently, it includes 130 members from six regions of the country and from the city of Minsk. Members participate in events organized by the Association and partners. The Association aims to give Belarusian teachers an opportunity to improve their professional skills, to develop personally, and to improve their English. BeINATE is a member of IATEFL and also cooperates with the British Council, TESOL, and leading publishing houses both in Belarus and abroad.

Norwich Study Centre (NSC) is a private language school established in 2000, with a core team of seven full-time academic staff and five administrative staff, offering the following courses:

- General English, exam preparation (IELTS, Cambridge, OET)
- Specialist ESP courses for adults (English for work)
- General English courses for young learners (11-17 years old)
- Intercultural exchange courses for adults and young learners
- Professional development for overseas teachers of English

The school provides courses face-to-face and online.

Key features of the context

Course participant (CP) profile:

- 112 female teachers, one male
- 86% work at secondary schools
- 80% located in towns or cities

Other key contextual features:

- All CPs have access to the internet at home
- 93% of CPs work in a team of two or more English teachers
- 84% of CPs rarely speak English outside their school

Outline of the course and rationale

The goal of the course was to provide an opportunity for professional development among teachers less confident about using English in the classroom. However, level testing revealed that 105 CPs had a B2 or C1 English level, while in needs analysis just under a 100 CPs stated that they were confident about using English in the classroom. Eight CPs tested at A2 or B1 level, and all reported that they were not very confident about using English in most classroom contexts.

Needs analysis also revealed that the most common objective among CPs (98.1%) was to exchange ideas about motivating students and making lessons more creative. Consequently, NSC decided that its PRELIM course would emphasise these areas. To accommodate the large number of CPs, the eight A2 and B1 level CPs would attend a nine-week course focusing on motivation and creativity, but which would also allow for emerging language needs to be met. In addition, there would be six higher level groups, each attending a three-week course, with two groups running concurrently over the nine weeks.

Further needs analysis showed that CPs wanted 1.5 hours of synchronous classes and some asynchronous homework each week. CPs also expressed a preference to have these sessions at between 6 and 8pm. Both CPs and NSC teachers were familiar with the Zoom platform, so this was chosen for synchronous sessions. Edmodo was used to create a hub for sharing materials and for responses to reflection tasks, while Viber enabled direct communication between CPs and NSC staff.

Project findings

Working in partnership

NSC and BeINATE collaborated successfully throughout the planning stage, quickly establishing a schedule of weekly meetings. During meetings, it was possible to agree timelines for the completion of tasks, including level testing and needs analysis, as well as selecting course delivery platforms.

Key learning points

- ETAs and UK partners are often very busy with work outside the project. It is important to commit to a regular timetable of meetings and to create timelines for completing different tasks.
- ETAs have a broader understanding of local context, so can make a valuable contribution to the development of tools for needs analysis and level testing.

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- In course development, ETAs may be able to share teaching materials familiar to CPs. This can be helpful in informing course design.

Working within the CoP

Because NSC had not participated in PRELIM 1, it was helpful to gain insight from those institutions which had. UK partners also benefitted from sharing ideas about the merits of different synchronous and asynchronous course delivery platforms and methods for gathering data. Neil Harris at CELT language school was particularly helpful to NSC at this stage, offering additional suggestions outside the CoP session.

The structure of CoP sessions, utilising breakout rooms to discuss different topics, made it possible for UK partners to focus on areas most relevant to them. Using Google Docs to record suggestions and ideas from each focus group also provided a useful resource beyond the duration of CoP sessions.

Key learning points

- Active involvement in the CoP sessions enables UK partners to develop relationships and share ideas for best practice at different stages throughout the project.
- Reaching out to other UK partners who may have relevant past experience saves time and provides valuable input.
- A project like PRELIM 2 can be stressful. Participation in CoP sessions helped UK partners to anticipate problems and also to seek out solutions to existing challenges.
- One-to-one meetings with NILE consultants were essential in providing feedback and advice with regard to the course timetable and course design.

Designing/delivering the course

Because needs analysis had revealed that CPs wished to focus on motivation and creativity, course design for the three-week course emphasised these two areas. BeINATE also gave NSC access to Belarusian coursebooks, highlighting a lack of visuals in teaching materials. As a result, the following plan for the three-week course was developed:

Week 1: Motivation

Week 2: Using visuals in the classroom

Week 3: Adapting the coursebook

Materials for the course were designed by NSC course tutors and drew on a range of audio and visual resources. Each session utilised a lesson from a Belarusian coursebook, making the sessions relevant to CPs' teaching practice. Reflection tasks also allowed CPs to reflect on their own coursebooks in light of each of the synchronous sessions. This was motivating for students and stimulated lively discussion in all sessions.

For the first two groups, attendance on the course was almost 100%. However, midway through groups three and four, attendance tailed off considerably, coinciding with the outbreak of war in Ukraine. From

this point onwards, CPs were often preoccupied and, in several cases, stated that they felt less able to focus on the course. Participation in groups five and six remained low, with CPs also stating that they were distracted by the news.

