

TNE emerging conversations: embrace the rant

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TNE EMERGING CONVERSATIONS: EMBRACE THE RANT

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Abstract

*This paper explores the extent to which Transnational Education (TNE) both deconstructs and reconstructs EAP thinking and practices. In our conference symposium, we used the acronym RANT to discuss our TNE challenges across four interrelated themes: **Re**constructing Identity; **Ass**essment; **(K)**nowledge sharing and **T**ransitions. Writing the paper gave us scope for reflection and space to consider the positive aspects of TNE as well as the cyclical nature of ranting. As a result, our RANT developed a more measured, reflective tone, which led to a revised version: **Reflect, Assess, Negotiate, and Transform**. The paper comprises 5 vignettes exploring challenges affecting EAP teacher identity, assessment, knowledge sharing, power relations, and equity within our various TNE and EMI contexts.*

Keywords: Transnational Education, TNE, RANT, Teacher Identity, Assessment, Knowledge Sharing, Power Relations

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The term 'rant' may be interpreted somewhat negatively, for example as 'a long, angry, and confused speech' (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.). This can be true, but the action of 'ranting' can also lead to positive outcomes. As educators, many of us have had problematic situations in our professional practice, such as a teaching session that did not go as planned. Within the Transnational Education special interest group (TNE SIG), we are familiar with challenging situations that arise from cross-border, cross-cultural, and cross-institutional teaching and learning. One response may be to 'rant' to colleagues because expressing frustrations may be helpful in processing and articulating emotions and beliefs.

At the time of the BALEAP 2023 conference, the TNE SIG members used the acronym RANT: **R**econstructing identity, **A**ssessment deconstructed, **kN**owledge sharing, and **T**ransition to capture some of the challenges affecting EAP teacher identity, assessment, knowledge sharing and power relations within our various TNE and EMI contexts. On the heels of the Pandemic, a ‘rant’ was sorely needed, but following the symposium our RANT developed a more measured, reflective tone, which, in our view, can mirror the cyclical nature of ranting, much like models of reflection. This in turn led to a revised version of our RANT: **R**eflect, **A**ssess, **N**egotiate, and **T**ransform.

Embodying our new interpretation of RANT, we see themes of identity, knowledge, and power running through the four sections of our symposium. In the following sections, we reflect on a wide range of contexts that have been challenges for us and explore questions including: How does English Medium Instruction (EMI) and translanguaging pedagogy impact identity? Who has the power to create assessments? How can TNE partners share assessment knowledge equitably? How can knowledge sharing help to balance power dynamics and shift identity? How can we, going forward, ensure our partnerships have an equitable power balance between institutions? We capture our rant as a linked chain of five vignettes, in which we start with some more personal reflections about our own teaching identities and move to broader concepts within our own TNE provision.

