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‘Education is not just teaching’: learner thoughts on Exploratory Practice in EAP

Judith Hanks

Abstract: Exploratory Practice (EP) has recently been established as an innovative form of practitioner research in language education, one which includes learners alongside their teachers as co-researchers. However, to date, little attention has been given to learners’ perspectives of/on this approach. This article focuses on the experiences of learners engaging with EP for the first time in an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) context.

Introduction

The Exploratory Practice (EP) framework is based on a set of principles for practitioner research honed over 20 years of working with teachers, learners, and researchers. Developed in the early 1990s, EP is distinctive in that it seeks to integrate pedagogy and research (Allwright 1993) *for* and *by* learners and teachers, with little or no involvement from third party researchers. It places puzzling and ‘working for understanding’ before problem-solving, and aims to develop collegial working in language education by positioning teachers and learners as co-researchers (Allwright 2003) investigating their learning and teaching lives. In doing so, EP prioritizes ‘quality of life’ (Gieve and Miller 2006) in the language classroom, emphasizing the need for those most closely concerned to be involved in classroom research.

The EP framework is based on seven principles for inclusive practitioner research:

The ‘what’ issues

1 Focus on *quality of life* as the fundamental issue.

2 Work to *understand* it, before thinking about solving problems.

The ‘who’ issues

3 Involve *everybody* as practitioners developing their own understandings.

4 Work to bring people *together* in a common enterprise.

5 Work cooperatively for *mutual development*.

The 'how' issues

6 Make it a *continuous* enterprise.

7 *Minimise the burden* by integrating the work for understanding into normal pedagogic practice. (Allwright and Hanks 2009: 260, original emphases)

Firmly rooted in the traditions of experience, empowerment, and social interaction outlined by, for example, Freire (1973), EP foregrounds the contributions that practitioners can make in the research enterprise. Through inviting learners to participate in the research work alongside teachers, EP takes the notion of practitioner research (Cochran-Smith and Lytle 1999; Zeichner and Noffke 2001) one step further. Learners are encouraged not only to investigate questions that have puzzled their teachers, but also to formulate their own questions and investigate issues themselves using normal pedagogic practices as investigative tools. Thus EP is:

... process-oriented, integrated within everyday ways of working rather than something added to it and driven by the local concerns and needs of both teachers and learners. (Breen 2006: 216)

EP, then, represents an explicit attempt to move away from the 'problem-to-solution' paradigm presented in many forms of practitioner research. It recommends instead an attitude of 'puzzlement', as teachers and learners set their own agendas to explore what puzzles them about their language learning/teaching experiences, and investigate their own classrooms. EP offers opportunities to develop greater understandings of issues in the classroom '... creating pedagogical time and space for *the discourse of puzzlement* to be understood *as syllabus*' (Miller 2009: 90, original emphases).

However, these approaches raise questions. What are the experiences of

practitioners when they try out EP in their own classrooms? How does EP ‘fit’ into a pre-existing syllabus, particularly in the intense, goal-oriented atmosphere of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) pre-sessional courses? Such questions informed my approach as I tried out EP for the first time with colleagues (teachers and learners) in our institution in the UK. In this article, I report on the perspectives of two learners in particular, studying on an EAP pre-sessional programme and trying EP for the first time. I draw on a set of qualitative data, framed along the lines of Stake’s (2003) view of a case study, to illustrate these experiences.

The study context (EP in EAP for undergraduates)

The study took place in a language centre at a British university. With the encouragement of the course director and teachers, EP was implemented during the third term of a year-long pre-sessional programme (designated ‘P3’ here) designed to prepare individuals for undergraduate study in the UK.

P3 is a relatively ‘young’ course, both in the sense of the course (it first ran in 2002) and the age of the participants (18–22 years old). Students typically come from the Far East (mainly China and Japan), the Middle East, and North Africa. Typical of many EAP programmes, P3 aims to develop students’ academic skills alongside language skills in preparation for study at a British university. Strands focus on language development, academic writing, and seminar skills (see Table 1). Normal EAP pedagogic activities include essay/assignment writing, oral presentations, listening to lectures, and project work.

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
9.30–11.00	Language development	Language development	Language development	Academic reading skills	Academic project
11.30–13.00	Academic listening skills	Academic writing skills	Accuracy in English	Academic writing skills	Academic writing skills
14.00–15.30	Seminar skills	Options	Options	Options	Self-study

Table 1 Generic timetable for P3

One question P3 teachers faced was how to make the third term just as compelling for students who believed that they had already achieved in the second term what they needed (in terms of IELTS scores) to go on to academic study. Simply attaining the required IELTS score is clearly not enough for students to be ready to face the academic challenges ahead, yet many students displayed a drop in motivation once they had achieved the magic 6.0 (or equivalent). It was hoped that EP would help to address this issue. Consequently, EP was implemented with one class of 15 students during their Options strand (two to three classes per week), while the other groups were doing IELTS preparation classes.

