



From research to reality: the need for practical guidance for inclusive teaching practices of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) in higher education

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Abstract

In a higher education (HE) landscape that is becoming increasingly internationalised and diversified, the importance of inclusive teaching practices, particularly in the context of English for Academic Purposes (EAP), is gaining growing international attention. While comprehensive frameworks and strategies are developed through educational research to support such practices, a significant gap remains between theoretical recommendations and practical implementation. This disconnect hinders the promotion of inclusive teaching practices, as identified by an ongoing wide-scale research project funded by BALEAP - The Global Forum for EAP Professionals. Current policies often emphasise broad aims such as inclusivity, diversity and equity but lack detailed guidance, leaving learning developers and other frontline educators, EAP tutors included, without the tools to realise these goals effectively. This opinion essay discusses the intersections between education research and policy on inclusive teaching practices of EAP in HE, identifying gaps in existing policies and setting a way forward. Highlighting the need for comprehensive policy frameworks that bridge theory and practice, it underscores the anticipated outcomes of the ongoing BALEAP-funded project that aims to provide practical recommendations, offering concrete strategies to foster inclusive learning environments, thereby enhancing educational experiences and outcomes for all students.

Keywords: inclusive teaching practices; English for academic purposes; higher education; educational policy.

Introduction

In a higher education landscape that is becoming increasingly internationalised and diversified, the importance of inclusive teaching practices, particularly in the context of English for Academic Purposes (EAP), is widely acknowledged. Comprehensive frameworks and strategies have been developed through educational research to support such practices (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). However, a persistent issue remains – research often provides robust theoretical recommendations but falls short in offering the explicit practical guidance necessary for effective implementation. This disconnection between theory and practice is a significant barrier to promoting inclusive teaching practices of EAP in higher education (HE), as evidenced by an ongoing large-scale research project funded by BALEAP – The Global Forum for EAP Professionals (Bakogiannis & Papavasiliou, 2023).

While this opinion essay primarily targets EAP practitioners, the gap identified extends to Learning Developers (LDs) and other subject tutors, all of whom play a pivotal role in shaping and implementing educational strategies. These professionals require clear, actionable guidance to effectively translate research into classroom practice. EAP practitioners focus on equipping non-native English speakers with essential language skills for academic success, while LDs address a broader spectrum of academic skills, including critical thinking and academic literacies, across various disciplines (Webb, 2023). Despite their distinct areas of expertise, both roles share a common goal: enhancing students' engagement with academic practice and fostering inclusive learning environments. However, this cannot be achieved without concrete, evidence-based guidance that bridges the gap between theory and practice. While some subject tutors may have access to frameworks tailored to their core teaching disciplines, such resources are often lacking for academic literacies. This leaves EAP practitioners and LDs - henceforth referred to as frontline educators - without the necessary tools to fully implement inclusive and effective teaching strategies.

This opinion essay will therefore explore the intersections between educational research and policy on inclusivity in EAP to identify policy gaps and propose a way forward. It highlights the need for a comprehensive policy framework introducing pragmatic, actionable strategies (applied steps) that bridge theory and practice, thereby emphasising

the importance of the outcomes of the ongoing project. This framework will be essential for frontline educators aiming to create more inclusive learning environments. By addressing practical needs through detailed and actionable policies, frontline educators can ensure that inclusive practices are not only understood but effectively implemented in diverse educational settings.

Gaps in current policies: from research to reality

Current HE policies often focus on broad aims and principles to support inclusive teaching practices, emphasising equality, diversity, and inclusion (Ainscow, 2020). These policies align well with theoretical insights, promoting a vision of what inclusive education should look like. However, they frequently lack detailed guidance on how to translate these aims and principles into practical classroom practices. This can leave frontline educators with a strong theoretical foundation but without the practical tools or strategies needed to achieve these goals in daily teaching (Lawrie et al., 2017). The absence of specific, actionable steps can result in educators feeling unsupported and uncertain about how to implement inclusive practices effectively.

