

**Leeds Institute for  
Teaching Excellence**



**UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS**

**UNDERSTANDING THE INTERSECTION OF LANGUAGE,  
DISCIPLINARY KNOWLEDGE COMMUNICATION  
AND IDENTITY**  
Executive Summary

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## Introduction

As the number of international students studying in the UK increases, particularly at taught postgraduate (PGT) level, there is a concurrent increase in the need to consider the barriers to learning faced by this cohort of students. Understandings of, and support in relation to, these barriers now need to be more nuanced and problematized, and to reach further than specialised international student offices or the provision of extra-curricular language support. Instead, they need to become embedded in core curricular practices.

Although language proficiency (or deficiency) is a frequently cited barrier to success for international students, I argue through this project that this is too broad a generalisation. Language does play a vital role in student attainment, but our understanding of language and the role it plays in shaping discipline-specific knowledge and understanding needs to be clarified.

The socio-cultural and (academic) identity shifts that the transition to postgraduate study demands of all students need to be further explored and related back to the language used in disciplinary practices, as does the impact on and adjustments made by those involved in teaching an expanding and changing cohort of students. The language used to communicate discipline-specific expectations, cultures and concepts is often tacit in nature, carrying the weight of layered, implied understanding which is only fully understood by those already socialised into the field of study. Teachers need support in how to foreground this understanding in order to enable the full participation of all students.

## Methodology

Using three sites – one STEM, one Arts, Humanities and Cultures, and one specifically for language teaching – as case studies, my project investigates the often divergent understanding of the role language plays in knowledge communication at PGT level between content teachers, English for Academic Purposes (EAP) teachers and students.

Taking a broadly Academic Literacies ethnographic approach (see, for example, Lea & Street, 1998), I collected a range of qualitative data from the three Case Study sites. Interviews and focus groups were held across the three sites, with 'thickness' added to the data from classroom observations, field notes and a range of related documentation.

This data was repeatedly scrutinized and coded for emergent themes. These themes were considered within each of the Case Study sites separately before a cross-site analysis was conducted, with separate themes arising from this.

## Findings

The findings from this project are presented in a number of ways. As each Case Study site was analysed and presented individually, a picture of engagement with language was built in different contexts.

Within the Language Centre, EAP teachers had a detailed knowledge and understanding of language as an academic subject and a powerful identity as 'teachers', with the ability

to draw students out and build confidence. However, they were less confident when required to work with high-level academic content in an unfamiliar subject, and experienced decreased academic authority in the classroom when doing this. In Media and Communication, teachers were aware of the importance of language within their discipline and were able to describe ways in which they addressed issues of language through their teaching. However, claiming a lack of expertise and time, they were also unwilling and unable to spend the time they felt was needed to enable many of their students to demonstrate fully their developing understanding of their subject. Large numbers of students at PGT level generally seemed to be putting a strain on resources and time. This was compounded by a high proportion of these students coming from different educational and language backgrounds. The consequences of this were felt, not only through the time and effort involved in marking 'inelegantly' written scripts, but also within the traditional dynamics of knowledge creation and sharing via seminar discussion. A cultural disconnect was reported by both teachers and students, not between L1 and English-as-a-second or other-language (L2) speakers in general, but more specifically between (the more numerically dominant) Chinese and non-Chinese students.

Teachers within this School demonstrated high levels of reflection and reflexivity around their teaching practices, and a desire to find solutions to the problems they perceived as resulting from students' cultural (which they emphasised over linguistic) differences.

Within Biological Sciences, there was very little sense that language was a consideration within their teaching. Language in general was not seen as problematic. This School generally seems to conform to the more traditional model of PGT teaching, as apprenticeship for research. Emphasis throughout appeared to be on developing students as researchers, through research. Whilst there were procedures for supporting students who were identified as being in difficulty, this was viewed as a separate issue to the main work of the content teacher. Language only seemed to become visible when a student's text did not match expectations, at which point language was viewed as a problem which was distinct from other elements of the learning taking place and the curriculum as a whole, rather than as part of the social practice of knowledge communication.

Whilst many students reported feeling lost at times around academic expectations and assumptions, they maintained confidence in the discipline in general and seemed to accept that the sometimes opaque nature of the information they were given was part of their apprenticeship into the discipline. However, when a student was struggling with both these tacit academic conventions and a developing language proficiency, the affective 'noise' became too great and breakdown in understanding became almost irreparable within the timeframe of a one-year PGT programme.

