

The Interdisciplinary Condition: Navigating precarity, identity and epistemic translation as an early-career researcher

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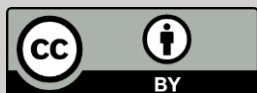
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This article has been subject to an editorial review process.



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Abstract

Early-career researchers (ECRs) increasingly navigate interdisciplinary landscapes, where addressing complex societal problems requires crossing disciplinary boundaries before fully consolidating a scholarly and professional identity. Drawing on my experiences as an ECR in Applied Linguistics, which include engaging in research-informed teaching, mentoring, and collaborative projects across computer science, chemistry, medical education, AI, and mental health, this article critically reflects on the practices, challenges, and opportunities of interdisciplinarity facing ECRs. These include negotiating identity as a disciplinary 'outsider', performing epistemological translation across differing research cultures, and managing the relational and cognitive labour of boundary-spanning. While such work can exacerbate precarity and divert focus from core disciplinary expertise, it also cultivates linguistic agility, epistemic humility, relational intelligence, and integrative problem-solving, the competencies of what I term 'interdisciplinary expertise'. Supporting ECRs requires institutional structures that value cross-boundary contributions, provide longer-term stability, foster recognition and inclusive practices, and strengthen mentorship networks. By reframing interdisciplinarity as a site for cultivating adaptability, leadership, and integrative thinking, institutions can empower researchers to thrive as confident, future-ready scholars.

Keywords: early-career researchers; ECRs; interdisciplinary studies; interdisciplinary research; research culture; research precarity

Introduction: ECRs in an Interdisciplinary Research Landscape

In today's academia, interdisciplinarity has recently come to be perceived not merely as a trendy scholarly approach but sometimes even as a moral responsibility to define what competent researchers and quality research is. Interdisciplinary research is often framed as the most viable response to complex real-world problems, such as AI ethics, climate change, and mental health, as well as the most effective way to produce new knowledge outcomes (**Earnshaw 2020**). Funding calls, strategic development and educational plans, and institutional and governmental mission statements often promote and even require cross-disciplinary and interdisciplinary collaboration, framing it as both a virtue and a necessity (**Graff 2015; Leahey & Barringer 2020**).

In this context, staying strictly within one's own disciplinary boundaries may be perceived as short-sighted, indicative of a limited capacity and knowledge, as well as an outdated approach to problem-solving in the current research landscape. This shift extends beyond ways of knowing or studying the world. Especially for early-career researchers (ECRs), it can also affect their position within the transforming academic landscape by way of the perception of their academic value and how it fits within the current research ecosystem (**Spence et al., 2024**).

While interdisciplinarity can offer new opportunities to solve pressing societal challenges, it may also introduce uncertainty regarding career stability, funding prospects, and professional recognition (**van Helden et al., 2024; Vantard et al., 2023**). ECRs, whose nascent academic careers are already precarious, now have to navigate a delicate balance between pursuing innovative, cross-disciplinary research and meeting the practical demands and expectations of institutions organised around traditional disciplinary norms and supports (**Shellock et al., 2023**).

Locating the Self: The Identity Work of Interdisciplinary ECRs

As an ECR with a research background in Applied Linguistics, I have spent my early career not following a linear progression. Rather, my career has developed through my ongoing engagement across multiple disciplines, through interdisciplinary research and research-informed teaching outside my home department. I have contributed to intercultural teamwork, project management, and research communication in Chemistry and Computer Science, and supported interprofessional communication practice in the University of Warwick Medical School. In

each context, I brought my expertise in language and social interaction, as well as perspectives inspired by the social sciences to enrich scholarly discussions in learning spaces. While I do not fully 'belong' to any single disciplinary domain, the value of my research lies in drawing on the fresh perspectives generated by the differences between and intersection of my own disciplines and these other fields, and in my ability to make visible what disciplinary insiders might not readily perceive in their own ways of working, communicating, and researching. Throughout my interdisciplinary research and related teaching journey, I have come to realise that no single discipline can claim epistemic authority, given that contemporary real-world problems require a broad range of knowledge and problem-solving skills from various subject areas.

For instance, my home discipline of Applied Linguistics does not treat language as an isolated structure. Instead, it examines how language both shapes and is shaped by social realities, institutional power, and lived identities (**Schmitt & Celce-Murcia, 2020**). This foundation has given me a distinctive lens through which I interrogate a complex world. I do not only observe human or digitalised communication; I analyse the discourse underpinning it. Likewise, I do not only describe or record the transfer of information; I examine how meaning is produced, circulated, consumed, and interpreted; how positions are negotiated; and how authority is enacted or dissolved through that transfer. In interdisciplinary collaborations, this granular and critical perspective allows me to perceive what often remains nascent, including the assumptions embedded in terminology, the hierarchies encoded in professional genres, and the values reflected in routine practices.

