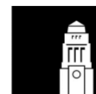

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Integrating Research and Pedagogy:
An Exploratory Practice approach

1. Introduction

Exploratory Practice (EP) is a form of fully inclusive practitioner research (Allwright, 2005; Allwright and Hanks, 2009) in which "learners as well as teachers are encouraged to investigate their own learning/teaching practices while concurrently practising the target language" (Hanks, 2017, p.2). EP draws on ideas of empowerment, as practitioners (learners and teachers) identify what puzzles them about their language learning/teaching experiences, and use their pedagogic practices as tools for investigation. This integration of research and pedagogy (my title deliberately references Allwright, 1993) is complex, and some are unable to see how it might be implemented in an English for Academic Purposes context.

The EP framework is conceptualized as a set of principles for practitioner research (see Allwright, 1993, 2003, for early iterations). The first of these convey an overarching concern for Quality of Life (see Gieve and Miller, 2006; Wu, 2006) in both research and pedagogy and emphasize practitioners working to *understand* their language learning/teaching issues before attempting problem-solving (Allwright, 2005; Hanks, 2017; Miller, 2009). The middle principles, which focus on collegiality (Allwright, 2003; Hanks, 2009), represent an attempt to bridge the theory-practice divide by bringing the different stakeholders (learners, researchers, teachers) together as they set their own, personally and professionally relevant, research agendas, and work together using "normal pedagogic practices as investigative tools" (Allwright, 2003, p.127).The aim is to work for mutual development, ie what helps the researcher also helps the teacher, *and at the same time* helps the learners to understand more about language learning/teaching. Crucially, EP principles recommend that "working to understand life" (ibid., p.128) is sustainable and is integrated into everyday classroom practice, rather than something added on to already full workloads. Thus, the argument goes, the research aids the

learning/teaching, rather than taking time, energy, and resources, away from pedagogy.

Existing literature has shown successful uptake of EP in a variety of contexts around the world (Allwright and Hanks, 2009; Hanks, 2017; Miller, Côrtes, Oliveira and Braga, 2015; Tajino and Smith, 2016). However, little work has been undertaken to critically examine the practical issues surrounding EP's call for learners as well as teachers to engage in researching their language learning and teaching experiences. This article tells the story of incorporating EP into an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) pre-sessional programme preparing students for postgraduate study in the UK. Taking a critical approach, I present the puzzles of the practitioners and consider the ways in which they integrated research and pedagogy. Their stories provide insights into the lived experiences (van Manen, 1990) of practitioners beginning to explore their learning and teaching lives.

I begin by reviewing the literature: of Exploratory Practice, of English for Academic Purposes, and of EP studies in EAP contexts. I then describe the case study, and discuss the themes that arose from the data. I conclude that despite initial concerns about EAP as a goal-oriented context, perhaps inimical to the EP framework, there are in fact creative opportunities for practitioners to integrate research and pedagogy.

2. Literature Review

The Exploratory Practice framework emphasizes small-scale, locally relevant, research, which is integrated into the pedagogy, and is conducted *by* and *for* practitioners themselves. The framework positions students alongside teachers as co-researchers (Allwright, 2003), with agency in developing their mutual understandings together (Gieve and Miller, 2006). Crucially, EP prioritizes working for understanding (Allwright, 2005, 2015), and suggests asking 'why', or 'puzzling' about learning and teaching (Hanks, 2009; Miller, 2009), as a productive starting point for research.

2.1 Exploratory Practice around the world

In Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, where EP began, Lyra, Fish Braga and Braga (2003) investigated the notion of puzzling by analyzing 88 puzzles gathered from EFL teachers working in the municipal school system over several years (1997-2001). At first sight, these questions addressed classroom discipline or institutional (lack of) respect, as well as motivation and anxiety. On closer analysis, the research highlighted the sense of loneliness and isolation that these teachers were combatting by using EP as a source of "nourishment" (Lyra et al., 2003, p.156) and support.

This 'nourishing' aspect of EP was also noted in studies where teachers and trainee-teachers investigated their classrooms in China (Wu, 2006; Zhang, 2004; Zheng, 2012). Likewise, teachers were the focus of a study in high schools in Japan (Hiratsuka, 2016), where EP was used to investigate the complexities of team-teaching on the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) programme. Hiratsuka noted the need for patient and thorough investigations, which acknowledge the interpersonal relations between participants as well as "the timing and type of data collection" (2016, p.117). In similar vein, Slimani-Rolls (2003) investigated, via EP, the challenges of group-work in business French classes at tertiary level. She found that EP helped participants to understand the need to examine their routine teaching/learning activities and contemplate in a new light the paradoxes they negotiated daily. Focusing specifically on learners and teachers in state secondary schools, Miller, Côrtes, Oliveira and Braga (2015) described the use of Potentially Exploitable Pedagogic Activities in Rio de Janeiro. They noted the complexities and challenges of this, but concluded that the rewards were manifold, particularly in terms of quality of life in the language learning classroom.

This brief sketch of EP work from around the world shows that it has been implemented in a range of contexts: language teaching in state schools, private language schools, universities, teacher training colleges. It has been used with different groups of participants: teachers, novice teachers, and

learners. I now turn to the growing field of EP in the specific context of English for Academic Purposes.

