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Evaluating co-production as a guiding philosophy for EAP teacher training course development

Diana Mazgutova [a,b,*], Tineke Brunfaut [b], Kamola Muradkasimova [c], Rano Khodjieva [c], Gulhayo Qobilova [d], Aziza Yunusova [e]

[a] University of Leeds, School of Education, Leeds, LS2 9JT, United Kingdom
[b] Lancaster University, Department of Linguistics and English Language, Lancaster, LA1 4YL, United Kingdom
[c] Uzbekistan State World Languages University, Department of English Philology, Tashkent, 1000138, Uzbekistan
[d] University of World Economy and Diplomacy, Department of English Language, Tashkent, 100007, Uzbekistan
[e] Bukhara State University, English Linguistics Department, Bukhara, 200118, Uzbekistan

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ABSTRACT

This paper considers the research philosophy of *co-production* for use in the field of EAP, where it has been little utilised as a guiding principle for research and development projects. The central question to be addressed is the appropriacy of co-production in a specific setting, and the challenges and benefits it brings to the research process. For projects situated in settings that are relatively unfamiliar to professional researchers, co-production provides a promising framework to i) ensure diversity of contextually appropriate perspectives, ii) engender collaboration and egalitarianism, iii) build capacity for action, and iv) engage with and bring together the community to work towards a common goal.

We explored the potential of co-production through a project aiming to improve EAP teaching quality in tertiary education in Uzbekistan. The project was designed and implemented by one UK-based and four Uzbekistan-based team members who trained tertiary-level teachers to better instruct EAP, and it successfully reached approximately 300 teaching professionals across Uzbekistan. We detail how co-production brought value to the project but also ways in which it could not be fully implemented. We intend this paper to be an introduction to the application of co-production, through which others in EAP can explore its exciting possibilities.

1. Introduction

Co-production – which involves a range of stakeholders working together on equal terms to decide, create, deliver or monitor collective solutions, services, or projects – is increasingly utilised in academia (see e.g., Bell & Pahl, 2018; Campbell et al., 2016). Campbell et al. state that co-production "blurs the line between pure and applied research" (2016, p.13). Thus, while characterised as a "research philosophy" (e.g., Banks et al., 2018), co-production's imperative to action means that its principles can, and are, applied to projects which co-produce that which might not traditionally be considered wholly 'research', such as the design and implementation of courses or training programs (see e.g., Cameron et al., 2018, p. 71). So far, few applications of co-production, which directly reference it as their guiding principle, have been reported for the field of Language Education, or English for Academic Purposes (EAP).

* Corresponding author. University of Leeds, School of Education, Leeds, LS2 9JT, United Kingdom.
E-mail address: d.mazgutova@leeds.ac.uk (D. Mazgutova).

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Co-production may be beneficial to EAP as it brings a flexible set of precepts for the elaboration of projects emanating from and embedded within the communities that will be the beneficiaries of the knowledge they produce. This is likely to bring about contextually appropriate, sustainable and transformative research-informed EAP practice, through egalitarian knowledge exchange and production between a range of EAP stakeholders. The purpose of this article is to reflect and report on the opportunities and constraints of co-production in language education – with a focus here on EAP teacher training, to provide grounded insights into a co-produced course development process, and hopefully, inspire others to incorporate co-production into their practices.

1.1. Defining Co-Production

Co-production is a *philosophy* that accepts and draws equally on both the *natural* and the *socially constructed* in the search for knowledge (Jasanoff, 2004). The first documented usage of the term 'co-production', and a clear example of its utility, comes from work describing how law enforcement needs to work collaboratively with the community it keeps watch over to be maximally effective (Parks et al., 1981). Policing without the consent of, or without information exchange with *the community* is a difficult task, much like teaching a class would be in the absence of these factors. There are multiple understandings of *co-production* (Banks et al., 2018) and its methodological implications and practical applications are not always entirely agreed upon (Miller and Wyborn, 2020). However, certain clearly distinguishable threads run through much of what is termed *co-production*, as clarified below.

