

Exploring inclusive teaching practices of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) in higher education (HE): Research protocol

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There is growing evidence suggesting that inclusive practice, an approach to teaching that accepts diversity as framing the learning experience, transforming the educational system based on ideals of enacting social justice, is now part of the global educational agenda with institutions worldwide. Inclusion, however, still remains elusive, with conceptualizations proliferating across the literature and in practice where different people use the term in different ways and for varying purposes. The proposed study will employ qualitative and co-production methods to explore perspectives and attitudes towards inclusive teaching practices of EAP in HE and identify strategies through which such practices can be best promoted/implemented, the endpoint being to develop a framework/set of recommendations to be utilized as a guide to good practice.

Keywords: inclusive teaching practices, English for Academic Purposes, EAP, higher education, qualitative research, co-production methods

Background and rationale

There is much debate on theorizing over social justice, with no universally accepted definition of the concept that is largely perceived to co-occur with concepts pertaining to human rights and fairness (Bates, 2007). This perception seems to originate from Greek theories of justice (Theophanous, 1994) according to which social justice reflects on ideas of equality, viewed as a prerequisite to democratic life. Enacting social justice is therefore seen as a need for a fair and equal distribution of what seems to be beneficial and valued for all individuals within the society (Singh, 2011, p. 482).

The intersection between social justice and HE, however, is hard to explore as there seems to be quite an overlap between the role of education

and societal development, with educational institutions not only directly reflecting socio-cultural and economic aspects of the society but also being directly involved in societal progress. The complexity of this process is well summarized in ‘the social justice goal of constructing societies which are more inclusive, fair and democratically enabling remains a central normative and policy challenge, both in relation to the contribution of HE to societal progress as well as within higher education itself’ (Singh, 2011, pp. 491–492).

In this sense, social justice and HE appear to be inherently intertwined and this connecting link can be established through adopting and implementing pedagogical strategies and policies that can effectively promote inclusion and equity (Osman et al., 2018). It should be acknowledged, however, that pedagogy is just one dimension which, alongside leadership and professional development, creates a multi-dimensional project of enacting social justice in HE.

The need for approaches to teaching and learning that foster inclusion and equity in HE has been extensively researched in recent years, with questions of inclusion and equity being a dominant theme of research undertaken by various stakeholders including scholars, practitioners and policy makers (Dewsbury & Brame, 2019; Shaeffer, 2019; Stentiford & Koutsouris, 2021). The importance of widening participation has been widely explored and particularly highlighted (Bradley & Miller, 2010) as well as the development of academic cultures and approaches that promote value, respect, and inclusive education for a wide variety of learners (Ouellett, 2005; Grace & Gravestock, 2009).

While much research on inclusive education seems to be focusing on issues of access to teaching and learning for students with learning difficulties or disabilities (Fuller et al., 2004; Riddell et al., 2007), special attention is also being placed upon the interplay of teaching and learning with ethnicity, socio-economic status, religion, and other axes of identity (Cole & Ahmadi, 2010; Devlin et al., 2012; Ladson-Billings, 2014). This growing body of evidence indicates that inclusion is now part of the global educational agenda with institutions all over the world being concerned ‘with increasing participation and broad educational achievements of all groups of learners who have historically been marginalised’ (Ainscow et al., 2006, p. 295) and, thus, transforming HE into a socially just pedagogy through promoting inclusive practice.

Inclusive practice (or inclusive education) is an approach to teaching, according to which the learning experience is framed by diversity, the value of it being maximized to enhance this experience for all students involved (Equality Challenge Unit, 2013); enables all students to access course content, actively engage in the learning process (participate in all tasks and activities) and demonstrate their knowledge and potential at assessment; and respects

and safeguards their legal right to teaching, not discriminating against them based on age, gender, ethnicity, religion or belief, disability or sexual orientation (Equality Challenge Unit, 2013).