2.2 English for Academic Purposes

Teaching English for Academic Purposes (EAP) is a specialist area in the field of language teaching, where there is a dual focus on enhancing both language proficiency and academic skills (Dudley-Evans and St John, 1998; Jordan, 1997). EAP is “needs driven rather than [language] level driven” (Alexander, Argent and Spencer, 2008, p.18), and it “seeks to understand and engage learners in a critical understanding of the increasingly varied contexts and practices of academic communication” (Hyland, 2006, p.2). Moreover, as many have noted (Alexander et al., 2008; Hanks, 2015b; Petrič & Harwood, 2013; Wingate, 2015), EAP in the UK, as elsewhere, is high-stakes: students have left their jobs and family, and paid large sums (not only fees, but also visas, travel, accommodation) in order to prepare for their academic careers. Furthermore, students only have a limited period of time (in some cases a matter of weeks) to reach the demanding requirements for entry onto their desired degree programme. There is, therefore, a strong focus on goals, objectives and outcomes (Jordan, 2002) as students need to be ready for their chosen degree programme.

Pre-sessional programmes such as the one in this study aim to address these needs. Teachers, course directors, and learners, work together to form a bridge between students and their desired academic career, by practising the approaches that will be needed, and developing techniques that go beyond sitting down and reading or writing alone. As institutions implement research-based teaching (Healey, Flint and Harrington, 2014), students are increasingly required to conduct small-scale research projects in which they identify and investigate issues on their own or in groups, and, in addition to written assignments, they are required to give oral presentations of their work.

Such activities are part of the fabric of EAP practice – so much so that they are almost invisible to the practitioners themselves. Yet the potential of these

every-day activities for research remains largely untapped. This is not to suggest that EAP is more challenging than other contexts, but merely to note that for many practitioners working in EAP the open-ended approach of Exploratory Practice, with its focus on puzzling rather than problem-solving, may seem incompatible.

2.3 Tapping the potential: an Exploratory Practice approach

Turning to accounts of EP in EAP contexts, Smith (2009) focused on EP principles underpinning the development of a new EAP curriculum in Japan, where teachers and students collaborated in designing, implementing and evaluating their programme. Chu (2007) reported working with her students to incorporate EP on a Study Skills course in a junior college in Taiwan. She charted three main phases of development, from her students' uncertainty at being asked to take responsibility for their learning, via hesitant acceptance of agency, to full, active engagement in researching learning. In the UK, two companion pieces considered EP from the perspectives of pre-undergraduate students (Hanks, 2015a) and their teachers (Hanks, 2015b), working on a year-long pre-sessional course. Elsewhere, Gunn (2010) reported on her investigation, in the United Arab Emirates, into MA TESOL students' resistance to reflection. Her findings indicated that EP helped the process of developing student understandings of the need (because assessed) to reflect appropriately. At the same time Gunn began to understand her students' difficulties as they grappled with the notion of assessed reflection; for them an unfamiliar concept. In Australia, Rowland (2011), working on an academic preparation course, used an EP approach to raise student awareness of their agency as "critical language experts" (2011, p.254). Here, they compared the literature in the field of TESOL with their own experience as language teachers. Rowland concluded that EP helped his students to enter the academic community and to develop as researchers as well as teachers.

2.4 Critical reflections

EP suggests using normal pedagogic practices as investigative tools as practitioners work to understand what puzzles them about their learning and teaching experiences. However, the very real constraints of busy EAP

practitioners with tight deadlines and goal-oriented courses, students and colleagues, mean that the EP principles may seem overly idealistic.

In Hanks' and Chu's cases, the students were preparing for undergraduate study. A critic might argue that they were therefore more pliant (because younger), and that post-graduates would be less willing to accept the EP framework. Of the studies involving post-graduates (Gunn, 2010; Rowland, 2011), the participants were language teachers themselves, preparing for MA TESOL programmes. Arguably, these are specialized groups, who might be expected to show interest in researching language learning and teaching. Students intending to study Master's degrees in Business or Design or Healthcare might be less enamoured of an EP approach. As a critical researcher, I therefore questioned whether the Exploratory Practice principles could 'fit' in such a goal-oriented context.

Such considerations led to an overarching research question: *'What is the relationship between the EP principles and the everyday practices of EAP?'* In particular, I wanted to investigate the principle of integrating "work for understanding into classroom practice" (Allwright, 2003, p.130); that is, the processes of integrating research and pedagogy.

3. Methodology

The study was implemented on an intensive 10-week summer pre-sessional programme (henceforth PS10) at a university in the north of England. In common with many other EAP programmes, PS10 aimed to:

- Develop academic skills enabling students to successfully participate in the academic community (eg developing critical thinking, listening to lectures, reading academic texts effectively, giving oral presentations, and writing assignments)
- Improve general communication skills in English (including sessions on the four skills, grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation)

- Provide orientation to life in the UK and the university (eg library inductions, opening bank accounts, registering with a doctor)

3.1 The shape of the case study

The over-arching case study incorporated all the teachers and students on PS10. This larger case was then granulated to yield a series of intersecting smaller cases for analysis. As Figure 1 indicates, a total of 91 participants on the programme including seven teachers, and eighty-four students (mainly from the Far and Middle East) took part. This article focuses on two teachers and six learners in depth.