I knew P3 well, having previously worked on it as a tutor, and although at this point I was not teaching on this particular course, I was working in the centre, teaching on parallel courses. Thus, in addition to knowing the course, I was well-known to the tutors and the students alike as a colleague and tutor.

Methodology

My research questions were as follows:

- 1 What are the challenges faced by practitioners (teachers and learners) when they try to conduct EP in an EAP context?
- 2 What is the relationship between principles and practices in EP?

As a practitioner-researcher, I took an interpretive approach, working closely with the teachers and learners. I interviewed volunteers at regular intervals, kept a research journal, and collected other artefacts, including timetables, posters, and assignments.

Six learners, 'Chiho', 'Ted', 'Yumi', 'Ahmad', 'Kai', and 'Kelly' (pseudonyms are used throughout), volunteered to participate in the study. Also, two teachers were involved: 'Bella' and 'Jenny'. Jenny led the EP strand; Bella took the more traditional EAP topics of 'Recycling', 'The legal system', and 'Education'. For an account of the teachers' perspectives, see Hanks (forthcoming). Here, I will focus

on two learners, Ted and Ahmad.

Procedure

I began with a formal presentation to the class (a taste of their future lectures on academic courses). I introduced EP principles, described the ideas behind EP, and asked what puzzled them about their own language learning/teaching experiences.

This presentation had a dual purpose: (1) to give learners practice in listening and note-taking from a live talk, and writing summaries and (2) to introduce the EP framework and invite volunteers for the study. Table 2 indicates the learners' pseudonyms, nationality, length of time in the UK, and the question(s) that puzzled each of them.

Name	Nationality	Length of time in UK	Puzzle(s)
Ahmad	Saudi Arabian	6 months	Why can't I study in certain situations?
Ted	Japanese	6 months	Why do people learn bad words [= swear words] more easily?
Chiho	Japanese	6 months	Why can't I speak like I think?
Yumi	Japanese	New arrival	Why can't I speak like I think?
Kai	Japanese	New arrival	Why can't I speak like I think?
Kelly	Japanese	New arrival	Why are Japanese good at writing and Saudi Arabians good at speaking?

Table 2 What puzzled the learners?

I interviewed participants at regular intervals, asking them to describe their feelings on starting EP, discuss their ongoing investigations, and reflect on the experience at the end of the course. The interviews were conducted in English (i.e. their target language) and although this meant they sometimes struggled to express themselves clearly, there was an added benefit for the learners: extra opportunities to practise the language they had come to the UK to study.

Following the initial presentation, the learners mingled in their Options class, comparing their different puzzles, looking for areas of commonality, and forming groups. For example if their questions related to issues around speaking, they formed a group; if considering study habits, another group formed. Their teacher invited them to think about ways in which they could investigate and they began to prepare interview schedules or questionnaires (typical activities in EAP programmes). After piloting these, the learners went outside the classroom, visiting the library, talking to other students and teachers, and using the internet to research their questions. Over the next two weeks they analysed their data and prepared their poster presentations.

Each group presented their poster to the rest of the class. Presentations lasted 20 minutes (each member of the group spoke) and were followed by a discussion with the rest of the class. The presentations were videoed and uploaded to a private space on the institution's virtual learning environment (VLE), so that individuals could assess their own performance. Finally, the groups worked together to write an assignment describing and analysing their investigations. This was marked and returned to them in the last week of the course.

Table 3 summarizes the data collection procedure over the 11 weeks of the course.

Week	Student/teacher activity	Comments
1	Induction to the course	<p>Many planned activities had to be postponed due to travel delays caused by the volcanic ash cloud of April 2010.</p> <p><i>Planning meeting with teachers (Bella and</i></p>