Most scholars agree that the focus of inclusive education should be on transforming the educational system, and the rationale underpinning this focus is predominantly based on ideals of enacting social justice (Lipsky & Gartner, 1996). Despite this widespread agreement, however, inclusion remains elusive, with numerous conceptualizations and definitions persisting across the literature and in practice where the term is utilized in different ways and for varying purposes. In addition, opinions about how to best promote inclusion in HE proliferate with lack of clarity and consistency persisting as to the ways/steps to implement inclusive practice in the classroom.

When it comes to addressing social justice issues in the field of language teaching, there seems to be a gap in the literature, with the main body of existing evidence focusing predominantly on TESOL exploring issues pertaining to racism, highlighting the need to de-silence race in language teaching (Kubota & Lin, 2006; Von Esch et al., 2020) and settler colonialism, suggesting that language teaching should invest more in postcolonial practices (Lin & Luke, 2006; Sterzuk & Hengen, 2019). Recent empirical research seems to be looking into issues of content design and, more specifically, into ways of developing and integrating content that is social justice-oriented (Mortenson, 2022).

Utilizing social justice pedagogy as the main theoretical framework on a range of data sources including classroom observations, field notes, interviews with teachers, and other relevant documents (e.g., course syllabi, in-class materials, and course websites), recommendations have been made on deploying teaching practices that promote equity and inclusion when designing and delivering EAP provision (Mortenson, 2021; 2022). Such recommendations, however, need to be treated with caution as available evidence on enacting social justice in frontline EAP is scarce. Further research is therefore required to be able to draw safe conclusions and construct a set of recommendations that could be used as a guide for practice to promote inclusive teaching of EAP in HE.

Exploring Inclusive Teaching Practices of EAP in HE is a wide-scale project designed to address and explore the enactment of social justice in frontline EAP in the area of pedagogy focusing on inclusive teaching practices in higher education. To our knowledge, this is the first project to critically explore different aspects of inclusive education (including but not limited to conceptualization, importance and benefits, teachers role, and implementation strategies) bringing together all key stakeholders involved in the teaching and learning of EAP in HE (including but not limited to students, subject tutors, course and programme leads, learning developers, academic skills advisors, co-ordinators, and directors).

Significance and impact

The proposed project is expected to have a direct and considerable impact on enacting social justice through promoting inclusive practice in HE for all parties involved, i.e., EAP practitioners and students. Through exploring perspectives and attitudes of EAP practitioners towards inclusive education and co-producing a proposed framework/set of recommendations that can be used as a guide for good practice, the project will, on the one hand, contribute to colleagues professional development, raising their awareness/knowledge of inclusive education and the ways this can be promoted/implemented and, on the other hand, enhance the student learning experience by identifying the appropriate strategies to be implemented to promote inclusion and foster diversity and equality in HE. This wide-scale project will benefit the entire HE community, encouraging it to revisit and review its context of practice in terms of inclusion and, by applying the guide for inclusive practice that the project aspires to develop, improve its teaching practice and, as a result, enhance the learning experience for its students.

Aims and questions

Exploring Inclusive Teaching Practices of EAP in Higher Education aims to

- explore perspectives (incl. awareness/knowledge and perceptions) and attitudes (incl. practices and experiences) of EAP practitioners towards inclusive learning and teaching in HE;
- identify and record strategies through which inclusive learning and teaching in HE can be promoted/implemented; and
- develop a framework/set of recommendations for inclusive teaching and learning in HE that can be used as a guide for good practice.

The overarching questions to be addressed are as follows:

- What are the perspectives and attitudes of EAP practitioners towards inclusive learning and teaching in HE?
- How can inclusive learning and teaching of EAP be best promoted/implemented in HE?

Study design

This is an exploratory study seeking, as the name implies, to explore or search through a situation or a problem, not clearly defined or understood yet, with varying levels of depth – inclusive teaching practices of EAP in HE in this case – in an attempt to offer better insights into the nature of the situation/problem, and being predominantly concerned with discovery i.e.,

building or generating theoretical knowledge rather than providing final and conclusive evidence (Stebbins, 2001).

