

Learner Development Working Papers: Different Cases, Different Interests

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**Exploring the Principles of Exploratory Practice:
Quality of Life or Quality of Learning?**

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Chapter Eight

Exploring the Principles of Exploratory Practice: Quality of Life or Quality of Learning?

Alison Stewart, Gakushuin University, Tokyo, with Robert Croker, Nanzan University, Nagoya, and Judith Hanks, University of Leeds, England

Abstract

In their book, *The Developing Language Learner*, Allwright and Hanks (2009) state that “Quality of Life” should be the central concern for language teachers and that working to understand the Quality of Life we share with our students is more important than seeking to improve it. In this paper, I draw on the experience of starting up a seminar class based on Allwright and Hanks’ principles of Exploratory Practice to reflect on and discuss the question of what we might mean by Quality of Life. Over the course of the first two years of this seminar class, the class practice has evolved as a result of students’ identification and exploration of “puzzles” about what we do. The repeated cycles of puzzling about our practice bring to light new questions about the nature of practice and research (discussed with Robert Croker) and about the relevance of social context and the identity of the participants (discussed with Judith Hanks). I conclude by arguing that the term Quality of Life is unnecessarily broad, and that, while recognising the danger of returning to a tendency to see learner development only in terms of measurable outcomes, a more appropriate term may be Quality of Learning.

要旨

The Developing Language Learner(2009)の中でAllwright とHanks は、語学教員にとって最も考えるべきことは、学習者と共有するQuality of Life（生活の質）についての理解を深めることであり、向上させることではないと述べている。本論文では、このAllwright とHanksのExploratory Practice研究法概念を用いてスタートさせた、担当ゼミクラスにおけるQuality of Lifeについての考察を振り返る。はじめの2年間におけるゼミクラスは、学生自身のアイデンティティと自分たちが行っていることの意味を問いかけるパズルによって形づくられた。そして繰り返されるパズルのサイクルが実践と研究について（ロバート・クロカー氏談）、また社会的状況や学生（被験者）のアイデンティティについて（ジュディス・ハンクス氏談）新しい疑問と探求を生み出したのである。この振り返りにより、Exploratory PracticeにおいてQuality of Lifeは表現として不必要に広義すぎ、数値で学びを測るという古典的な学習者ディプロメントに帰属する危険性をはらむもののQuality of Learning（学びの質）と言う表現がより相応しいと言う結論に至った。

Key words

Exploratory Practice, inclusive practitioner research, quality of life, negotiated syllabus, curriculum development

探究的実践, 包含的実践者研究, クオリティ・オブ・ライフ, 交渉型シラバス, カリキュラム開発

Chapter Eight

Exploring the Principles of Exploratory Practice: Quality of Life or Quality of Learning?

Alison Stewart, Gakushuin University, Tokyo, with Robert Croker, Nanzan University, Nagoya, and Judith Hanks, University of Leeds, England (and including the Gakushuin University English Education seminar classes of 2012 and 2013)

Part One

Introduction

In the 2012-13 academic year, I started teaching a research seminar, a class of third- and fourth-year English major undergraduates, all of whom were interested in language and education and eager to write their final research report on a subject of their choice within that broad area. New to the practice of conducting a seminar, I wanted to explore with my students different modes of learning and aim for an optimal balance between collaborative and individual learning. The approach that I adopted for this purpose was Exploratory Practice (EP) (Allwright, 2003, 2005; Allwright & Hanks, 2009).

Through the experience of exploring learning together with my students in this class, our view of the class--what it is now and what we want it to become--is continuously evolving. Similarly, as a result of this practical experience and along with in-depth discussions that I have had with Robert Croker and Judith Hanks, two leading practitioners of classroom research and practice, my understanding of EP and its potential in university education is also evolving. In this chapter, I tell the story of this evolution in order to illustrate the practice of EP in one particular context and, in so doing, to consider some more generalizable questions concerning the principle of "Quality of Life" as a primary concern for practitioner research.

Seven principles of Exploratory Practice

In their book *The Developing Language Learner*, Allwright and Hanks (2009, pp. 149-154) set out seven principles for EP:

Principle 1: "Quality of life" for language teachers and learners is the most appropriate central concern for practitioner research in our field.

Principle 2: Working primarily to *understand* the "quality of life", as it is experienced by language

learners and teachers, is more important than, and logically prior to, seeking in any way to improve it.