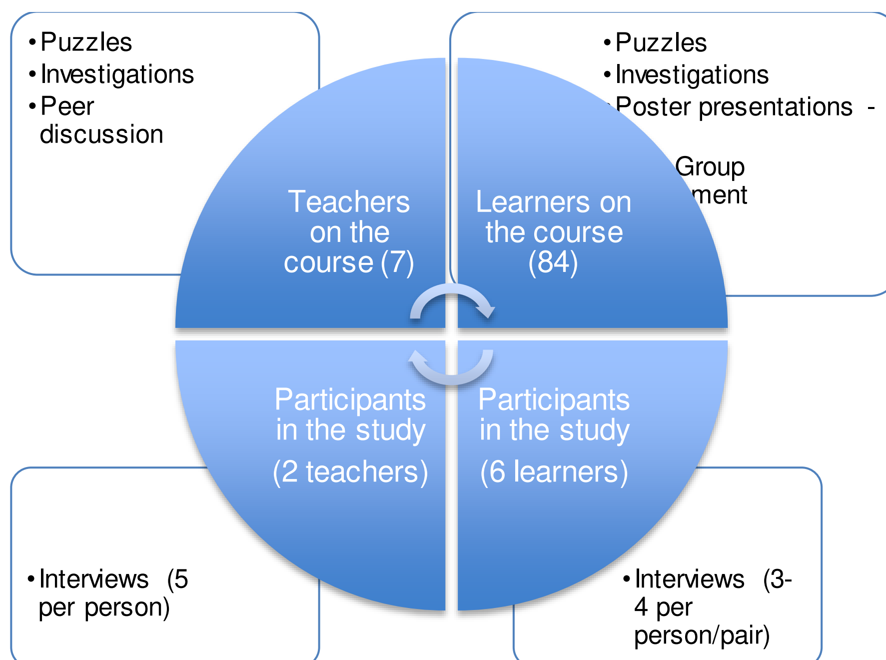

Figure 1: The shape of the Case Study

I took a qualitative, interpretive approach, using case studies as a 'way in' to the lived experience of EP in EAP. Case studies provide a means of collecting and interpreting rich data rooted in the social world, and offer ways of developing our understandings of complex social phenomena (Duff, 2008; Stake, 1995) such as EAP classrooms. As I observed EP in my own EAP

community of practice (Wenger, 1998), I analyzed the multiple realities (Stake, 2003) of the case, with an insider's understanding that would not have been available to an outsider (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2009). This approach allowed me to sketch the everyday world of EP in EAP, while also identifying particular, individual and uncommon aspects. I used interviews, field notes, and artifacts such as timetables, lesson plans, and student work (eg posters) to develop a multi-layered, multi-dimensional picture. Thus I was able to examine the EP principles and observe the tensions that arose when they were incorporated into classroom practices.

3.2 Ethical issues

All research involves ethical dilemmas and this study was no exception. Ethics were particularly important, given my multiple roles and the potential for me to be seen as an authority figure. I took care, therefore, to build in strong ethical checks and balances, such as inviting voluntary participation, ensuring the right to withdraw, and preserving anonymity (eg pseudonyms agreed with the participants). However, this merely procedural approach cannot capture all the ethical considerations involved. In EP, the principles explicitly encourage an epistemological shift, which positions the practitioners (learners as well as teachers) as the researchers of their own classrooms (Allwright, 2005). This meant taking an egalitarian approach, in which we were all responsible for the teaching, learning, researching during the study. It also meant respecting the time and input of participants. For example, the principles of working together, involving everyone, working for mutual development, as well as the principle of integrating research and pedagogy (summarized from Allwright, 2003), guided the study. In sum, I aimed to respond to Small's call "to ensure that educational research is ethical research" (2001, p.45) by considering these issues carefully, and incorporating ethical considerations into decision-making at all times during the study.

3.3 Participants

Two teachers and six learners volunteered to participate. Kay had taught for a number of years in ESOL and EFL contexts, and was entering a new phase in her career, teaching EAP. In contrast, John had taught EAP for many years. He had worked in Self Access Areas in a number of institutions, and had published articles on his work. Of the learners, one (Kae) was an undergraduate preparing for her Study Year Abroad, while the rest were going on to Master's level degree programmes: two in Healthcare (Meow and Cheer – they had the same puzzle and elected to work, and be interviewed, together), two in Business Studies (Gina and Ken), one in Design (Lynne). Appendix 1 summarises participant information.

3.4 The structure of the programme

The central aim of PS10 was to prepare students for their future academic studies. Relative freedom was given in the Language Development (LD) classes, so that teachers could identify learners' needs, and respond appropriately, negotiating the syllabus with their students. In contrast, Academic Writing (AW) classes were prescriptive, typically focussing on aspects such as: cohesion and coherence, contrasting approaches to writing introductions in different fields, and appropriate use of referencing conventions. Afternoon classes included Oral Presentations, Seminar Skills, Listening to Lectures, and Reading and Note-making. This is not to endorse any particular approach to EAP teaching, but merely to describe the situation as it was at the time of the study. A typical week on PS10 is represented in Table 1.