Sampling and recruitment

Non-probability convenience and snowball sampling will be employed to identify eligible participants from BALEAP – the global forum of EAP practitioners, using BALEAP JISC mail list for participant recruitment. Any EAP practitioner, i.e., member of BALEAP and registered with the BALEAP JISC mail list, with either current or previous experience of teaching EAP in HE will be eligible for inclusion. Members with no experience of teaching EAP in HE will be excluded.

Considering that there is a series of factors shaping sample size including participant motivation, and that the depth and detail of individual responses cannot be fully anticipated in advance (Morse 2000), the ability to address the questions and data-set richness are, at this stage, more critical to consider than determining the exact number of participants to be recruited. Twenty participants ($n=20$) has been set, however, as the minimum requirement for inclusion. Participants will be required to complete, sign, and return an informed consent form to confirm participation.

Data collection

Self-administered online qualitative surveys comprising a set of open-ended questions presented in a fixed and standard order will be conducted to explore perspectives and attitudes of EAP practitioners towards inclusive learning and teaching of EAP in HE. Questions will explore: concept, main features, importance and benefits, implementation strategies (steps and processes), teacher's role and qualities required. This primary method has been purposefully selected, as qualitative surveys 'seek to harness the potential qualitative data offer for nuanced, in-depth and sometimes new understandings of social issues' such as that of inclusive education (Braun et al., 2020, p. 1). Considering that qualitative surveys require responses for which participants have to use their own words, instead of selecting from pre-determined options, rich and complex accounts of meaningful sense-making data can be produced which is of critical interest to qualitative researchers (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

Co-production methods (Hickey, 2018) will be used to identify and record how inclusive learning and teaching of EAP can be best promoted/implemented in HE and for developing a proposed framework/set of recommendations that can be used as a guide for practice, bringing together users (students) and other key stakeholders (including subject tutors, course and programme leads, learning developers, academic skills advisors, co-ordinators, and directors)

involved in the practice of EAP. Co-production, occasionally referred to as participatory or collaborative research, involves a range of key stakeholders, from different institutions or organizations, working together to address and explore certain research issues resulting in new knowledge being co-produced (Graham et al., 2019). Not only does this approach allow for a greater degree of equality between the researcher and the participants, as well as between the participants themselves (Pohl et al., 2010) but also produces evidence and knowledge that is 'generally believed to be more socially robust, truthful, comprehensive, inclusive, and overall more accurately representative of reality' (Markkanen & Burgess, 2016, p. 5). This is why co-production has been gaining increasing attention from funding bodies, academic institutions, researchers, and policymakers as the research approach to optimize research use and maximize impact (Hickey, 2018; Graham et al., 2019).

Co-production workshops – during which focus groups (a minimum of two) comprising six to eight participants each will take place – will be organized and delivered. Participants, purposively selected from the pool of those who completed the online qualitative survey will be invited to attend co-production workshops that will run either face-to-face at Teesside University or online via Zoom or MS Teams depending on mobility needs and personal circumstances and last between sixty and ninety minutes. Purposive sampling will allow to access a particular subset of participants to ensure that a range of key stakeholders (including subject tutors, course and programme leads, learning developers, academic skills advisors, co-ordinators, and directors) are represented in co-production workshops. A guide to facilitate focus group discussions will be developed. Discussions will be video recorded, with participants' permission, and transcribed verbatim.

Data analysis

Data will be analysed using thematic content analysis, as described by Strauss and Corbin (1990). This inductive approach to data analysis comprises a rigorous and systematic classification process of open coding. Themes and/or patterns will be identified and integrated into an initial coding framework. This framework will be constantly refined through an iterative process following discussion and consensus, the final version of which, ensuring reliability and replicability of observations, will be applied to all data to facilitate subsequent interpretations. This approach is particularly useful as it allows for qualitative data to be classified, summarized, quantified, and tabulated (Boyatzis, 1998). NVivo v.12 will be used for data analysis.

