

BRIDGING THE GAP: FOSTERING SOCIAL JUSTICE THROUGH INCLUSIVE RESEARCH SPACES

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Abstract

This paper discusses a project aimed at integrating social justice into an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) course. Initially conceived as an in-house initiative, the project evolved into a research grant proposal, ultimately enabling a group of hourly-paid pre-sessional teachers to transition from passive recipients of course materials to active participants in the creation and evaluation of course content. The authors emphasise the importance of the teaching-research nexus, as highlighted by McKinley (2019), advocating for practice-based research that reflects real classroom contexts rather than idealised studies. Throughout the project, the teachers gained confidence and developed a stronger connection to mainstream academia, leading to significant professional growth, including one participant securing a permanent university position. The project not only addressed issues of equality, diversity, and inclusivity but also showcased the transformative impact of collaborative research on educators' careers and their engagement with the academic community.

Keywords: EAP, Social Justice, Hourly-Paid Lecturers, Inclusivity, Course Design, Teaching-Research Nexus

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INTRODUCTION

This is the story of a project that helped to bring a group of teachers out of the margins and into mainstream research activity. The research journey was triggered by a desire to incorporate aspects of social justice into elective classes on an intensive English for Academic Purposes (EAP) course. This started out as an in-house aspiration before it grew into a proposal for a research grant, the subsequent achievement of that and then the enactment of the project itself. As the project unfolded, the

teachers, who were initially passive recipients of course materials, gradually became active participants in the creation of course content, materials design, and the subsequent evaluation of the work they had produced. Over time, they played an integral role in shaping the project and its outcomes. These were hourly-paid pre-sessional teachers who, unfortunately, are often at the bottom of higher education's de facto food chain. Alongside the inherent precarity of their positions (Le Roux, 2022), McKinley (2019) discusses the challenges faced by such practitioners as they strive to position themselves on the teaching and research nexus of TESOL. Since EAP may be seen as part of the same broad family as TESOL and ELT (Breen, 2024), this paradigm aligns with the experiences of the practitioners at the heart of this study.

Academic research is typically undertaken by individuals enrolled in Master's and Doctorate programmes or by those contracted by their institution to engage in such activities. This space is scarcely occupied by teachers on 'Language Teacher', 'Teaching only' or 'Part-Time Visiting Lecturer' contracts. Hourly paid contracts are commonly used for instructors teaching on short courses, such as Pre-Sessional English courses (PSE), due to the surge in student numbers during this period. This compels teachers to participate in 'the gig economy' (Churchill et al., 2019), which is an extension and continuation of neoliberal influences, whereby institutions contract teachers for a specific number of hours or weeks.

Hourly paid contracts in education can be viewed either positively or negatively, depending on the educator's perspective. Some argue that such contracts can lead to feelings of inequality, isolation and deprofessionalisation, or a sense of not belonging (Mansfield, 2022; Buchanan & Settles, 2019; Pickering, 2014). Mansfield (2022) recounts just this, during her ten-year experience as a contractor working in UK higher education. She highlights the hierarchical divide among EAP practitioners: those on permanent contracts and those on hourly-paid contracts. In particular, she notes the developmentally constricting challenges faced by the latter group, including restricted access to Continual Professional Development (CPD), a sense of not belonging to a Community of Practice (CoP) (Wenger, 1998), where they could share experiences, developments, obstacles and good practice with their peers, restricted career prospects and the inability to seek research grants.

In an effort to bridge the gap between permanent members of staff and Part Time Visiting Lecturers (PTVLs), a collaborative team was formed, consisting of six members: two full time permanent Senior Lecturers (SLs) and four PTVLs. Together they pursued a BALEAP research grant with a dual purpose: first, to champion the cause of social justice within EAP

and, second, to actively engage in the research process. This vignette aims to document the research journey undertaken by the PTVLs who, at the start of Summer 2022 PSE, volunteered to participate in the project following a 'Call for participants' email sent to all PTVLs, demonstrating how the SLs opened up an inclusive space, typically inaccessible to these educators. Through our unwavering commitment to fostering social justice with a focus on equality and inclusion, we aim to demonstrate that this space should remain free of unnecessary constraints which include predefined hierarchies or barriers that limit participation based on such factors as institutional status, type of contract, pay grade or other variables that have traditionally impacted on equity in the workplace.

