



Specialist Language Courses



Europe's first OET-accredited
Premium Provider

CASE STUDY:

OET PREPARATION FOR BUCKINGHAMSHIRE HEALTHCARE NHS TRUST

Nursing Group
Programme

The Occupational English Test (OET) was recognised by the NMC in November 2017 as an official assessment of whether an international nurse has the right English language skills to practice safely and effectively in the UK.

OET is a healthcare-specific English language test that assesses the language proficiency of healthcare professionals from 12 professions, including nurses. It differs from general or academic tests in that it uses real communication scenarios that nurses will experience in the healthcare workplace.

Background

In May 2018, Specialist Language Courses (SLC) was commissioned by Stoke Mandeville Hospital, part of Buckinghamshire Healthcare NHS Trust, to prepare a group of overseas-trained nurses to take the Occupational English Test (OET). This was so they could achieve the score stipulated by the NMC to demonstrate they had the appropriate English language skills to register as nurses in the UK.

There were eight nurses in the group, all of whom had been in the UK for at least a year, coming from a variety of countries: India, Italy, Portugal, Romania and Croatia. Some of the group had previously attended IELTS preparation courses provided by the Trust and delivered by a local teacher. However, none had achieved the scores required by the NMC to register i.e. a band 7.0 in the four papers; Listening, Reading, Writing and Speaking.

In November 2017, the NMC announced that it would accept OET, a test of English for Healthcare in addition to IELTS, a test of Academic English. The Trust then evaluated OET with the advice of SLC and decided it was a suitable test for its nurses. It then arranged with SLC to set up a pilot group to prepare for the test.

Phase 1: Level Assessment

Initially, the Trust conducted an assessment phase to bring a coherent group of nurses together. SLC tested the English language level of around 20 overseas-trained nurses at the Trust, all of whom needed to meet the NMC language requirements to register in the UK. The eight eventually selected for the tuition programme had a level of mid- or high-B2 in the four skills of listening, reading, writing and speaking.

This level refers to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), used by language professionals around the world to assess language skills. Mid- to high-B2 is more commonly called an upper-intermediate level and is equivalent to C – C+ in OET or 6.0 – 6.5 in IELTS. The NMC requirements of B in OET or 7.0 in IELTS is the next level up – C1 on the CEFR or advanced level English. To go from a B2 to a C1 level typically requires around 300 hours of input (teaching and self-study).

Phase 2: Training

A 4-month programme was agreed with the Trust. This consisted of 120 hours' tuition in SLC's online classroom, delivered over 12 weeks at 2 hours every weekday. This was supported by two online courses, namely Reach OET B Nursing (50 hours), focusing on OET test techniques and strategies, and B2 General English (50 hours), focusing on consolidating general language skills, vocabulary and grammar. Participants were also given plenty of homework and test practice throughout the course.

The course covered the four skills papers in equal measure. Mock tests were given at mid- and end-points, with individual tutorials given to go through the results and discuss personal learning points. Each nurse followed individual learning plans throughout the course.

5 out of 8 achieved Grade B in 4 papers

62.5%

Attendance was good with the Trust allowing participants to leave their shifts early to attend, and the teacher was pleased with the attitude and application shown by all the learners. Homework completion was excellent and there was clear progress from all the nurses. Weekly reports on all aspects of the course were sent to the Trust, so any potential issues were able to be addressed quickly.

When analysing progress, however, the SLC team could see that quicker advances were being made in the receptive skills elements of OET – Reading and Listening – than the productive skills elements of Writing and Speaking. The course was adapted accordingly.

The OET test was booked two weeks after the course finished, so giving the nurses time to review and revise the work they had done. SLC provided exam mentoring during this time to those who requested it.

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“The nurses were highly motivated and were happy to be working on a test of Healthcare English. Not only did it seem more relevant, but it meant they were also able practise outside the classroom which improved their progress.”

Dan, SLC OET Trainer

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“The Writing test in particular has been a challenge for OET candidates across the board. Nurses have to select information from a set of case notes, not all of which are relevant, and then write a letter using a more formal style than they are used to.”

Bethan Edwards, SLC Academic Director

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Taking the Test

Like many high-stakes tests, taking OET can be both challenging and stressful for candidates. Sitting the Listening, Reading and Writing papers in one morning with only a short break between them can prove exhausting, especially as the Writing paper is the third one. Then the time of the Speaking test varies, as interviews are conducted throughout the rest of the day. A candidate may be examined very soon after the lunch break on the one hand, or wait until the end of the day, on the other.

The Results

Of the eight candidates, three passed all four papers first time, one of these following a re-mark of her Writing test, which was refunded by OET. Of the other five, three failed the Writing paper only, while two failed the Writing and the Reading. So very close.

The latter two then re-took the OET at the next sitting and passed. Knowing what to expect on the day seems to have helped. So, five out of eight passed and are in the process of registering with the NMC, although the two Indian nurses also need to take an Observed Structured Clinical Examination (OSCE). All eight nurses remain working at the Trust.

And the other three? As they failed Writing only, the Trust is supporting them to take a short OET Writing course with SLC before taking the test again. Everyone feels they have strong chances of passing this time. This Case Study will up-dated once we have their results.

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“We've been delighted with SLC's support for our nurses. It's clear from the nurses' feedback that the tuition they received was of a very high standard and gave them the best possible chance of passing the OET. The on-line teaching platform clearly works really well. SLC head office staff are always responsive and flexible..”

Paul Martin, Workforce Strategy Manager, Buckinghamshire Healthcare NHS Trust

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Lessons Learnt

Following an extensive review of the results and feedback from the participants, their teacher and the SLC programme manager, the Trust have commissioned further courses. The next courses have been set up to integrate the following learning points:

- Tutoring of 150 hours, so an additional 30 hours to allow extra focus on the Writing paper in particular.
- Mock tests taken earlier in the course at weeks 5 and 10 to allow more targeted mentoring where appropriate.
- Reviews with the Trust at these points to highlight any specific areas of concern, adjust the course accordingly and individualise inputs where necessary
- An understanding that the first sitting may be a shock for some, so building in a second sitting into the Trust's thinking for those who perform below par.



"In my opinion, SLC classes were very helpful to understand how OET is structured and what aspects of my English I should improve. They were especially beneficial for medical vocabulary and for the writing task. Since I was working Monday to Friday, I found that having classes every other day would be better than everyday. Our teacher was always keen to help and the platform had several tools that allowed us to discuss and share documents without leaving our room."


Course participant, passed at first attempt



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