Principle 3: Everybody needs to be involved in the work for understanding.

Principle 4: The work needs to serve to bring people together.

Principle 5: The work needs to be conducted in a spirit of mutual development.

Principle 6: Working for understanding is necessarily a continuous enterprise.

Principle 7: Integrating the work for understanding fully into existing curricular practices is a way of minimizing the burden and maximizing sustainability.

When I first read these principles, they appeared to offer an ideal framework for developing the research seminar. Since, at the beginning of the year, both my students and I were equally ignorant about, yet equally committed to the goal of creating a successful research seminar, an inclusive practitioner approach seemed to be highly appropriate. Principle 7 ("Working for understanding is necessarily a continuous enterprise") was particularly relevant, since I felt that a good way to learn to do research about learning would be to research the practices of the seminar itself. By engaging in authentic research practices themselves, students could gain skills and experience of data collection and analysis. In this way, the work for understanding would not only be integrated into, but also serve to enhance our curricular practices.

At the same time, however, I was not convinced about the priority of "Quality of Life", since it seemed to me to be somewhat vague. I also thought that my students would themselves prefer to be working towards understanding more concrete phenomena or practices relating to language and education. Having worked in Japanese universities for the past 18 years, I have continually sought to be a researcher-practitioner, each year posing new questions or problems, or experimenting with new technologies and practices. As a researcher, I have always preferred a qualitative approach, since, to me, the insights gained from the words of individual students and teachers can be extremely powerful and memorable. However, I understood the "quality" in "qualitative research" to refer to the experience of learning, rather than more broadly and more vaguely to the Quality of Life itself. Wasn't "Quality of Life" too much to expect? Not knowing how to answer this question, I decided to commit for the time being only to the principles of inclusivity, and thus I prepared to begin the first year of inclusive practitioner research.

First steps: Research circles study

On a Wednesday afternoon in April, at the beginning of the 2012 academic year in Japan, 20 students and I met for our first seminar. I had been working at Gakushuin University, a private university in central Tokyo, for four years and already knew all but two of the students, as they had been in my language classes in their first or second years. In addition to 16 third-year students, 4 fourth-year students had transferred from another seminar in order to complete their graduation thesis under my guidance.

Since the students are required to submit a graduation thesis based on the research they do in the seminar, I wanted to set up practices from the outset that would facilitate individual and collaborative learning. More precisely, students would work individually on their own research, but they would also work in groups, or as a whole class, to develop knowledge and skills that would support or enhance their individual work. After a round robin to find out what each student was interested in researching for their graduation thesis, I proposed that we start with the following three basic practices: (a) individual practice of keeping research journals; (b) class practice of short lecture-style presentations by the teacher, followed by discussion, on topics the students wanted to learn about; (c) research circles or small groups of three or four students who would share their research and written summaries or thesis drafts outside of the class.

I did not, at this point, consider what I was doing for the seminar to be EP. Although the students were involved in this syllabus to the extent of providing a list of topics that they were interested in, their role was mainly to approve, or to modify if they wished, the framework that I was suggesting. I also told students that towards the end of the semester we would together conduct a study of the research circles in order to learn about collaborative learning outside of the classroom. This study would be based on the EP principle of Inclusivity.

The first class discussion began with the students talking with each other about the syllabus for the research seminar as a whole, and then specific details about the research journals, followed by proposals of topics for the weekly mini-lecture and discussion. I then asked them to form research circles, preferably with two or three other students sharing a similar research interest. I asked them to decide within their groups the purpose and goals of their research circle, and the means and frequency of communication or contact. I let them know that I would not monitor the work of the research circles during the 15-week semester, but that we would conduct a research project together at the end of the semester to find out how each research circle had fared.

Reading about EP before embarking on this year, I was struck by the fact that Allwright and Hanks (2009, p. 156) use the term *puzzle*, in preference to problem solving, since puzzling assumes trying to understand the situation without necessarily aiming to change anything. The research circles were the first puzzle that I wanted to explore, but, in fact, the puzzle was much bigger than this. Everything was unknown at this stage in the year. Neither my students nor I had any idea how the seminar and how their individual research projects would develop. The research circles were a small piece of the puzzle, but it seemed more manageable to start small. It also seemed safer since the object of the exploration was out-of-class practices that had no immediate bearing on in-class practices, although my hope was that they should be beneficial to individual research efforts.

