

## **Empowering professional identity and positive outcomes through third space collaboration: A subject lecturer and EAP practitioner case study**

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### ***Abstract***

English for Academic Purposes (EAP) staff frequently find themselves sidelined in higher education (HE), where they can be perceived as operating on the edge of academia, or even outside of it. Proactively claiming a role in the third space (Whitchurch, 2008) potentially supports recognition of their professional identity, value, and contribution. This case study reflects on a collaboration between a Lecturer with a professional services background, and an EAP Practitioner, incorporating perspectives from both staff members. The collaboration took place at all three levels identified by Dudley-Evans and St John (1998) for this type of shared work: cooperation, collaboration, and then team teaching. The third level of team teaching was achieved through a co-delivered assessment workshop. This was designed to allow the EAP Practitioner's expertise to scaffold the students towards asking clear questions of the Lecturer, in a safe space, supporting understanding and assessment performance, while minimising concerns about inappropriate challenge or loss of face. Both staff members benefitted from this third space collaboration, building professional confidence, with the EAP Practitioner feeling empowered in their expertise and practice, which can be challenging for third-space professionals with previous negative experiences of attempted collaboration. The student outcomes appeared positive, and this collaboration led to other activities that further cemented the collaborative working relationship and demonstrated the value of activity within the third space.

**Keywords:** English for academic purposes; case study research; team teaching; third space; pedagogy.

## ***Introduction***

This case study focuses on two staff members (an EAP Practitioner and a Lecturer) at a small specialist UK university. It considers their experiences of a collaborative approach to teaching and support for an international student cohort completing a fourth-year Human Resource Management (HRM) module assessed by written report. The authors' reflections are underpinned by the principles of Atkins and Murphy's model (1993), focusing on learning from the salient events and feelings experienced, to evaluate underlying knowledge and formulate conclusions and recommendations. The EAP Practitioner had 20 years' experience and had been employed in the English Language Support (ELS) team for around two years on a part-time, term-time only contract. The Lecturer had worked in the institution for over a decade, spending several years working part-time within professional services in careers, before taking a full-time lecturing post. The international students were Chinese nationals from one Chinese university. Their first two years of study were at their home institution, and the second two years at the UK institution. Students attended optional, non-credit bearing ELS classes for three hours a week. One-to-one ELS tutorials also allowed students to bring written draft work to elicit feedback and to analyse assessment briefs.

The Lecturer identified that students were uncomfortable asking direct questions about the assessment brief. They were given many opportunities to ask questions in class, which they did not take, but then emailed the lecturer multiple questions afterwards. This seemed to indicate concern about levels of subject understanding and the ability to effectively communicate their questions, common amongst international students (Holliman et al., 2024). The lecturer's usual approaches of an in-class launch of the written assessment brief, follow-up guidance video, and subsequent in-class question and answer (Q&A) session were tried, but the issue persisted. The Lecturer and EAP Practitioner were already working together effectively with cooperation and collaboration, the first two levels identified by Dudley-Evans and St John (1998) for shared work between subject specialists and EAP practitioners in the third space. They therefore looked to solve the problem together, using the third and final level of this model, team teaching.

## **Literature review**

Liu et al. (2024) noted that good university teaching transcends national and cultural boundaries. The idea that international students need a different approach to succeed is inherently based on a deficit narrative, which can lead to marginalisation and ‘othering’ (Agostinelli, 2021; Lomer and Mittelmeier, 2021; Liu et al., 2024). However, this narrative is all too common, with international students framed as passive rather than active learning participants (Marlina, 2009; Lomer and Mittelmeier, 2021; Deuchar, 2022). Many lecturers may consciously or unconsciously adopt this framing, perceiving international students as passive rote learners who struggle with critical thinking (Shaheen, 2016; Bai and Wang, 2022). This perception may be exacerbated when Chinese students avoid active questioning due to concerns about losing face (Young, 2017) or inappropriately challenging the lecturer (Holliman et al., 2024).

