



CRITICAL REFLECTIONS ON EAP PRACTICE

Off the record? Insider research in EAP

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ABSTRACT

Insider research, where the researcher has a connection with the field researched, is often conducive to capturing rich contextualised data which provides practical solutions based on the reality of the situation on the ground. However, while the risks of insider research have been widely discussed in higher education, EAP as a discipline tends to exploit rather than critique the phenomenon. A reflective vignette of my own insider research, an enquiry into collaboration between professional services colleagues and EAP practitioners, provides a lens to explore the methodological and ethical tensions. The strengths of insider research are acknowledged, particularly the benefits of maximum contextualisation, before addressing concerns, not least the risk of over-interpretation, and discussing potential mitigation strategies. The article concludes with a number of interventions which can render insider research in an EAP context more robust.

KEYWORDS:

insider, methodology, research

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The contribution of insider research to EAP

As EAP is a relatively new field, research is important in providing recognition and impetus. Hearteningly, there seems plenty of research activity. Tracking the trajectory of EAP research from 1980 to 2020, Hyland and Jiang (2021) conclude that the research base of EAP is widening in terms of topic. This is confirmed by a separate survey by Charles (2022), who found assessment, technology, in-session issues and teacher education to be trending. However, Hyland and Jiang (2021) caution that inclusion in their survey is not an indicator of quality. This is an important reservation which distinguishes quality from quantity and variety. If EAP is to have credibility and join established disciplines, associated research must be judged on its quality. One research direction viewed as potentially problematic in this regard is insider research, namely that “conducted by researchers who have an understanding of and connection with the field researched” (McQuade, 2024: 267). Offered here is a reflective vignette of my own small-scale insider research project in order to highlight the methodological and ethical tensions involved. My central argument is that insider research can produce rich data and offer valuable insights into EAP, but there should be awareness of threats posed, and interventions made.

Brannick and Coghlan (2007) recite the common charge that insider researchers are too close to the data to be able to detach a personal and emotional response. Certainly, insider research makes no attempt to obscure the identity of the researcher. Rather, it highlights identity because it establishes researchers’ membership role vis-à-vis the group studied (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). The degree of membership in the group varies from, using Adler and Adler’s (1987) ethnographic terminology, “peripheral” to “complete”, depending on how fully researchers are integrated into the group’s activities, values and goals. Those identifying with “complete” membership could class themselves as carrying out insider research, but this does not mean that others on the “peripheral” to “complete” cline are outsiders. For, insiderness is relative and context-dependent, often making demarcation from the outsider role artificial (Kerstetter, 2012).

The contestable inside/outside dichotomy has been much debated. Gao and Cui’s (2024) longitudinal study of EAP teacher identity shows the complexities as they position all three of their teacher researchers on an insider-outsider cline, inside in some respects, and outside in others. This reveals Dwyer and Buckle’s (2009) membership criterion as pliable rather than fixed, since membership changes profile across the range of researcher involvement. Certainly, insiderness is more than a description of roles or “shared characteristics” as Bulk and Collins (2024: 573) put it. As blind researchers studying the blind, Bulk and Collins are aware that visual disability does not automatically qualify them as insiders. Instead, they realise insiderness as subjective, embodied and variable. For instance, a disabled participant’s “You know what I mean” challenged the researchers, because they could only partially identify with this participant and the specific health issues they faced. This participant’s statement also reveals that notions of insiderness may clash; participants in the study might perceive the researchers to be insiders, but the researchers themselves feel outsiders, with vice-versa possible. Accordingly, the chief feature of an insider study is deemed a sense of connection, which is not fixed or static but comes from experience and shared values rather than labelling.

Insider research has permeated to education from ethnography, with “more teachers engaging in research in their own educational institutions” (Greene, 2014: 1). In particular, much of action research with its localised and practitioner-led emphasis qualifies as insider research (Coghlan & Brannick, 2014). This is often true even when insider research is not recognised as such. For example, Van den Broeck’s (2023) action research adopting a critical approach to EAP pedagogy classifies (p. 110) the researcher (teacher) as outsider and participants (students) as insiders, but it is the author’s own teaching practice which supplies the justification and context. Indeed, my contention is that insider research as a phenomenon is little recognised, let alone critiqued, within EAP.