Among the descriptions of co-production, Miller and Wyborn (2020) characterise it as a philosophy as involving: i) inclusivity and diversity in participation, ii) flat group power hierarchies, iii) knowledge production as a political action, and iv) engagement with stakeholders for knowledge to be accepted and used. Similarly, Banks et al. (2018) define co-production as: i) collaborative groups which value a diversity of voices, ii) helping to create communities of place, iii) having consideration of identity, iv) capacity building for action, and v) striving for social change. With direct relevance to co-production between academics and the wider community, Campbell et al. (2016) describe co-production as entailing: i) mutual respect, ii) no hierarchy of forms of knowledge, iii) fuzzy boundaries between co-production group members, and iv) a focus on action rather than just analysis. Clearly, these three descriptions have more in common than not, but there are subtle differences in focus. For example, Campbell et al. (2016) do not push the political angle of co-production as strongly as the other two sources, while Banks et al. (2018) focus more on the facets of co-production concerning community and identity. These divergences might be explained by the idea that co-production is not a fully-fledged theory (Jasanoff, 2004) or strictly defined methodology (Banks et al., 2018; Miller & Wyborn, 2020); rather it is a philosophy or 'meta-methodology' (Campbell et al., 2016), underpinned by some or all of the abovementioned concerns.

1.2. Co-production in language education

In the sphere of language education, the term *co-production* has been, until recently, little utilised; however, the field is replete with manifestations of some of the key aspects of co-production. Hanks (2021) presents a unifying framework for *practitioner research*, a *family* of methodologies commonly implemented in language education research comprising *Reflective Practice*, *Exploratory Practice* and *Action Research*. Hanks describes and contrasts these methodologies and delineates co-production, on some level, as a theme running through *Exploratory Practice* (see Hanks, 2019 for an overview) and *Action Research*. For example, Burns (1999) states that the original goal of action research was to "bring about change in social situations as a result of group problem-solving and collaboration" (p.12). Consoli and Dikilitaş (2021) furthermore argue that "partnerships of social educational action and research practice are the sole path for meaningful impact that may benefit all" (p.4). Additionally, three of the central principles of *Exploratory Practice* – i.e., involve everybody as practitioners developing their own understandings; work to bring people together in a common enterprise; and work cooperatively for mutual development (Allwright & Hanks, 2009) – relate to bringing together a diversity of perspectives to work for the common good. These ideas chime strongly with those from the co-production literature above. However, co-production - as a *meta-methodology* - is considered to "transcend disciplinary boundaries" (Campbell et al., 2016, p. 34) and generalise to all the social sciences and beyond. This makes co-production a useful framework to apply to projects in Language Education that go beyond the classroom.

1.3. An example of Co-production

This paper reports on and critically evaluates the process and outcomes of the *co-production* and implementation of an in-service teacher training course for EAP teachers in Uzbekistan. The course was co-produced by a team of four Uzbekistan-based EAP lecturers and one UK-based scholar, working collaboratively without a strict power hierarchy and sharing knowledge and perspectives.[1] The objective of the teacher training course the team co-developed was to improve knowledge and practice of EAP writing and its teaching across universities in Uzbekistan. This paper reflects upon several aspects of that project, specifically: i) needs assessment, ii) developing materials, iii) development of academic language skills, and iv) professional development of EAP lecturers in the context of a co-produced project.

[1] A further UK-based scholar acted as a sounding board and helpline for the team as a whole, while not being a direct part of the co-production team.

2. Innovative practice: the teacher training course development

The co-production reported in this paper focused on implementing an inclusive, collaborative, egalitarian, community- and capacity-building project with a strong stakeholder engagement component which strived for social change. The aim was to improve the quality of academic English teaching in Uzbek Universities. In recent decades, English has become the *lingua franca* language of science with more than 90% of indexed natural science articles being published in English (Di Bitetti & Ferreras, 2017). However, a 2010 survey of language use in central Asia (Aminov et al., 2010) found that only 1% of students, teachers, professors, and public servants in Uzbekistan used English in their professional lives or read articles in English. Furthermore, a World Bank, 2016 study showed that only 347 scientific journal articles originated from Uzbekistan in 2013, which is substantially lower, per capita, than for many other comparable low- and middle-income countries. This situation may be partially explained by low levels of academic English proficiency in Uzbek universities.

