

English for Academic Purposes as a Field of Practice and Inquiry: A Personal Viewpoint

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Weiyu: Prof. Hu, I greatly appreciate your acceptance of this interview for the *RELC Journal*. I have been following your research for years, particularly related to English for Academic Purposes (EAP). Your work has greatly contributed to the understanding of how knowledge-making practices and social relations shape discursal features of the academic community.

Guangwei: Thank you for the kind words. It is a privilege to take part in this conversation on work that I have been doing for the past 25 years.

Weiyu: Could you please tell our readers about your initial motivation for doing research in this field?

Guangwei: Sure, Weiyu. My initial interest in researching EAP arose from my personal experience as an English-as-an-Additional-Language (EAL) academic and my role as an EAP course coordinator. Despite the Herculean effort I invested in writing my PhD thesis, I struggled to turn my research findings into English journal articles. When I shared my first English journal manuscript with an EAL colleague who had a good number of published papers under his belt, the ego-bashing feedback I received left me doubting my ability to ever publish my research in English. Conversations with other early-career EAL academics further revealed that they, too, faced difficulties in meeting the linguistic and rhetorical demands of academic publishing. These direct and vicarious experiences led me to recognize that language is not just a tool for communication but a critical mediator of knowledge construction, professional identity, and access to opportunities. I decided to read up on the EAP literature to learn the ropes of scholarly publishing.

Around the same time, I was given the task of coordinating a pre-sessional English academic writing course as part of a six-month intensive communication skills program at Nanyang Technological University. This program was set up specially for an annual intake of more than 200 elite students from China who were awarded a governmental scholarship to complete their undergraduate education at the National University of Singapore or Nanyang Technological University. As the developer of the academic writing course, I faced a dilemma: although the students would eventually major in different disciplines, making discipline-specific instruction ideal, they had not yet chosen their programs of study by the time they took the academic writing course. This was essentially the specificity–commonality tug (Flowerdew and Peacock, 2001; Hyland and Hamp-Lyons, 2002). To develop an effective writing course for the students, I devoured the EAP research I could lay my hands on and did a bit of my own research. The results were a revamped course and my very first EAP research article, published in this journal (Hu, 2007).

From the first day of teaching this writing course, I observed that some highly capable Chinese students with strong content knowledge employed intertextual practices that would be considered plagiarism in English academia. While I recognized that most of them did not engage in plagiarism intentionally, I could not figure out why Chinese students appeared particularly susceptible to these stigmatized intertextual practices. This paradox fueled my interest in probing into both its causes and potential solutions. It happened that a graduate student under my supervision, Jun Lei, had a similar interest. We quickly established a strong collaborative rapport and initiated a series of research studies on Chinese students' perceptions, attitudes, and practices regarding plagiarism (Hu and Lei,

2012, 2015; Lei and Hu, 2015; Yang et al., 2023), with the latest being a Cambridge Elements book (Lei and Hu, 2024).

Over time, these earlier endeavors expanded into broader investigations of genre, disciplinary identity, academic literacy, and the social practices of academic and disciplinary communication. Looking back, I can see that my motivation has always been rooted in a desire to address real-world problems, inform effective practices in teaching English for academic purposes, and enable students from diverse linguistic backgrounds to succeed in their academic pursuits.

Weiyou: What is your perspective on the current status and future directions of EAP research? What topics in the field may have been overly explored and, therefore, left little space for future research? What are some emerging issues you deem deserve immediate attention?

Guangwei: I'm glad you asked! EAP research has made significant strides over the past few decades, evolving from a nascent, practice-oriented area of inquiry to a well-established and vibrant discipline with substantial scholarly impact. Today, EAP research is characterized by its interdisciplinary nature, drawing on insights from corpus linguistics, discourse analysis, sociolinguistics, and educational psychology, among other fields. This has enriched our understanding of how language functions in academic contexts and how we can better support students and early-career academics in meeting the linguistic and communicative demands of their disciplines. As the field matures, however, it is important to critically reflect on the current status of EAP research and identify areas that may have been overly explored, as well as emerging issues that warrant immediate attention.