Table 1: Generic Timetable for PS10

	Monday	**Tuesday**	**Wednesday**	**Thursday**	**Friday**
9.30-11.00	Language Development	Language Development	Language Development	Language Development	Language Development
11.30-13.00	Academic Writing	Academic Writing	Academic Writing	Academic Writing	Consultations / Tutorials
14.00-15.30	Oral Presentations	Listening to lectures	Oral Presentations	Reading & note-making	Self-study

It was an ethical imperative, and central to the EP approach, to ensure that the research would help, and not hinder, learning. Hence EP was incorporated into the curriculum without significantly adding to or replacing sessions. Instead, I looked at ways in which the participants could re-frame pre-existing sessions, materials or approaches. The only difference was the orientation of inviting participants to puzzle about their learning/teaching by asking 'why'.

3.5 Procedure

EP recommends using normal pedagogic practices as investigative tools "so that working for understanding is *part of* the teaching and learning, not extra to it" (Allwright and Hanks, 2009, p.167). Consequently, Exploratory Practice was woven into the fabric of the whole programme, with specific emphasis in the Language Development classes for the first four weeks. At the end of the fourth week, students gave poster presentations of their work. The emphasis then shifted to EP in the AW classes for the last six weeks, as participants wrote group assignments. Interviews with participants were conducted at regular intervals, to capture their experiences of EP as it played out on the programme (see Appendix 2 for a summary of the procedure).

The Induction week began by introducing EP to the teachers. As part of a series of in-house Teacher Development workshops, I gave a presentation of the principles of EP, with examples from different contexts. The workshop ended by asking teachers: 'What puzzles you about your language learning or teaching experiences?' and I invited volunteers for the study. Two teachers (John and Kay) came forward. The following day all the other teachers announced that they, too, wanted to try EP.

In the first week of the course, I gave a lecture to the whole cohort of students. This lecture (one of a series of 'live lectures' from academics in the University) had several functions. Firstly, students had the opportunity to listen to a lecture and to practise their note-taking skills (a common, and vital, academic skill). Concurrently, it introduced the concepts of practitioner research, and EP in particular. As with the teachers, I ended with the question

‘What puzzles you about your language learning experiences?’ and invited volunteers to participate in the study. I accepted the first six volunteers.

Students were then asked to write a summary of the lecture using their notes. They worked in groups to compare and develop their summaries. Here, students were refining their puzzles, while also practising key academic skills (e.g. listening, note-taking, summarizing). Unsurprisingly, some students found this particularly difficult, as their notes were incomplete. Since listening to lectures and taking appropriate notes for use in written assignments are crucial skills for successful academic performance, this subtly made the point that effective note-making and summary-writing skills needed their attention.

Both teachers and learners expressed excitement about EP. Although none had heard of EP before, they were intrigued by the possibilities of collegial working and developing their understandings through small-scale research activity. However, as a participant-researcher, I was cautious about their enthusiasm, as it could have stemmed from a desire to please me (see Bailey, 1983). I therefore deliberately sought to create space in the interviews for participants to express worries, fears and disappointments. I actively searched the data for examples that ran counter to enthusiasm.

In the second week, the students mingled, and formed groups (of 2-5 students) based around their topics of interest. They then worked with their teachers to think about how they might investigate their puzzles. Suggestions ranged from ‘ask the teacher’ or ‘visit the library; read books; look on the internet’, to conducting interviews or questionnaires. Under the guidance of their teachers, they piloted questionnaire/interview questions, and made adjustments that were both linguistic (lexico-grammatical) and structural (e.g. eliminating redundant questions; changing the order to a more logical sequence). The majority of the cohort were ready to collect data by the third week. This followed EP principles of using *familiar* pedagogic activities (project work involving questionnaires or interviews is not new in EAP) to investigate their puzzles. As a group, the teachers decided that the best place for the learners to conduct data collection was within the cohort itself. They

therefore took over the corridor between classrooms, so that all the students and teachers could mingle.

The first phase ended in the fourth week, as students collated and analysed their data, and prepared and delivered group oral presentations. Again, the classroom doors were opened, and the common space of the corridor was used for them to hang their posters and present their work to other students, teachers, and others working in the centre. This was deliberately organized in much the same way as successful poster presentations at academic conferences.

The poster presentations were a high point in the course: both teachers and students appeared highly motivated, and there was a shared sense of elation at the end of the week. However, it should not be thought that this was an end-point. The posters may imply a product, but EP is in fact about *process* (Breen, 2006). Thus, following the presentations, the remaining six weeks were given over to a group-writing assignment. Here students worked in their EP groups to write assignments of 800-1,000 words, treating this as a methodology chapter (the 'write-up' of their work). As with all the EP work they did in the study, this was done with an eye to preparing them for their future academic lives. Many departments require students to produce group assignments, and most of the students on PS10 had never attempted collaborative writing in this genre before. Interestingly, some students became even more enthusiastic about EP once they had moved into this writing/reflecting phase.