The study of research circles was conducted in the final three weeks of the semester. Prior to commencing the study, students learned about and discussed interviewing as a research method, and as a class, they drew up a structured interview schedule. In the first class of the 3-week study, each student interviewed a member of another research circle. The interviews were recorded using digital recorders or cell phones, and the students transcribed the discussions at home. In the following class, the students completed a table (see Table 1) summarizing the activities of each group, and discussed themes that emerged from the interviews. In the final class, the students gathered in two groups to discuss and add quotes to

the themes and finally to discuss how they felt about the study and its findings. Although the students did not initiate the study, their role in collecting and arranging data, and then in discussing the implications of the findings seemed to satisfy Principles 3 and 4 of Exploratory Practice, that everybody is involved in the work of understanding, and that the work serves to bring people together.

Table 1 Research circles

Group	Members (senior/junior)	Common interest	Method of contact	Frequency of contact/activity
A	4 (3S, 1J)	education systems: Finland, Korea, Iceland, China	Facebook	All members uploaded information each time they found new research
B	4 (2S, 2J)	various	email	One member emailed twice, then gave up
C	4 (4J)	sociolinguistic code-switching, politeness, SLA	Blogger	none
D	3 (3S)	SLA (motivation/L2 reading aloud	face-to- face meetings in English	once a week
E	4 (4J)	SLA (classroom practice)	Blogger	none

Regarding the results of the study, as Table 1 shows, only two of the research circles could be described as successful, with the other three simply failing to get off the ground. Notably, the successful circles included fourth-year students who had a clearer idea of their research topic, as well as a greater sense of urgency concerning their graduation thesis. What surprised me, however, was that the study itself led to a change in the behavior of the circles. At the beginning of the second semester, I showed the class a PowerPoint summary of the research circle study, expecting that the research circles would not have changed since the previous semester. It was at this point that I discovered that all the research circles had been active over the summer holiday: all five groups were now using Facebook as a means of communication and, particularly, of sharing resources among the members, and the group that consisted of three fourth-year students (Group D) had started using the circles for peer feedback on working drafts of their theses. It was clear that the study had satisfied Principle 5 of EP, namely, that it was conducted in a spirit of mutual development, with all the circles, including the successful ones, changing their practice to incorporate what they saw to be more effective ways of learning together.

On the basis of this response, the students and I agreed to continue in the second semester the same procedure that we had started in the first. A new schedule of topics that students wanted to learn about and discuss (including, for example, language and identity, motivation and learning strategies) was negotiated, students continued to keep individual research journals, and the research circles resumed operations according to the revised procedures that the students had decided. A day was set aside at the end of the second semester for further exploration of the research circles and for a reflection on learning throughout the year.

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Different Cases, Different Interests