To establish this from the recent literature, I conducted a modest scoping review of EAP articles published in 2025 in *Journal of English for Academic Purposes* (JEAP), and *International Journal of English for Academic Purposes* (IJEAP). This covered volume 78 of JEAP and volume 5 of IJEAP, 24 articles in all. With the reservation that my review was limited in scope, I found that 18 of the 24 articles, with two indeterminate, could be considered insider studies in that the authors had “an understanding of and connection with the field researched” (McQuade, 2024: 267). None of the eighteen explicitly self-referenced as insider studies, nor did they reflect on insiderness as a conceptual issue in evaluating their methodology. Eight of the papers I have labelled as insider studies included brief ethics statements, typically one or two formulaic sentences, for example, “Ethical approval was obtained from the university...” (Zhou, 2025: 4), but these did not comment on insiderness. Still fewer papers, four, articulated measures which can be assessed as mitigation strategies for insider studies. As an example, Widdowson (2025) excluded from the study participants that the researcher personally taught “to avoid any bias and coercion” (p. 193). This is a small sample of papers limited to two journals, but it suggests that in EAP scholarship reflexivity does not extend much to insider research.

Whether or not explicitly acknowledged (I would suggest usually not in the case of EAP), insider research poses both benefits and risks. The major strength is that direct access to students and other stakeholders provides multiple forms of rich data within an identifiable context that the researcher can leverage. This is evident in Lai’s (2025) ethnographical study of a blended academic writing programme. Lai video-recorded her teaching and analysed transcripts of student consultations to create annotated “event maps” which connected the different elements of the blended learning experience. Her small sample size, four participants, seems reasonable for studies where the data is localised. However, while small sample sizes allow for thick description, a restricted data pool limits the external validity of the findings. As admitted by Fan and Khattak (2025) in a study of multimodal academic communication, their in-house sample of twenty-six student presentations is not comprehensive or varied enough to represent the construct even in their context.

External validity is a challenge for most projects, but there are particular issues for insider research to contend with. First, there is a heightened risk of interpretive overreach, wherein insider knowledge emboldens the researcher to draw unwarranted conclusions. Second, when the researcher and the researched inhabit the same space, there is potential for role conflict and power relations to emerge. As in Widdowson (2025) above, researchers may be participants’ teachers, so their relationship with participants is not disinterested or

symmetrical. In connection, even when ethical formalities are observed, and my modest scoping review revealed this not to be a given, there can be blurred boundaries in consent and interaction. For instance, when Li et al. (2025) report that “[t]he first author immersed herself in the two participants’ classrooms for the entire semester” (p. 3), one wonders to what extent the teachers had signed up to such intense scrutiny, and how their students felt (the fact of their consent is not established). The culmination may be participant vulnerability, not least a breach of confidentiality because too much detail in a case description can identify participants, especially when $n=1$ as in Wang et al.’s (2026) case study of how “Helen”, a friend of one of the authors, and in a high-profile position, crosses disciplinary boundaries. Such concerns are not limited to insider research, but they seem exacerbated when the researcher enjoys membership of the group.

Clearly, there are methodological and ethical reasons why insider researchers should take precautions. Breen (2018) discusses his own response in his account of delivering a series of in-house workshops aimed at developing EAP teachers’ competence in technology enhanced learning. First, there was full and continuous disclosure to participants about his role and motivation, a PhD student conducting research, initially signalled through an information sheet to participants and followed up by a declaration at the start of each workshop. Second, Breen coaxed a “consensual democratic” (p. 53) atmosphere within the workshops where participants felt non-threatened. Third, data analysis was corroborated with participants in follow-up interviews. Finally, the baseline for research ethics, participants provided informed consent. Breen’s efforts at mitigation are well motivated, but hardly specific to insider research. This article aims to go further and, based on my own experience of insiderness, formulate operational interventions that can strengthen research and make the experience less fraught, both for participants and researchers.