The nine-week course included the sessions on motivation, using visuals and adapting the coursebook, but sessions were adapted to incorporate additional focus on scaffolding language, setting up activities and modelling tasks. Although NSC had a clear idea of subjects to cover in subsequent weeks, this was reviewed weekly to accommodate emerging needs.

From the outset, attendance in the nine-week group was low with only three regular attendees. However, these participants thrived in a smaller group and showed significant progress in activities which allowed for the practice of classroom language.

Key learning points

- NSC and BeINATE did not devise any system by which CPs had to commit to attending every session of the course. A scheme of this type might help to ensure full attendance throughout the course.
- Initially, NSC tutors tried to avoid any mention of the conflict in Ukraine. However, it was immediately apparent that some CPs wanted space to share their thoughts. Engaging with, rather than avoiding a difficult topic, defused tension and promoted trust within the group.

The online learning platform and connectivity

Zoom was effective as a primary platform for course delivery, with the majority of CPs already familiar with using the platform in an educational context. However, there were some challenges in sending out Zoom invitations for each session with these not being received by some email domains.

Using Edmodo as a platform for asynchronous study had limited value. It was a challenge for NSC administrative staff to get CPs signed up to the PRELIM 2 page and then into correct groups. As with the Zoom invitations, many invites to join the Edmodo page were not received by certain email domains. Consequently, some CPs uploaded their reflection task to Edmodo whereas others emailed it to their course tutor.

Viber was selected as a platform for direct communication between CPs and NSC staff. However, in the first week, the Viber accounts for each tutor were blocked once groups reached a certain size. From then on, CPs were advised to email the NSC administrative team to address any issues. This system was effective throughout the project.

Key learning points

- All CPs should be asked to use the same email domain, for example, Gmail. This minimises the likelihood of there being issues with CPs not being able to sign up for different course delivery platforms.

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- It is easier to use platforms that CPs are familiar with. While platforms like Edmodo are effective when up and running, it is a challenge to get CPs signed up to a new platform and to use it with confidence. Familiar platforms like Facebook have an advantage in this respect.
 - Before asking CPs to sign up to multiple platforms, it is important to consider whether the platform has real benefits. Email may be a simple alternative in the absence of a shared messaging service like WhatsApp.

Course outcomes

Because the higher group courses were only three weeks long, there was no test element at the end of the course. Instead, CPs were invited to complete a feedback form in which they were asked to reflect on how the course had impacted their teaching. Of the 75 CPs who attended the entire course, 39 completed the questionnaire. 38 of these reported that the course had been effective in helping them to deliver more creative and motivating lessons, while 34 stated that they intended to use visuals more often in their classes. Similarly, 34 CPs reported that they felt more confident in designing tasks and questions for visuals. A further 33 CPs stated that they intended to use some of the ideas for adapting the coursebook when preparing lessons for their own classes. The positive impact of the higher level course was also evidenced in numerous statements made by CPs in the feedback questionnaire:

“Mostly I enjoyed being able to share experience with all the other engaged teachers, get acquaintances, being able to communicate with them, estimate my progress and set my goals for the future”

“Visuals make our lesson more creative and interesting, develop critical thinking of our students. I have already used some activities not only among my students but also I have shared some ideas with my colleagues while managing teacher training course for young teachers of English.”

“I really enjoyed the last part - when we had to work with real lessons materials and discuss different ways of adapting, changing them according to the level of our classes and aims.”

Because there were only three participants on the lower level nine-week course, feedback was completed via a class discussion at the end of each three-week period of the course. All three CPs reported that the course had been effective in increasing their confidence when using English in the classroom. This was also evidenced by CPs’ achievement in the practical tasks completed in live sessions.

Emergent learning

The PRELIM 2 project provided an opportunity for NSC academic and administrative staff to work closely on a project, through to its completion. As well as adding value to NSC staff and their roles, this experience gave participating staff an insight into the challenges faced by their colleagues, and consequently had a unifying effect which has continued beyond the life of the project.

Working alongside the course manager, course tutors showed a flair for designing materials which NSC hopes to utilise on future courses. Meanwhile, the course administrator showed an aptitude for solving logistical and technical problems throughout the project creating confidence that NSC is able to effectively deliver projects of this type.

On a personal level, participating staff found the experience of working on the PRELIM 2 project valuable for their professional development:

“The PRELIM 2 project gave me an excellent opportunity to work collaboratively on course design, something I had never done before” (Emma, course tutor)

“As an English teacher this was an excellent opportunity to branch out creatively and experience a new and challenging aspect of professional development” (Renee, course tutor)

“Participating in the PRELIM 2 project gave me a unique opportunity to collaborate with colleagues on the academic side in a much closer way than I have before. I was able to help tackle the technological and logistical problems that a project of this size and nature presented” (Emily, course administrator)