		<p><i>Jenny)</i></p> <p><i>Interview with Bella</i></p>
2	<p>Presentation about the principles and ideas of EP to learners and teachers.</p> <p>Learners write down their own puzzles about language learning experiences.</p> <p>Homework: learners write a summary of the talk.</p>	<p>Dual purpose:</p> <p>practice in listening and note-taking from a 'live' talk</p> <p>introduce the ideas and principles of EP to the audience and recruit volunteers.</p> <p><i>Interview with Jenny</i></p>
3	<p>Learners compare puzzles in class, look for any commonality, and form groups.</p> <p>Learners think about how to investigate puzzles.</p>	<p>Four groups formed around the puzzles with between two and five members in each.</p> <p><i>Interviews with Jenny</i></p>
4	<p>Learners write questions for interviews or questionnaires. Learners pilot questions and make adjustments.</p>	<p>Late arrivals fitted into the pre-existing groups (their own choice of group).</p> <p><i>First set of interviews with learners: Kai, Ted, Chiho, Yumi, Ahmad, Kelly</i></p>
5	<p>Learners go into community and collect data (including interviews/questionnaires, going to the library, using internet).</p>	<p>Jenny informed me that students often stayed late (up to two hours) after class to work on their puzzles.</p>
6	<p>Learners collate data, analyse it, prepare for poster presentations.</p>	<p><i>Second set of interviews with learners: Kai, Ted, Chiho, Yumi, Ahmad, Kelly</i></p> <p><i>Interview with Jenny</i></p>
7	<p>Learners give group poster presentations to the rest of their class.</p> <p>Each presentation lasts approx. 20</p>	<p>Jenny and I attended the poster presentations held in class. Presentations were recorded and uploaded to a private section of the VLE</p>

	minutes and is followed by 5 minutes of questions and answers (as at a conference).	for learners to view.
8	Learners write group reports on their EP work.	
9	Group writing continues.	Reflection on EP <i>Interview with Jenny</i> <i>Third set of interviews with learners (Ted; Kelly)</i>
10	Groups hand in their reports; T marks.	<i>Third set of interviews with learners (Kai; Yumi; Chiho; Ahmad)</i> <i>Interview with Bella</i>
11	T gives back reports with marks and comments. Course ends.	

Table 3 Data Collection Procedure

It is worth emphasizing that first of all normal EAP pedagogic practices were used throughout and secondly, learners were practising key language skills and key academic skills at all times. Projects are typical activities on EAP courses, but this does not mean that EP is solely a project-based approach. EP simply uses the 'normal pedagogic practices' (in this case, project work, and poster presentations) to enable learners (and teachers) to investigate their own puzzles about language learning and teaching. Thus the EP process here draws on project-like activities, but EP can be pursued in other ways, such as using an upcoming unit in the course book (eg on 'Likes & Dislikes') for class investigation/discussion, asking teachers to include puzzles as part of programmes of continuing professional development, or getting learners and teachers to include their EP explorations in their language learning/teaching

diaries, journals or blogs.

What did the learners think about EP?

One of the worries for the teachers was that the youth and perceived lack of maturity of the learners would lead to them not taking the EP work seriously. There was a concern that they would either ask ‘What are we doing this for?’ or that they would simply accept whatever they were told to do, without reflecting more deeply on the process. However, the learners engaged with EP and even puzzles that seemed at first to be challenging or humorous emerged as profound opportunities for learning.

In initial interviews, learners cited the novelty of being asked to think of their own questions about language learning. Kelly, for example, stated:

That is very fresh for me [...] very stimulatedⁱ.

This was echoed by others who welcomed the chance to set their own agenda. Some students also noted the egalitarian approach, with Chiho particularly pleased by the notion of teachers learning from learners:

Of course we can learn a lot of things from the lecture, but I think [...] we are studying, the teachers are also studying, so interaction is very beneficial to both teachers and studentsⁱⁱ.

Ted’s story

Ted’s story is illustrative of the EP principles in action. In his first interview, he contrasted EP ‘puzzling’ with the more typical topics found in EAP, such as Recycling, where the answer is well-known to students and teachers alike. EP offered the opportunity to think about something new and relevant to his own learning:

We know we have to do recycling and we know we have to reduce many [...] rubbish, so I can’t find any point to write an essay, but something new I can write about it.

As a young man going to parties and mixing with many nationalities, Ted had noticed the prominence of taboo words used as a social mechanism and wondered why:

Many people teach me bad words and they are having fun with me ... I mean having fun when I say something bad in their language.

Although the topic could have been interpreted as a challenge to classroom discipline, with students sniggering over taboo language, his teacher (Jenny) encouraged him to investigate:

Ted really wanted to know 'why do people learn bad language ... before anything else' and I said, the others were going 'err err err', and I said 'that would be a really good puzzle'.

Ted worked with his group, searching for books and articles on the use of taboo language. After a week Ted described his frustration with published work stating 'I couldn't find good article'.