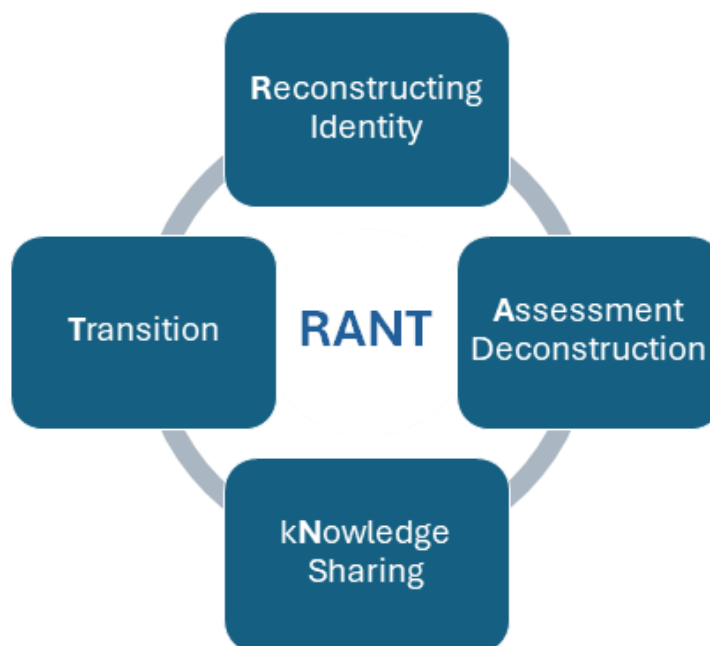
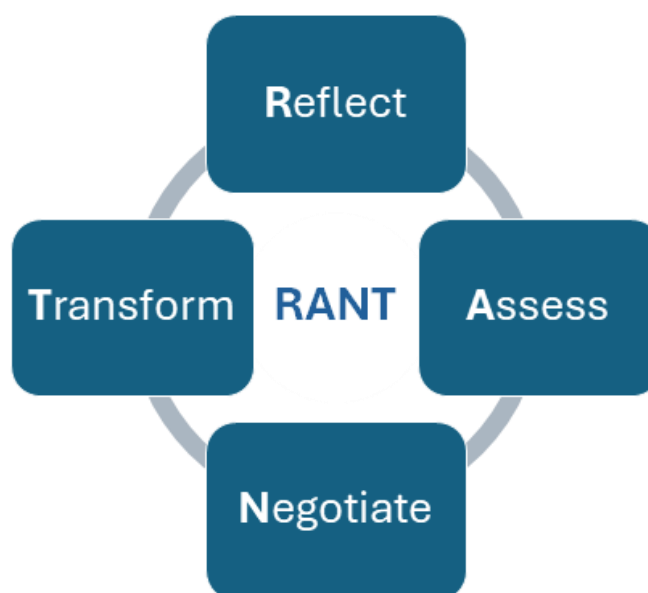


Figure 1: Conference symposium **RANT**

Figure 2: Revised **RANT**

REFLECTING ON IDENTITY AND TRANSLANGUAGING: TWO PERSPECTIVES

Reflections on Identity in Practice (Samantha Wilson)

To begin our RANT, we start with **R**eflections about English Medium Instruction (EMI) identity and translanguaging. In the EMI literature, Macaro et al. (2018) highlight concerns around language proficiency of staff. EMI Lecturers fear their English level might impede learning or will prevent connection with students. House and Lévy-Tödter (2010) found that the EMI context sometimes changes the traditional roles of teacher and student (and support staff) as the teacher will sometimes have lower English proficiency than the student, leading to the students interrupting and correcting their teachers. EMI subject lecturers have more subject knowledge than their students; however, they may be uncomfortable with being identified as a language teacher because it is not their 'area of expertise' or because of a perceived lack of knowledge in that area (Block & Moncada-Comas, 2022).

In some transnational partnerships, English language support is offered to students, which may alleviate some of this pressure on content lecturers (Pecorari & Malmstrom, 2018). Southwest Jiaotong University-Leeds Joint School, for example, provides EAP modules for students, which are designed with input from the content lecturers. Despite this support, I have worried that by prioritising English, students' subject

content knowledge may suffer and actually leave them less equipped to enter the workforce. However, Macaro et al.'s (2018) review has stated that there is no conclusive evidence to suggest that learning in English has a negative impact on content learning. Similarly, a study conducted by Lin and Lei (2021) compared a module offered in both English and Chinese and found the medium of instruction had no significant impact on student outcomes.

In other partnerships, translanguaging may be used or encouraged. Translanguaging is defined by Canagarajah (2011) as 'the ability of multilingual speakers to shuttle between languages treating the diverse languages that form their repertoire as an integrated system' (p. 402). Translanguaging has been a frequently mentioned approach to promote the full range of students' linguistic abilities and support their identities (Canagarajah, 2011). It also has the potential to support lecturer identity; if the EMI lecturers mentioned by House and Lévy-Tödter (2010) share an L1 with their students, they may be able to regain 'control' over their classrooms, even if they have lower English proficiency than their students. However, thinking about my own identity, I have been reluctant to implement translanguaging. As a monolingual English speaker, I fear that I may lose some control or authority over my classroom by encouraging students to use their L1—a concern similar to the content lecturers with lower proficiency in English, and one noted in the research described in the following section.

