

Being part of the EAP community but not quite: a voice from the precarity camp

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I am very excited and indeed honoured to be part of the Precarity event, which I find unique both for its content and form. Events like this one are of great importance for including and engaging temporary staff into the EAP community. My contribution contains bits of my experience, reflections and concerns as a temporary worker and a member of the EAP community. The issues I discuss do not exhaust all the worries, insecurities and fears I might have and which are very eloquently outlined in the introduction to this event. I have used the pronoun “we” to refer to the group of temporary EAP tutors of which I am also a part but I do appreciate the fact this group is not so homogeneous and each practitioner has their unique experience and personal circumstances. I have also used the generic “one” to the same effect. The phrases “temporary worker”, “temporary staff” and “precarious worker” are used as synonyms.

If the EAP practitioner is to be encountered somewhere “on the edge of academia” (Ding and Bruce, 2017), I feel the temporary EAP tutor can be said to operate on the periphery of the EAP community. I also feel the place of this tutor within the community can to a great extent be determined by their own agency and desire to be involved in it. I will address the questions of agency and scholarship from my perspective in an attempt to explain why I feel a part of the EAP community but not quite.

Agency is a word I first came upon at a BALEAP organized event where someone was discussing it in their paper. I pondered on the concept and formed a vague idea on what it could mean. Agency was later the buzz word at the conference in Leeds in 2019 through Cynthia White’s plenary. My own understanding of agency entails being actively involved and responsible for one’s own professional improvement and development. This belief has guided me in my TEAP journey. Thus, before my first employment on a pre-session course I did some reading and research on EAP and read Charles and Pecorari’s (2016) “Introducing English for Academic Purposes”. Later, I did a TEAP course at a BALEAP accredited UK university. I am an individual member of BALEAP, which gives me the opportunity to keep updated on the latest research, news and important issues in the field. I attend BALEAP events when possible and have also engaged with the BALEAP TEAP Scheme but due to Covid 19 developments (we will invariably address this during the event), acceptance of my application has not been officially ratified. I am genuinely grateful and consider myself to be extremely lucky for being supported by my family to be able to access those channels for CPD and participation in the EAP community.

Despite my efforts and bouts of agency, when it comes to my place in the EAP community on many occasions I feel as if I am taking part in a discussion by listening and nodding but not really being able to contribute. The way I see it, the main reason for this is because teaching only for a couple of months on a pre-session course would not provide enough practical TEAP experience to meaningfully engage in any conversation about praxis, even though one might have enough theoretical knowledge on a topic. Lack of enough practical experience and short working spans deprive us of the opportunity to be involved in scholarship and research, which is also an essential channel for conversation in the EAP community.

During discussions on EAP tutors engagement with scholarship in Leeds the most common issue raised seemed to be lack of time to conduct research due to ongoing work-related duties, teaching and family-related obligations. As a precarious worker, I find myself in a Catch 22 situation. Temporary work allows for more time for CPD and research on a topic of a particular interest for me but at the same time I cannot engage into scholarship because I do not teach for longer periods and cannot conduct research properly. While teaching on pre-session

courses I have found myself being excited by a particular pedagogical strategy or idea for the classroom that I would have liked to delve into deeper but my precarious position and lack of enough classroom time have prevented me from doing so. Further, even if I have the time to do research within this time span, there are other institutional constraints related to ethical requirements and policy on conducting research, which I have not looked into in detail so am unable to further comment on at this point. I do hope this topic comes up in our conversation during the week.

Finally, I would briefly like to touch upon some concerns I have had. Lately I have been worried that I might actually start to lose my teaching skills or the EAP knowledge I have acquired due to lack of consistency in my teaching periods. Another issue of a more practical nature stems from the fact that if I want to experience a different pre-session programme (possibly one of the few benefits of temporary staff) and apply to a different institution from the one I worked at in previous years, I might find myself in the uncomfortable position of having to contact previous employers to request reference for a future employer where those two parties are, or might be, in competition for securing summer pre-session staff. Related to this is the fear that I might compromise my position and loyalty towards one employer (where I might be a seasoned returning tutor) and fall into disfavour, which might jeopardize my employment there in future. I am particularly interested to find out if any other colleagues have felt this way, especially with view of the current Covid-19 situation where temporary staff have greater choice of pre-session courses to apply for due to the online/ remote courses universities offer.

References:

Charles, M. and Pecorari, D., 2016. *Introducing English for academic purposes*. Routledge.

Ding, A. and Bruce, I., 2017. *The English for Academic Purposes Practitioner: Operating on the Edge of Academia*. Palgrave Macmillan