In his last paper published in *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, John Swales, a founding scholar of genre analysis and EAP/ESP [English for Specific Purposes], provided an insightful viewpoint on EAP research. He singled out five investigative areas that he believed to have been over-explored: 'a) circumscribed studies of ESL [English as a Second Language]/applied linguistic texts; b) circumscribed move-step analyses; c) circumscribed textual studies of stance and engagement; d) ringfenced studies of lexical bundles; e) more broadly, studies that have no useful pedagogical import' (Swales, 2019: 76). His candidates for stringency resonate with my own. While pioneering work in these areas has been invaluable in identifying the linguistic and rhetorical conventions of academic discourse, there is a real risk of saturation. For example, as co-editor of the flagship journal of EAP research, I have handled numerous manuscripts on the move-step analyses of familiar and new genres, metadiscourse in various types of writing and speaking, lexical bundles used by experienced/published/native-English academics versus novice/unpublished/non-native-English students, or topics that are only tangentially related to EAP teaching and learning. These manuscripts, while well written and meticulous in their analysis, merely repeat findings already documented in the literature and yield no new insights. There is

a dire need for the field to move away from such studies and shift toward more critical and interpretive approaches that consider the sociocultural and ideological dimensions of EAP and academic communication (Monbec and Ding, 2024), rather than focusing solely on frequency counts and linguistic patterns.

A few years ago, my collaborator and I conducted a scientometric review of more than 1000 main articles published in *English for Specific Purposes* and *Journal of English for Academic Purposes* from 1980 to 2018 to identify, among other things, the historical trends, major research themes, and significant topics of EAP/ESP research (Liu and Hu, 2021). Our review revealed that research on disciplinary academic discourse, ethnolinguistic variation, academic vocabulary and formulaic language, and academic English in global contexts is currently vibrant and is likely to remain active in the next few years. We have also pointed to several emerging topics in need of more research attention, including intradisciplinary variation in academic communication, multimodal academic discourse, academic speech genres, EAP/ESP teacher development, improvement on EAP/ESP research methodologies, and reception studies of EAP/ESP research. To this list, I would like to add several new issues that deserve immediate attention and have the potential to shape the future of EAP research. First, the rapid digitalization of academic practices has transformed how knowledge is produced, disseminated and consumed, and EAP research needs to explore the implications of digital tools, online platforms and multimodal texts (e.g. videos, infographics) for academic communication and EAP instruction. For instance, how do digital environments influence the way students and scholars engage with academic content, and how can EAP instruction adapt to these changes? We urgently need research that explores how digital tools can be effectively integrated into EAP pedagogy. Second, there is a growing awareness of the need to address issues of equity and inclusion in EAP, particularly in relation to multilingual scholars and students from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Research should examine how power dynamics, linguistic hierarchy, institutional policies, and other contextual factors shape access to academic resources and opportunities. Third, the use of English as a lingua franca in global academic communication raises important questions about language standards, intelligibility, and identity. EAP research should investigate how such communication unfolds in diverse academic contexts and how EAP instruction can prepare students for the complexities of international collaboration and communication. There is also a need to develop more inclusive pedagogies that validate students' multilingual repertoires and support their transition into academic communities. Finally, assessment has been a largely under-studied area in EAP research. However, EAP assessment research is crucial to ensuring the validity and reliability of the assessment tools employed in EAP programs, improving the effectiveness of EAP instruction, meeting diverse EAP learner needs, supporting policy and curriculum development, and addressing ethical issues (e.g. fairness, transparency, equity) in EAP assessment.