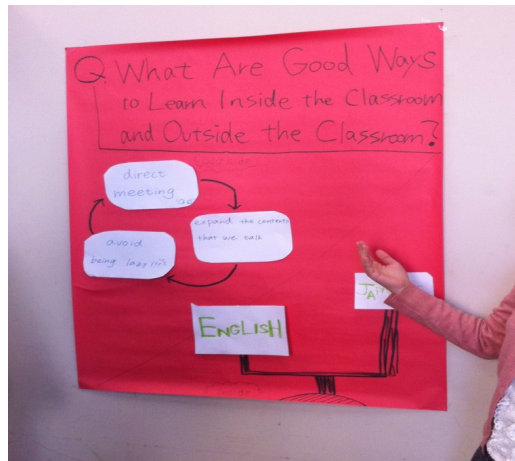


Figure 2 Poster (third-year students) January 2013



Figure 3 Poster (third-year students) January 2013

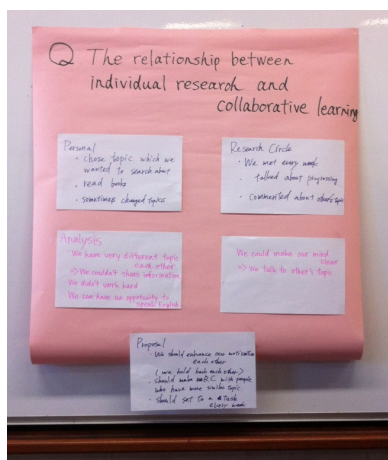


Figure 4 Poster (third-year students) January 2013

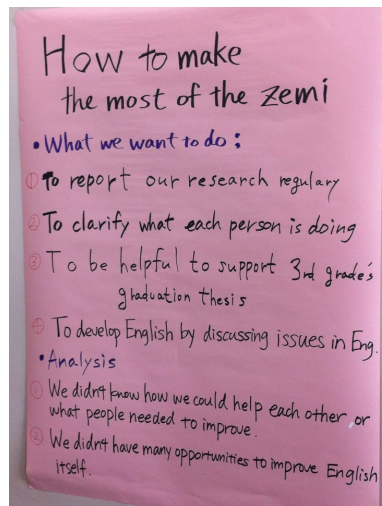


Figure 5 Poster (third-year students) January 2013

It was striking to me that the posters produced by the third-year students were substantially different from the one produced by only fourth-year students. Graduating this year, and with the satisfaction of having already written and submitted their graduation theses, Ryo, Kazu and Mayu (see Figure 1) were proud of what they achieved, both individually and as a very active and mutually supportive research circle. They did list problems, but these related to additional work they could have done that they felt, in retrospect, would have challenged them more.

The third-year posters were much more critical and had many more suggestions to make about how to conduct the seminar in the following year. The students in Figure 2 and Figure 5 felt that they had not used the seminar to practise English enough, even though short lecture presentations and readings were given in English, and many of the students did discuss questions in English. The students in Figure 4 blamed themselves for failing to motivate each other and “holding each other back”. Together with the group in Figure 3, they also felt that the research circles should be free to change members, so that people could move as they changed direction and came to find a focus for their research.

The group in Figure 5, similarly, felt that they didn’t support each other sufficiently (“we didn’t know how we could help each other or what people needed to improve”) and stated that they would like to report their research more regularly to the whole class not only to spur their own progress, but also to “clarify what each person is doing”. Significantly, this group wrote on their poster that they wanted to “be helpful to support 3rd grades’ graduation thesis”. Unlike the beginning of the year, when the seminar was brand new, these students now felt that they had developed some expertise that they could share with newcomers. This confirms Principles 5, 6, and 7, that the practice should support mutual development, that the work is necessarily a continuous enterprise, and that the work for understanding should be integrated into existing curricular practices. None of these principles made sense at the beginning of the year since we did not have any practice on which to build. But, in the light of the year’s experience, it seemed clear that the students who would be continuing on in the seminar in the coming year were invested in seeing our practice develop and improve further.

Bringing in outside views

At this point, having agreed to contribute a chapter on EP for the Learner Development Special Interest Group collection of working papers, I turned to two people who I knew had a particular interest in classroom research in general and EP in particular. The first was Robert Croker, a Japan-based language educator and researcher who teaches and writes about qualitative research methods (Heigham & Croker, 2009).

We met in December at a workshop he gave at Nanzan University in Nagoya. Over lunch, I explained that, although I had adopted EP in the seminar, I was still having trouble conceptualizing exactly what it was. For instance, when I first began the seminar, I was under the impression, despite Allwright's assertion to the contrary (2005) and despite the fact that "practice" is the second word in the term, that EP was a research approach, rather than a kind of classroom practice. Over the course of the year, however, I had come to think of it more as a "practice" than as "research". I asked Robert what he thought about this. Later he wrote back to me.

Robert Croker: *Your account of the seminar is an important example of Exploratory Practice in Japan and it raises some very thought-provoking issues. As I am interested in research methods, I found the question of whether it is a research approach or a classroom practice quite intriguing. As a response, I will compare EP to two more established forms of educational enquiry—formal academic research and classroom action research—and explain how I think EP differs from them both. However, rather than concluding that it is not a form of research, I would like to argue that the definition of research should be broadened to encompass more democratic, inclusive approaches such as EP.*

The fundamental purpose of all educational research is to develop and deepen understanding. The first question is, whose understanding? In formal academic research, it is the researcher's, not the participants'. It is assumed that participants already have an adequate understanding of their learning processes; the point of research is to uncover this understanding, not to help participants develop it. Similarly, the objective of most forms of action research is to foster the teacher-researcher's own understanding. Helping learners develop their understanding is considered beneficial but coincidental, and usually only undertaken to the extent that it helps teacher-researchers develop their understanding and then help them implement change and innovation. By contrast, the principal purpose of EP is to develop the understanding of language learners and teachers, as was the case in the seminar class.

