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Learner-initiated Exploratory Practice: Revisiting curiosity

Yoshitaka Kato and Judith Hanks

Abstract

This paper investigates the potential of learner-initiated Exploratory Practice (EP), which encourages learners to set their own investigative agenda based on their curiosity-driven puzzles. A case study was conducted in a remedial course for undergraduate students at a university in Japan. Data included student puzzles, posters, and reflective questionnaires. Student investigations of their puzzles remind teachers and researchers of the affordances of learning *from* learners. The results suggested that, despite their previously disoriented attitudes towards learning English, this form of fully inclusive practitioner research, EP, provides learners with an opportunity to realize their curiosity and reinvigorate their motivation towards language learning.

Introduction

Learners can better learn when being curious as von Stumm, Hell, and Chamorro-Premuzic (2011) suggest. However, curiosity, or intrinsic motivation to learn, is not always prioritised in language learning, where learners and teachers may be too busy, or too anxious, to deviate from fixed norms of language education such as memorizing as many words as possible, obtaining a good score in a test, finishing gap-fill exercises, or writing essays. Yet these activities are not necessarily successful in developing language skills or motivation. Teachers and learners often take such norms for granted and do not “step back” (Allwright 2003: 128) to reflect on the consequences for pedagogy. Regular routine thus tends to overshadow opportunities for learning from curiosity.

However, learners are not ‘teachees’—those who are being taught passively—as Widdowson (1983) ironically noted. Instead, they can be perceived as ‘key developing practitioners’ (Allwright and Hanks 2009: 2) who can actively explore their own puzzles generated from the process of learning. This curiosity-led puzzlement is one of the key concepts of Exploratory Practice (EP). It is argued

that whereas ‘problems’ are essentially negative, with participants aiming to solve a troubling difficulty, ‘puzzlement’ can be an exploration of curiosity, with participants aiming to understand the situation (see Hanks 2017: 119–25).

Taking puzzlement (and therefore curiosity) as a starting point, EP proposes the following seven principles for inclusive practitioner research:

1. Put ‘**quality of life**’ first.
2. Work primarily to **understand** language classroom life (**puzzling**).
3. Involve everybody (**inclusivity**).
4. Work to bring people together (**collegiality**).
5. Work also for **mutual** development.
6. Make the work a **continuous** and **relevant** enterprise.
7. **Integrate** the work for understanding into existing curricular practices.

(adapted from Allwright and Hanks 2009)

Although many previous studies have tended to focus on EP as a framework for *teacher* research (e.g. Slimani-Rolls and Kiely 2018), this study explores its potential as *learner*-initiated research. Focusing on a remedial course¹ for approximately 60 undergraduate students in Japan who had failed a mandatory language course in the previous semester, the study investigated how to remind them of their agency in activating their curiosity in language learning.

Literature Review

Teacher-initiated and learner-initiated EP

EP can be categorized into teacher-initiated and learner-initiated activities (see Figure 1). The former begins with teachers generating their own puzzles while the latter begins with learners.² Puzzles in EP are normally formed as *why*-questions about language learning and teaching such as ‘*Why can’t I speak like I think?*’ (see Hanks 2015), which encourage the process of practitioners’ developing understandings of classroom life (Principle 2). Although both teacher- and learner-initiated EP encourage collaborative exploration of shared puzzles among all the class participants (Principles 3, 4, and 5), the origin of puzzles can affect the nature

of EP. While teacher-initiated EP is mainly conducted for teachers' continuing professional development, learner-initiated EP focuses on the development of language learners. Allwright (2003) argues that learners should not be regarded as 'objects' but rather as active participants in research. We further argue that learner-initiated EP can create an enterprise where researchers as well as teachers can learn from learners.