Reflections on Translanguaging in Research (Sofia Di Gallorardo)

The theme of *Reflecting on and re-constructing EAP teacher Identity* also emerged from a collaborative project between the University of Glasgow and the Politeknik Negeri Pontianak in Indonesia. My involvement led me to reading about translanguaging, which challenges beliefs about the use of English only in the classroom. I wondered what it would mean to me as an EAP teacher to embrace a translingual pedagogy. Here, I share research that resonated with my exploration of this idea.

The first comes from Hiller (2021), a teacher working in an EMI context in China. Hiller introduced translanguaging in an EAP class to promote 'the use of Chinese students' full linguistic and communicative repertoires' (p.307). The students were encouraged to conduct research in their L1 and to make decisions about when and how to use L1 or English. The approach had a positive impact on students' identity making and intercultural communication skills. But Hiller also alludes to a shift in learner and teacher roles and [perhaps] power, where her limited knowledge of

Chinese language and genre conventions meant that feedback on assignments that had integrated both languages, required negotiation of meaning between herself and the students. Hiller does not explore this in detail, but the impact on EAP teacher identity and the potential for feelings of disempowerment are implied.

Another study by Williamson (2022) discusses the contested role of translanguaging in EAP pre-sessional course(s) in Australia where an English only policy continues to be widely accepted in language classrooms. Williamson found that adopting a translanguaging pedagogy benefited students' learning. But it also exposed tensions for EAP teachers, conflicted about the use of Chinese in the classroom – on the one hand they supported the targeted use of translation; on the other they promoted an English Only culture. While Williamson does not specifically address EAP teacher identity in her study, she highlights potential tensions around teacher beliefs in relation to pedagogy, policy, and teacher roles, which are central to EAP teacher identity.

Finally, a study by Gu, Li and Jiang (2021) made me reflect on and question my own tendency to prioritise linguistic knowledge in teaching and learning. The study looks at the EMI context in China and challenges the pervasive deficit discourse around non-native English teachers. It reimagines EMI as a multilingual and multimodal space of learning, one in which EMI teachers embrace a flexible approach to the use of English, and use a repertoire of spatial, cultural, and linguistic resources including local knowledge to make content and learning meaningful.

As an English-speaking EAP teacher, the study prompted me to consider how a translingual pedagogy, which seems to create a space that embraces a wider repertoire of skills, capacities, and modalities of teaching may impact EAP teaching and professional identity in wider non-EMI contexts. As for my own teacher identity, I think this exploration has opened a space in which I am more open to and less fearful of the 'other' language. This could empower both my students and me in creating a more equitable teaching and learning relationship.

ASSESS: ASSESSMENT DECONSTRUCTED

(Elisabeth Wilding)

The next link in our RANT chain encompasses another set of skills: those related to assessment. Aligning assessment to meet student needs is a core principle of EAP (BALEAP, 2022). To what extent should we re-assess our EAP assessment assumptions and practices in the collaborative context of TNE? This has been the question we have been exploring at

the NUIST Reading Academy, a Sino-UK joint education institute established in 2015. Our research into the knowledge, needs, and concerns of our staff and student stakeholders has provided an opportunity to reflect on the importance of context and collaboration in effective EAP assessment.

In the case of the NUIST Reading Academy, the UK partner was responsible for developing the integrated credit-bearing EAP curriculum, including the assessment framework. The well-established EAP assessment had been extensively used (and researched) in the UK. However, it was now newly transplanted to a TNE context, to be delivered by the Chinese partner's teaching team. This transnational intersection offered opportunities for knowledge exchange in both directions. The local teachers, experienced in English language education but new to EAP, undertook bespoke training and development delivered by the UK partner. The UK team developed a greater understanding of the local context and gained valuable insight into the students' needs.

This collaborative approach resulted in successful student outcomes and positive feedback overall. However, there were still challenges related to assessment. Not least was the fact that the Academy offered dual degrees. The staff and students were having to simultaneously navigate both the Chinese and UK systems: what Dai, Matthews and Reyes (2020) describe as 'learning between different assessment approaches'. When it came to EAP assessment, the partners' language testing knowledge and skills were not always in alignment. For instance, there were differences in approaches to feedback, or in views on how the assessment linked to learning.