The tremendous advances of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI), particularly the advent of ChatGPT in late 2022, have brought along a whole slew of new research topics and possibilities. These range from development and capabilities of GenAI tools (e.g. bias, reliability and effectiveness of GenAI-generated feedback; GenAI's mimicking of academic genres; construction of discipline-specific large language models; comparative strengths of different GenAI tools) to explorations of GenAI in EAP teaching and learning (e.g. GenAI-assisted personalized instruction and learning; affordances of GenAI tools for EAP materials development; the impact of GenAI on assessment in EAP programs; pedagogical frameworks for leveraging GenAI; development of teachers' and students' AI literacy), ethical issues in the use of GenAI tools (e.g. plagiarism and other forms of GenAI-enabled misconduct; misuse of GenAI to generate assignments/research articles, review manuscripts and evaluate grant proposals), GenAI-assisted EAP research (e.g. use of ChatGPT to do more analyses) and policy development (e.g. equity and access in GenAI use; institutional guidelines for GenAI in EAP programs; EAP teacher training for integrating and regulating GenAI tools). These are all important and worthy research topics. However, amid our enthusiasm for exploring GenAI in our teaching and research, we must guard against several tendencies. First, we must combat the tendency to view GenAI advancements as panaceas. We need to ask: do these developments represent genuine innovations, or are they merely repackaged existing paradigms? Second, we must resist methodologically superficial studies on GenAI. For instance, *Journal of English for Academic Purposes* has seen a rapid surge in studies comparing AI-generated and human texts (e.g. abstracts of research articles) in terms of generic structure or certain linguistic features. Many of these studies, however, offer limited practical utility and risk producing misleading conclusions, as observed differences may primarily reflect artifacts of prompt engineering rather than inherent capabilities or deficiencies of AI. Third, there is a dire need to guard against everyone jumping on the GenAI bandwagon. A stampede into GenAI-related research risks overshadowing or marginalizing other vital areas of EAP inquiry that are equally deserving of scholarly attention.

Weiyu: There seems to be greater value placed on quantitative research within the field of EAP and applied linguistics at large. Do you agree with this position? Where does qualitative research stand in the current research landscape?

Guangwei: This is a complex question, as it touches on broader debates about research paradigms, methodological rigor, and the purposes of scholarly inquiry. While it is true that quantitative research has gained prominence in recent years, the fields of EAP and applied linguistics were dominated by qualitative research (e.g. case studies, ethnographies, and discourse analysis) in their early days. As an illustration, a review of early issues of *Journal of English for Academic Purposes* (e.g. Volume 1, 2002) reveals a predominance of qualitative studies, with only a minority incorporating basic descriptive statistics (e.g. percentages or

frequencies). The shift to quantitative research has been prompted by the rise of corpus linguistics (e.g. corpus-based discourse analysis), the availability of statistical software, the popularity of standardized questionnaires as data collection instruments, the institutional demands for evidence-based research (e.g. experimental studies), the influence of scientism in academia, etc. I believe that both quantitative and qualitative research have distinct and complementary roles to play in advancing our understanding of EAP. The most compelling research often integrates both approaches, using mixed methods to leverage the strengths of each and explore complex phenomena.

Without a doubt, quantitative research has made significant contributions to the field of EAP. For example, large-scale corpus-based analyses have yielded valuable insights into the linguistic and rhetorical features of academic discourse, while experimental studies have shed light on the effectiveness of specific instructional interventions. The distinct strength of quantitative research lies in its capabilities to identify patterns, test hypotheses, and generalize findings across contexts. This is undoubtedly important in a field like EAP, where evidence-based practices are increasingly emphasized. Furthermore, quantitative research is often perceived to align with dominant notions of scientific rigor, such as objectivity, precision, replicability, and generalizability. These qualities make quantitative research appealing to funding agencies, policymakers, and institutions seeking measurable outcomes and data-driven recommendations. That said, I'm also convinced that qualitative research remains indispensable to the field, and its contributions should not be underestimated. Qualitative approaches, such as ethnography, case study, in-depth textual analysis, and narrative inquiry, offer rich, context-sensitive insights that elude quantitative methodologies. For instance, qualitative studies have been invaluable in exploring the lived experiences of students and academics, uncovering the sociocultural and ideological dimensions of academic communication, and examining the complexities of identity construction by EAL scholars. A key strength of qualitative research is its ability to provide depth and nuance, allowing explorations of the 'how' and 'why' behind observed phenomena. This is particularly important in EAP, where the challenges faced by students and academics are often deeply intertwined with social, cultural, and institutional factors (Monbec and Ding, 2024). Qualitative research also plays a key role in challenging prevalent assumptions, giving voice to marginalized perspectives, and supporting more inclusive and equitable practices.