Cross-case-study analysis broadened the findings of this project far beyond the use and impact of language within a discipline. The data highlighted socio-political and cultural issues around the role and purpose of the University, particularly the changing function of teaching at PGT level. Approaches to teaching and learning are thrown into question when dealing with large numbers of students who are not already socialised into the system and who are also continuing to learn the language

that is the medium of instruction. This has an impact on the time, identity, sense of agency and trust in the system of those involved in PGT student education (See Figure 1).

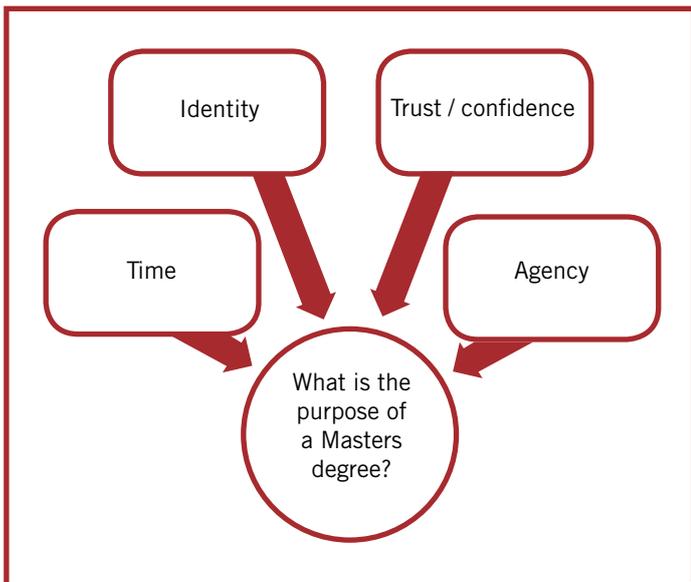


Figure 1: Questioning the purpose of M-level teaching

The same four themes emerge within the EAP teaching unit. As an emerging discipline, on the frontline of neoliberal activity and internationalisation agendas, and at the interface between knowledge production and practice (Bernstein, 2000), EAP teachers also appeared to be re-establishing and questioning the parameters of EAP. Questions were asked as to whether knowledge of the language system as an academic construct and an understanding of how to teach was enough. Whilst EAP teachers are aware that more connections may be needed, again the constraints of time, an unclear and diverse set of identities, a sense of a lack (and at times an abdication) of agency and a lack of confidence in their academic content knowledge also lead to a questioning of the overarching purpose and impact of EAP teaching (Figure 2).

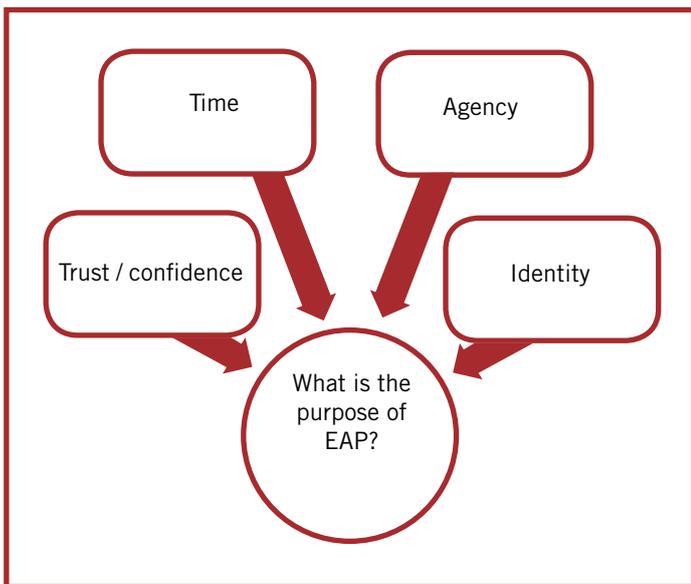


Figure 2: Questioning the purpose of EAP

This changing nature of academic / teacher identity was a strong but unexpected thread in my data. The main focus, on issues connected specifically to the impact of language across

the three Case Study sites, revealed a complex picture that was difficult to unpack. Issues relating to educational background and culture, disciplinary content knowledge and language are not easy to tease apart. However, there seem to be seven broad areas that can be used as a framework through which to analyse the data. At times, the data cross the different areas; as teachers and students described their experiences it became clear that one area often impacts and resonates across many. However, in Figure 3 the seven areas are represented as disconnected parts of a jigsaw, as currently each of them seems to be addressed through disconnected or separate areas of the University and its curriculum.