PREPARING THE RESEARCH GRANT: ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

When preparing the research grant, we carefully considered the team members diverse roles and backgrounds. The SLs brought over a decade of experience in higher education together with extensive expertise in researching and writing grant proposals, the four PTVLs had diverse backgrounds and unique areas of expertise. All PTVLs were seasoned instructors of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), with EAP teaching experience ranging from two to eight years. Among them, one held a PhD, three had master's degrees, and one possessed a DELTA qualification. They had two years of experience teaching on the PSE programme. During the rest of the year, they pursued their individual careers. One taught as a PTVL on the University of Westminster's Foundation Programme, another taught English as a Second Other Language at a Further Education college, one worked as a translator, and another managed a professional teacher training company.

When considering the research process, we engaged in a discussion about the strengths of the team members, as well as the areas where the PTVLs might require support. Here, the teaching-research nexus as discussed by McKinley (2019), again became a focal point. McKinley (ibid) suggests that research should be grounded in 'classroom contexts' (p.1) so there is a shift away from 'the sanitized and idealized nature of published studies' (Rose & McKinley, 2017). Through supporting this ethos of practice-based research being equal to more abstract, theoretical research, our study aspired to provide a platform for fresh voices to emerge. It should be stressed though that such voices were fresh only in the sense of being new to formal research processes. They all had a considerable amount of experience at the practical end of

McKinley's (2019) nexus. Additionally, through a combination of personal and professional experience in a diverse range of contexts, the group was well qualified to understand issues of equality, diversity and inclusivity at the intersection of education and real-world issues.

A vital first step in the process was in reaching a consensus on what the project as a whole hoped to achieve and how it would be enacted in actual classroom practice. There was also a need for careful and ethical management of the process. On the one hand, as stipulated by BALEAP in the initial feedback for our research proposal, the participants had to be partners in the research process. On the other hand, because of their position on McKinley's (2019) teaching and research nexus, there was a need for some developmental scaffolding. These were teachers like those in earlier studies by Slaouti et al. (2013) and Breen (2018); experienced professionals in one sense, navigating a whole new terrain in another. However, unlike the studies that focused on the interface of technology and language learning, this study operated at the intersection of teaching and research.

The more experienced members of the team assumed a scaffolding or mentoring role, in a Vygotskian sense of helping others re-examine their old practices in light of new knowledge (Manning & Payne, 1993; Breen, 2018). That was done through email messages and group discussions, very much tailored to individual needs. It was important for us to remember that, for example, even though most of the PTVL group were novices to this kind of research, one member already held a PhD. That of course is not untypical in the field and part of the arbitrariness that comes with precarity in EAP (Le Roux, 2022). In the hierarchical world of universities, there is often a prejudice against those on fractional contracts, as if somehow their lack of qualification or some other variable has contributed to their economic conditions. Here, we were keen to avoid that, being conscious through our own professional experiences (Mansfield, 2022) of injustices within the self-professed meritocracies we work in.

This is why right from the beginning we sought to divide up the roles and responsibilities in such a way that this was both socially just and developmental. It would have been unfair, for example, to give research novices the task of conceptualising a theoretical framework. That would most likely also have created a discomfort, mystifying academic research and parts of its discourse. Therefore, to make people at ease, we placed them at a juncture of that teaching and research nexus (McKinley, 2019) where they could feel confident of their contribution. In practical terms, this meant that they were positioned at the "teaching-led" end of the research spectrum (Charles, 2018; McKinley et al, 2018). By focusing on

classroom practice, they were in more of a comfort zone or what Vygotsky (1978) describes as being in the 'zone of proximal development.'