The project was not overtly concerned with political action or identity, two common themes in co-production, as these were not considered relevant to the pragmatic goals of the project (i.e., to improve EAP teaching in Uzbek universities). In fact, in some contexts, including Uzbekistan, an overtly political focus would be potentially detrimental to gaining the permissions required to undertake projects. This study can nevertheless be understood as co-production for two main reasons. Firstly, the standing of co-production as a 'philosophy' rather than a structured methodology was felt to permit the team more flexibility in implementing a collaborative project in the specific context. Secondly, the co-production philosophy meshed closely with the guiding principles of the ESRC Global Challenges Research Fund Postdoctoral Fellowship project which funded it and required in-country capacity building and a push for social change, aside from the production of knowledge. Ethical approval for the co-production project was granted by Lancaster University's FASS-LUMS Research Ethics Committee.

2.1. Stakeholders

The co-production team consisted of five female EAP professionals with varying levels and types of expertise in the field of EAP (teaching, teacher training, and/or research). One team member lectured in language education and teacher training at a British university, although she was also an Uzbek national who had studied up to tertiary level in the Uzbek system. She held a doctoral agree in Linguistics, obtained from a British university, and specialised in EAP – more particularly, EAP materials design and research. The other four team members were Uzbekistan-based and came from three universities in different regions of the country (two from the same institution but different departments). They held Masters degrees in English Linguistics and English Philology. Among these, one was an experienced EAP teacher trainer with expertise in teacher training materials design and the teaching of EAP writing, in particular. Another was an experienced EAP teacher and well-connected within the Uzbek English teaching community through her membership of the Uzbekistan Teachers of English Association. A further team member was also an experienced EAP teacher, with expertise in EAP materials design. This team member furthermore specialised in language testing and assessment, and in this manner had expertise in instrument design. The final team member was a more early career EAP teacher (<5 years' experience), but, having graduated relatively recently, able to bring in a student perspective into the project. The team represented a range of ages: one was mid-20s, two early 30s, one late 30s and one mid-40s.

2.2. Co-production process

As mentioned above, the project aimed to improve the quality of academic English teaching in Uzbekistan. Co-production was considered an appropriate approach to achieve this since (1) having in-country co-producers working on the project together would help build capacity for future projects within Uzbekistan, (2) the local knowledge and access the different Uzbek-based team members could bring was deemed necessary to disseminate the project as widely as possible, and (3) the lived experience and EAP teaching expertise of the Uzbek-based team members together with the EAP research and teaching expertise of the UK-based team member would be invaluable in creating appropriately pitched, contextualised, and research-informed training materials. The team created and disseminated: i) a needs analysis survey of EAP teachers in Uzbekistan, ii) collaborative construction of the teacher training materials, iii) delivery of an intensive three-day *primary workshop* to teachers from nine higher education institutions in Uzbekistan, and iv) ongoing support of *secondary workshops*. Specifically, based on the needs analysis, the co-production team created a set of training materials for improving the teaching of academic English to students. These materials were then modelled and provided to EAP teachers from around the country who travelled to the capital Tashkent for a *primary workshop.* These teachers and the four Uzbekistan-based co-production team members then travelled to their home institutions and conducted *secondary workshops*, training teachers at their own institutions to better instruct English academic writing.