Another question is, who decides how to develop that understanding? In formal academic research, it is the researcher who decides what the research focuses on, and who collects and analyses the data. Although action research may be more consultative than formal academic research, it is still usually the teacher-researcher who decides how the study is conducted. In EP, however, ideally it is the learners themselves who decide what to explore, as these students did. It is also usually the learners who decide how to investigate their own learning processes, guided by their teacher. In EP, then, agency resides primarily with the learners.

A further question is: with whom is that understanding shared? In formal academic research, the anticipated audience are other researchers, policy makers, and classroom teachers, but usually not

the participants themselves. In the case of action research, the main purpose is often to bring about change in the classroom or institution rather than to contribute to a broader knowledge base. Teacher-researchers usually only share their new understandings with colleagues and possibly their learners, if they share them at all, and principally as a way to facilitate changes they have chosen to introduce. In EP, on the other hand, the primary audience for new understandings are the other learners and the teacher in the classroom. And what is shared there can profoundly influence that community's learning processes; the experience of sharing itself shapes those processes, and this could then become the focus of further research, as this case clearly illustrates.

By exploring the answers to these three basic questions about the nature of research, it is evident that EP differs significantly from both formal academic research and action research. But does that not mean that EP is not a form of research? As classroom learning is now seen to be a dynamic, embodied process that is largely intuitive and set in particular social contexts, the importance of learners developing a better understanding of their own learning processes is being increasingly recognized. Without a doubt, learners can develop a deeper and more meaningful understanding through EP than if they participate in more established forms of educational enquiry. This represents the emergence of more democratic, inclusive approaches to educational research, approaches which contend that research should be done for and by learners themselves. It is a broader definition of research, one which EP neatly exemplifies. And it is one that puts the horse firmly before the cart.

Part Two

Alison: Robert's observations that research and learning are not necessarily distinct practices, and that learners have much to gain from an inquiry-based approach to their own learning, support what I intuitively felt about these first forays into EP. It is certainly true that, in the case of this seminar class, the research circle study did prove to be a fruitful way to fulfill a dual purpose of developing knowledge and understanding about their own learning and about the skills and processes of conducting research. Since these students must ultimately conduct their own research in order to write a graduation thesis, the study seems to have been particularly appropriate as a way for them to examine the phenomenon of their own out-of-class learning, and to gain knowledge about doing research through the action of collecting, analyzing and presenting data.

The study also served as a way "into" EP for the students and me. Although the students did not initiate the study or the subject of research circles, they were responsible for interviewing each other and then for transforming those interview recordings into data that they could present, discuss, and subsequently use as the basis for change in their practice. The understanding that we gained from that study contributed to the emerging practice of the seminar over the course of the year. As a group, these students became more confident and assertive about what they were doing and what they wanted to do in the seminar, while, for my part, I became more confident that the students were willing and able to exercise their autonomy in exploring and developing practice together. The seminar had become a "Community of Practice" in which critical exploration of our own learning practices is part of what we do. We seemed to be

“mutually engaged” in a “joint enterprise” in which we drew on a “shared repertoire of discursive practices” (Wenger, 1998). EP is thus a distinctive feature of the “small culture” (Holliday, 1999) that we are creating. As a tentative answer to the question I posed earlier, it is this “small culture” and the feelings of ownership and belonging that my students and I both cherish that characterise the quality of life of the research seminar.

This, for me, is where EP seems to diverge from research, although perhaps a better way to describe it is a shift of emphasis rather than a divergence. Conventional research, as I understand it, aims primarily to discover new knowledge or understanding; EP, however, aims to transform the quality of life. This shift is highlighted in the questions that the students raised about the EP principles. “What is meant by ‘Quality of Life?’” I could not answer that question by myself, but my students and I could talk about it together. With the help of the posters the students created and shared publicly, we could identify ways in which learning was not satisfactory and suggest new directions that might enhance the quality of that experience as individuals and as a learning community. This principle of “Quality of Life” is such a central concern in EP, but, although we had talked about it, I still felt that my students and I were groping in the dark with regard to what it was and how we might identify it.