To facilitate their development, the PTVLs were actively involved in developing the Scheme of Work for the electives, drafting materials, refining research instruments, crafting focus group questions and analysing data, with the support of one of the SLs. In doing this, the more experienced members of the team also went through a significant learning process, gaining valuable insights and refining their leadership and mentorship skills. This project marked a departure from the previous practice on the PSE, where much of the material used in classes, including electives, came pre-designed and pre-determined by course leaders for standardisation purposes. Instead, the genesis of this project established a new standard and ethos of material design, centred around the active involvement of PTVLs.

PTVLS AS CO-CREATORS OF MATERIALS

Jan McArthur talks about how 'pedagogical relationships without any foundation in trust and honesty are fraught' (2024, p. 78). For the purposes of infusing social justice into the entire ecosystem of EAP activity (Breen, 2024), it is necessary for managers to trust teachers. Therefore, a critical first step in this project, in helping participants find their footing on the teaching-research nexus (McKinley, 2019), was to make them co-creators of materials. Again, for scaffolding purposes, there was some input and mentoring in terms of theoretical design, drawing on the work of such theorists as Jane Arnold, Rod Bolitho and Brian Tomlinson who all featured heavily in the university's in-house MA TESOL courses. Significantly, this body of work is not just theoretical, but highly practical and functional. Through drawing on this type of literature, closer to the teacher end of the nexus, a further act of demystifying took place. That made the research itself seem more accessible, not a thing of language spoken only by those in the academic mainstream. Consequently, a sense of research ownership extended outwards to those in higher education's margins.

In order to capitalise upon this equalisation of accessibility, the co-creators had to feel comfortable with the materials they were designing. Therefore, they were also involved in shaping the topics that formed the basis of this design. Each teacher was asked to nominate a particular topic relating to social justice or issues of equality, diversity and inclusion. Subsequently, these would form the basis of their sessions. Concurrently, to some extent, in designing said materials, they were also

shaping the curriculum - although it should be stressed that the focus on the lesson was not on the topic as an end in itself. These topics drawn from issues relating to Social Justice were primarily used as a platform or springboard for the development of the usual academic literacy skills and increased proficiency that are the final goals of pre-sessional courses. In the Westminster context, there was a particular emphasis on discipline specific approaches and teachers had the flexibility to amend the materials according to the needs of students in relation to their discipline. Therefore, in line with the consensual ethos of the project, we held a couple of online meetings to talk about what topics people wanted to explore, or in some cases, did not want. Sometimes there was a need for compromise or negotiation and again this was all done in a consensual manner. We also enabled a process whereby we could share ideas and materials throughout the different stages of turning concepts to finished materials.

It is important to note that this was a learning experience for all involved in the process, including those more experienced in educational research and the application of theory to practise. One way in which this happened was to show the course leaders the value of going through a process of sharing ideas and practices when it came to the design of materials. By being exposed to the ideas of those teaching at the coalface of these courses, the materials perhaps came to more accurately reflect the needs and expectations of the students.

PTVLs AS CO-CREATORS OF RESEARCH

While the co-creation of materials primarily falls within the domain of teaching, it was important to remember that this was a platform for active participation in research. Drawing from a Vygotskian perspective, we understood that people develop through exposure to new knowledge gained by collaborating with more experienced practitioners. Given that our goal was to shift participants' positioning on the teaching-research nexus, this Vygotskian ethos seemed particularly fitting. However, it was equally important not to overwhelm anyone with the demands of engaging in research activities that might be perceived as overly challenging or demanding.