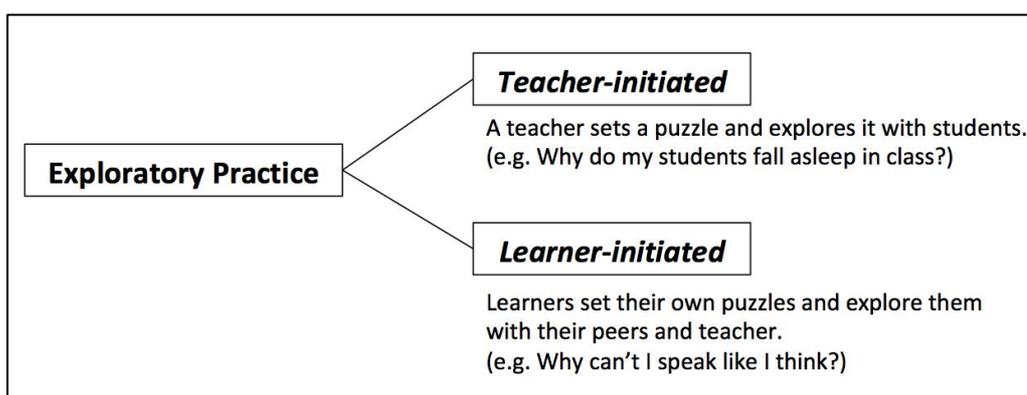


Figure 1

Teacher-initiated and learner-initiated Exploratory Practice

Recent work (e.g. Banister 2018; Hanks 2015) indicates that EP has potential, particularly in learner-initiated formats, to empower learners as well as teachers by inviting them to explore their own curiosity-based puzzles. Yet there seem to be smaller numbers of published studies on learner-initiated EP compared to teacher-initiated ones.

Earlier reports on learner-initiated EP can be found in case studies from Brazil, such as Carlos Magno's story in Allwright and Hanks (2009: 210–12), in which he and his classmates at state secondary school asked '*Why do we cheat?*'. They talked to teachers, classmates and even families to explore the puzzle, discovering in the EP process that adults (e.g. politicians) as well as schoolchildren cheat, and that cheating is a problem for society more generally.

In the UK, Hanks (2015) worked with students in a more detailed case study. Here, six pre-undergraduate students in an EAP class were invited to puzzle about their

own language learning. They investigated and shared their puzzles (e.g. ‘*Why can’t I study in certain situations?*’) through typical EAP pedagogic activities such as designing, conducting, analysing a questionnaire, visiting the library, and giving poster presentations. More recent examples include Banister (2018) and Dawson, Ihara, and Zhang (2017), both of whom were also working with students in EAP in the UK. These studies reported that the students welcomed the opportunity of learner-initiated EP, and enjoyed puzzling about academic life and language learning.

However, the impact of learner-initiated EP, especially when implementing it with learners who seem to have lost their enthusiasm for language learning, has been under-researched. As language learning involves a long journey to reach mastery (e.g. Inagaki 2005), some students often ‘stumble’ during the course. In the case of universities in Japan, such students may be grouped into a so-called ‘remedial course’ that accommodates undergraduate students who had failed a language course in the previous semester. Kiyota (2010) suggests these students tend to show disoriented attitudes towards English classes and may have low self-esteem due to their negative experiences in the past.

Tajino and Smith (2005) argue that engagement in EP could remind students that “learning arises from curiosity” (p. 468). Therefore we posited that learner-initiated EP could provide these students with a beneficial opportunity to step back from their routines and might remind them of their curiosity about language learning.

Research Question

This study was guided by the following research question: *How do students in a remedial language course respond to learner-initiated EP?* To our knowledge, this question is addressed for the first time in the literature. In order to probe the potential of learner-initiated EP, we designed a single case study that enabled triangulation (Duff 2014) through several data sources including student puzzles, posters, reflection sheets, and reflective questionnaires.

Methodology

Teaching context and participants/practitioners

The study was conducted in a course led by one of the authors at a private university in Japan. The class was a graduation requirement in the curriculum for first-year students majoring in engineering, applied biology, life and health sciences, business, humanities, and education. English language was not their major, but they needed to pass in order to progress. If they failed, they were offered a remedial course. This remedial course accommodated 65 students who had previously failed the mandatory English language course.

Teachers leading this course had to comply with the fixed reading syllabus, but they were still allowed some flexibility in lesson planning. Consequently, teacher and learners decided to dedicate 3 out of the 15 classes (i.e. Weeks 4, 14, and 15) for EP sessions as shown in Table 1. Each class lasted for 90 minutes.

Ethics: Consent was sought from all students, and only those participants who signed the consent form (56 students) are included in the study. Codes are used to preserve anonymity; participation was voluntary and participants had the right to withdraw at any time.