By happy coincidence, Judith Hanks, co-author with Dick Allwright of *The Developing Language Learner* (2009) came to Japan to attend the Japan Association for Language Teaching (JALT) PanSIG Conference in Nagoya in May 2013. Having recently started a new academic year and resumed the seminar with last year’s third-year students who were now fourth years, and with a new group of third-year students, I was still puzzling over EP’s prioritization of “Quality of Life”. I caught up with Judith before she left Japan and invited her out to dinner to ask her what she meant by this term. She later summarized her answer to my question by email.

Judith: *When reading your chapter, I was struck by how often you (Alison, Junsei and Kazu) returned to this question about Quality of Life (QoL). In order to answer, I need to step back, and consider the background against which the principle of QoL emerged.*

As teachers and learners we spend hours of our lives in the classroom, and it can be a tiring, frustrating, miserable existence as we grapple with problems of workload, discipline, changes to the curriculum, and examinations. Adding the requirements of research or scholarship to the already heavy burdens of teaching and learning can lead to burn-out. After all, designing good research instruments and analyzing/writing up data is a time-consuming process - all too often, such research then drains energy away from the real work of the classroom: teaching and learning. Arguably, then, whatever we do in our classrooms, we need to ensure that pedagogy is paramount, with research supporting it rather than taking time and energy away from it.

As we (learners and teachers) inquire more deeply into our puzzles, we share questions, doubts, experiences and findings and re-discover our enthusiasm for teaching and learning. In other words:

[QoL] is what teachers and learners understand, and/or try to understand about their joint experience in classrooms, [...] these understandings are of greater intrinsic importance to them than how productive or efficient classroom outcomes are by external standards. (Gieve & Miller, 2006, p. 23)

What you say above about the feelings of ownership and belonging that you and your students "cherished" is (to me) the essence of QoL. The fact that your students continued their work over their summer holidays, and that your third-year students intend to continue with their research circles and their investigations, seems to indicate that the EP principle of "making research a continuous enterprise" was also being met – because your students wanted to do it. In my opinion, EP's approach empowered them to make their own decisions about their learning with a view to developing not only as language learners, but also as budding researchers.

Quality of Life, then, is about enhancing our "lived experiences" in the classroom (Gieve & Miller, 2006). These may, or may not, achieve external, standardized government/ ministry/institutional targets, but more importantly EP promotes the potential for learners and teachers working together to develop our understandings of language learning.

Alison: The enhancement of lived experiences in the classroom that Judith talks about is something that resonates with what I had felt about the seminar. At the same time, the qualification that these experiences "may, or may not, achieve external, standardized government/ministry/institutional targets" leads me to wonder about the potentially subversive nature of this approach, and to question whether, as a result, this may limit the extent to which EP could be adopted in various educational contexts.

In my own case, for example, despite the extremely positive experience that my students and I have had with EP, I would hesitate to affirm that including learners in research about their own learning is necessarily an ideal approach in all circumstances. I have to admit that the seminar is an exceptional class, because the students commit to it for two years, and because a great deal of value is placed on it by students and within the curriculum. This means that it is already more likely to develop into a community in which students are highly invested. Indeed, in this respect, I may be flattering myself if I think that my seminar is very different from that of my colleagues, apart from the fact that there is an explicit focus on understanding processes of learning itself rather than only content.

Other classes I teach are either one- or two-semester courses—a much shorter time frame that is more usual in Japanese universities (and elsewhere). This more limited time together makes it harder to develop a sense of trust, ownership and shared identity that I have found to be so important in the exercise and maintenance of EP. I would ideally like to adopt EP in all my teaching, but the truth is that I would be hard pressed to justify to students of other classes or to the university authorities the approach I have taken in the seminar.

Further explorations of EP

But maybe I am simply being too timid? Perhaps I could explore how that approach might be adapted? I put this to Judith. Did she think that EP could be implemented in any context in language teaching? Are there any conditions which render it unworkable?

Judith: *Interestingly, for the past decade, this has been a driving question for my own work. I had noticed that, despite the interest shown in many different parts of the world, EP was not evident in my context of teaching English for Academic Purposes in the UK, and I wondered why. Was the intense, goal-oriented nature of such programmes a barrier to EP? Somewhat hesitantly, I decided*

to try it out. To my surprise, my colleagues (teachers and learners) welcomed EP, and others, curious about what was going on, began to adopt it too.