Insider research: An illustrative vignette

What follows is an account of my own insider research. I am framing this as a vignette, in the sense of a concise narrative of a lived experience (Agostini et al., 2024), rather than a detailed description of a research project. Its purpose is to illuminate insider research through my own experience rather than reproduce the full study in Rimmer (2025). In brief, I interviewed six professional services colleagues (PS) about their experiences of collaboration with EAP practitioners. The role of PS was at the heart of the project and while it is difficult to define this role precisely, the term PS possibly mapping differently in a non-UK context, PS make up a significant sub-set, 46% of employees (HESA, 2025), of non-academic staff.

As I had “understanding of and connection with the field researched” (McQuade, 2024: 267), my project would seem to meet the definition of insider research. The research was set in my own institution with participants I worked with. The sample size was characteristically small, as noted in several of the studies cited above, for example, Gao and Cui (2024). Below the surface, in line with Bulk and Collins’ (2024) identification of an insider study with shared experiences and values, working in the same context as the PS, often sat in the same room, I had an understanding of what PS were working for and towards. For example, I knew that they faced similar frustrations with the video conferencing technology as myself, but, like me, appreciated that live online instruction brought more flexibility to

learning and the virtual environment allowed for the affordances of technology. In terms of Adler and Adler's (1987) terminology, my membership of the group seemed "complete" because we had both behaviour and values in common.

Analysis: Advantages, risks and mitigation strategies

My vignette exemplifies both benefits and challenges of insider research. The latter I draw out to mitigation strategies which can compensate within insider research as a general phenomenon in EAP.

The major advantage was that a shared context facilitated interpretation. I often knew what PS were referring to and could draw on my own experience of the institution and background knowledge. This operated in general and specific terms. To illustrate in general terms, when a participant complained about the lack of PS staff, I could relate this to my personal experience of situations where PS had been understaffed and overextended. Regarding specific contextual knowledge, I could almost always decode personal pronouns, so with "She spent a lot of time on that", I knew who "she" was and what this task was. As a practical consideration, contextual familiarity speeded up the interview process as there were fewer follow-up questions asking for clarification.

A further advantage of a shared context was that as interviewer I was able to probe further because I sensed there was more to explore. For instance, a participant talked about how she had worked with an EAP colleague on a student feedback exercise, only for the initiative to be dropped. I was not aware of this particular case, but my instinct, which proved correct from the participant's response, was that this was not an isolated event. We could then discuss further the sense of frustration when cooperation was thwarted, and how this affected the participant's sense of agency. This led me to conclude that interviewing, even if fully scripted, is an instinctive process and an effective interviewer will respond to comments which suggest further avenues of inquiry. This intuition probably comes easier in insider research when more variables are known.

A shared context is not always advantageous. Mercer (2007) questions whether familiarity can engender a sense of myopia as potentially significant signals in the environment are assumed to be norms. Yip (2024) also warns that operating with known variables can create the illusion that the research process will be relatively straightforward. Delicacy is required to handle what Mercer calls "a double-edged sword" (2007: 5). In particular, the flip side of what I have called probing is intrusion, taking advantage of your relationship with the interviewee to go into areas that may deviate from the research question. This represents the risk of **power imbalance**, attributed by Anyan (2013) to the fundamental asymmetry between researcher and participant. Kvale (2006) underscores the fallacy of positioning interviews as open dialogues between equals. Working from a semi-scripted interview schedule, it was easy to go off topic simply because I was curious, and the participant by virtue of being a participant probably felt obliged to answer. For instance, one participant commented on the lack of promotion opportunities for PS staff and we discussed what her future career options could be. The participant seemed happy to talk about this, but it was not pertinent to the research question and the interview lapsed, briefly, into conversation mode. While this can happen in any semi-structured interview,

insider status makes it more likely because shared workplace familiarity can cause both parties to slip into collegial conversation rather than research talk.

Mitigation strategies for power imbalance centre around voluntary participation safeguards, viewed in the literature (e.g., Nusbaum et al., 2017) as essential if flawed. Informed consent should be sought with the understanding that potential participants may feel under pressure to agree, especially if the researcher is their superior. Good practice would be to adopt an individual approach to contacting participants and not to make any presumptions about a participant's commitment. Phrasing such as the following may allow for an easier decline: "I realise that you are very busy and have other priorities, but if you can participate, please let me know." The person contacted would not need to decline in words, simply not reply. This may seem an over-elaborate approach, but reluctant consent is not real consent.