Table 1

Timetable for the remedial course

Week	Contents
1	Introduction to the course and EP.
2–3	Classes based on the fixed reading syllabus. <i>At the end of every class, students were asked to write puzzles on a reflection sheet.</i>
4*	First-round of EP: Preparation and poster presentation. <i>Students created their individual posters (in Japanese) and made a poster presentation (in Japanese).</i>
5–13	Classes based on the fixed reading syllabus. <i>At the end of every class, students were asked to write puzzles on a reflection sheet.</i>
14*	Second-round of EP: Preparation.

Students formed 11 groups based on their shared puzzles and created a poster together (in English) in their groups.

15* **Second-round of EP:** Poster presentation.

Students made a poster presentation (in Japanese).

*These are the three 90 minute classes in which learner-initiated EP was conducted.

Procedure

Stage 1: Puzzlement.

In Week 1, the teacher introduced EP by showing some sample learner puzzles (e.g. *'Why are English classes fun/boring?'*) and asked the students to think about their own puzzles about language learning. As learners are said to struggle to articulate their puzzles (Banister 2018), the teacher assisted their puzzle generation through the use of a reflection sheet.³ At the end of every class, students were asked to reflect on the class and write at least one puzzle on the sheet. Some students had difficulties generating puzzles, but plenty of problems. The teacher suggested that they could transform their problems into puzzles. For example, when a student left a comment such as "I hate making a presentation in front of the class.", the teacher gave them feedback saying, "*Why* do you hate that? It can be a great puzzle!". The feedback also included suggestions (e.g. "Can you make it a why-question rather than how/what-questions?") and encouragement (e.g. "I haven't thought about this!"). This written communication was adopted to encourage students to incubate their puzzles during the course and enable the teacher to give them feedback when necessary.

Stage 2: Individual investigations.

In Week 4, students practiced in order to build confidence in the techniques and approach. They identified one puzzle each, investigated it individually, and made a poster, presenting their findings in Japanese. As in Hanks (2015), they searched on the internet, referred to books, and discussed with other classmates to explore their puzzles. The students appeared anxious to begin with, because this was the first time for them to engage in such activities. To reassure them, the teacher shared past samples of EP posters, and this assisted them to shape the image of

what they wanted to do, building their confidence. This preliminary experience readied them for the second-round of EP, when they worked in groups to investigate their refined puzzles, and created posters in English.

Stage 3: Group investigations.

In Weeks 14 and 15, the students formed 11 groups (of approximately five per group) based on their shared puzzles. In Week 14, the groups made their posters. In Week 15, all 11 groups presented their posters at the same time, conference-style (see Figure 2). As the students moved around the room to listen to their classmates, one student per group remained by the poster to present their work. They took turns, so that by the end of the session every student in every group had the experience of presenting, and also of listening to others and asking their classmates questions.

Stage 4: Reflection.

At the end of the class in Week 15, students answered a questionnaire that invited their thoughts on their experiences of EP.