2.2.1. Needs analysis

The initial step undertaken by the co-production team involved designing and distributing a needs analysis survey. The aim was to determine which aspects of academic English teachers across Uzbekistan felt they needed to improve their knowledge and teaching skills in. A first draft of the survey was developed by the UK-based team member and one of the Uzbekistan-based team members with experience in questionnaire design. It was then piloted and checked for congruence and contextual appropriateness by the remaining three co-production team members. The co-production team decided to subdivide the needs analysis survey into two parts – one on academic reading and one on academic writing. It contained 8 personal background and 10 needs analysis questions (see Supplementary Materials A), eliciting teachers' perceptions of their students' difficulties with academic reading/writing as well as of their

own challenges with the teaching of these skills. Once the survey design was finalised, each of the four co-producers sent the survey to approximately 30 EAP teachers in various higher education institutions in Uzbekistan and asked them to further disseminate it via snowball sampling. The survey was hosted online via *Qualtrics* and remained active for three weeks. By the end of the third week, over a hundred teachers had submitted their responses. Descriptive statistics were calculated using SPSS.

2.2.2. Materials design

Based on the needs analysis findings, a set of teacher training materials for a three-day workshop was developed. The co-produced materials package consisted of eight self-contained sessions, each focusing on a particular aspect of academic reading or writing (see Supplementary Materials B for descriptions of the sessions), and each designed for a 90-min workshop (except for the introductory session which intended to last an hour). The co-production team members worked in pairs to develop the content of particular sessions. Each pair obtained constructive feedback on their initial material drafts from the other co-production team members. A final round of editing was conducted by the UK-based team member to ensure consistency in language use and formatting across session materials. The materials were designed so that workshop attendees would be involved in small-group and whole-class discussions and searching for answers to tasks and activities.

2.2.3. Primary workshop

The primary workshop was attended by ten EAP teachers from a geographical spread of Uzbek universities. The main aims of this workshop were to provide training to i) improve teachers' own academic English, ii) enable them to better teach EAP to their own students, and iii) train other teachers in their home institutions on i) and ii). The three-day workshop was delivered in the capital city Tashkent, was intensive in nature, and comprised both some theoretical input on academic reading and writing skills development as well as a range of interactive group work activities such as various exercises and small group presentations.

2.2.4. Support of secondary workshops

To maximise the impact of the training, the attendees of the primary workshop and the four Uzbekistan-based co-production team members conducted secondary workshops at their home institutions. To run these secondary workshops, they formed pairs of trainers, so in total seven secondary workshops were held at seven universities around the country (from Nukus to Andijan). Based on reports from the workshop convenors, an estimated average of 45 teachers participated in every workshop, resulting in over 300 trained teachers across Uzbekistan.

3. Evaluating a co-production approach to teacher training course development

To evaluate the co-production approach used for the teacher training course development, semi-structured interviews, conducted online by the UK-based team member, were held with the four Uzbekistan-based team members, referred to as P1–P4 (randomly allocated labels). Ethical approval for these post-project interviews was granted by the University of Leeds' School of Business, Environment and Social Services Research Ethics Committee. The interviews lasted 10–40 min and were audio-recorded. They took place after the secondary workshops had been conducted. The interview questions (see Supplementary Materials C) elicited views regarding: i) the team member's professional background, ii) the needs analysis, iii) materials design, iv) primary course delivery, v) secondary course delivery, vi) logistical issues, and vii) the value of the team member's personal contribution. The aim was to gather evidence on how well the principles of co-production had held up in authentic practice. The data was transcribed and analysed by the UK-based team member via content analysis, focusing on the guiding principles of co-production: i) inclusivity of voices and perspectives, ii) collaboration and egalitarianism, iii) capacity building for action and, iv) community engagement and cohesion. Another UK-based scholar, external to the co-production team and with extensive experience of qualitative data analysis, reviewed and confirmed the content analysis results. It should be noted, however, that it is often difficult to tease the four co-production themes apart entirely, and some overlap exists; nevertheless, it was felt that this taxonomy offered a meaningful way to systematically reflect on the outcomes of the project. The findings are reported below according to four sub-sections related to the guiding principles, supported with illustrative quotes from the transcripts.