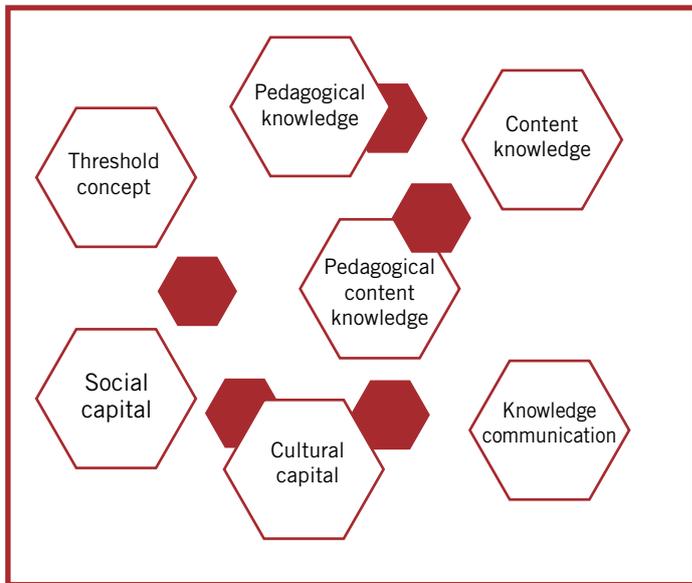


Figure 3: Language disconnected across the university experience

## Recommendations

As PGT programmes only run full time for one year, there is very little time to work with students; it is therefore even more vital at this level that the teachers are fully prepared for a diverse and changing cohort. To move away from a deficit view of international students, teachers need to develop a clearer understanding of the tacit linguistic expectations they place on their students and work to highlight these in their teaching practices. This can be done via a curriculum that is built in collaboration with others across the University who hold expertise in teaching language, in developing skills and in supporting students. This curriculum should remain sensitive to particular teaching contexts, and maintain academic challenge and rigour whilst harnessing the expertise of others and drawing in the student as active participants in their learning. By addressing these needs, the hope is that a curriculum will emerge that has notions of inclusion and diversity at its heart. There are therefore two main recommendations emerging from this project.

1. The first is that the seven areas depicted above be connected rhizomatically. Language use needs to be understood as involving more than the mechanics and structure of a coding system to be learned before study in a discipline begins. Language cannot be untangled from the community of practice of a discipline, or from the broader social and cultural expectations of Higher Education in the UK. All teachers need to understand the impact that language, as the main means of expressing

thought, knowledge and understanding, has on academic knowledge communication and make this more explicit in their teaching. I therefore present the seven main areas of a university experience which the data suggest are key to developing students' ability to participate in this communication (Figure 4) as fully connected. Weaving these seven areas into curriculum design and planning across the University will address some of the support and development issues of international or L2 speakers specifically. By developing a 'language connected' curriculum, the support provided by, for example, EAP teaching units, skills centres and International Student Offices will be more clearly drawn into the academic offer. This will make the work of all more visible, more connected and, importantly, more relevant to the students' main purpose of obtaining an M-Level qualification.

2. The second recommendation is for further educational development of content and EAP teachers. This is to enable all teachers to work towards a language-visible curriculum and to approach teaching an internationalised cohort of students with confidence. This teacher development work needs to support content teachers to incorporate language awareness in their academic content teaching, and EAP teachers to highlight language and discourse through relevant academic content. Using the HEA UKPSF and the BALEAP teaching competencies as frameworks, I suggest themes from the data that could be incorporated into CPD programmes that would encourage teachers to consider the issues involved in teaching high-level academic content to students with a developing understanding of English for academic purposes.

## Conclusions

If UK universities continue to work towards an agenda of internationalization, and continue to maintain general language entry levels at the equivalent of IELTS 6.5, or B2 on the CEFR, it is vital that opportunities for all students to continue to develop their language are provided within and through their usual academic curriculum. Separating language learning out from their other, chosen academic endeavour, creates false understandings of the role that language plays in knowledge communication, and also in knowledge building and learning in general. This separation makes the move from language learning to language use more problematic. It also highlights and even creates differences between students who are labelled as being more or less proficient in language, setting one group in deficit in comparison to the other. This needs to be avoided if universities wish to create an environment and curriculum that encourages and embraces the principles of inclusion.



Figure 4: Language connected across the curriculum