During an online workshop on inclusivity in EAP delivered by the BALEAP Academic Literacies Special Interest Group (AL SIG), participants from different professional backgrounds, experiences, and roles across a range of UK HE institutions highlighted a significant mismatch between broad policy recommendations and the practical applications needed to bring these recommendations to life. For example, some practitioners noted challenges in adapting materials to cater to diverse linguistic abilities within the same classroom, while others struggled with a lack of concrete guidance on how to design assessments that are both inclusive and reflective of varied student needs. Concerns were also raised about the limited training on how to address cultural differences that affect participation and engagement, and the difficulty of implementing inclusive strategies within rigid institutional structures that may not allow for much flexibility.

This mismatch means that even well-intentioned educators may struggle to consistently apply inclusive strategies, leading to inconsistencies and gaps in practice (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). To address this, there is an urgent need for policies that bridge the gap

between research and reality by offering detailed, context-specific strategies and resources, thereby ensuring that the principles of inclusivity are translated into practical teaching practices across diverse HE landscapes. Frontline educators must be equipped with the tools and resources necessary to guide and support educators in this endeavor, ensuring that inclusive strategies are both practical and applicable.

The heart of the problem: theory vs. practice

The heart of the problem lies in the fact that research evidence, while providing valuable theoretical guidance, often lacks the practical applications necessary for effective implementation. While theoretical orientation is crucial for understanding the broader context and objectives of inclusive education, without detailed actionable strategies that frontline educators can readily employ, translating these theoretical concepts into practice remains challenging. This has been described as the ‘implementation dip’, where the initial enthusiasm for new research-based approaches diminishes when faced with practical obstacles in the classroom (Fullan, 2001; Hopkins & Reynolds, 2001).

As an EAP practitioner, I have encountered this ‘implementation dip’ firsthand when attempting to integrate inclusive teaching practices into the classroom. For example, while research emphasises the importance of fostering linguistic inclusivity by accommodating diverse language backgrounds (Voltz, Sims & Nelson, 2010), practical guidance on how to achieve this within the constraints of pre-existing course materials and rigid assessment frameworks is often lacking. During a recent module, I aimed to adopt more inclusive assessment methods that would allow non-native English speakers to demonstrate their understanding in ways that accommodated their language proficiency. However, without specific, adaptable models to follow, the implementation of these strategies was limited, resulting in assessments that still favoured higher language proficiency over content mastery. This gap between theory and practice ultimately affects students' experiences, as well as the educators' ability to provide equitable support, underscoring the need for more concrete and practical guidance to overcome these challenges.

To bridge this gap, policies must be designed to integrate practical applications, making them both accessible and usable for educators. This means moving beyond broad

theoretical frameworks and ensuring that research is accompanied by concrete examples, tools, and methods that can be implemented directly. Frontline educators need these resources to effectively support and train educators in implementing inclusive practices, turning theoretical insights into actionable classroom strategies.

Case in point: differentiated instruction

Consider the example of differentiated instruction, a widely recommended inclusive teaching strategy, based on which instruction is tailored to meet the diverse learning needs, interests, and abilities of students within a classroom. Rather than using a one-size-fits-all approach, teachers modify content, processes, learning activities, and assessments to ensure all students can access the material and engage meaningfully at their own level. Research extensively discusses the benefits and principles of differentiation (Santangelo & Tomlinson, 2009; Turner, Solis & Kincade, 2017; Lindner & Schwab, 2020; Onyishi & Sefotho, 2020), but many educators report difficulty in applying these principles without concrete examples and structured guidance (Lavania & Nor, 2020). This scenario underscores the necessity for educational policies that do more than set broad goals. They must also provide detailed context-specific strategies and tools that educators can implement directly in their classrooms. Without this support, inclusive teaching practices risk being inconsistently applied, failing to achieve their full potential in enhancing student learning outcomes. Frontline educators play a critical role in translating these theoretical concepts into actionable classroom strategies, providing educators with practical tools and examples to implement differentiated instruction effectively.