Applied Linguistics carries its own epistemic culture, just as every discipline does. Taking reflexivity practice as an example, as an applied linguist, I am trained to regard researchers as participants not neutral observers, to view knowledge as always socially situated, and to appreciate that knowledge production is facilitated by human beings and their subjectivities (**Consoli & Ganassin, 2023**). When I entered a science and medicine context, I encountered a very different approach to knowledge, one that urges objectivity. In these spaces, credibility is usually measured by quantification, by numeric data. Research is considered rigorous only if the researcher remains distant from those being studied, and language is treated as solely an instrument for conveying information rather than being recognised as a mediational tool that shapes how we understand the world.

This contrast in approach created methodological challenges and moments of self-reflection. As an ECR making forays into multiple disciplines, I constantly had to translate across epistemic differences, justifying why my qualitative inquiry is rigorous, why reflexivity is essential, and why discourse analysis is diagnostic rather than descriptive. For example, when developing a research-informed case study on patient safety for medical students, the project lead required me to specify that examining communication in a simulated medical case discussion is not a distraction from clinical competence but is actually a core skill in professional practice that reveals how empathy, hierarchy, and uncertainty are organised through language.

These moments spurred me to become more confident and assertive in my research and to critique constructively. They also highlighted the invisible labour of interdisciplinary ECRs like me, for whom research 'legitimacy' still has to be earned and then continually reaffirmed in every collaboration outside one's disciplinary comfort zone (Apine et al., 2026). This labour appears in project meetings where research questions are reframed to travel across fields, in grant applications where qualitative insight has to be translated into impact, and in classrooms where assumptions about neutrality are gently unsettled. Although challenging, this work has strengthened my commitments and deepened my respect for epistemic diversity. Rooted in Applied Linguistics, I have carried its reflexive ethos into new contexts, insisting that *how* we know cannot be separated from *what* we know and how we are different, and that meaningful interdisciplinary collaboration begins with making epistemological conflicts visible and acknowledged (Dalton et al., 2022).

Boundary-spanning as Practice and Precarity: STEM, AI, Medicine and the Labour of Integration

My research-informed work across Chemistry, Computer Science, and Medical Education has unfolded as a continuous journey between fields, translating knowledge and helping others navigate interdisciplinary spaces. At first glance, these areas might seem very different, but they share a common tension: balancing human complexity and technical precision. With each, I confronted the same fundamental challenge: what happens when disciplines built on claims of objectivity encounter the vast, messy human realities of meaning, interpretation, and collaboration?

In Chemistry, I worked as an interdisciplinary research project mentor. My role involved guiding undergraduate teams on interdisciplinary projects,

supporting research writing, presentation skills, and public engagement, as well as offering one-on-one tutorials on project development and design. My mentoring work, in practice, involved constantly translating research between disparate disciplinary research cultures. For instance, many chemists were trained to use statistical methods to uncover truths about the world, treating numbers and formulas as objective reflections of reality. But at the same time, I tutored student groups who were conducting qualitative research and often struggled to recognise what counts as 'valid' in this context, which methods to prioritise, how to apply qualitative approaches appropriately, and how knowledge is socially constructed. By encouraging students to reflect on moments of uncertainty in shifting research paradigms, interpretive decisions, and the reasoning behind their analytical choices, I created a space to make visible the human work behind scientific inquiry. This was not about undermining the rigour or questioning the validity of their common scientific inquiries. Rather, it was about recognising that human agency—our decisions, interpretations, and interventions—can enable us to dig into the deeper layers of meaning that often remain hidden in quantitative methods.

In Computer Science, I was able to bring questions from my research on AI, language, and social interaction into a different disciplinary setting. For example, I developed a research-informed case study on the ethical implications of conversational AI in medical consultations. Asking questions such as 'whose language is being marginalised?' or 'who benefits from these systems?' helped shift the conversation from technical correctness to broader social implications, bringing questions from my research on language, inequality, and AI into a more technically focused discipline. This experience required me to explain ideas from my research in ways that connected with a different field and made me reflect on how different disciplines approach questions of language, ethics, and social justice. It also showed me how interdisciplinary research can bring different perspectives together to explore shared problems.

My work in Medical Education offered a different opportunity to apply my research on communication and interaction. In simulated interprofessional communication exercises, I focused on how people use interaction to establish expertise, build trust, express uncertainty, and manage professional identities. I encouraged students to consider who speaks, whose concerns are prioritised, and how uncertainty and emotion are handled in conversation. This work helped me see how research on interaction can shed light on professional practice, while also highlighting the contribution that qualitative approaches can make to research

cultures where biomedical and technical forms of knowledge have traditionally been more prominent.