EAP staff working closely with those for whom English is not a native language may gain a more nuanced understanding. EAP can be defined as language research and instruction that ‘identifies specific language features, discourse practices, and communicative skills of target academic groups, and which recognises the subject-matter needs and expertise of learners’ (Hyland, 2018, pp.383-384). Many EAP practitioners take an English for Specific Academic Purposes (ESAP) approach, concentrating on the discipline specific needs of learners (Flowerdew and Peacock, 2001, p.16), where collaboration with subject specialists is key. The skills of EAP practitioners include the articulation of literacy requirements, the development of instructional materials through text analysis, and the ability to pinpoint underlying problems in student assessments (Wingate, 2018, p.353), which add value to, and across, all disciplines. Collaborative ESAP approaches are increasingly prevalent, although EAP practitioners face challenges in convincing subject specific colleagues to collaborate (Crandall and Kaufman, 2002; Wingate, 2018), with workload and research commitments cited as possible reasons for limited engagement (Seldon and Davies, 2016), along with concerns about EAP practitioners’ subject-specific capabilities and knowledge (Spack, 1998). Third-space professionals can also find their own workloads, perceived identities, and institutional standing inhibit collaborative activity (Whitchurch and Law, 2010).

Another challenge faced by EAP practitioners is their uncertain professional standing within universities, frequently operating on the edge of academia (Ding and Bruce, 2017). Descriptions of EAP staff cast them as service providers. Raimes, for example, likened

EAP practitioners to 'butlers' who serve the academic community from their position 'outside academia' (1991, p.243). Other similar analogies include EAP practitioners described as 'poor relations' of more specific subject experts (Hamp-Lyons, 2011, p.91) and having Cinderella-status (Charles and Pecorari, 2015). In this institution, EAP staff were known as "English Language Support Tutors", nomenclature which risked marginalising the group and minimising their professional abilities (Caldwell, 2024).

EAP practitioners can find themselves professionally sidelined, but within this positioning, they can find freedom for pedagogical innovation (Macdonald, 2017; Palanac, 2022), and a place in the 'third space'. Whitchurch (2008, p.378) describes the third space in HE as existing 'between the traditional binary of an academic domain and an administrative or management domain that supports this'. Third-space staff can have professional identities and significant academic credentials, deliver value to their institutions, staff, and students, and potentially be actively researching and teaching (Campbell, 2017), whilst not holding an 'academic' role. The third space can also be conceptualised as a place of fruitful collaboration amongst staff with varied expertise and experience; a place of academic and educational development (Little and Green, 2021), and policy planning and enactment (McKay and Robson, 2023).

Thus, it could be said that the third space is a fitting home for EAP practitioners and their expert contribution to collaborative HE work. In the context of this case study, research specifically focusing on EAP and subject specialist collaboration is highly relevant. Dudley-Evans and St John (1998) outlined three potential levels for shared work, which can be adapted for different settings and subjects. The EAP practitioner initiates the first level, cooperation, gathering information from the subject specialist. At the second level, collaboration, they work together outside the classroom to prepare students, and at the third level, they work together in the classroom in a team teaching format (1998, pp.42-48). This subject-led approach (Hyland and Hamp-Lyons, 2002) recognises that by working together, the EAP practitioner and subject specialist have the potential to become greater than the sum of their parts, in relation to student learning. Other models, such as Contextualisation, Embedding, Mapping (CEM) (Sloan and Porter, 2010), have demonstrated the added value of integrated EAP programmes, but EAP provision was not integrated at this institution. Alhassan et al. (2022) identified reticence from subject specialists around team teaching, and a preference for first-level cooperation. This case study reflects on the experiences of two staff who worked towards that elusive third level,

initially building cooperation and collaboration, before taking on the challenge of team teaching.

## **Method**

The EAP Practitioner initiated contact with the Lecturer at the start of the module and reviewed the module's Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) page. This level one cooperation (Dudley-Evans and St John, 1998) allowed the EAP Practitioner to gather information about module content and tasks. The Lecturer responded, highlighting VLE items that could be the foundation of an ELS class (e.g., relevant HRM articles and terminology). This created alignment between EAP and subject content, supporting student engagement (Flowerdew and Peacock, 2001). Further activities then occurred at level two (Dudley-Evans and St John, 1998), including the Lecturer discussing the assessment brief with the EAP Practitioner, and the EAP Practitioner using the Lecturer's assessment brief video to support their own understanding, and that of their students.