Elsewhere, EP has been implemented in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil for more than 20 years, in elementary, secondary and tertiary education; in state schools and private language schools; in universities and colleges. EP has been incorporated into teacher education in Israel, Brazil and Australia, and curriculum change in China. In Japan, Smith (2009) relates his experiences of using EP in an English for Academic Purposes context, while Tajino (2009) relates EP to soft systems methodology. EP is reported as trickling into mathematics classes in Rio, while in the UK, EP has been used in academic and business French classes.¹

So to answer to your question, thus far, I have not found any conditions that would render EP unworkable. However, I can imagine some situations that would inhibit the uptake of EP. For example, just as no one can make learners autonomous, no one can make learners and teachers try EP. A colleague of mine investigating learner autonomy put it rather well recently: "You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make it drink... not even if you put its head under the water!" (Parkin, 2011, personal communication). Each of us has to find our own path, and while EP may provide helpful signposts, it is up to the individual to decide to read, and choose whether to take up, the indications they find. Those teachers, learners, course directors, presidents or principals with a determined focus on "improvement" and "performativity" (Breen, 2006) are unlikely to want to even try EP. Any attempt to persuade them against their will is likely to end in failure.

Part Three

Alison: Encouraged as I am by the range and diversity of contexts in which EP is being applied that Judith cites, and indeed by my own experience of it, I am still hesitant to accept that the primary concern should be the "Quality of Life" rather than, more simply, the "Quality of Learning". I may not be one of those teachers with a determined focus on "improvement" and "performativity", but I do feel that I am to some extent accountable for providing opportunities for learning and growth. There are of course arguments to be made for the term "life". Allwright (2006), for example, proposes a shift from thinking of teaching and learning as "work" to thinking of them as "life". In the same vein, it could also be argued that the term "Quality of Learning" fixes attention on change in the learner, and hence, is an easy step back to quantifying what occurs, rather than staying focused on other non-measurable factors, such as feelings, that make up our "lived experiences".

Nevertheless, I would like to argue the case for "Quality of Learning" over "Quality of Life". This assertion is based in what I believe to be our primary social identities in the seminar, as learners and teacher. These learner and teacher identities are constructed by and within the social context, and, even though we may for various reasons sometimes adopt different roles, I

¹ For references to EP in international contexts, please refer to Additional Reading.

believe we tend to accept and take these learner/teacher identities for granted. As a corollary of these identities, what we do when we are together is usually associated with learning, and thus “Quality of Learning” is arguably more representative of what we are about. Provided we respect and value each other as people too, I would suggest that the term “Quality of Life” imposes a corrective label that we don’t really need.

Continuing puzzles: pair poster presentation

At the time of writing, the seminar has just come to the end of the first semester of the 2013 year. Nine of the 20 students are new to the group, while 11 fourth-year students were in the seminar last year. This time, as a way of reviewing the semester, students formed pairs in the penultimate class and decided on puzzles that they wanted to explore. In the final class, two-thirds of the class time was devoted to a poster presentation followed by a whole-class discussion (see Appendix 1). A particular focus of these posters was why some students are reluctant to use English, either in the class or out of class on a Moodle that was set up to allow students to continue discussions on topics covered in the class. Interestingly, but also frustratingly, these puzzles are not so different from the issues that were raised by the students in the previous year. Indeed, some of the practices that were implemented this year (Moodle, pre-graduation thesis for 3rd year students) were intended to meet needs identified by last year’s students. But this year’s third-year students were not part of the experience that led to that awareness and those decisions.

How can we build on the experience of previous years without losing sight of the need to include new members in the decision-making? As a teacher, this is a new puzzle for me, and one that I look forward to sharing with the students. “Quality”, whether of life or of learning, is elusive and ephemeral, and, as the seminar experience illustrates, Exploratory Practice does not always guarantee quality of learning. What it does offer, however, given time and opportunities for frank and open discussion, is a principled approach to democratic and inclusive learner development.

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Appendix 1 Other student posters

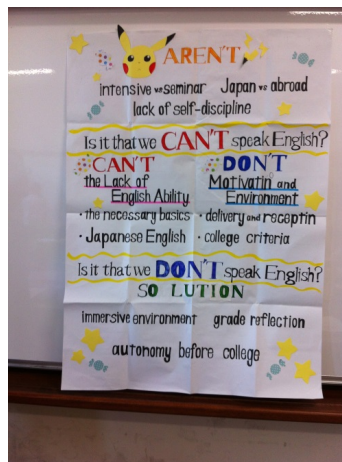


Figure 6 Is it that we can't speak English or don't speak English?

