

## Conversations in Process: Two Dynamic Program Builders Talk about Adapting WAC for Trilingual Hong Kong

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One need only look at recent writing studies publications—those published in the International Exchanges on the Study of Writing series, for example—to chart WAC’s increasing interest in transnational approaches to teaching writing in and across the disciplines, particularly in regions where English is an additional language and scholars often draw on different theoretical traditions. And the interest is mutual, as evidenced by the growing number of international scholars and practitioners attending IWAC conferences over the past many years, including the two dynamic and dedicated English Across the Curriculum (EAC) program builders introduced here—Julia Chen from the Hong Kong Polytechnic University (PolyU) and Jose Lai from The Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK). Julia’s and Jose’s work may already be familiar to many of you who may have attended their panels at IWAC conferences, which is where I first met Julia in 2014. Shortly after that, Julia visited a number of notable US WAC programs to inform the fledgling EAC initiative, including George Mason’s where I had directed the program until retiring. A year later, in 2015, EAC was launched in Hong Kong with an international conference for which Jose was one of the organizers and I one of the plenary speakers. Since that time, I’ve had the privilege of working with both Julia and Jose on a number of their innovative EAC projects. For this interview, I’ve asked them to talk about why and how the EAC initiative was developed, including the changes in the structure of higher education that provided the exigence, the influence of WAC on its design, current EAC projects, and the cross-institutional collaborations that have contributed to its sustainability.

But let me begin with a brief description of the EAC initiative, a WAC-adaptation that focuses on both writing and speaking in English. At the outset, EAC, which grew out of a 2013 cross-disciplinary community of practice at PolyU, was supported through a government inter-university learning and teaching fund. To win this funding, in 2014 Julia invited three universities—CUHK, the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, and City University of Hong Kong—to join

PolyU in bidding for a grant through the University Grants Committee (UGC), an independent professional advisor to the Hong Kong government on the funding and development of the higher education sector. The funded project—*Professional Development in English Across the Curriculum (EAC)*—was first presented at a symposium for English teachers from local universities, with planning already underway for an international conference to be held the following year to introduce this new initiative far and wide.

Led by a cross-institutional team, EAC, like WAC, has been guided by the key premise that programs and practices are always best developed locally, responsive to differing institutional contexts and exigencies. Also like WAC, the collaborating EAC institutions share a central goal of extending the teaching of English writing and speaking to faculties (colleges), departments, programs and courses across the curriculum. To accomplish this goal, the English language teaching units have taken the lead, variously establishing communities of practice (CoPs) with instructors in other disciplines, creating discipline-focused writing and speaking courses or workshops and materials, and developing innovative approaches like the mobile app Julia and colleagues designed and the peer tutoring initiative Jose launched, both of which they describe here.

And now I've talked enough, so with that preamble, I'll turn the conversation over to Julia and Jose, starting with a question about the trilingual context of Hong Kong, which necessitates making significant adaptations to any WAC-like program that's adopted.

**Terry Zawacki:** I'm a little embarrassed to admit, Julia, that until I attended your 2014 IWAC session about your efforts to create a writing and speaking across the curriculum initiative, I knew very little about language use in Hong Kong, other than that both English and Cantonese are used, and even less about educational policies around languages used in the schools, particularly after the Handover to China. Let's start there.

**Julia Chen:** With the 1997 Handover, Hong Kong was returned from British rule to Chinese rule, and the following year the government introduced a new "Medium of Instruction" policy wherein three-fourths of previously English-medium secondary schools switched to Chinese-medium teaching. In contrast, the vast majority of universities in Hong Kong use English as the medium of instruction, and all assessments, apart from those related to other languages, are to be completed in English, which is difficult for many students who only had to write up to 300 words in English in secondary school.

The current language education policy says its aim is that students will become biliterate and trilingual with the expectation that secondary school graduates will be

proficient in writing Chinese and English and able to communicate in Cantonese, English, and Putonghua. While this is the policy, many students in Hong Kong universities, such as in my university with its research and teaching mission, enter with a rather low English proficiency level. [Note: Putonghua, or standard Mandarin, is the language used in schools and workplaces in mainland China. Chinese refers to the written form with traditional and/or simplified characters.]

**Jose Lai:** CUHK, a comprehensive research university established in 1963, is the only university in Hong Kong that adopts a bilingual language policy whereby both English and Chinese are considered official languages on campus. Depending on the nature of the programs, faculties are free to choose their medium of instruction and students are free to choose whichever language they want to operate in unless it is specified by the faculty. For example, within the same course, students may hand in their written assignments either in English or in Chinese. Since English is used as a second or foreign language, it is not difficult to understand that students have a strong preference for Chinese, their native language. So it has been our real challenge to help the university achieve their goal of making their graduates “globally competitive” and able to use English as an international language. With students’ relatively low motivation in using English, perhaps it’s not too exaggerating to say that we have to fight an uphill battle trying to enhance students’ English language proficiency in general and academic literacy in specific.