To ensure explicit and comprehensive reporting, the COREQ (Consolidated criteria for reporting qualitative research) checklist will be used (Tong et al., 2007).

Ethical approval

Ethical approval to conduct this project was obtained from the School of Social Sciences, Humanities and Law Research Ethics Committee at Teesside University in March 2022 (Review Reference: 2022 Mar 7080).

Expected outcomes and dissemination plans

Expected outcomes and dissemination plans comprise:

- papers to be drafted and submitted for publication, in peer-reviewed academic journals including:
 - a survey-based paper (original research)
 - a recommendations paper (evidence from co-production workshops)
- presentation of papers at national and international conferences, including the Learning and Teaching Enhancement Conference 2023 held by Teesside University, and the BALEAP 2023 Conference.
- an educational blog to be posted on the Academic Literacies SIG (Special Interest Group) website; and
- promotion of different aspects of this work through BALEAP (the global forum of EAP professionals), the Academic Literacies SIG and social media.

Participation in a BALEAP event to showcase all funding stream projects and a final report to be published on the BALEAP website have also been set as core deliverables by BALEAP, the funder of this research project.

Strengths and limitations

- This is the first exploratory study to address diverse aspects of inclusive education (including but not limited to conceptualization, importance and benefits, teachers role, and implementation strategies).
- In addition, this is the first study to bring together all key stakeholders involved in the teaching and learning of EAP in HE.
- The proposed study adopts a well-established methodology (transparent and rigorous), helpful in narrowing down a timely and challenging topic that has not been clearly defined and understood so far.
- The evidence produced, though rather tentative and inconclusive, can be utilized to guide future research laying strong foundations for similar studies or studies on the same topic in the future.

Future directions

While the proposed framework/set of recommendations for promoting inclusive practices of EAP in HE – once developed – will be circulated to the BALEAP membership for any input/comments and suggestions to improve the quality of the guide, further and more systematic evaluation could be performed through a follow-up study designed and launched to assess applicability and utility of the proposed guide in different academic contexts across institutions in the U.K. and abroad. Future research could be also conducted to explore and account for facilitators and barriers to implementing inclusive teaching practices of EAP in HE as well as the extent to which contextual factors can affect or interfere with such implementation.

Timeline

The proposed project is set to commence in April 2022 and is expected to be completed by the end of March 2023. The milestones (tasks and activities) to be achieved within the deadlines set including expected dates for output and dissemination plans are presented in Table 1.

Table 1 Project timeline incl. milestones and deadlines

Project phase	Activity	Activity period/ month
Ethics and GRA recruitment	Drafting and submitting the application to gain ethical approval Recruiting graduate research assistant (GRA)	Months 1/2
Phase I: online survey	Developing the self-administered online qualitative survey Collecting data Preparing data for analysis Analysing data Writing up paper for publication	Months 1/2 Month 3 Months 4–6
Phase II: co-production workshops	Organizing workshops including drafting and sending out invitations and planning the events Running co-production workshops Collecting and analysing data Writing up paper for publication	Month 7 Month 8–10 Month 11
End of Project	Writing up final report	Month 12

Conflicts of interests

None declared

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Biographies

Angelos Bakogiannis, a linguist by background, has been involved in English language teaching for more than fifteen years. Since 2010, he has been teaching EAP and study skills in U.K. HE. He is currently based at the English Language Centre, Teesside University working as a programme lead in EAP, leading and co-ordinating academic literacies, English for academic purposes, and research and study skills. He is particularly interested in academic literacies, doctoral education and multi-modal approaches to teaching and learning in higher education and since 2021 he has been the BALEAP academic literacies SIG convenor.

Evie Papavasiliou, a psychologist by background, with expertise in complex interventions, systematic reviews, and qualitative research methods is currently based at the School of Clinical Medicine, University of Cambridge. She has been actively involved in various research projects including systematic reviews and qualitative research. Since 2019, she has been leading seminars on the social and ethical context of health and illness, being particularly interested in embedding academic literary support to modules and courses aimed at students in health and medicine.