Consequently, he and his group began to ask other learners about their experiences of swear words in language learning. They used a questionnaire to gather student opinions on why swear words were so prominent in their language learning lives. This generated deeper questions for Ted:

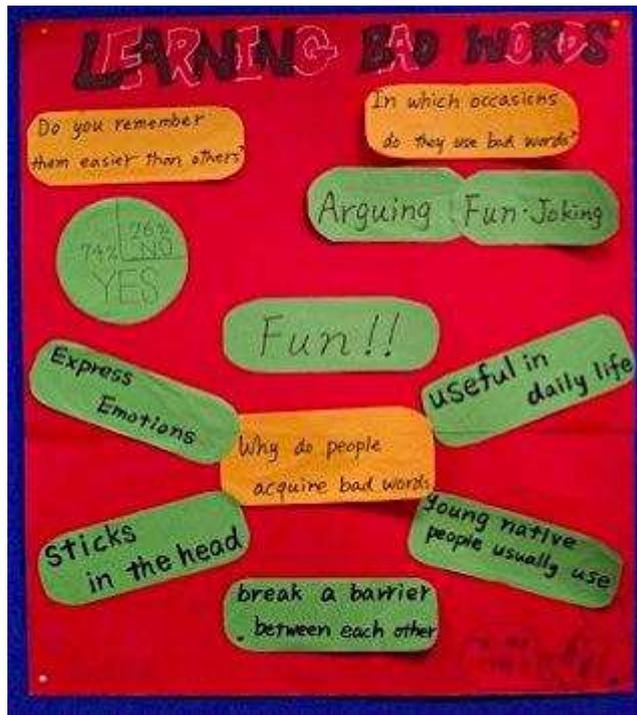
Many people said learning bad words is silly, okay but ... why? And why do they think it's a bad thing? And I asked one of the ... in my group the guy in my group and he ... did research about is it really bad thing or not?

In turn, this further motivated Ted to continue 'Some parts of that research I did, really I didn't know that ...'.

He became so interested that he exported EP to another class in the P3 programme, persuading a group of learners to investigate British attitudes to swearing as part of their 'British culture' project.

As more information was collected, the learners became engrossed. The frustration Ted had described earlier had vanished, replaced by a sense of

critical inquiry. He did not simply accept the view that 'learning bad words is silly', instead he opted to probe further. In their poster presentation, Ted's group focused on the social aspects of learning swear words. The poster (see below), though simple, is insightful. It presents the group's understandings of the topic so far, with headings taken from the results of their investigations (for example 'fun', 'express emotions', 'breaking down barriers', etc.).



The conclusions that Ted was beginning to draw were serious. It is clear that he was not being mischievous or trying to derail the lessons by focusing on taboo words. Instead, he appeared to be making genuine connections between the attitudes to swearing held by students. He was intrigued by the ways in which taboo language can help to break down barriers for language learners, using swear words as a kind of 'social glue'. And he liked the open-ended nature of the approach. In contrast with typical EAP topics (such as Recycling) where the answers are well-known, Ted was motivated by the chance to explore a subject entirely new to him, one without obvious answers:

I found it interesting to know something ... like something common but you don't know any answer ... so using swear words it's common I know, everyone do it, but I don't know why they do it so it's very interesting to review the answer.

Ahmad's story

Thus far, I have shown the positive aspects of EP, but I also want to take a more critical look: what happens when the principles clash with other pressures in the classroom?

One student, Ahmad, found collegial working less congenial. He chose to work with a group on their question: 'Why do I find it difficult to study in different situations?'. As he did so, he established his independence in deciding how to proceed, and who to work with. He repeated his preference for lone working several times in the initial interview, but also acknowledged the need to work with other people:

Usually in my life I prefer to work alone that's why I don't like groups work because I'm ... naturally I don't like participate in others [...] but I think in this project I have to work in groups because you know I need to make questionnaires, surveys and some ... interviews some people, that's why I think I need to work with other people rather I think if I did it myself I will—wouldn't get anything.

However, as time went on, Ahmad seemed to forget his initial reluctance, and in Week 6 he spoke enthusiastically about the work he had been doing with his group:

We've been working on the puzzle, how could different places affect us [...] yes for studying, um ... main, main points were working under time pressure, um working some ... different places. That's where we are. And we made our questionnaire asked some people we got some useful answers; now we are going to interview some people. We didn't decide yet who to interview.

His extensive use of the word 'we' seemed an indication that he had integrated himself fully into the group, and that he was working as part of a team. He sounded relaxed and happy, and was focused on the work in hand.

Ahmad described how the group moved from reflecting on their own study habits to asking others and comparing results:

Our topic was about 'Why do I find it difficult to study in different situations?' and we asked many people around the university from different nationalities, different genders er ... we really wanted to do that because all happened to us and we wanted to see if that's different from other nationalities or not ... especially our group, or all our group. And we found that happened to many, many students.