With British Council funding, we therefore undertook a collaborative project* focused on EAP assessment literacy within the partnership. Language assessment literacy (LAL) is complex and multi-layered (Inbar-Lourie, 2013; Scarino, 2013) and understanding the perspectives of stakeholders is key for a balanced understanding (Butler, Peng, & Lee, 2021). And as Yan, Zhang, and Fan (2018) argue, contextual and experiential factors are critical to LAL.

The first stage of the project was designed to obtain input on the EAP assessment experiences of our teachers and students. We gathered this data through questionnaires, focus groups, and the analysis of module evaluation forms. Although issues and areas for improvement were highlighted, we also found that simply by undertaking the project together, we were able to jointly question what we need to 'learn, unlearn, and relearn' (Coombe et al., 2020), and this in itself, has already improved communication and understanding. To give one example: teacher focus groups facilitated a discussion of the potential benefits of

test preparation and practice activities for the first-year students: learners who teachers described as very teacher dependent. This has fed into a review of how models or exemplars could be used more productively in the curriculum, while also encouraging independent learning and engagement with peer working. Initial piloting has had good results, so the next step for this (and other findings) is to develop teaching and training materials to further support teachers and students.

The project is still a work in progress, but our TNE assessment self-assessment so far has proven to have reconstructive, rather than deconstructive, potential within the transnational space.

**Developing EAP Assessment Literacy for Academic Success in UK-China* TNE is part of the UK-China Joint Institute Project: *Enabling collaborative academic development, research, and entrepreneurship* supported by a “Going Global Partnerships - Enabling Grants UK-China 2021” grant from the British Council’s Going Global Partnerships programme.

Ethics approval has been received from the University of Reading.

NEGOTIATE: KNOWLEDGE SHARING

(Stella Bunnag)

The third link of our RANT, **k**nowledge sharing, focuses on a key aspect of successful TNE partnerships which, according to Keay and O’Mahony (2014), should be collaborative and build trust to achieve the best possible outcomes for students. The sudden change from face-to-face to online delivery of our programmes in China during COVID (2019-2023) posed challenges to our ability to work equitably with our partners within Nottingham Trent University’s (NTU) joint institute with Communication University of China (CUC). Yet, it provided an opportunity to reflect on and assess how we could strengthen our working relationships. With a move back to in-person teaching in China in 2023 we shifted our focus to seek opportunities for deeper collaboration through negotiation and knowledge sharing in the areas of community building, research and feedback.

Four years of online teaching had proved difficult for community-building; a vital component to build bonds amongst students and staff within TNE settings (Smith, et al., 2004; Otto, et al., 2015; Chen, 2016), as well as developing intercultural communication skills (Singh, 2019) and natural everyday English language fluency (Duff, 2017). In response to this issue, NTU and CUC collaborated to build a Global Lounge, a

dedicated physical space offering programmes of social and intercultural communication events for all international students and staff on the Beijing campus. NTU already has an award winning [Global Lounge](#) in Nottingham dedicated to just this, and TNE staff in both countries have worked together on the project, exchanging expertise to create this space on our Beijing campus to enrich the student experience. The CUC Global Lounge serves as a meeting hub for both Chinese and international students and staff to build a global community, learn about each other's cultures and practise authentic everyday English regularly. Our launch event in June 2023 was attended by over 40 students from 20 different countries and over 95% of these attendees indicated they had enjoyed the event, made new contacts, learnt about other cultures, practised English and wanted more! We have used the feedback to jointly develop a programme of social and cultural events, services and facilities delivered through the CUC Global Lounge. The work we have done on the social and cultural events has led to discussions around joint research with our colleagues in China. During COVID we had carried out [research with UK colleagues](#) about the TNE programme itself, presented at conferences and delivered workshops, but we are now doing this with our Chinese counterparts, delivering in both English and Chinese. In addition, our students have given presentations, workshops and [published papers](#) on a range of intercultural topics relating to the TNE programme. We are now fostering collaborative opportunities between our international student communities in China and the UK. As well as encouraging community building, intercultural exchanges and language practice, these opportunities can help empower students and staff and give a sense of 'belonging' which Singh (2019) highlights as being essential to the TNE experience.