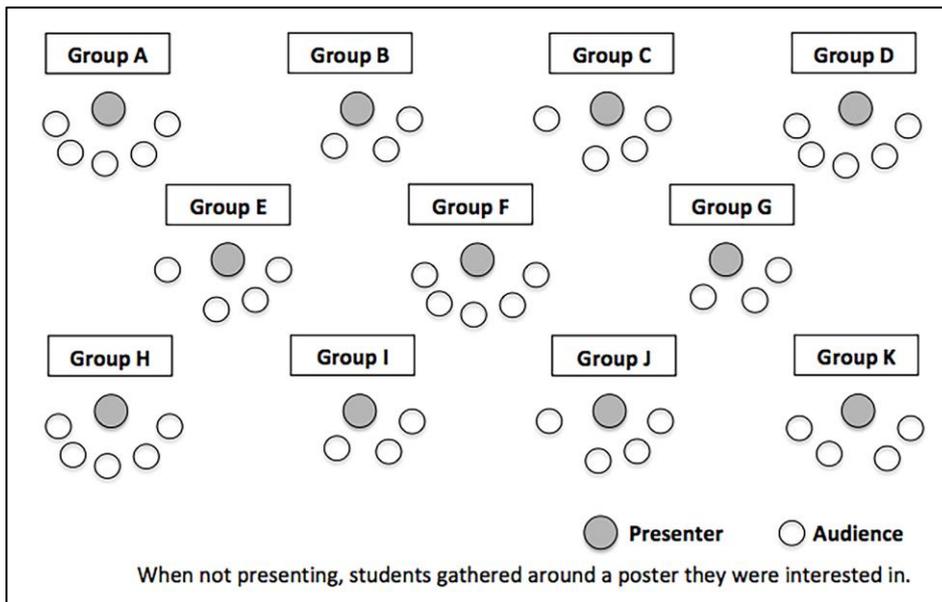


Figure 2

Conference-style poster presentation

Following EP principles, ‘normal pedagogic practices’ (Allwright 2003: 127) were used to collect/generate data throughout. The purpose of this was not only for research but also for pedagogy. The data-set here consisted of student puzzles (see Tables 2 and 3), posters (see Figures 3 and 4), reflection sheets, and reflective questionnaires, all of which are standard pedagogic practices on a remedial language course of this nature.

Results and Discussion

The results of the study suggest that the students in this remedial course generally welcomed the learner-initiated EP activities. Moreover, their engagement with their puzzles demonstrated EP’s potential to remind them of curiosity in language learning.

Student puzzles

The puzzles students explored in the first-round of EP, originally written in Japanese, are listed in Table 2.

Table 2

Individual student-generated puzzles

Individual puzzles	<i>n</i>
Why is English a world language?	15
Why is English difficult to learn for Japanese people?	15
Why do we have to learn English?	10
Others (some examples below)	16
- <i>Why are American and British English different?</i>	1
- <i>Why cannot people who even got a full score in TOEIC speak English fluently?</i>	1
- <i>Why does not direct translation from English to Japanese make sense?</i>	1
- <i>Why is Japan called ‘Japan’ in English?</i>	1

As the list indicates, a similar number of students generated similar puzzles at first. The top three were: ‘*Why is English a world language?*’, ‘*Why is English difficult to learn for Japanese people?*’, and ‘*Why do we have to learn English?*’ Because they stuck to similar puzzles or imitations, we assumed that the puzzles they chose

were not authentically theirs; our impression was that they did not explore what truly interested them. Consequently, the teacher gave them feedback through the reflection sheet, as explained in the Procedures section, and helped them to delve deeper into what actually puzzled them.

Table 3 summarizes the puzzles they generated in the second-round of EP.⁴ This time, the content varied more than before.

Table 3

Group student-generated puzzles

Group	Group puzzles	<i>n</i>
A	Why we don't pronounce some characters (e.g. knife)?	5
B	Why are there qualification tests (e.g. TOEIC)?	4
C	Why is English common to the world?	5
D*	Why is English difficult to catch?	4
E	Why do not foreign people understand Japanese English?	5
F	Why do we have Japanese English?	5
G	Why is there no honorific in English?	6
H	Why study English?	5
I	Why does English have big and small letter [i.e. uppercase and lowercase letters]?	6
J	Why is English the world common language?	6
K*	Why does English have cursive writing?	5

*The two highlighted puzzles are the ones examined in this paper.

EP posters

Among the 11 posters, only two are discussed here (the full set is available at: <https://osf.io/f7heu/>) to enable a qualitative, in-depth analysis. We selected these two (Groups D and K) because of their unusual puzzles, and rich potential to enable understanding of student thought-processes. Despite some language errors, the students had attempted to make the contents intelligible for the audience as well as for themselves.

The students in Group D created the poster shown in Figure 3. Their puzzle ‘*Why is English difficult to catch?*’ chimes with the work of Renandya and Farrell (2011), who list the principle features making spoken text difficult for EFL learners: (i) speech is fast; (ii) speech is variable; (iii) word boundaries are blurry; and (iv) speech has to be processed in real time. The students’ idea that ‘the speed of the conversation is fast for English’ resonates with points (i) and (iv) above, while the students’ idea that ‘pronunciation changes when a words connect in a sentence’ links with points (ii) and (iii). Without any help from teachers or researchers, the students identified their own difficulties when listening to their target language and developed their own understandings of the issue.