3.1. Inclusivity of voices and perspectives

Co-production is usually used to refer to work undertaken jointly by professional researchers alongside stakeholders who have first-hand knowledge and experience of the object of the research (Banks et al., 2018). This contrasts with more *typical* academic research which usually involves any non-academics purely as *subjects* (Campbell et al., 2016). Such nomenclature (academic vs. non-academic stakeholder) may be confusing and present too 'clean' a picture in the context of EAP, however, as this is often situated in a university context, and EAP teachers/teacher trainers may be embedded in academic departments and English degree programmes and hold academic appointments (also see Barkhuizen (2021) for a broader debate on academic vs non-academic identity of teacher educators). Nevertheless, for the sake of simplicity, we can understand the UK-based team member to have a more conventional professional researcher/academic profile, and the four Uzbek-based team members to constitute key stakeholders (so-called 'non-academics' in typical co-construction terminology) with direct contextual knowledge and experience. Below, we present a grounded set of justifications for the importance of inclusivity; however, for a more theoretical approach see, e.g., Miller and Wyborn (2020).

Including those with first-hand knowledge of the Uzbek EAP teaching context and lived experience of the object being investigated helps ensure that the knowledge produced in a project is useful and applicable to the context on the ground (Bell & Pahl, 2018). To do

this, we involved EAP teachers/teacher trainers – the people who would be implementing the knowledge generated about the best way to train teachers to teach EAP. An example of the value of an Uzbek teacher's perspective is when **P1** states:

> "In terms of the needs analysis, I was able to help decide on the topics [to be included in the survey] that would be the most interesting and helpful for our Uzbek teachers".

The UK-based team member did not have the lived experience of teaching in the Uzbek context to be able to design the needs analysis survey without the co-operation of the Uzbekistan-based team. Note that we considered including students in the project. However, due to concerns about overburdening them during their studies, the team decided against it. In retrospect, it would have been valuable to include student voices in some way (although the less-experienced teacher in the team was able to partly offer this perspective), as they would be the ultimate recipients of the knowledge produced and would be able to offer unique contributions.

Including the Uzbekistan-based stakeholders in the team can better generate acceptance and uptake of the outcomes of a project and increases the reach of the research network. We agree with Bell and Pahl when they state: "It is of vital importance that research produced through co-production is disseminated in forms accessible and useful to those who helped produce it" (2018, p. 110). As mentioned above, the Uzbekistan-based co-production team (as well as the attendees of the initial workshop) were provided with all the materials and were trained to – in turn – conduct the workshop at their own institutions across Uzbekistan, which they did. Further evidence of acceptance of the knowledge produced (i.e., the content of the workshops) comes from **P3**, who related that:

> "Still the participants of the secondary training ask me to organise more trainings of that kind."

We also found that having the 'non-academic' stakeholders on the team "opened doors" (Campbell et al., 2016) and allowed the project to connect with individuals who would have been otherwise hard to reach. The Uzbekistan-based co-production team members all mentioned how they distributed the needs analysis survey to their professional network and undoubtedly their personal influence helped encourage response. With over 100 replies, we managed to engage a sizable proportion of tertiary-level EAP teachers in Uzbekistan.

The role of the 'professional researcher' in a co-production team should not be downplayed. Bell and Pahl (2018) state that professional researchers are "useful in shaping questions such that are likely to produce desired and 'useful' forms of knowledge" (p. 109). The co-production literature goes into detail about what 'non-academic' stakeholders bring to the co-production process while somewhat glossing over what the professional researchers bring. Having professional researchers as part of the team means their knowledge and experience of robust research methodologies can add rigour to the product and help steer the group – not just shape the questions being asked. In the current project, an example of how the UK-based researcher aided the group was signposting useful materials to create materials. **P1** said, of the 'professional researcher', "You welcomed every single suggestion or idea we brought up to you and also you gave us the links, pdfs of the books to read, learn and research to know more about our chapter [i.e., the assigned sessions to produce]".