Despite his stated preference for working alone, Ahmad worked well with his group in the poster presentation. They did not attempt to provide solutions or advice in their poster (see below). Instead there was an emphasis on the question 'Why?' and analysis of study conditions (at home or at university) and student experiences.



However, Ahmad later returned to his earlier stance. In the penultimate weeks, students were writing up their EP work in group assignments. Most seemed happy, but the teacher noticed Ahmad had distanced himself by sitting apart from his group and refusing to participate in discussions.

Jenny attributed this behaviour to a personality trait suggesting that he was a loner who found group work challenging. But at the end of the cycle of interviews, Ahmad provided his own interpretations:

When we start write our report we couldn't find the best way to divide the work between us. At the beginning we said 'let's work together', once the

end everyone just write and we will correct the essays together. But we found that it's very difficult and will take a long time so we decided that each two will have a specific parts and they write their parts ... after that we come together and put all our pieces together and to write the final report ...

Ahmad then surprised me by commenting on the joint-writing process:

Er always in my essays I tried to use complicated sentences, long sentences three lines or four lines like that and make all of them many areas in one sentence but what I found that some er members of my group, they have the same idea but may be they are they write the areas in different sentences but they use connection words perfectly [...] when I look at their sentences they write eight and ten but they are all connected in good way.

He valued what he was learning from his partners and identified areas where they could teach him. Moreover, his estimation of his partners had increased:

Ahmad: I opened my e-mail I found the report ... honestly I was really surprised.

Judith: Why?

Ahmad: I didn't expect it to be that good.

Judith: Really?

Ahmad: Yes [*smiling*]

Judith: Yeah!

Ahmad: To be ... that clear, many opinions, but I found it very, very clear. Specially using ... connection words. And I don't know who wrote the conclusion but he wrote the conclusion in very, very good way xxx include the main ideas. [...] So I was very surprised.

Ahmad's story is interesting because he seems to have adopted the EP principles

of collegiality and mutual development, despite his desire to work alone. His story illustrates the mutual respect that developed as a result of working together to develop understandings. Through EP, Ahmad had become involved and the empathy that he shows not only for his fellow students but also for his teachers is striking. He focuses on the need for *both* sides to engage in the educational enterprise, mutual development writ large:

Yes and I think it's very important because the education is not just teaching, it's teaching from one side and learning from other side.

So what does it all mean?

The poster presentations and comments from learners in the interviews showed that learners had really engaged with their EP work. They were not 'just going through the motions', they were motivated and excited by what they were doing. Themes that emerged were

- the novelty of being asked to puzzle about their own experiences (many said they had never been asked to do this before);
- the pleasure of being in a position to help others (teachers and learners);
- the enjoyment that this new work promised.

A number of participants commented that they enjoyed working on questions where the answer was not yet known (not even by the teacher). Ted, for example, contrasted EP's open-ended nature with more routine question-and-answer displays. He attributed his enjoyment of EP work to this sense of not-knowing; EP puzzling gave meaning to his investigations and thence his studies.

Ahmad, on the other hand, struggled with the collegial elements of EP. Working in groups involves complex social interactions, as Slimani-Rolls (2003, 2009) has shown. There is no guarantee that all will contribute equal amounts of work or enthusiasm, as evidenced by the experiences of students above. If EP is to continue to develop, these are areas that require further scrutiny. Nevertheless, Ahmad was able to learn from his classmates, and like Chiho, he commented on the potential for mutual development in education, with teachers learning from

learners too.

Conclusions

I began by wondering if EP was feasible in my EAP context; the responses from the participants provided a resounding 'yes'. Learners welcomed the responsibilities of setting the agenda (via their puzzles) and driving the EP work forward. They described their experience of EP in emotive terms: 'fantastic', 'fresh', saying that no one had ever asked them to consider what puzzled them about teaching and learning. They described a release from the usual grind of lessons about the environment or recycling where both questions and answers are already known.

The EP principles of working for understanding, 'puzzling' before problem-solving, involving everyone, bringing people together, and working for mutual development were foregrounded in responses to the work. Integrating this work for understanding into normal pedagogic practice meant that the learners were using the language as they investigated. EP, then, through encouraging practitioners to set their own research agendas, makes the work directly relevant to the participants themselves.

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ⁱ Quotes are taken unedited and without linguistic corrections from recorded interviews in English with participants as part of my doctoral studies.

ⁱⁱ Some quotes from this data set are also found in the proceedings from a plenary given at the JALT PAN SIG Conference 2013 in Nagoya. The paper was written for different purposes and context and with different intent and argument.