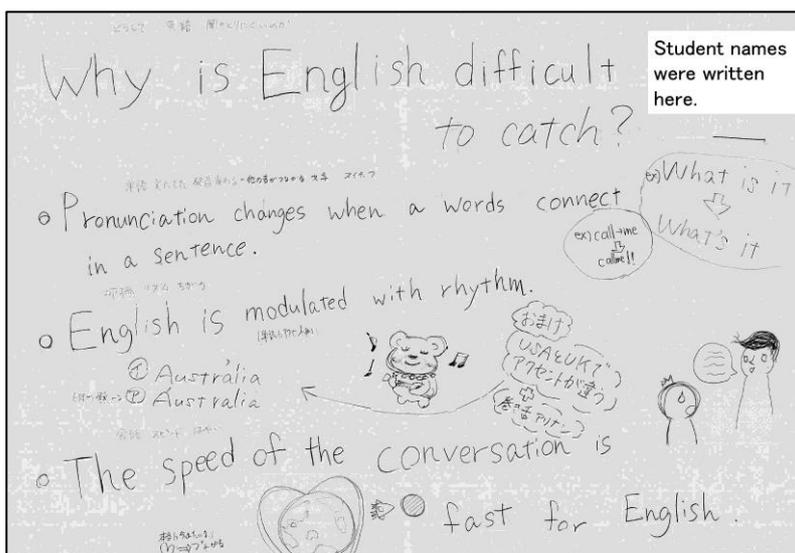


Figure 3

Poster created by the students in Group D

The poster also showed some evidence of translanguaging and their engagement with linguistic inclusivity (e.g. García and Wei 2014). For example, the students included their mother tongue (i.e. Japanese) on the poster as well as English. While they created this poster, they explained the reason to the teacher: Because they were not confident in English, they wanted to ensure what they wrote was understandable for the audience. Likewise, their intention to communicate was confirmed from the illustrations they drew on the poster. Those visualizations

made it easier to understand for their peers.

Figure 4 shows the poster created by the students in Group K. Their puzzle was ‘Why does English have cursive writing?’ The students artistically created the poster by writing the title and sections in elegant cursive (i.e. joined-up) writing. They also included Japanese translations of some difficult English words.

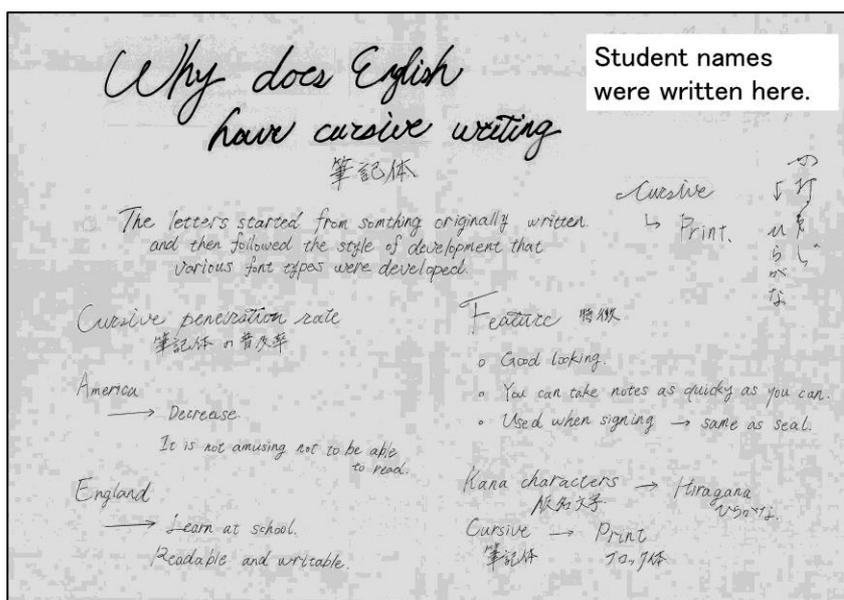


Figure 4
Poster created by the students in Group K

Cursive writing in English used to be taught in Japan alongside printed handwriting, but it has become an optional teaching item since around 2002. That change probably made the students curious about the way of writing and how it has been developed into the current form of writing. In addition to their investigation of the history and popularity of cursive writing in the UK and USA, they attempted to compare the development with that of their first language. They found that Japanese also has the *sosho* (cursive) style writing developed into current *hiragana*. We infer that they were integrating their explorations into daily life experiences, making their work more relevant by comparing English with their most familiar language, Japanese.