Throughout the project, several research outcomes emerged. However, for the purposes of this vignette, our exclusive focus is on the development experienced by the PTVLs, viewed through the prism of McKinley's (2019) aforementioned teaching and research nexus. That is why, from the onset, we emphasised using the practitioners themselves as both data generators and research subjects. In this context, they were

tasked with assessing the impact of the project whilst also conducting their own research and evaluations, such as examining the effectiveness of materials and student responses. This approach can be seen as a form of insider research in the sense of Kerstetter's (2012) argument that a great deal of contemporary research actually exists on a spectrum of 'insider, outsider, or somewhere in between' (p. 99). Furthermore, insider research resonates with Vygotskian perspectives regarding cruciality of context and situated cognition (Breen, 2018). Because the context is familiar to inside researchers, they scaffolded more comfortably on their movement along McKinley's teaching-research nexus.

Furthermore, it is important to remember that the overarching focus of the study revolved around social justice. An important but neglected part of social justice comes about in the empowerment of practitioners, particularly those operating in precarity. Through giving voice to the thoughts of these PTVLs and making that a part of research activity, it can be argued that we were bringing them out of the margins and into the mainstream of academia. Even though economically they may not have equilibrium in higher education, their voices were now a part of a body of research that could inform their own professional communities of practice, extending beyond that into the wider domain of higher educational research. Some ways in which this has happened is through the dissemination of the findings. These have been shared and reported at a number of events both internally and externally, not just in the UK, but at an international level as well.

THE RESEARCH PROJECT'S IMPACT

A year after the project's completion, we conducted a brief online survey with the four PTVLs to assess the impact of the project. The survey included three open-ended questions: (1) their feelings during the process of creating the materials and performing the research, (2) the academic and professional benefits they derived from the project, and (3) whether they felt more connected to academia now. Three out of the four PTVLs provided responses to the survey.

In response to the first question, Researcher 1 expressed her enjoyment in creating materials that addressed real-world issues. Researcher 3, who also shares a passion for these issues, emphasised how she lacked prior academic research experience in EAP. Consequently, she valued the opportunity to research a topic she's passionate about: social justice. Researcher 2 provided a more detailed response, and she claimed:

I felt valued and appreciated for my skills and experience. I was excited to be part of an academic project with the potential to make a significant impact in the field of EAP. Collaborating with a team of experts made me feel included and motivated, as they embraced my input and we all worked together to advance the EAP field. It was a fulfilling experience.

The findings from this first question highlight the positive impact of the researcher's involvement in the project. Their expressions of enthusiasm, alignment of research with personal passion, and recognition of the project's potential impact, collectively demonstrate the project's significance and meaningfulness to them. Furthermore, the emphasis on inclusivity and collaboration within the team highlights the importance of fostering an environment where team members feel valued and motivated.

In terms of academic and professional gains from the project, it is worth noting a significant positive outcome. The start of the project coincided with Participant 3 receiving a permanent post at a university. While it is not possible to say whether the project influenced the decision making of the interviewees, she was indeed probed on the project during the interview. Participant 1 found the experience rewarding and gained confidence in *"the many stages and complexities of setting up a research project"*. Within this Participant's responses too, there seemed to be a growing confidence in expressing honesty about what McKinley (2018) refers to as the 'messiness' of real-world research. Indeed, all participants used a language that reflected growth, honesty and greater confidence. Participant 2 noted academic growth, particularly in understanding the Activity Theory Framework and how it can be used in designing materials. She believes *"This knowledge has left a lasting impact, as I now naturally consider its principles whenever I'm crafting EAP materials"*. Moreover, professionally, Participant 2 remarked that the project opened new doors. She elaborates on this when she said:

The opportunity to collaborate with experts in the EAP field not only added to my credibility but also showcased to the job market my dedication to my growth as an EAP lecturer. This experience has demonstrated my commitment to staying current with the latest methodologies and innovations in the field, positioning me well for future opportunities and career advancement.

As observed, the research project not only aided significant academic and professional achievements, but it also had a lasting impact on the participants, through enhancing their confidence, knowledge and credibility in the field of EAP.