In class, the Lecturer supported student engagement and scaffolded active learning through immediate learner input and feedback, such as polls, question prompts, and in-class discussion (Biggs and Tang, 2011; Tharayil et al., 2018). For the assessment, the Lecturer recorded an explanatory video, supporting an asynchronous review of the requirements. The Lecturer also ran an in-person assessment Q&A session, to support understanding and tackle shared questions as a group, with the potential for peer learning (Dolan and Collins, 2015). The Lecturer used Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles of choice, which benefit both international students (Qu and Cross, 2024) and other learners (Almeqdad et al., 2023).

However, in this instance, the in-class launch, video, and Q&A had not resolved students' concerns, as the lecturer continued to receive multiple emails from students about the assessment. Valuing their perspective, the Lecturer discussed this with the EAP Practitioner. Options were discussed and it was jointly decided to deliver a further in-person team-taught Q&A on the assessment, a third level activity (Dudley-Evans and St John, 1998).

The principles of this two-hour, third level session were as follows:

- The EAP Practitioner delivered the first hour. The objective during this time was to support students in articulating their questions and to identify any underlying issues or misunderstandings. The EAP Practitioner delivered this part individually to capitalise on their existing relationship with the group, and to minimise student concerns around inappropriate challenge or loss of face.
- The facilitator role taken by the EAP Practitioner also allowed questions to be grouped into areas of common interest or concern. Students could be directed to any answers already provided in the video, brief, or marking rubric.
- The Lecturer then joined the group for the second hour, and the students posed their questions. The EAP Practitioner remained engaged in the teaching, providing support and clarification as needed.

### ***Immediate outcomes***

The session had very good attendance and engagement from students. They interacted as anticipated, using their connection with, and support from, the EAP Practitioner to build confidence in the first hour. This scaffolding meant students asked the Lecturer clearly framed questions in the second hour.

In terms of immediate benefits perceived by the staff involved, the students subsequently appeared to gain confidence around asking questions in class, and the overall standard of the submitted assessments was strong. The staff also saw immediate tangible benefits for their own work, as the questions asked helped the Lecturer to develop the assessment brief for later cohorts, while the EAP Practitioner was able to hear directly from both the Lecturer and the students, rather than only hearing from one stakeholder at a time, clarifying their understanding and practice.

## ***Discussion and reflection on longer-term benefits***

From the EAP Practitioner's perspective, this collaborative approach worked because there was Lecturer 'buy-in', which is crucial to success (Sloan and Porter, 2010; Hakim, 2023). The Lecturer's collaboration enabled better access to the module, to tailor ELS to students' needs. Through third-space collaboration, the students were aware of the relevance of the classes and could demonstrate their subject-specific knowledge, which possibly enhanced motivation (Hyland, 2018, p.391). Engagement from the Lecturer clearly demonstrated to students that the provision was an integrated, collaborative, and interdisciplinary approach.

The Lecturer's own professional services background, albeit not in EAP, may well have influenced their own receptiveness. Due to their understanding of the importance of third space work in HE, they could immediately see how collaboration was mutually beneficial and would enhance student experience and learning, as well as professional development (Abegglen, Burns and Sinfield, 2023). Working through the three levels (Dudley-Evans and St John, 1998) with the EAP Practitioner, the Lecturer gained understanding of barriers to learning that could be resolved, such as use of idioms in teaching (Miller, 2020) and a potential lack of confidence in critical thinking (Holliman et al., 2024).

Another advantage of working in the third space was that the students appeared to feel this was a safe space to share issues or misunderstandings. This concurs with research by Owen (2002, p.45), who emphasised that the EAP classroom often provides 'a sheltered context for grappling with the cognitive demands of new content'. The EAP Practitioner viewed drafts of assessments in one-to-one sessions before the Lecturer, so they were also able to feed back on areas of misunderstanding. As the Lecturer was a relatively new member of lecturing staff, this supported their professional development. Similarly, the students could also review their own practice; the team teaching Q&A modelled strategies around analysing assessments and questioning that they could use elsewhere in their course, potentially supporting increased autonomy.