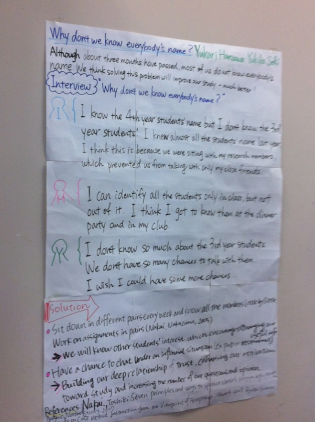


Figure 7 Why don't we know everybody's name?

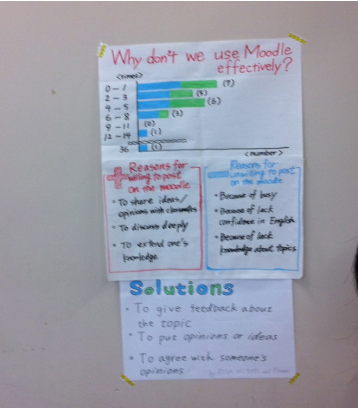


Figure 8 Why don't we use Moodle effectively?

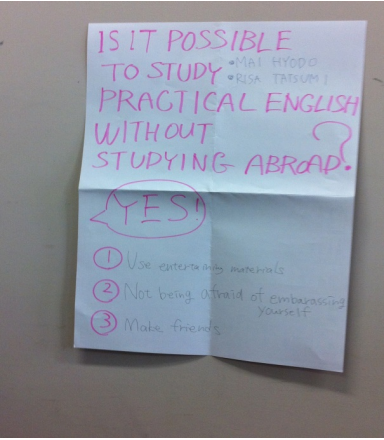


Figure 9 Is it possible to study practical English without studying abroad?



Figure 10 Why can't we speak English fluently?

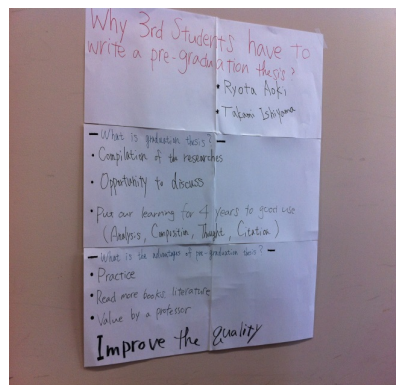
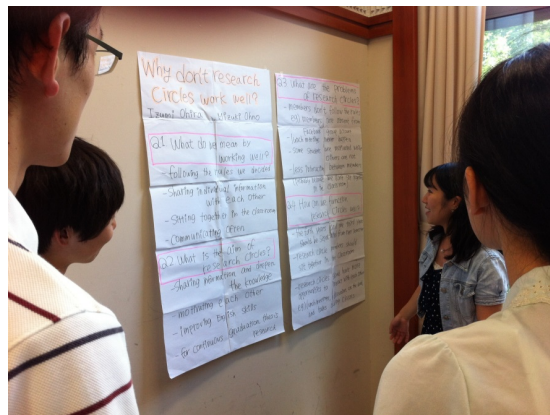
Figure 11 Why do 3rd year students have to write a pre-graduation thesis?

Figure 12 Why don't Research Circles work well?

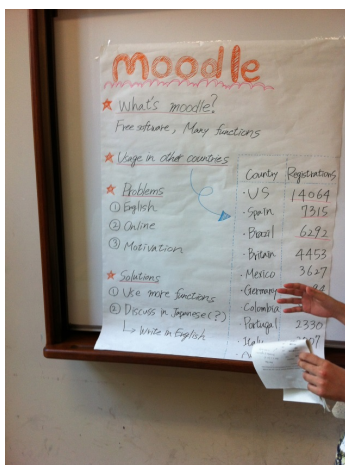


Figure 13 What is Moodle?

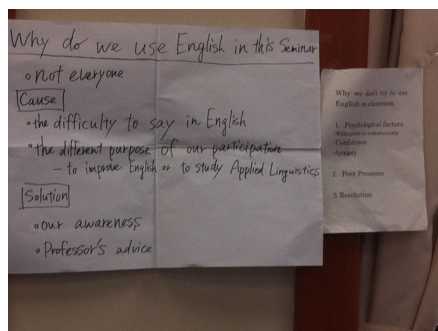


Figure 14 Why do we use English in this Seminar?