In the current research landscape, there is a growing recognition of the need for methodological pluralism and mixed-methods approaches (Riazi and Farsani, 2024). While quantitative research continues to dominate certain research areas such as corpus-based discourse analysis and needs analysis, there is a renewed appreciation for the unique contributions of qualitative research. For example, studies that combine corpus analysis with interviews or classroom observations can provide a more holistic understanding of academic language use and its

pedagogical implications. Qualitative methods are also uniquely positioned to provide a deep understanding of complex and context-specific issues such as decolonizing academic English, supporting multilingual academics, and addressing inequities in access to academic publishing. Moving forward, the field of EAP should strive for a balanced and inclusive research agenda that values both quantitative and qualitative approaches. Rather than privileging one paradigm over the other, we should focus on how different methods can be used in complementary ways to address complex research questions. In particular, mixed-methods research should be promoted because it can provide a better and deeper understanding, combine particularity with generality, situate patterned regularity in contextual complexity, enable triangulation of research findings, and overcome the weaknesses and biases of a single methodological approach. Ultimately, however, the choice of research methodology should be guided by the nature of the research question and the goals of the study. By embracing methodological diversity and epistemological pluralism, we can ensure that our research remains relevant, rigorous, and responsive to the diverse needs of stakeholders in EAP contexts.

Weiyu: Quantitative research is an area that many scholars find challenging. Given your expertise in quantitative research methods, could you give some advice on how scholars can approach learning about and using quantitative research?

Guangwei: Quantitative research can indeed seem very daunting for novice academics and scholars more accustomed to qualitative or theoretical approaches. However, with the right mindset, resources, and strategies, it is entirely possible to develop competence in quantitative methodologies and even come to appreciate their capacity to address certain types of research questions and produce generalizable findings, measurable outcomes, and statistical rigor. Based on my own experiences and observations, scholars interested in learning about and conducting quantitative research should start by clarifying why they want to use quantitative methods and how these methods align with their research goals and questions. By starting with a clear purpose, they can focus their efforts on learning the most relevant quantitative techniques and avoid being overwhelmed by the sheer breadth of quantitative approaches. Scholars new to quantitative research need to build a solid foundation in research design and statistics by taking courses (e.g. some of those available in Coursera and edX) on research methods and statistics, and self-studying good textbooks on research design, variables, hypotheses, sampling and descriptive/inferential statistics. For instance, Andy Field's tome, now in its 6th edition (Field, 2024), is a popular and user-friendly introduction to statistical methods. The foundational skills thus acquired are essential for conducting meaningful and rigorous quantitative research. One of the most effective ways – and my preferred approach – to master quantitative methods is through learning by doing. Starting with small, manageable projects allows one to apply one's newly learned knowledge and skills in a low-stakes

environment. As confidence grows, one can gradually tackle more complex analyses and research designs. Mistakes are unavoidable in this process, and learning from them is an integral part of mastering quantitative research.