Across various disciplines, I noticed a clear pattern in my work. By spanning boundaries, all of these experiences in interdisciplinary research make visible what each individual discipline often takes for granted (**Wagner et al., 2011**). The production of new and novel knowledge does not come from everyone simply agreeing on the same assumptions or ways of seeing a problem (**Stoffels et al., 2022**). It often arises when differences between disciplines and perspectives require researchers to explain their assumptions, reflect on their own positions, and engage in dialogue with one another. As an ECR who moves between different disciplines, I felt this firsthand. My interdisciplinarity means I am often valued for my outside perspective but am rarely fully included in any single community. The work of translating knowledge, anticipating scepticism regarding my credentials, and carefully framing critique can be tiring.

Interdisciplinary work is relational as much as it is intellectual. I spend a lot of time building trust, mediating misunderstandings, and smoothing tensions through meetings, emails, and casual conversations, so that all my interdisciplinary 'voices' can be heard. Without a clear home for my research, I sometimes felt like an outsider. My contributions are not always fully understood, and moments of self-doubt are common. At the same time, I know this work is deeply useful and meaningful. Moving across boundaries forces me to think differently, to question assumptions, and to support others in doing the same.

Nonetheless, boundary-spanning is not just about navigating academic boundaries. Instead, it is a form of leadership by example. Complex problems require people who can see how data, technology, human behaviour, and experience interact. Doing this work has taught me that being a boundary-spanner is not about being a critic from the sidelines. It is about acting as a catalyst, helping others see things anew, inviting reflection, and expanding what counts as legitimate knowledge.

Epistemological Translation, Power and the Making of Interdisciplinary Expertise

Another central theme of my experience in the interdisciplinary space has been the uneven power dynamics that shape who gets to define what counts as such valid and useful knowledge. Interdisciplinary work is often described as democratic and collaborative, yet in practice it is a

negotiation shaped by epistemic hierarchies (Cullen et al., 2023). Terms such as *rigour*, *impact*, and *evidence* can take on different meanings and expectations even within the same institution. What is regarded as credible and foundational in one discipline may be viewed as peripheral, or even inconsequential, in another.

I became aware of this when I joined a mental health intervention project during my PhD study, at a time when I had no formal training in health sciences. Although I had been recruited because of my expertise in language, peer interaction, and communication, I often felt out of place in early project meetings. I questioned whether my ideas were legitimate, and I hesitated to speak up. I interpreted unfamiliarity with health terminology as incompetence rather than as a natural condition of interdisciplinary work. Eventually, I understood that the uncertainty I felt was not only about myself; it expressed my discomfort with deeper disciplinary hierarchies and asymmetries. While the health-related knowledge of my peers spoke with ontological and epistemological authority, my linguistic and qualitative insights were suspect. Without intentional effort, interdisciplinary environments risk reproducing these hierarchies, marginalising those instrumental to research outcomes who are positioned outside the dominant field.

What transformed my experience for the better was not my gaining more health and medical knowledge, but the changes made in leadership practice in this interdisciplinary space (Feldman et al., 2006; Resendiz et al., 2026). Senior colleagues intentionally invited my input, treated my questions as intellectually valuable, and acknowledged the broader relevance of my research skills and expertise. Importantly, they involved me in decision-making instead of confining me to a narrow, technical and administrative role. This shift disrupted the implicit hierarchy that had made my contributions feel peripheral, allowing me to recognise that my role was not supplementary but integral (Borrego & Newswander, 2010).

Since then, I have come to understand much of my interdisciplinary work as a process of epistemological translation (Klein, 2010). This kind of translation is not a matter of simplifying or diluting ideas. Instead, it is a deliberate act of reframing concepts so that their significance is visible and meaningful to collaborators operating from different disciplinary perspectives. To be able to confidently, competently, and comfortably translate between epistemological domains requires three interdependent capacities:

- 1) *linguistic agility*: the skill to switch between the languages of different disciplines without changing the core meaning of ideas;
- 2) *epistemic humility*: the ability to recognise that your own disciplinary perspective is limited and to approach other ways of knowing with curiosity instead of defensiveness;
- 3) *purposeful simplification*: knowing when to simplify a complex idea so it is clear to others, and when to keep its complexity to avoid misrepresenting it.

Moreover, this experience is about relationships as much as it is about ideas. Successful translation between disciplines requires an environment where people from different fields feel safe to share their perspectives. Without careful attention to power dynamics, interdisciplinary work can become superficial, consisting of parallel conversations rather than true integration.

Building on Cooke (2024), Haider et al. (2018), and Mennes (2025), I describe this practice more broadly as *interdisciplinary expertise* (IE). IE is composed of three key competencies:

- 1) *boundary-crossing capability*: the skill to enter new fields, understand their core values, and contribute meaningfully even within limited timeframes;
- 2) *epistemic synthesis*: the ability to combine insights from different domains, such as AI ethics and Applied Linguistics, to create new understanding;
- 3) *relational intelligence*: the interpersonal and collaborative skills needed to support interdisciplinary teams, including negotiating tensions and translating ideas across differing expectations.