3.6 Data Analysis

Over the period of PS10, I collected a range of data. In providing this narrative of the participants' experiences, I selected what to focus on and how to analyse and present the findings (Holliday, 2002; Richards, 2003). The case study was multi-layered, and multi-dimensional, in that teachers and students were engaged in EP and reflecting on their experiences while they were doing so. After reading Silverman's (1993) critique of Grounded Theory (Strauss and Corbin, 1990), I realized that the "implicit theories" (Silverman, 1993:

p.47) inherent in my own work would be better used explicitly. I therefore used a form of Template Analysis (King, 2012) in which I identified a limited number of *a priori* themes, with the EP principles forming the initial template. In this article, I focus on one main theme: the principle "Integrate the 'work for understanding' into the existing working life of the classroom" (Allwright, 2005, p.360).

4. Participants 'living' Exploratory Practice

As described above, EP was incorporated into standard EAP practices. Project work involving questionnaires and interviews followed by poster presentations is standard procedure on many pre-sessional courses, and PS10 was no exception. However, the *approach* was markedly different. Rather than an external researcher setting the agenda (see Allwright, 2005; Breen, 2006), the students and teachers themselves identified questions to investigate, and those questions focused on their own pedagogy.

4.1 Relevance to future academic life

In the first weeks of the course, the participants told me of their reactions to EP. The teachers emphasized the attractions of the learners doing EP as a way of preparing for future academic life. As John approached EP for the first time, he predicted his students' response:

> **John:** I think they will react well because they will see that even though they may not have done any research in the past they will see that this is a skill they need to start to develop because they will need it.

Kay also raised the potential for EP to develop the academic skills of students:

> **Kay:** Do you think that by doing this this way we're going to be honing the analytical and critical skills of the students?

Both teachers related the EP principle of working for understanding (Allwright, 2003) to the academic skills necessary for students to be successful: critical thinking and analytical prowess.

Students, too, evinced excited anticipation. Ken, from Taiwan, attributed his interest to the novelty of the approach:

> **Ken:** I think it's very interesting for me because this is my first time to try this system and I think it also can help me to learn in English

Similarly, a young Japanese student, Kae, commented:

> **Kae:** it's fantastic because we don't usually think about this kind of question so [*laughs*] I don't know whether I will find the answer of my puzzlement, but it's exciting […] what do other students think about concentration?

Listening to lectures of an hour or more, sitting in seminars and struggling to participate, writing essays and assignments, all require intense concentration. Kae was acutely aware of the need to understand what causes lapses in concentration. Over the first four weeks, she worked with another student to investigate attention span, seasonality and time of day (when sleepiness fell most heavily). As they interviewed other students, they found they were not alone. Like many of the participants, Kae moved from thinking she was the only one struggling to keep her attention focused in class, to realizing that this was a common issue. The discovery that others suffered the same lapses in concentration was a welcome revelation (see Bakhtin, 1986; Gieve and Miller, 2006, Hanks, 2017, for discussions of the importance of the 'Other'). Over time, Kae's explorations of the ways in which concentration waxes and wanes over time caught the interest of her peers, and she reported high levels of interest from other students, especially during the poster presentation, who wanted to know what she had found out.

Gina, a Taiwanese student, conveyed a similar curve of excitement. Her puzzle ("Why can't I remember and use new vocabulary?") was one that many other students on the programme had identified.

> **Gina:** it [EP] makes me feel excited because I will look forward to the result. Find some reason why I cannot memory [=remember] or why I can't understand [a new word].

Clearly, a student embarking on academic study needs to be able to command the specialist vocabulary in that field. A student studying Business who doesn't understand the word 'corporate' and how it differs from

‘corporation’ or ‘cooperation’ (for example) struggles to perform successfully if the meaning and appropriate use of such words remain unknown. Gina was hyper-aware of the need to learn key lexis and wanted to explore ways of learning and activating vocabulary.

4.2 The importance of puzzling

Like many other students on the course, Meow (a Thai student going into an MA in Healthcare) reported an immediate surge of questions following the introduction of EP:

> **Meow:** I just find ‘Oh! – I have a lot of puzzles that I never thought about it before’

She had written several puzzles, but settled on one: *Why can't I speak English well after studying for a long time?* This chimed with her classmate Cheer (a Japanese student also heading for Healthcare), and they opted to work together. Although neither had heard of EP before, they were intrigued by the possibilities of collegial working (see Hanks, 2009; Slimani-Rolls, 2003), and of developing their understandings of the processes of learning and teaching:

> **Meow:** I think it’s very helpful for me if I can understand what puzzle I have.

However, this attitude was not universal. Nervousness at exposing perceived weaknesses in front of the teacher or classmates was also a consideration, as Gina indicated:

> **Gina:** to be honest I feel a little bit nervous because the teacher tried to find some problems, maybe some puzzlement. This means I have some problems.

She rightly pointed out that admitting to a problem may be a risky act. Like many others, Gina had automatically ‘translated’ her puzzle into a problem, and it took some time before she could move towards ‘being puzzled’ (see Hanks, 2015a; 2015b).

Although the overall picture I am painting was of enjoyment as participants engaged in Exploratory Practice, the work was not without difficulties. As a

critical researcher, I wish now to draw attention to the complexities of puzzles and problems.