Regarding the final question about whether the participants feel more connected to academia now, all three participants unanimously expressed a stronger sense of connection. Participant 3 commented on how the opportunity has *“opened new opportunities for collaborations with my colleagues”* while Participant 2’s response highlights a significantly enhanced connection to academia. This was driven by the concrete outcome of the project’s practical application and the transformative impact of the project’s publication in the sense of marginal voices being brought into contact with the mainstream, which altered her previous perceptions and reignited her enthusiasm for contributing to academic discussions. The unanimous consensus of a reinforced connection to academia among the participants reflects the profound impact of this research project.

CONCLUSION

The journey outlined in this vignette is a testament to the transformative power of inclusive research spaces in the realm of higher education, particularly in situations where participants are being scaffolded. Here, the scaffolding was designed to facilitate a greater sense of equilibrium in the participants’ teaching-research nexus, in line with the work of McKinley (2019). The project’s origin as a simple aspiration within a group of hourly-paid teachers evolved into a collaborative endeavour that bridged the gap between them and their full-time counterparts. This project not only championed the cause of social justice within EAP, but also actively engaged the participants in the research process.

The project’s emphasis on co-creation was pivotal. By making participants active contributors to both material design and research evaluation, empowered them to assess the impact of the project while conducting their own research. This inclusive approach not only democratised the research process but also gave agency to these practitioners operating in precarity, bringing them into the mainstream of academic discourse on social justice.

One year post project and the online survey results revealed the tangible impact the project had on the participants, as well as the potential transferability of lessons to other contexts. Although they cannot be taken as a definitive sample of their field, the experiences of the participants demonstrate the value of such projects to people in their positions. Their enthusiasm, alignment of research with personal passion, and recognition of the project’s potential impact highlight its significance. The academic and professional gains, including one

participant securing a permanent post at the university, demonstrate the project's transformative effects on their careers. Importantly, they all expressed a stronger sense of connection to academia, further highlighting the profound impact of this research project.

Engaging our PTVLs in academic research has been transformative, not only for our understanding but also for fostering a culture of equality and inclusion. As we navigate this journey, we have embraced the opportunity to learn alongside them, continuously striving to enhance our efforts in promoting diversity and representation. Within our PSE courses, we have now implemented a range of opportunities for all of our contractors, offering paid involvement in research projects at various levels. Whether serving as data donors or integral partners of the research team, they now have the chance to contribute meaningfully and, in turn, gain recognition as co-authors of forthcoming publications and presenters at academic conferences. This newfound avenue not only bestows upon them academic credibility but also provides invaluable experience that was previously inaccessible. Through these initiatives, we are reshaping the landscape of academic engagement, empowering individuals who have traditionally been marginalised to actively participate and thrive within scholarly discourse.

This narrative serves as a compelling example of how inclusive research spaces can foster social justice, including equality and inclusion within higher education. It highlights the potential for change when educators from different backgrounds collaborate and contribute to meaningful research, breaking down the barriers that often marginalises them within the academic community. In essence, this project exemplifies the power of inclusive research spaces to bridge divides, empower individuals, and create positive change within the world of education. Further to this though, time and financial resources are also key components. Without BALEAP's support for this project, for example, it may never have gathered the momentum that it did. Presently a lot of systems within universities also make research funding appear quite inaccessible to those in the margins. However, as this project demonstrates, once people are afforded that access in a way that gives them a sense of ownership and confidence in their own abilities as researchers, they can make a valuable contribution. Importantly too that contribution must be valued and like the application of principles of equality, diversity and inclusion within today's universities it must be underpinned by a desire for substantive rather than superficial change.

Finally at some point it is hoped that these practitioners might also add to the story in their own voices, but a number of factors prevented that from happening in this instance, not least the fact of their paid work

being situated more on the teaching than research nexus. However, even if there remains a lot of work to do in fulfilling the potential of all such practitioners in the spheres of practice that we inhabit within EAP, this study serves as one instance of empowerment, transformation and equalisation for its participants.

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Notes

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