**JC:** On a 2016 government survey of students and economically active professionals, respondents rated their Cantonese competence at around 87 percent, so much higher than the 25–29 percent ratings they gave for their spoken and written English. At the same time, they rated the frequency of using written English at work considerably higher than that for spoken English or Cantonese, which tells us that we should focus our EAC efforts on students’ writing abilities since there seems to be so much more for them to learn about writing than about speaking, the different academic/disciplinary genres of writing, for example.

**TZ:** I know that there were changes in the structure of higher education after the Handover, so will you each explain what those were and how the changes led to the adaptations in the writing and speaking curricula and also motivated the EAC scheme?

**JL:** It was not so much about the Handover but the proposed territory-wide education reform which covers the curricula, the assessment mechanisms, as well as the admission systems for different stages of education. More importantly, it involved the implementation of a new normative *four-year* undergraduate program, known as the 3+3+4 program to replace the former *three-year* undergraduate program (seven years

of secondary and three years of tertiary education). This means freshmen will have received one less year of advanced English training at the secondary level prior to entering a university. To facilitate the implementation of this new education system, in 2008, the University Grants Committee, the funding agent of all government funded universities, organized symposia to encourage exchanges among all institutions. The biggest impact of this change in the education system that took effect in 2012 was the perceived need of English language enhancement for the freshmen, so having a first-year foundation English program was considered crucial. At CUHK, the English Language Teaching Unit (ELTU) was naturally entrusted with the task of designing a new English curriculum that now spans over three years to meet the students' academic literacy needs.

**JC:** In a number of universities in Hong Kong, but not including Jose's bilingual university, almost all subjects are done in English except for Chinese subjects. Moving from a three-year to a four-year undergraduate curriculum, however, has not necessarily meant more curriculum space for standalone English proficiency courses offered by the English language center. This means that students often have no English courses in many of the following semesters in their four-year undergraduate curriculum. At the same time, feedback from academic faculty and English language teachers indicates that students often exhibit a lack of transfer of the generic academic English skills they learnt in these compulsory courses. In my university, many of our undergraduate degree students enter with a bare pass in the post-secondary public English exam, and, while their English at university exit is a little better, employers' feedback says our graduates are weak at English. That is why my colleague Dr. Grace Lim and I saw the need to start EAC to offer more English learning support to students.

**TZ:** I'm curious why you chose WAC as a model for EAC rather than CLIL, which would likely be more familiar to many education professionals in Hong Kong, especially at the secondary level, given the British/European influence.

**JC:** Content and Language Integrated Learning, CLIL, aims to help students learn both the content and the language appropriate to that content in the same subject; for example, a CLIL geography course puts equal focus and time on teaching students climatic characteristics in different regions and the English used to describe those climatic characteristics. But CLIL typically requires a re-write of the whole course to provide that equal focus on content and language. Plus, finding suitable teachers who can teach the content and also have language teaching qualifications is a challenge, especially in places like Hong Kong where content teachers are generally non-native speakers of English who do not have confidence to teach English. Finding

curriculum space to teach the remaining fifty percent of the content that has been taken out of a CLIL course is not easy either. So it was more feasible to introduce some language elements in an existing content course without disrupting the flow of the course and without taking up a lot of class time on language learning. And we also decided to have language teachers work with subject teachers to offer course-related English resources that they can use with their students or give out to students, e.g., a lab report for engineering courses with a lab component. So this is why WAC was chosen.

**JL:** I'll add that I don't believe we can talk about WAC as a model for EAC without mentioning an earlier WAC initiative that dates back to 2004 when my former colleague, Dr George Braine, started WAC in Hong Kong at CUHK and brought it over to two other universities, PolyU and City University. Call it serendipity, call it fate, it is interesting to note that after a decade WAC was rekindled in the form of EAC at PolyU with CUHK joining the project in 2014. To develop the project at CUHK, I was joined by another colleague, Dr Damian Fitzpatrick, to reach out to both administrators and academic staff. As Director of the English Language Teaching Unit, I started talking to department and program chairs about our vision, while Dr Fitzpatrick talked to individual faculty members he came into contact with. Interestingly, the first early adopter from the School of Architecture was recruited by Damian from the athletic field. Another early adopter was our Pro-Vice-Chancellor Professor Isabella Poon from the Statistics Department. She believed that it would be strategic of her as PVC to join the project to testify to its worth and practicality before we reached out to the significant others. The following year, she offered the ELTU extra funding to conduct a one-year EAC communities of practice pilot project, which in turn laid the foundation for that project to be fully funded from 2016 to the present. I speculate that part of the reason why PVC Poon would place such good faith in our EAC movement is because she had experienced WAC back in 2004 and found the practice impressive. She once lamented over the fact that the WAC project had to be discontinued at the time due to the ending of funding. So right from the outset, I've been very conscious of its sustainability, and our team has worked doubly hard to making it a regular practice within our university.