Students were often keen on finding 'solutions' to their problems (words many of them used). Cheer's experience gives an insight into the process of moving from a problem-focused approach towards puzzlement and developing understandings. The disjuncture between her own performance and that of her classmates (or, indeed, her expectations) meant that Cheer became, in her words, "more deeply" puzzled. When describing her impressions of the EP work, she explained that she was really searching for a practical solution to her problems:

> **Cheer:** I want, need, some more useful skill or tool to improve my puzzlement […] understanding is useful for my puzzlement but I want, mmm, I want more useful, like solution

However, when the time came to present, Cheer selected the shortest, least demanding, section: the introduction. This was an interesting decision, given her professed desire to improve her speaking. At various times over the weeks she had expressed disappointment with her (in-)ability to speak, yet she also chose situations which required her to speak less. In fact, as she herself acknowledged, she already knew the solution to her problem (as any teacher would also have advised: "practise speaking more often!") but for various reasons she seemed unable to take action to do this. Rather than trying to solve the (insoluble) problem of speaking, EP allowed Cheer to explore these reasons for herself in depth.

Later, she reflected on her experience of EP, contrasting it with another well-known form of practitioner inquiry: action research:

> **Cheer:** maybe other people expect some action research. So through EP they expect their puzzlement solved by EP […] But a little bit different. Now I can understand [my] personality, my personal problem, and environment also.

Cheer gained some insight into her own difficulties, and was also able to look beyond her personal situation and consider others. She hinted at the futility of expecting solutions to such complex issues as anxiety about speaking. As a

healthcare worker, she knew about action research in her field, and was able to distinguish it from EP (see Hanks, 2017, for a longer discussion of Cheer's work). By clarifying the difference, she could explore the expectations of participants (including herself), and unpack the issues affecting her speaking.

4.3 Engagement

Once they had started working with their students and their puzzles, the teachers reported being "pleasantly surprised" (Kay) and "thrilled" (John) by their responses. They described in very similar terms how they had helped their students form groups based on their topics of interest, using normal pedagogic practices (Allwright, 2003). John, for example, described using a standard approach such as pyramid discussion:

> **John:** we discussed in pairs, very small groups, possible puzzles that might interest us, interest them. And then we got into bigger groups, I think there were ten or twelve, [eventually] I split the class into two groups to see if there was any commonality.

The majority of learners were ready to collect data by the third week of the course. As they collected data, the students were concurrently practising academic as well as language skills (question formation, questionnaire writing, interview techniques). They all worked together to collect data across the entire programme:

> **John:** when the whole cohort were out [conducting questionnaires and interviews], that went extremely well; couldn't have gone any better, I think, for all groups: just a buzz.

Gina provided a student's perspective on the same activity:

> **Gina:** that is the first time I tried to understand my difficulties in studying English. And I found that not only me but a lot of interviewees and classmates want to know the answers. They ask me 'How about the others' answers?'

The EP work had caught Gina's imagination so much that she and her groupmates chose to continue their data collection after class:

> **Gina:** in the class we opened the door and meet each other. But some interviews is not in the class because the time is not enough. So we have a date and visited in our flats, in our accommodation and sit down [together]. That's a good environment […] because they can talk anything and they can think

This was not seen as 'homework' in the traditional sense; nobody had asked them to do this – as with Chu's (2007) students, they decided themselves how to organize their time. Instead, it was seen as an opportunity to sit in a quieter atmosphere than in class, with enough time for deeper discussions about vocabulary learning.

John conveyed a similar sense of engagement from his students. They had become so involved in the analysis of their data, sharing analytical, technical or computer skills that they did not want to stop:

> **John:** they've been analyzing and collating the data. And they're really enjoying it. To the extent where today, when I asked them about 10 minutes before the period ended, to 'Close down everything now, and come and sit in your seats', they didn't come!

Far from being upset that his request had been ignored, John was pleased by his students' focus on their work:

> **John:** they were so involved, I don't think they'd registered that I'd asked them. They were so involved with it that they just continued on, and so in the end I said 'OK keep going and we'll finish the lesson now, but if you want to stay in the classroom and continue on, you can. Just lock up when you've finished.'

In the fourth week of the course, the students presented their posters. They took over the whole corridor to hang their posters, and the noise was deafening as twenty-five groups presented their posters at the same time. During, and immediately after the poster presentations, there was a sense of elation amongst the participants. This was particularly evident amongst the teachers. In the staff meeting that followed the presentations, teachers expressed their delight:

> **John:** it would be difficult to design an activity that engages them more. They were all engaged, and they were really interested in the findings. I couldn't believe it [*vociferous agreement from staff*]. They were really great…

Arguably, these accounts are merely examples of a common experience of student enthusiasm when engaged in an absorbing group task or project. However, the point here is that each of these excerpts points to the EP principle (Allwright, 1993, 2003, 2005) of integrating the work for understanding into the pedagogy.

4.4 Participant Reflections

Towards the end of PS10 I asked the participants to reflect on their experiences of EP. Lynne, a Chinese student studying Design, noted that by setting their own questions and investigating, the learners were active in the *process* of learning:

> **Lynne:** very helpful, I think, because if just in class the teacher said something, and we just accept some answer, I think it's easy to forget it. I think every student take part in this process and we found the answer by ourselves.

