



Reconceptualising Inclusion: From Integration to Relational Practice

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Abstract

This paper examines the evolving concept of inclusion in education and its implications for contemporary educational practice. Drawing on scholarship in inclusive education, it traces key conceptual shifts from early models centred on integration and access toward more recent perspectives emphasising participation, systemic transformation, and relational engagement. While these developments have shaped broader educational debates, their implications for language education, and English for Academic Purposes (EAP) in particular, remain insufficiently articulated. Recent empirical evidence highlights considerable conceptual plurality and ambiguity in how inclusive EAP is understood and enacted in practice. In response, the paper proposes a dynamic relational conceptualisation of inclusion and reflects on its implications for pedagogy and educational practice in linguistically diverse contexts.

Keywords

1. Inclusion
2. International and language education
3. English for academic purposes

AI Declaration

During the preparation of this work, the author used ChatGPT-4o (OpenAI) to improve language clarity and check for grammatical and structural accuracy. After using this tool, the author reviewed and edited the content as needed and takes full responsibility for the content of the publication.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.



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Introduction

The concept of inclusion in education has evolved significantly over recent decades. Early approaches focused primarily on widening participation and providing access for learners historically excluded from education (Ainscow, 2020). More recent scholarship, however, conceptualises inclusion more broadly as encompassing accommodation, representation, and belonging within educational environments (Fraser, 2008; Ainscow, 2015; Slee, 2018). From this perspective, inclusion involves transforming educational practices and institutional cultures so that learners can participate meaningfully and have their linguistic and epistemic resources recognised.

These developments are particularly consequential in internationalised HE, where students increasingly engage in linguistically and culturally diverse academic environments. Because participation in academic knowledge practices is closely tied to engagement with specialised forms of discourse (Hyland, 2015; Lea & Street, 1998), language becomes central to how inclusion is realised in practice. EAP, which mediates students' engagement with English-dominated academic communication, therefore occupies a critical position in enabling, or constraining, equitable participation in academic communities.

Yet despite growing attention to inclusion across educational research and policy, its conceptual implications for EAP remain insufficiently articulated (Canagarajah, 2012; Lillis & Scott, 2007). Recent empirical evidence from a BALEAP-funded large-scale project, for example, reveals considerable conceptual plurality and ambiguity in how inclusive EAP is understood by practitioners, resulting in inconsistencies in how inclusive principles are interpreted and enacted in practice (Bakogiannis et al., 2024; Bakogiannis & Papavasiliou, 2025). This paper addresses this gap by tracing key conceptual developments in inclusion and proposing a dynamic, relational conceptualisation for EAP pedagogy, while reflecting on the implications of this conceptualisation for EAP practice.

The Evolution of Inclusion

Within the field of education, particularly inclusive education, understandings of inclusion have evolved through several identifiable conceptual phases (Ainscow, 2020; Booth & Ainscow, 2002; Slee, 2018). These shifts reflect broader developments in educational policy, social justice scholarship, and critical perspectives on participation in HE. Table 1 summarises this progression, which moves from early notions of integration toward more transformative and relational understandings of inclusion. Early work on inclusion in education between the 1970s and the 1990s often equated inclusion with integration, understood primarily as the physical placement of previously marginalised learners within mainstream educational settings (Booth & Ainscow, 2002). In this model, learners were “placed” in existing systems but expected to adapt to dominant institutional norms and practices. As a result, inclusion was frequently interpreted as access to educational space rather than meaningful participation within it.

During the 1990s and early 2000s, influenced by global education policy initiatives such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO)



“Education for All” agenda (UNESCO, 1990), the focus broadened from physical integration to access and accommodation. Educational institutions began adapting teaching, support, and assessment practices to respond to learner diversity (Ainscow, 2005). While this represented an important shift toward recognising difference, these approaches often remained compensatory, aiming to help individuals fit existing institutional structures rather than questioning the structures themselves.

Table 1*Conceptual Shifts in Understandings of Inclusion in Education*

Period	Concept	Understanding of Inclusion	Key Characteristics
1970s - 1990s	Integration	Inclusion understood primarily as placing marginalised learners in mainstream educational settings. Learners are expected to adapt to existing institutional norms and practices	Focus on physical presence in mainstream settings rather than meaningful participation
1990s - early 2000s	Access and accommodation	Inclusion framed as providing adjustments and support so diverse learners can access existing educational systems	Focus on access and compensatory support mechanisms that help learners fit institutional structures
Early 2000s - 2010s	Participation and belonging	Inclusion understood as enabling learners to participate actively in educational and knowledge practices	Focus on participation, learner agency, and belonging within educational communities
2010s - present	Transformation	Inclusion conceptualised as addressing structural inequalities that shape educational participation	Focus on systemic change in institutional practices, policies, and epistemologies that may reproduce exclusion
Emerging perspectives	Relational practice	Inclusion understood as an ongoing, co-constructed process emerging through relationships within educational communities	Focus on dialogue, shared responsibility, and the recognition of diverse linguistic and epistemic resources



From the early 2000s onward, scholarship increasingly reframed inclusion in terms of participation and belonging. Drawing on sociocultural perspectives, this work emphasised learners' agency and their active role in shaping educational environments and knowledge practices (Long & Guo, 2023; Ainscow, 2015). Inclusion was therefore understood less as placement or support and more as the conditions that enable learners to participate meaningfully in academic communities.