Having worked closely with the Lecturer and feeling that their contribution had been valued, the EAP Practitioner was encouraged and empowered to seek further collaborations and carry out their own research (Abegglen, Burns and Sinfield, 2023). According to Hakim (2023, p.37), continued marginalisation can lead EAP practitioners to doubt their own expertise and competence, which was the case here. Previous attempts to

engage with subject lecturers had not always been fruitful, but through this positive experience the EAP Practitioner felt empowered to use the third space to occupy a more active role within the university (Whitchurch, 2008). For example, following the collaboration, the EAP Practitioner and Lecturer worked together on a further co-created international student project, which they presented at the institution's Teaching and Learning Conference.

The 'buy in' from the Lecturer was evident in their willingness not only to collaborate but to reflect on the experience of collaboration and disseminate findings more widely. While there is research on EAP practitioners sharing their experiences of similar collaborations (Morley, 2008; Sloan and Porter, 2010), subject-specific lecturers do not always share their perspectives (Wingate, 2018). The Lecturer was mindful in both team teaching and subsequent dissemination of the need for genuine partnership. The perception of EAP Practitioners as 'butlers' (Raimes, 1991) or 'handmaidens' (Hyland, 2006) was avoided through the way in which the staff interacted as equal partners in front of the students, and in how they referred to each other in any student or staff discussions. Similarly, the later co-created conference dissemination was collaborative and equal. Subsequent module-based collaboration included inviting EAP practitioners and wider members of the team supporting international students to watch and provide feedback on student presentations, further cementing their role as valued colleagues.

However, the EAP Practitioner experienced a greater level of practical challenge in facilitating this work than the Lecturer. Students were enrolled on several other modules and despite effort from the EAP Practitioner, collaboration was more limited with other subject specialists. Consistent, successful collaboration requires a top-down approach where collaboration is encouraged by senior leaders (Wingate, 2018).

## ***Conclusions and recommendations***

Both the EAP Practitioner and Lecturer benefitted from working together and learned from each other, enhancing and developing their work with students, and their professional confidence and competence. These benefits applied to this module, but also to their wider work. They would therefore recommend that other staff consider the potential for third-

space collaboration to enhance their practice and student learning and engagement.

Although both were relatively new in their respective roles, these benefits are equally applicable to longer-standing members of staff. In this example, the authors were building on a pre-existing working relationship, and the EAP Practitioner was known to the students. Where this is not the case, additional relationship building may be needed, or the educators may prefer simply to work at the levels of cooperation or collaboration (Dudley-Evans and St John, 1998). Transferability may depend on this, which is a subject for further investigation.

At a practical level, the use of videos on assessment briefs as a level one (if viewing) or level two (if discussing) activity is highly recommended as an accessible way for subject specialists to share vital assessment knowledge with students and with EAP practitioners. Progressing this to a level three team teaching activity brought the most significant benefits to the staff in this case, and modelled respect and third-space collaboration to the students.

In this work, student feedback on the team teaching in the Q&A itself was not captured. However, other observed indicators, such as the level and type of student interactions and questions, assessment outcomes, and overall module feedback suggested that the approach was successful from the students' perspective. In any similar work in the future, the authors recommend that student views and feedback are captured, or better still, that team teaching is co-created with students (Abegglen, Burns and Sinfield, 2023).

There are factors that would support more collaboration of this nature, and it is recommended that institutions consider these to support third space work. These include top-down approaches that allow and support subject specialists to engage properly with EAP practitioners (Wingate, 2018, p.353), for example by considering the standing of EAP Practitioners within the institution and amplifying their work (Whitchurch and Law, 2010), and disseminating examples of successful collaboration with subject-specific staff. The EAP Practitioner in this case study also noted practical considerations around contract hours, namely that preparation and collaboration can be challenging on term-time only contracts. The assumption that EAP staff only work their contact hours underestimates the preparation time of third space professional staff, and risks shifting the burden of preparation into unpaid, unrecognised time, while also limiting collaboration.

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