As she worked through EP, Lynne developed in confidence and began to take more responsibility for her own learning. Chiming with Breen's (2006) analysis of EP, Lynne identified a key issue: by inviting learners to move away from dependence on the teacher for answers, students began to develop agency.

Meow explained that in the past she had never investigated her own learning processes. The opportunity to explore such issues had focused her attention on her spoken output:

> **Meow:** I tried to speak more and […] now I speak and I thinking when I speak 'oh did I do some grammar mistake when I speaking?' Because normally I speak without thinking of grammar, so now I think about grammar before I speak.

Her investigations into the difficulties she encountered when speaking had not solved her problem, but as she realized that many of her communication

difficulties had stemmed from grammar mistakes, she incorporated new (to her) techniques of monitoring. This was something she needed to discover for herself. Teachers telling her (which they undoubtedly had), did not have the same effect.

Gina described a progression from thinking that a particular problem is personal, and unique to that person (I'm struggling alone) to realizing that others face similar difficulties:

> **Gina:** that's helpful. Because I can know myself. I am surprised because originally I supposed that's my personal problem. But after that I found out 'Oh everyone has that problem' so that's a good way to finding out [about] your puzzle

During Gina's investigations, a shift occurred as she moved away from an attitude of problem-solving towards puzzling (see Hanks, 2009, 2017; Miller, 2009). The process of puzzling was both internal (developing self-knowledge) and external (realizing that others also struggle, and that they may have helpful advice to offer).

From the teachers' perspective, Kay noted that students were practising not only language and academic genres, but also the management of intensive workloads and different deadlines:

> **Kay:** I think it's great practice. Because when they go on to their courses […] they need to know how to manage their time. This has given them a skeleton […] to hang all the academic stuff they need to know [on], so I think it's been a real, valuable exercise for the students.

Over the period of PS10, John had become an advocate for EP because he appreciated the relevance of what they were doing:

> **John:** it's given them an excellent speaking and writing opportunity […] they can see it's *entirely* relevant to what they're going to be doing. […] That's what EP has done. It's made all the work we're doing relevant to their needs.

In his final interview he explained:

> **John:** I think that as teachers we are constantly looking for authentic materials, and EP gives the students their own authentic materials.

This led him to consider EP as a form of research as well as pedagogy:

> **John:** It's a gentle way into heavyweight research […] I see it as a tool, as a springboard for jumping into more and more formal research

5. Discussion

The question that drove this study was 'What is the relationship between EP principles and EAP practices?'. More specifically, I wanted to know what it means to try to implement Principle 6 "Integrate the work for understanding [ie research] into classroom practice" (Allwright, 2003, p.129). Considering the learners' perspectives as well as those of the teachers, provided insights into the challenges and opportunities created by implementing EP in an EAP context.

5.1 Challenges

5.1.1 How, practically, to integrate research and pedagogy in EAP

A degree of imagination was needed to see how normal EAP practices could be adapted to incorporate learner and teacher explorations, whilst also ensuring that the main aim of the programme (preparing students for academic life) was met. Allwright argues that "the whole conception of Exploratory Practice relies on it being integrated into the curriculum, not seen as separated from it" (2015, p.32). Consequently, the timetable and curriculum remained unchanged. Activities that aimed to prepare students for their future academic careers were utilised as students investigated their puzzles. The puzzles themselves could be seen as embryonic research questions leading to gathering data and analyzing, then disseminating, findings. Contrary to initial concerns, the EP principles not only fitted the EAP context, they actually seemed to enhance student and teacher motivation. Students destined for Business, Design and Healthcare, welcomed the EP approach, because they, and their teachers, could see an immediate link between problematizing (Freire, 1973) their pedagogy, and their future academic careers. This is not, however, an easy process, and more research

is needed to chart the difficulties and how others address them, in different contexts.

5.1.2 Moving from problem/solution to puzzlement/exploration paradigms

In many cases the initial questions that participants identified in response to the prompt 'please write down what puzzles you about your learning/teaching experiences' indicated dissatisfaction with the current state of their language learning or teaching situations. It is likely they were searching for solutions, for example *how* to activate vocabulary, or improve speaking skills, or help concentration, rather than exploring *why.* The focus on problems and solutions was common to many of the participants, and perhaps stemmed from traditional beliefs about research (see Borg, 2009). Naturally, many wanted to know 'the answer' to their questions, and some were uncomfortable with the uncertainty generated by an open-ended approach of working to develop deeper understanding. A challenge for implementing EP, then, is to successfully convey the importance of puzzling, and to give enough time for a question framed as a 'problem' to transmute into genuine puzzled curiosity. There is a fine distinction between a problem (requiring remedial action) and puzzlement (a cognitive challenge), which merits further investigation.