Quantitative research in EAP often involves large datasets and/or complex statistical analyses. Such analyses can be time-consuming and error-prone if done manually. Fortunately, many user-friendly software programs exist to make analyses both fast and accurate. Beginners can start with programs like SPSS (IBM Corporation, 2025) or JASP (JASP Team, 2025), which offer intuitive interfaces and guided workflows. More advanced researchers may prefer tools like R (R Core Team, 2023) or Python (Python Software Foundation, 2023), which offer greater flexibility and are increasingly used in the EAP community. Corpus linguistics software like AntConc (Anthony, 2024) or Sketch Engine (Lexical Computing, n.d.) can help us analyze large datasets of text. There are huge online resources (e.g. tutorials and forums) where one can learn how to use these tools effectively. This is pretty much how I learned most of my statistical analysis skills.

Collaboration is one of the best ways to build our quantitative research skills. Partnering with colleagues or students who have quantitative research expertise not only benefits our work through diverse perspectives and skills but also allows us to learn from their skills. This is why I consistently encourage my graduate students to consult or collaborate with colleagues and peers knowledgeable about particular statistical methods. Additionally, attending conferences and joining professional networks can help us connect with scholars who share our research interests and can offer guidance and support. We should not hesitate to seek feedback on our quantitative research from mentors, peers or reviewers. Constructive criticism can help us identify areas for improvement and refine our skills over time.

Learning to do quantitative research is a journey that requires patience, persistence, and a willingness to step outside our comfort zone. However, the rewards, such as the ability to address new types of research questions, contribute to evidence-based practices, and collaborate with a wider range of scholars, are well worth the effort. That said, it is imperative to approach quantitative research with a critical and reflective mindset. We must be mindful of the limitations of such research and endeavor to combine quantitative methods with qualitative insights for a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of our research topics. The goal is not just to apply quantitative methods, but to use them effectively to answer meaningful research questions. By starting small, seeking support, and maintaining a critical perspective, we can develop the skills and confidence needed to excel in quantitative research.

Weiyu: I have noticed that corpus-based discourse analysis has become a popular method in EAP. You have also published many papers using corpora. There is a rich body of corpus-based research documenting patterns of language features across

academic contexts. However, the applications of the findings in teaching and learning are still rather limited. What do you think are the reasons? Do you have any suggestions about how to apply corpus findings in teaching and learning?

Guangwei: Corpus-based discourse analysis has indeed become a cornerstone of EAP research, providing invaluable insights into the linguistic and rhetorical patterns of academic communication in various genres and across different disciplines. Over the years, corpus studies have documented a wide range of language features, such as lexical bundles, interactive and interactional metadiscourse, citation practices, value arguments, and promotional language. These findings have significantly advanced our understanding of how language is used in academic contexts. However, as you rightly point out, the application of corpus findings in actual teaching and learning practices remains limited. This disconnect between research and practice can be attributed to several factors. First, corpus studies often produce detailed and nuanced descriptions of language use, which can be challenging for teachers and learners to interpret and apply. For example, while a corpus analysis might reveal that certain lexico-grammatical resources are frequently used in research articles, it may not immediately clarify how these resources function in different rhetorical contexts or how they should be taught in the classroom. Second, many EAP instructors may lack access to corpus study findings or, when they do have access, they may not feel trained or confident enough to apply them in their teaching. Third, developing corpus-based teaching materials and activities can be time-consuming, and EAP teachers often face heavy workloads and limited resources. As a result, they may rely on existing textbooks that have not been informed by the latest findings of corpus-based research. Finally, as Swales (2019) has pointed out, much of the corpus-based research in EAP lacks pedagogical value, focusing on describing linguistic patterns rather than their application in teaching and learning.