To implement differentiated instruction effectively in EAP settings, educators can employ several context-specific strategies and tools. One approach is to use diagnostic assessments at the beginning of a course to identify students' varying levels of proficiency and learning needs. Based on these assessments, educators can design tiered assignments that offer different levels of difficulty, ensuring all students are challenged appropriately. Additionally, incorporating flexible grouping techniques, where students work in different groups based on their skills and learning styles, can promote collaborative learning and peer support. Technology can also play a crucial role; for example, using learning management systems (LMS) to provide personalised learning paths and

resources tailored to individual student needs. Interactive tools like quizzes, forums, and multimedia resources can engage students at different proficiency levels. By providing concrete examples, such as detailed lesson plans and templates for differentiated tasks, frontline educators can be better equipped to apply these strategies effectively in their classrooms, ensuring that inclusive practices are practical and impactful.

Addressing the challenges: a collaborative approach

Addressing the challenges of implementing inclusive teaching practices in EAP requires a multifaceted and collaborative approach. Research institutions and policymakers must work together to create detailed guidelines that not only articulate theoretical frameworks but also provide specific, actionable steps for educators. This collaboration should extend to the design of professional development programmes that emphasise both the principles of inclusive teaching and the practical skills and techniques needed for effective implementation. For instance, these programmes should include hands-on workshops, case studies, and interactive training sessions that allow educators to practice and refine their skills. Additionally, policies must ensure that adequate resources are allocated to support the implementation of these inclusive practices. This includes securing funding for ongoing training programmes, providing access to high-quality teaching materials, and developing robust support systems within educational institutions to assist educators as they adopt new strategies. Frontline educators should be at the forefront of these initiatives, ensuring that resources and training are tailored to the practical needs of educators.

Furthermore, the success of this collaborative approach hinges on the establishment of a continuous feedback loop among researchers, educators, and policymakers. This loop would allow for the ongoing refinement of guidelines and policies based on real-world experiences and outcomes. LDs should play a central role in this process, acting as intermediaries who can translate research insights into practical applications and ensure that the everyday needs of educators are addressed. By gathering feedback from educators and sharing it with researchers and policymakers, LDs can help create a dynamic and responsive educational ecosystem. This approach not only bridges the gap between theory and practice but also ensures that inclusive teaching practices are

effectively integrated into the classroom, ultimately enhancing the learning experiences and outcomes for all students. By continuously updating and refining practices based on feedback, frontline educators can ensure that inclusive education remains relevant and effective.

Conclusion

In conclusion, while education research offers invaluable theoretical frameworks for inclusive teaching in EAP, the lack of explicit practical recommendations hinders effective implementation. Bridging this gap is essential to realise the full potential of inclusive education. Policymakers must go beyond setting broad goals and principles, providing EAP practitioners and LDs with clear, actionable strategies and the necessary resources. The take-home message is clear: for inclusive teaching practices in EAP to succeed, comprehensive policies must integrate both theoretical insights and practical applications, ensuring that educators are equipped to translate these principles into effective classroom practices. By providing pragmatic, actionable steps, tools, strategies, or even suggestions, research can better support frontline educators, departments, and institutions in promoting inclusive teaching practices in HE. Frontline educators must be at the forefront of these efforts, advocating for and implementing strategies that bridge the gap between theory and practice, ensuring that inclusive education is both theoretically sound and practically effective.

Moving forward

The challenges identified underscore the importance of the ongoing BALEAP-funded research project designed to explore inclusive teaching practices in EAP within HE (Bakogiannis & Papavasiliou, 2023). This comprehensive study aims to fill current gaps by providing practical, actionable recommendations that LDs can implement directly in their classrooms, allowing policies to effectively translate theory into practice. These recommendations will serve as a valuable resource, offering concrete strategies and examples to foster inclusive learning environments at all levels of higher education. The project aspires to bridge the divide between theoretical frameworks and practical application, equipping educators with the necessary tools to effectively implement inclusive

practices of EAP in HE. This initiative holds great potential for setting new standards in educational inclusivity, ultimately enhancing the educational experiences and outcomes for all students by creating a more equitable and supportive academic landscape. Frontline educators will be instrumental in driving this change, ensuring that the insights gained from research are effectively translated into meaningful classroom practices, and promoting a culture of continuous improvement and inclusivity in education.

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