5.2 Opportunities

The puzzles of the participants in this study were directly relevant, not only to their own experiences of learning and teaching, but also to their future academic lives. This is particularly pertinent now as preparation for academic study needs to address the notion of students-as-researchers (Healey et al. 2014), and as teachers are increasingly obliged to engage in research or scholarship. Breen describes EP as "explicitly resisting performativity" (2006, p.216) and, arguably, viewing the process of research in language teaching and learning as "an ethical and an epistemological matter" (Allwright, 2005, p.362) provides multiple opportunities for developing our understandings of the field rather than mechanically performing the motions of what is commonly believed to be research. Since EP explicitly prioritises puzzles/working for understanding rather than problems/solutions, it is worth noting the journey from a problem/solution mentality towards an approach of 'being puzzled' and

exploring pedagogy productively. The impact on these participants was clear, but more research is needed to explore ways of resisting performativity in our field.

Many of the participant comments indicated explicit as well as implicit assumptions about learning and about research. For example, their pleased surprise at being invited to puzzle implied a history of being treated as objects rather than as potent actors in the co-construction of research and learning and teaching practices. By "strengthening the agency potential" (Gieve and Miller, 2006, p.21) of participants, Exploratory Practice provided a means for locally relevant understandings to develop, without neglecting the pedagogy.

Participants often began by thinking they were all alone. Through working together and sharing findings, they discovered that they were not the only ones to have such difficulties. Recognition that others struggled with similar issues was at once reassuring and helpful. As the sense of isolation receded, they could build a supportive community of practice which included a variety of modes of expression. They could also begin to expand their research and pedagogy repertoire, and respond to others constructing a dialogic relationship (Bakhtin, 1986) with the research, the pedagogy, and the people involved in both.

As Hyland (2006, 2015) has pointed out, EAP is an area of discourse laden with issues of prestige and power. Working in the UK system, Wingate (2015) has argued persuasively that there are often mismatches between student and lecturer understandings of academic literacy practices. Yet, for many EAP practitioners around the world, Wingate's vision of more inclusive practice in universities remains an aspiration rather than a reality. Recognizing differences in academic practices, and understanding what is required for success, is vital if EAP students, budding academics themselves, are to survive and thrive in their new academic careers. Exploratory Practice affords ways of doing this by using classroom practice productively to explore questions that are deeply relevant to the participants themselves.

Breen characterizes EP as “process-oriented, integrated within everyday ways of working rather than something added to it and driven by the local concerns of both teachers and learners” (2006, p.216). Normal (EAP) pedagogic practices include activities such as raising awareness of research practices and developing academic literacies beyond words on the page. In sum, the greater purpose (of preparing for the rigours of study) turned out to be a significant factor in the positive responses on PS10. EP was, in the words of one participant: “*entirely* relevant to what they’re going to be doing”.

6. Conclusions

The principles of EP speak to agendas of inclusive practice and research-based teaching, consequently EP becomes a conduit into the academic community for fledgling researchers. By positioning practitioners as legitimate researchers from the start, Exploratory Practice provides a ‘way in’ to the academic community. It encourages learners and teachers to engage with research as part of their pedagogy and thus to move from the periphery towards the centre of the academy. Arguably, EP worked well not *despite* the goal-oriented intensity of EAP, but *because* it was directly relevant to student needs, and teacher perceptions of those needs. Hence the potential that EP offers is clear: integrating research and practice is a way of empowering learners and teachers to take their rightful places as knowers and researchers of their own learning and teaching lives. Pedagogy is thus elevated, in a subtly radical move, to sit alongside research as a central concern for the field.

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Appendix 1

Participants

Teachers	Nationality	Number of years in teaching	Number of years in EAP	Puzzle
John	New Zealander	10	4	Why do some students come on a course not prepared or willing to learn?
Kay	British	5	1	Why do I feel nervous when students ask me questions about grammar?

Students	Nationality	Destination	Puzzle
Cheer	Japanese	MA Healthcare	Why can't I speak English well after so many years of study?
Meow	Thai	MA Healthcare	Why can't I speak English well after so many years of study?
Gina	Taiwanese	MBA Business	Why can't I remember and use new words?
Ken	Taiwanese	MSc Business	Why have I stopped learning English easily?
Lynne	Chinese	MA Design	Why do I have accent?
Kae	Japanese	Study Year Abroad	Why can't I concentrate in class all the time?

Appendix 2

Table Summarising Procedure

Week	Activity	Interviews	Comments
Week 0	Induction (for teachers). Presentation on EP as part of in-house Teacher Development workshop series. Volunteers invited.		2 teachers (John & Kay) volunteered immediately. All teachers decided to try EP.
Week 1	Induction (for students). Talk on EP for students. Students identified own puzzles. Students wrote summary of talk.	Teachers	6 students volunteered to be interviewed.
Week 2	Students formed groups around puzzle topics. Discussion of possible research techniques & instruments.	Teachers Students	
Week 3	Students wrote, piloted, revised, conducted questionnaires and/or interviews	Teachers Students	
Week 4	Students collated and analysed data; prepared presentations; groups gave poster presentations	Students	Recording of staff meeting following poster presentations
Week 5	Groups wrote assignment on their EP work Teachers began exploring their puzzles.	Teachers Students	
Week 6	Group writing	Teacher	
Week 7	Group writing	Teacher	
Week 8	Group writing – assignment submitted.	Teachers Students	
Week 9	Marking		3-day week due to August Bank Holiday
Week 10	Teachers returned assignments with feedback.	Students	