It is also advisable that consent is sought at different stages of the research, especially in longitudinal projects where participation may need to be renegotiated (Stutchbury & Fox, 2009). While it is standard that initial information to participants stresses that they can withdraw at any stage, many colleagues would feel awkward communicating this. Therefore, the consent procedure should be repeated at different stages of the project, for instance, when after interviews the transcript is sent for participants to verify. This would be laborious with a large sample size, but it should reassure participants and preserve the essential no-harm principle.

Returning to my vignette and risk factors, power imbalance was opening up **role confusion** because my identity as researcher slipped. As noted by Kvale (2006), the artificiality of the research interview problematises the maintenance of a neutral identity. This became apparent to me when a participant paused then began "Off the record..." As a point of fact, what came next cannot have been off the record because I was recording the interview. More significantly, this suggests the participant was reassigning the researcher a new role, that of confidant. As it happened, my participant's follow-up was nothing particularly revelatory, but this could have posed an ethical dilemma.

In mitigation of role confusion, there should be setting of boundaries in the research process (Dickson-Swift et al., 2006). This could be as simple as the researcher referring to themselves as just that, researcher, rather than using their personal name and / or professional status, in all documentation framing the research. Interview questions could also be shared with participants beforehand to encourage interviewers to stay on script. If confined to the researcher, the interview schedule might also include scripted boundary statements and "stop points" where there seems risk of questions going off track. If practical, a second interviewer might make the interview more disciplined, especially if the procedure is agreed beforehand and standardised.

When it came to analysing the interview data in the vignette, I was conscious of **over-interpretative reach**. Frosh and Emerson (2005) identify theory-driven (top-down) approaches as most liable to misleading assumptions but acknowledge grounded (bottom-up) research as also open to misinterpretation. I was approaching the interview data through the lens of someone who knew the wider background to participants' comments

and could read between the lines so to speak. Language aside, the extra-linguistic material provided scope for over-interpretation. For instance, it was possible to fill pauses with what I imagined was going through the participants' heads; I was sensitive to participants' body language and what that suggested. My thematic analysis was grounded in the actual language, but this is an interpretative exercise, and the significance of comments can be over-read.

The ideal mitigation strategy would be a second researcher as an inter-rater reliability measure, as recommended by O'Connor and Joffe (2020) in interview settings. If possible, this second rater would be an outsider, so in a position to challenge any inferences the insider researcher drew that did not seem valid. In a solo project, the researcher should at least perform multiple analyses, intra-rater analysis, as this may jettison readings which are less secure.

Writing up the research, I faced the dilemma that it is difficult to preserve **confidentiality and anonymity limits**. One participant realised this and asked me to exclude any direct quotations from her in subsequent research outputs. Those who declined to participate in the research may also have considered this. Although I observed standard practice of allocating pseudonyms to the six participants, I suspect that my colleagues could identify some of them from the quotations even when identifiable clues were redacted. Such breach of internal confidentiality is recognised as deductive disclosure in the research ethics literature (e.g., Kaiser, 2009). There is nothing I reported that is *prima facie* detrimental to the participants, on the contrary it provides a very positive picture of their commitment and collegiality, but it cannot be denied that the ethical requirement of anonymity was problematic.

As noted, pseudonyms are a form of mitigation, but this strategy is not infallible. Increasing the sample size, multiple settings as well as more participants, lowers the risk but widens the project. Certainly, the aforementioned voluntary participation safeguards should acknowledge confidentiality and anonymity limits, and consent should be resought before any publication using participants' direct words.