Viewed this way, epistemological translation becomes a core part of interdisciplinary expertise. From my experience working across Chemistry, Computer Science, and Medical Education, I have learned that questioning assumptions, reframing ideas, and adopting different perspectives are not peripheral tasks. Instead, they are the very processes and mechanisms that make the creation of new knowledge possible.

Conclusion: Interdisciplinarity and Institutional Responsibility

Over time, I have come to understand the challenges of interdisciplinary research as interconnected and shaped by institutional structures and

cultures. Universities frequently endorse interdisciplinarity in strategic language, and I have benefited from these commitments. Yet in everyday practice, the communicative and relational labour that enables interdisciplinary collaboration often remains under-recognised.

Much of the formal training I have undertaken has focused on funding mechanisms, collaboration models, and project design. These structural dimensions are important and necessary. However, they rarely address the subtle dynamics that shape interdisciplinary interaction in practice. Questions of whose discipline 'speaks' first, whose terminology frames the discussion, and whose definition of rigour becomes normative are seldom made explicit. Authority is unevenly distributed across disciplines, and assumptions about what constitutes legitimate knowledge often remain implicit. For scholars positioned outside the dominant field, these dynamics can generate uncertainty about belonging and credibility. The consequence is not only personal self-doubt but also the potential narrowing of intellectual exchange.

These experiences have led me to reflect on how IE is valued. Traditional academic models tend to prioritise depth within a single disciplinary domain. By contrast, many contemporary research problems require integrative thinking, conceptual synthesis, and relational awareness. The capacity to move across disciplinary boundaries, to connect insights from different epistemic traditions, and to sustain dialogue across difference should not be understood as secondary competencies. In practice, they constitute forms of intellectual, collaborative leadership and partnership.

Institutional responsibility is therefore central. ECRs working across departments require stable pathways, appropriate mentorship, and evaluative frameworks that recognise cross-boundary contributions and IE. Project leaders need to cultivate inclusive practices that legitimise diverse forms of expertise. Translation, mediation, and the maintenance of team cohesion should be acknowledged as substantive scholarly labour rather than relegated to invisible administrative work.

Interdisciplinary research practice has also led me to reconsider how I interpret moments of misunderstanding. Earlier in my career, I viewed them as indicators of inadequacy, but I now see them as inherent to work conducted across epistemic communities. The task is neither to assimilate uncritically into other fields nor to defend one's disciplinary identity rigidly; it is to translate without erasing oneself, to question constructively, and to build connections while maintaining intellectual integrity.

If institutions genuinely seek to address complex societal challenges, they have to recognise that this collaborative labour is foundational rather than peripheral. IE is not incidental; it is cultivated through the sustained exercise of reflexivity, resilience, and relational practice in interdisciplinary research. Valuing such work requires valuing those who enable knowledge to travel across disciplinary boundaries, even when their contributions are not immediately quantifiable within conventional metrics.

Acknowledgements

I thank everyone who has believed in me and supported me throughout my academic journey, giving me opportunities to grow, take on new challenges, and develop as an interdisciplinary researcher. I would like to express my sincere thanks to Professor Tony Liddicoat, whose work to advance the social sciences has been a constant source of inspiration and whose example has encouraged me to approach research with curiosity, enthusiasm, and a lifelong commitment to understanding the complexities of the world around us. I am especially grateful to Dr Tom Ritchie, Dr Helena Tuomainen, and Dr Laura Chandler, who have guided and supported me throughout my interdisciplinary journey, believed in me, encouraged me through difficult times, and motivated me to learn and grow as an early-career academic. Their support has strengthened my confidence in interdisciplinary research and helped me recognise my own value as an academic and my ability to make meaningful contributions across disciplinary boundaries.

Dr Yanyan Li holds a PhD in Applied Linguistics and a Postgraduate Award in Interdisciplinary Pedagogy from the University of Warwick. She completed her MA in Applied Linguistics at University College London and is a fellow of the Higher Education Academy and the Warwick Institute of Engagement. She also serves as Warwick's Institutional Representative for the British Academy Early Career Researcher Network (ECRN), and co-chairs the ECRN of Warwick's Society & Culture Interdisciplinary Research Spotlight. Her research interests include human-to-human and human-AI interaction, public/mental health, and research culture. <https://profiles.warwick.ac.uk/u2176367-yanyan-li/about>



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To cite this article:

Li, Y., 2026. 'The Interdisciplinary Condition: Navigating precarity, identity, and epistemic translation as an early-career researcher'. *Exchanges: The Interdisciplinary Research Journal*, 13(3), 66–78. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.31273/eirj.v13i3.2227>.