More recent work, particularly since the 2010s, has advanced a transformative perspective on inclusion. Rather than focusing primarily on individual adaptation, this approach examines how institutional structures, pedagogical practices, and dominant epistemologies can reproduce exclusion (Ainscow, 2015; Slee, 2018). From this perspective, inclusion becomes a systemic project concerned with reshaping educational environments so that diverse learners can participate equitably and have their knowledge recognised.

Contemporary scholarship increasingly conceptualises inclusion as relational. Drawing on ecological and ethical perspectives, this view understands inclusion as an ongoing, co-constructed process shaped through relationships, dialogue, and shared responsibility within educational communities (Mamas & Trautman, 2025). In this sense, inclusion is not a fixed policy outcome but a dynamic practice that emerges through interactions among learners, educators, and institutions.

Building on these developments in inclusive education scholarship, this paper proposes a contextualised understanding of inclusion relevant to language and international education. Here, inclusion is understood as a dynamic and relational process through which pedagogical practices recognise and respond to the diverse linguistic, cultural, and epistemic resources that learners bring to academic environments (Bakogiannis, 2025). Such an approach emphasises flexibility, dialogue, and shared responsibility in creating conditions for meaningful participation and belonging.

Implications for Practice

Understanding inclusion as a relational and transformative process has practical implications for EAP pedagogy. Rather than positioning EAP primarily as support for linguistically "deficient" students, an inclusive approach recognises multilingual learners as active participants whose linguistic and cultural resources contribute to academic learning. In practice, this perspective calls for teaching, assessment, and institutional practices that support participation, flexibility, and recognition of diverse ways of knowing (Bakogiannis & Papavasiliou, 2025).

Inclusive EAP teaching begins with responsive course design that recognises students' goals, experiences, and learning needs. Early informal diagnostics and ongoing dialogue can help teachers understand students' academic aspirations and challenges, enabling tasks and materials to be adjusted accordingly. Scaffolded resources, varied task formats, and flexible pathways through activities can support learners with different levels of readiness while maintaining high expectations for academic engagement.

Equally important is the selection and framing of course content. Incorporating diverse perspectives in readings and case studies and encouraging students to connect academic topics with their own linguistic and cultural backgrounds can strengthen engagement and relevance. Valuing students' full linguistic repertoires, for instance through multilingual brainstorming, discussion of cross-linguistic concepts, or strategic use of more



than one language during learning activities, can also support deeper understanding and participation.

Assessment practices likewise play a key role in inclusive pedagogy. Providing multiple ways for students to demonstrate understanding, such as written, oral, or multimodal formats, allows learners to engage with academic tasks through different strengths. Emphasising feedback, reflection, and opportunities for revision can shift assessment toward supporting learning and development rather than simply evaluating performance. Inclusive practice also requires ongoing reflection. Gathering student feedback, observing participation patterns, and adapting teaching strategies can help ensure that classroom interactions support the engagement of all learners. Such reflexive approaches enable teachers to respond to emerging needs and continually refine their pedagogical practices.

Finally, sustaining inclusive EAP practices depends on supportive institutional conditions. Universities can facilitate this work by providing time and resources for collaborative curriculum development, promoting professional learning in inclusive and multilingual pedagogies, and strengthening connections between EAP provision and disciplinary teaching. Through such collective efforts, EAP can move beyond models centred on remediation toward approaches that recognise linguistic diversity as an integral resource for learning and participation in academic communities.

Conclusion

This paper has traced the evolution of inclusion in education from early models focused on integration and access to more recent perspectives emphasising participation, systemic transformation, and relational engagement. While these developments are well established in inclusive education scholarship, their relevance for EAP has often remained implicit.

By situating EAP within this conceptual trajectory, this paper has argued that inclusion in language and international education cannot be understood solely as providing linguistic support or facilitating access to academic conventions. Rather, inclusion involves recognising students as participants in knowledge-making communities whose linguistic and cultural resources contribute to academic learning.

The relational conceptualisation proposed here highlights the importance of dialogue, reflexivity, and shared responsibility in creating educational environments where diverse learners can participate meaningfully. From this perspective, EAP pedagogy becomes not only a means of developing academic language but also a space for negotiating belonging, voice, and participation within increasingly multilingual academic communities.



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