Any of these risks left unmitigated can lead to **participant discomfort**, I did not note any instances when I felt a participant was distressed or even uncomfortable, but this does not mean it did not happen at any stage of the project, which would have violated the over-arching "no harm" rule of ethics (Buchanan & Warwick, 2021). Mitigation strategies should protect participants, so they never experience a stage of discomfort. As the insider researcher knows their participants, this would begin with excluding from the potential participant list anyone deemed to be vulnerable for any reason. There must also be mechanisms for withdrawing at any point without any reason being given. To anticipate discomfort, following interviews, there can be member checking, a procedure where participants are presented with transcripts and consulted as to their accuracy and interpretation (Wardhana, 2022).

Interventions

Based on this reflection on my vignette, I would like to conclude by offering operational advice to EAP practitioners engaging in insider research.

1. Justify and declare insiderness

A BERA concise guide to insider research (Trowler, 2011) highlights that transparency becomes even more important in this environment.

Those who research their own HEIs need to be clear about precisely what their research questions are, what the rationale behind the research design is, and what the truth claims are. This advice holds for any kind of research, but other research designs tend to draw less critical fire. (page 4, para. 1)

This means understanding why as an EAP practitioner you are choosing insider research, and communicating this to stakeholders, so justifying the study to yourself and to others. Accordingly, Braun and Clarke's (2025) reporting guidelines state that insider research must describe the precise nature of the researcher-participant relationship. I would also argue for an editorial policy whereby EAP publications append an explicit declaration that this is an insider study, as is standard with the declaration of interests.

2 Reconcile with your own positionality

What Flick (2018) calls prior reflection, taking into account preconceptions, beliefs and experiences, is particularly important when the researcher is part of the research. Prior reflection would consider positionality, which acknowledges your status as an insider researcher (Goundar, 2025). An insider researcher should consider how their personal and professional (EAP) identity will impact the study, and again this should be declared to stakeholders.

3 Design for role conflict and power

The researcher-participant relationship, in EAP often mirroring an existing instructor-teacher structure, is rarely symmetrical and insider researchers should incorporate safeguards so that roles are not exploited. One such measure in interviews is to separate "workplace talk" from "research talk", eliminating or minimising the former, so that participants do not receive mixed messages about the purpose of the speech act.

4 Build staged consent

Issues surrounding the full meaning and exercise of informed consent attract much more discussion in medicine (e.g., Falagas et al., 2009) than EAP, but the essential nature of informed participant consent should not be downplayed. Consent should be sought at each stage of the project involving participants on the understanding that consent may be partial, conditional or withdrawn.

5 Plan anonymity realistically

Full anonymity is improbable if the EAP institution or department can be identified. Standard efforts to preserve anonymity such as pseudonyms and redacting interview quotes should acknowledge this. It would be realistic to identify outputs where anonymity is

vulnerable, for example, an internal report where participants are colleagues and consider how the data can be presented to shield individual identities.

6 Build trustworthiness into analysis

If taking a qualitative approach, establishing the trustworthiness of insider research involves making an argument for the credibility of the data, the extent to which the findings match the version of reality perceived and experienced by participants (Stahl & King, 2020). Practical measures discussed above include utilising a second researcher and member checking. It is also important to keep an audit trail throughout the project so that decision making can be traced and justified. An example instrument is a research diary, which corresponds to perhaps the more familiar notion of learner diary as deployed in Cowley-Haselden's (2020) insider study of a pre-sessional course.

7 Disseminate responsibly

The mainstream position, represented by the American Psychological Association (2020), is that research is not complete until shared. The study could be shared on different levels, from an oral debrief with EAP managers to publication in an EAP journal. Your decision how, possibly whether, to disseminate should be guided by ethics and the no harm principle. Naturally, there should be full disclosure of your plans before consent is sought.

This list of interventions should not be so daunting that insider research becomes an unattractive option. As discussed, there are valid reasons why insider research characterises many EAP studies. The most compelling is that insider research contextualises rich data, which leads to thick description. The resulting findings can then inform theory as well as produce change on the ground, hence the common action research trajectory. However, as highlighted by my vignette, there are real issues with how insider research is conceptualised, conducted and communicated, not least ethical concerns. I am not advocating that EAP should move away from insider research. EAP is so contextualised that insider research often represents a natural, even ideal, approach. Rather, researchers should be more aware of insider research as a specific phenomenon, appreciating that an insider perspective brings both privileges and obligations.

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