Questionnaire

At the end of the semester, the students were invited to answer a questionnaire reflecting on EP. We obtained responses from all the 56 students. We split them into 78 codes and discussed the emerging themes. We then asked another English teacher in Japan to crosscheck the results and discussed again where there were discrepancies in interpretation, which resulted in highly stable responses. Their original answers in Japanese were translated into English. Key themes which emerged are shown below:

(1) Curiosity and Fun

- The ownership of learning ($n = 10$)
e.g. "I rediscovered my 'exploratory mind'."
- Intellectual fun ($n = 11$)
e.g. "I enjoyed learning about puzzles I had never thought of."

(2) Group Activities

- Learning from/among group members ($n = 21$)
e.g. "I enjoyed the process of working together."
- Difficulties in working together ($n = 5$)
e.g. "I found it difficult to communicate with people I don't really know."

(3) Struggles in Presentation

- Difficulties in speaking out ($n = 19$)
e.g. "I got really nervous to make a presentation in front of others."
- Difficulties in English language ($n = 8$)
e.g. "I had difficulties in making a poster in English."
- Difficulties in finding relevant resources ($n = 4$)
e.g. "I struggled to find useful information to answer our puzzle."

The student reflections/comments indicate the potential of learner-initiated EP to help them regain curiosity in language learning. When they first came to class, many of the students seemed to have lost their sense of self-efficacy. However, EP gave them a space to reawaken their curiosity that used to be in their minds. Their

comments categorized into the first theme (i.e. Curiosity and Fun) also included: “My hesitant feelings towards English decreased.” or “I was reminded of the fun to learn English.” The students in this remedial course had experienced ‘failure’ in the past, but probably because of their struggles in learning English, they had much to share with other students and their teacher. Learner-initiated EP helped us to hear such voices.

On the other hand, some students had difficulties in working on EP activities due to their unfamiliarity with group work and poster presentation. While many ($n = 21$) answered that they did enjoy working together in making an English poster, others seemed to have struggled with group activities ($n = 5$) and presentation ($n = 31$). The comments categorized into the third theme (i.e. Struggles in Presentation) demonstrate their anxiety and lack of self-confidence in their output in English.

Because this study targeted students in a remedial course, these struggles may have been exacerbated. Providing more support activities regarding their English and scaffolding group presentation may have produced even more positive responses from the students, which is a potential area for future research.

Conclusion – Empowering only learners?

Given our qualitative stance, it is not our intention to generalize the findings; we aim instead for insights into how students responded to the implementation of learner-initiated EP and we hope to provoke further puzzling and discussion. Our study is unique in discussing the implementation and impact of introducing EP to students in a large-sized remedial course. In this study it does seem that learner-initiated EP gave the students a chance to realize their curiosity in language learning. Even though they struggled to find their own puzzles in the early stage of EP, appropriate teacher facilitation, including written communication through reflection sheets, allowed the students to incubate their puzzles during the course.

We conclude that learner-initiated EP can empower language learners who had negative learning experiences in the past to regain their motivation towards language learning. Every language learner has their internal puzzles regarding

their language education and everyone has potential motivation to explore their curiosity with their peers in the classroom. Furthermore, learner-initiated EP could also help teachers better understand their students and realize the need to learn *from* their learners who are supposed to 'be taught'. This was clear from the fact that some of the puzzles the students generated were beyond the teacher's expectations and he did not know the exact answer either. In that sense, we were all learning from the exploratory processes of the students.

We hope this could be a useful approach for teachers and learners wishing to facilitate autonomous learning and self-efficacy continuing after taking a course. Sharing voices of such curiosity-based Exploratory Practice would assist in their development as practitioners of learning and teaching.

Notes

1 'Remedial course' in this article is broadly defined as a course that complements what students missed in the past education.

2 Note that learner-initiated EP does not necessarily start 'purely' from learners generating their puzzles without any introduction to the EP concepts. Typically teachers invite their students to create puzzles.

3 Supplementary materials of this study such as the reflection sheet, the questionnaire, and the EP posters can be accessed from <https://osf.io/f7heu/>

4 The excerpts and quotes are unedited to preserve students' authentic voices.

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