We believe that the role of professional researchers in the co-production process should be as facilitators of the research process rather than guides.

3.2. Collaboration and egalitarianism

Despite the importance of including a wide range of voices in co-production, simply assembling a diverse team of co-production researchers is not sufficient; they must also actively contribute to the design and direction of the project. If all researchers are to fully participate, the implicit hierarchy must be broken down. In our project, the power-hierarchy was very flat as the experience and seniority of all members was relatively similar. As **P2** states:

> "I valued my team members, of course, too, because their comments and feedback were very positive, and we took into consideration each other's comments and ideas. Everyone could bring something important, interesting, interactive to all the sessions".

Interestingly, Bell and Pahl (2018) believe that while "co-production challenges the walls between academic and community co-producers, it should not be understood to do away with them altogether" (p. 109). We feel the extent to which the barriers are permeable depends on the nature of the relationship between the 'academic' and 'non-academic' team members. In a project where, for example, the collaborators are primary school schoolchildren, more control of the direction of the project might need to remain with the professional researchers.

Bell and Pahl (2018) suggest a number of practical steps to empower all members of the co-production team so that they fully participate. Among these is that the whole co-production team should be involved in the defining of the project aims and research questions. Unfortunately, this often does not fit with the way that research is funded (Campbell et al., 2016), where aims and research questions need to be carefully crafted at the application stage. In the current project, the research aims were written into the grant before the full co-production team had been assembled. We cannot know to what extent the lack of input into the research aims from the co-production team impacted on the quality of the project. In future projects, we hope to involve a co-production team in the setting of the research aims to further enhance the practical relevance of any proposal.

3.3. Capacity building for action

An important feature of co-production and part of the lasting impact is the capacity it builds within a community for action towards making a better future (Bell & Pahl, 2018; Campbell et al., 2016; Miller & Wyborn, 2020). During the design of this project, careful

attention was paid to ensuring that the Uzbekistan-based co-producers were challenged to learn and were motivated to implement new sets of skills. This comes across clearly in the interview data. **P4** talked about developing hard skills:

> "I developed my ICT skills. In one of my sessions, I used online tasks and I am still trying to use more of this kind of tasks and nowadays since we are teaching online that is really helpful".

P3 touched upon developing soft skills alongside hard skills:

> "My skill as a trainer improved, satisfaction, confidence and confidence in front of big audience of knowledgeable teachers and getting in touch with them, working with them, grouping them, giving instructions, organising and logistics".

P1 talked about the co-production project having provided the impetus for further knowledge and capacity building:

> "The project gave us huge motivation to work on our teaching skills and do more research".

While direct, teacher-centred training may be efficient for imparting knowledge of 'hard' skills (i.e., knowledge of academic English, ICT, or logistic skills), the co-production in this project seemed particularly valuable for building capacity in 'soft' skills (e.g., confidence, rapport building, or motivation) which are needed to successfully implement the 'hard' skills.

3.4. Community engagement and cohesion

A fundamental pillar of co-production is engagement with a 'community' (Banks et al., 2018; Miller & Wyborn, 2020). It bears repeating that the origins of co-production are rooted in building bridges between institutions and the community for the common good (Parks et al., 1981). In this project, the community to be engaged was that of tertiary-level EAP teachers in Uzbekistan. If this project did not reach them and improve their teaching practice, then it would not have been successful. We would like to note here that, while the above three sections discussed the processes of creating knowledge via co-production, this section is implicitly concerned with how to share that knowledge once created. It is of utmost importance that knowledge is disseminated in an accessible and useful way to the wider community for which it was constructed (Bell & Pahl, 2018). The *secondary workshops*, which provided the training to ~300 teachers in Uzbekistan, were key to dissemination, and we consider them to have been a very successful and cost-effective method for reaching a wide audience with minimal resources. In fact, the impact likely went beyond the secondary workshops, as **P1** mentioned that other teachers "also asked to share the materials with them." Echoing previous arguments, this high level of dissemination among the community was in a part due to the acceptability and clear practical relevance of the co-produced knowledge for the community in question. Furthermore, there was a documented increase in cohesion within the community, which is felt to be one of the successes of this project. **P2** stated:

> "We still have contact with those teachers from the universities all over the republic."

and **P1** expressed:

> "Because of this project we became even closer to each other like a family. Even now we keep contact with each other whatever project we know about."