**TZ:** Speaking of sustainability, I'm wondering about the current status of the cross-institutional movement. Has there been any new grant funding for EAC initiatives? And, Julia, what about internal PolyU support for EAC efforts there? How is EAC going to be sustained, in other words?

**JC:** In 2017 the HK government again called for learning and teaching project proposals that involve multiple universities, but the project focus had to be different

from the last round. Since mobile use was becoming more popular, I suggested to the other universities that we apply for this new fund to develop a mobile app to offer discipline-related English language tips to help students write their capstone projects. The app includes an assignments calendar, a chat function to talk with professors, plus specific support for assigned projects. Unfortunately, the cross-university mobile app project funding ran out in August 2021, but I have found some funding from my own university for the app, which four universities continue to use. During these years, I've also encouraged academic staff (faculty) and English language teachers in my university to apply for funding to do EAC in their own courses, and I am glad that there have been at least six funded EAC projects led by PolyU academic staff (i.e., not English teachers) and at least one by English language teachers. I'm trying to sustain EAC as much as I can at PolyU and the other collaborating universities. Besides the small grants I received to continue the Ninja mobile app, as we named it, I've also received a cross-institution grant to create an AI-assisted virtual platform to help students with academic presentations. I co-lead this project with a PolyU engineering faculty member. Hong Kong Baptist University will collaborate with us. I'm always looking for new funding sources, which requires ongoing program assessment. Our textual analysis of student writing, some with pre- and post-EAC intervention and some just post-EAC, for example, showed a heightened sense of awareness of key writing features brought up in our EAC discipline-specific support materials.

**JL:** At CUHK, we see EAC as a complementary component of the ELTU credit-bearing core curriculum. While ELTU can provide formal faculty-based language course training within a particular discipline, EAC allows us to flexibly cater to the needs of program-based or even course-based settings by offering different forms of intervention, including communities of practice, thereby encouraging faculty to take greater ownership of language education. With EAC we also aim to cultivate a culture of non-academic/creative writing on campus (e.g., reflective writing, memoir, poetry, and short stories through various means, such as organizing workshops and competitions), and we are incorporating eLearning components, such as the mobile app, micro-modules, and eLearning platforms. The assessment data we have—survey data with students and learning outcomes as reported by our department or academic program collaborators—all point to the encouraging findings that the EAC interventions have been successful. New collaborators have also been recommended to us by word of mouth. Some collaborators are even willing to provide funding and/or manpower support should our funding run out in the future. They, too, care about the sustainability of EAC, which they treasure.

**TZ:** You've both talked about some of your EAC successes, but are there additional successes you'd like to mention? And what about disappointments?

**JL:** Along with the successes I've already mentioned, I guess it would be the increasing number of collaborations with content teachers over the years and the retention of nearly all early adopters with high satisfaction levels on surveys we administer. Another indicator would be the expressed hope from the senior management to make EAC a flagship program of the university and their plan to provide recurrent funding for its implementation. I also expect that the scope of work for EAC will expand to include close collaboration with the university General Education Program with some corresponding funding forthcoming. If I have to list any disappointment, it would be the cessation of some cross-faculty collaborations due to circumstances such as the movement of participating content teachers or a course no longer on offer.

**JC:** I'll start with disappointments, which involves the rejection of a sustainability proposal I wrote that included EAC successes I'll mention shortly. Even though the proposal was supported by the Learning and Teaching Committee, it was rejected in September 2016 by the university senate and its chair, the university president, who did not see the need to institutionalize EAC. As a result, there is no regular university funding for EAC, so we have to keep looking for project funding elsewhere. But to focus on successes—perhaps my biggest success has been resuscitating WAC in Hong Kong after previous attempts were discontinued and getting four other universities on board the EAC project. Internally, at least twenty out of the twenty-nine departments in PolyU have participated in EAC and, as I've mentioned, we have academic and ELTU teachers spreading the fire by applying for EAC funding. And even though my sustainability proposal was rejected, we have an EAC that includes many academics from the disciplines. Since 2013 we have had an EAC community of practice, and we continue to offer staff development seminars and other forms of support to students. And I have plans to try to get the new university management to keep funding EAC every triennium, although my plan does not include another paper to the Senate.

**TZ:** Now, as we continue to talk about successes, Jose, will you describe your Peer Tutoring Scheme (PTS), a project inspired by the launching of EAC at CUHK? How did you decide to embark on this initiative?