A further development stemming from the CUC Global Lounge project was the opportunity to exchange knowledge about the type, focus, and format of the feedback we wanted to gather from the social and cultural programme. This led to talking about jointly collecting feedback from different stakeholders for all other aspects of the TNE programme, which has traditionally been done separately by NTU and CUC. On a practical level, this reduces duplication of effort on both sides of the globe, but more importantly it allows us to collectively continue to improve our TNE courses as a strong community of staff and students in a more 'equitable partnership' (Keevers, et al., 2019), an approach we all share in our different reflections.

TRANSFORM: TRANSITION

(Jennifer MacDougall)

The final link in our RANT chain focused on the concept of ‘transition’ and the potential transformative nature of enacting change. As noted under Assess, the UK TNE partner (or sending institution) often holds great power through designing teaching and learning materials, creating the curriculum (De Costa, Green-Eneix, & Li, 2022), and setting the standards for assessment. Initially, this may be welcomed by the partner organisation, particularly in situations where EAP pedagogy is new or less well understood. However, as the partnership matures and the host institution gains experience in this field, there is an opportunity, and potentially a need, for change. If managed successfully, this will hopefully lead to a more equitable balance of power and responsibility (mentioned as desirable in all 3 previous strands of the symposium); change which could be transformative in nature.

Glasgow College, UESTC, a partnership between the University of Glasgow (UofG) and the University of Electronic Science and Technology of China (UESTC) is working to realign the responsibilities and power of each partner, aiming to transform the way EAP is delivered within the partnership.

After a number of years spent designing and honing an ESAP (English for Specific Academic Purposes) curriculum cognisant of the needs of undergraduate engineering students (activities led by UofG), we are currently redefining our responsibilities. This will, we hope, ensure that the host institution has greater ownership of its EAP delivery and management while retaining the crucial collaborative processes built through partnership.

The ‘road to transition’ and ultimately the transformation began to take shape in 2021 when UESTC recommended that the EAP team on the ground* have more direct control of their work. In reality, this process had already begun prior to senior management intervention as it was always the goal to build capacity and create greater sharing of responsibilities. However, the call for realignment of responsibilities provided a catalyst for more immediate change and helped formalise the process.

Jointly we created a ‘transition roadmap’, setting out key responsibilities, with the UESTC team managing recruitment, delivery and assessment activities, and UofG taking on a Quality Assurance role while still continuing to develop learning resources and lead on EAP professional development activities. This split recognised each partner’s strengths and

expertise and took account of the practicalities of running the provision efficiently. A 'managed transition' was negotiated where a handing over of responsibilities would take place within a defined timescale. This would give people time to adapt to change.

The UESTC team report that through this transition they feel a greater ownership and believe that communication on day-to-day issues is more effective, with less need to negotiate across physical and time distances. However, this may also have led to weaker collaboration; for example, one staff member pointed out that a key reason for joining the programme was to benefit from working with a UK institution, which they now felt was less apparent. Other staff feel the pressure of additional workload such as being part of an exam-setting team, and some state they lack the training and expertise for this type of work.

The changes appear to have helped both sides understand better the complexities that partnership working entails and the myriad of components that need to be juggled to create successful TNE EAP provision. Furthermore, we appear to be more empathetic towards each other's work. However, at this juncture, the challenges are complex and the work on both sides has potentially expanded, with a huge amount of training and mentorship still required.

The long-term benefits of this transition could, of course, be transformative, with both sides of the partnership growing into new roles and more fully understanding the collaborative nature of TNE.

*All EAP teaching staff are employed by the Chinese partner

RANT OVER?

Our TNE-focused ranting has been one way to manage challenging situations productively. Our rants have led us to reflect more deeply, to assess the nature of the challenge from a variety of perspectives, and to negotiate solutions in collaboration with our partners. These rants will likely continue, as the TNE environment is complex, and challenges are frequent. The process of reflection and action is necessarily cyclical and without a clear endpoint. However, it is clear that using a 'reflective rant cycle' has the power to transform our perspectives, skills, and practice as we strive to ensure equity in our TNE partnerships

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Notes

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