With the discussion of dissemination of knowledge back to the community which created it, the co-production research cycle has come full circle. We now briefly summarise the lessons learned.

4. Conclusion

In this paper, we reported on the implementation of co-production methodology to develop EAP teacher training, more specifically an in-service course for EAP teachers in Uzbek universities. Our experiences and research insights support the contention that the benefits of utilising a co-production research philosophy in this project far outweighed the challenges. Without co-production, we doubt that the teacher training materials would have been such an appropriate fit for the context or that it would have had the large-scale uptake we saw. Additionally, co-production brought the community of EAP teachers closer together and built the capacity of the Uzbekistan-based team to undertake projects of their own in future. The co-production team worked collaboratively, with mutual respect, and little friction was reported.

In terms of challenges and limitations, wider inclusion was not always easy to achieve. We were unable to directly include students' voices in the co-production process. Also, a deviation from 'pure' co-production was the fact that the Uzbekistan-based team members were not involved in setting the aims or writing the funding proposal (although they did agree with these once involved). However, we feel that pragmatism trumps idealism in this context and that it is better to incorporate co-production into research to the extent that it is possible rather than eschew it altogether. We also suggest that those using a co-production approach do not have to dogmatically adhere to all its tenets, rather they should be negotiated and adapted to fit the constraints specific to the research context. We certainly intend to reap the benefits of co-production in future projects, and we hope that this paper will inspire others to incorporate this research philosophy into their own work.

Author statement

Diana Mazgutova: Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Investigation, Writing – Original Draft, Writing – Review & Editing, Project administration, Funding acquisition. Tineke Brunfaut: Conceptualization, Validation, Writing – Original Draft, Writing – Review & Editing, Supervision. Rano Khodjieva, Kamola Muradkasimova, Gulhayo Qobilova, Aziza Yunusova: Methodology,

Investigation.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.imu.2022.100866.

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Diana Mazgutova is a Lecturer in Language Education at the University of Leeds (UK). Her professional interests include second language writing, academic writing, second language acquisition, materials design and EAP. She has publications in such journals as *Language Learning, Journal of Second Language Writing,* and *Journal of Academic Writing.*

Tineke Brunfaut is Professor in Linguistics and English Language at Lancaster University (UK), where she specializes in language testing, L2 reading and listening, and academic language skills. Her research has been published in journals such as *Studies in Second Language Acquisition, TESOL Quarterly, Journal of Second Language Writing, Assessing Writing, Language Assessment Quarterly,* and *Language Testing.*

Kamola Muradkasimova is an EAP Lecturer and teacher trainer at the Uzbekistan State University of World Languages. Her main area of interest is language testing and assessment, especially language teacher assessment literacy. She has taught courses such as Methodology of Language Teaching, Research Writing, and Discourse Analyses.

Rano Khodjieva is a Senior Lecturer in EAP at the Uzbekistan State University of World Languages. She is interested in applied linguistics, especially reading and writing, academic writing, materials design, and EAP. She teaches the following courses: Reading and Writing, Independent Study Skills, and Communicative-Normative Phonetics.

Gulhayo Qobilova is an EAP teacher at the International Law Faculty of the University of World Economy and Diplomacy in Tashkent (Uzbekistan). She teaches courses such as Legal Writing, International Legal English, and Professional Legal English in Use.

Aziza Yunusova is a Senior Lecturer in EAP in the English Linguistics Department at Bukhara State University (Uzbekistan). Her professional interests include academic writing, second language acquisition, and methodology of teaching English language. She has taught such courses as Academic Writing, Integrated Skills and Research Writing.