**JL:** I am always passionate about service-learning, which involves students learning through training, experience and reflection. With this zeal, I started to brainstorm the possibility of introducing peer tutoring in speaking and writing as service-learning as early as the new 3+3+4 curriculum was implemented in 2012. Peer tutoring

was also in line with the non-formal “soft approach” to language enhancement the ELTU was proposing to complement the formal curriculum. With the launching of EAC, which is operative at the program/course level, I thought it appropriate that a personal level of support be given to students, particularly for those who tend to shy away from formal learning settings. I wanted to recruit peer tutors from across the curriculum into this service-learning opportunity to share their experience and knowledge of speaking and writing in general and within the disciplines.

Since peer tutoring is a service rather than a paid job, our tutors are only expected to serve at least an hour (i.e., one session) but they can meet up to seventeen hours per week as stipulated by the university. Tutees cannot exceed four one-hour sessions per week. We are indeed fortunate to have an average of some fifty peer tutors per year, and they come from all eight faculties and around fifteen countries/regions. This diverse profile has inarguably contributed to the attraction and success of PTS. Based on this success, we’re hopeful that funding will be continued, and PTS will be here to stay especially when one of our university’s new initiatives is service learning, as stated in the university’s recent strategic plan.

**TZ:** Julia, to the list of successes you’ve already mentioned, I’d also add the English Across the Curriculum conference volume you published in the International Exchanges series on the WAC Clearinghouse, and, of course, the three international EAC conferences you’ve organized and hosted at PolyU. Would you talk a bit about these accomplishments?

**JC:** The first EAC conference came about when we realized we had no WAC experts in HK who could give advice or share WAC experiences and insights. We decided to create a focused opportunity, a conference, to be held over two to three intensive days, for participants to learn about WAC, and also CLIL, from experts and presenters elsewhere. We also wanted to spread the word that we are starting EAC in HK, and we wanted to establish a profile for our EAC work to get senior management buy-in.

Four universities—those I’ve already mentioned—comprised the organizing committee for the first conference. We wanted big names for plenary speakers to draw participants, so we invited Terry Myers Zawacki, whom I’d met in the US, and Ursula Wingate, a CLIL scholar from the UK who had spent time in Hong Kong. For the third plenary, we purposefully chose a chemistry professor from the University of Missouri, whom I’d also met in the US. The first conference in 2015 was held at PolyU with 240 registrants. The second conference in 2018 was organized only by PolyU and again we invited big names from WAC, CLIL, and TESOL as plenaries, including Mike Palmquist for WAC. This conference drew registrants from twenty-two regions and countries, which brings me to the 2021 virtual conference,



which was organized by a five-university team. This time we had over 1,000 registrants from forty-eight regions and countries and 200 presenters! As before, plenaries included CLIL scholars and a WAC panel with Terry, Mike, and Marty Townsend that replaced invited speaker Michelle Cox [now Michelle Crow] who had to withdraw for health reasons.

An outcome of the second, 2018, EAC conference was the volume *English Across the Curriculum: Voices from around the World*, edited by a PolyU team and published in 2021 in the International Exchanges series, as Terry mentioned, with hard copies available from the University Press of Colorado. Our goal in this peer-reviewed collection was to show how EAC, WAC, and CLIL are developing around the world based on the range of presentations at the conference. (<https://wac.colostate.edu/books/international/eac2018/>).

**TZ:** Finally, in the midst of all of this professional activity, will you tell readers a little about yourselves? Your backgrounds? Your avocations?

**JC:** I was born in Hong Kong, but I did high school and my undergraduate degree in physics and astronomy in Canada, as well as my masters in TESOL and PhD in applied linguistics. I'm currently the director of the Educational Development Centre at PolyU and associate professor (courtesy) in the Department of English. Music is my pastime. I play the piano and lead a worship team for my church. I have a fellowship in singing performance from Trinity College London (FTCL) and have performed in operas and concerts as a soprano soloist. In 2014 I gave a solo concert at the Hong Kong City Hall Concert Hall to raise funds for homeless children, which raised over a million Hong Kong dollars with over 1,000 people attending. When I retire from university, I will likely take up some singing teaching.

**JL:** I spent my formative years in Australia attending senior high school and receiving all tertiary education there, including a BA and MA at the University of Sydney in English and linguistics and my PhD at Macquarie University in applied linguistics. Currently, I'm director of the English Language Teaching Unit, which is staffed by some sixty language educators and more than ten administrative and project support staff. I lead the unit in curriculum design, review, and development. In my spare time, if any, I enjoy sports, music, and planting in pots. Above all, I treasure spending time with family and friends, and in particular, my two grandbabies.

**TZ:** Thank you both so much for the time you spent answering my many questions, only some of which I've been able to include here. For now, I'm crossing my fingers that there will be a fourth EAC international conference when everyone will be able to meet in person once again.