To address these challenges and enhance the application of corpus findings in EAP teaching and learning, EAP researchers, intermediaries, and teachers can do a number of things. To begin, EAP researchers should disseminate their corpus-based research with EAP instruction in mind, making their findings accessible to EAP teachers and students and deriving actionable pedagogical implications. Downstream in the research–practice nexus, EAP materials developers, curriculum designers, and other educational mediators should actively translate research findings into specific learning activities, ready-to-use teaching materials, and concrete instructional strategies for EAP teachers to adopt in the classroom. Collaboration between researchers and practitioners can also facilitate the sharing of best practices and the co-creation of teacher-friendly resources. As end users, EAP teachers and students can integrate corpus-based activities into the classroom in ways that are both engaging and pedagogically sound. For instance, they can ‘replicate’ research activities by conducting simple corpus searches to discover how specific linguistic features are used in academic texts from their

disciplinary community. This not only helps students develop a deeper understanding of academic language but also fosters learner autonomy and critical thinking. Moreover, to build teachers' confidence and competence in applying corpus research findings, it is essential to provide targeted professional development opportunities. Workshops, online courses, and teaching guides can help teachers learn how to use corpus tools, interpret corpus findings, and design corpus-informed lessons. Furthermore, collaboration between corpus linguists, EAP teachers, and subject specialists can help ensure that corpus findings are relevant and applicable to specific academic contexts. For example, working with faculty in engineering or medicine can lead to the development of discipline-specific corpora and teaching materials that address the unique language needs of students in those fields. Finally, EAP teachers can play an active role in bridging the gap between research and practice by conducting action research in their own classrooms. For example, they may design and evaluate corpus-based activities, sharing their findings with the broader EAP community.

While the gap between corpus-based research and EAP teaching is a persistent challenge, it is not insurmountable. With concerted efforts of all stakeholders, we can unlock the full potential of corpus linguistics to enhance EAP instruction. Our ultimate goal is to empower both teachers and learners with the knowledge and tools that they need to navigate the complexities of academic communication with confidence and competence.

WeiYu: Finally, could you please share with our readers any ongoing research projects you have been engaged in?

Guangwei: I'm happy to do so. I'm wrapping up a University Grants Committee-funded research project on teacher questioning in the EMI classrooms of Hong Kong secondary schools. I have a lasting interest in teacher questions in EMI because effective teacher questioning can provide rich language input for students, elicit extended language output from them, convey informative feedback on their language use, activate their background knowledge, scaffold their cognitive engagement, foster deep learning and conceptual development, facilitate critical thinking, and create valuable opportunities for them to participate actively in the construction of new knowledge. My project aims to survey teacher-student interactions in Hong Kong secondary classrooms, determine the effectiveness of a teacher questioning intervention, and identify factors that may influence the effectiveness of such professional training (Uştuk and Hu, 2025a, 2025b; Ye et al., 2025). Another line of research I pursue in collaboration with my high-flying colleague, Dr Hassan Nejadghanbar, focuses on publishing literacy, particularly predatory publishing in the field of language and linguistics (Nejadghanbar and Hu, 2022; Nejadghanbar et al., 2023). Predatory publishing is pervasive in the academic world: 30 of the 100 largest academic journal publishers are potentially predatory (Nishikawa-Pacher, 2022). These predatory journals and publishers

pose a serious threat to the integrity and quality of scholarly publications as well as to vulnerable junior scholars. We are currently working on a contracted Cambridge Elements book to provide a critical examination of predatory publishing, raise awareness, foster publishing literacy, and empower stakeholders to uphold ethical standards and safeguard the integrity of academic publishing. Finally, I'm exploring the affordances of GenAI for EAP research. GenAI has huge potential to not only enhance EAP teaching and learning but also support EAP research. Recently, researchers have successfully leveraged GenAI's capabilities to perform core analyses in EAP research, such as move-step annotation (Kim and Lu, 2024; Yu et al., 2024). There are other labor-intensive, time-consuming analyses that form the backbone of EAP research. GenAI-enabled automation of such analyses can significantly broaden the linguistic/rhetorical features that can be annotated, increase the quantity of the data analyzed, reduce the human resources needed, and enhance the robustness of patterns identified. All this is going to be a huge boost to EAP research.

WeiYu: Thank you very much for your valuable insights into all the questions. I believe our readers will greatly benefit from the knowledge and expertise you have shared.

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