

CHAPTER

1

EAP Learners Explore Their Language Learning Lives Through Exploratory Practice

SUSAN DAWSON, IN COLLABORATION WITH LEARNERS
PHAPPIM IHARA, KAN ZHANG, AND EUS 9 CLASS

“Why do I always speak English in wrong grammar although I know how to use grammar?” “Why does team 3 (which is near the door) always speak in Chinese?” These questions (among others) were posed by a group of 16 international postgraduate students during an intensive, high-stakes English for Academic Purposes (EAP) course I taught. They were raised in response to my question: what puzzles you about your language learning lives?” The questions spearheaded an eight-week investigative process using the Exploratory Practice (EP) framework (Allwright, 2003, 2005): a form of inclusive practitioner research.

This chapter recounts the experiences of two groups of students in the class as they formulated puzzles to investigate, collected and analysed data to understand those puzzles, and then presented them to other students and staff. I concluded the process by giving my perspective on their work. The chapter switches between the separate first-person voices of me, Susan (as teacher), and Phappim and Kan (as two collaborating learner-practitioners).

Context

The class, which I co-taught and in which Phappim and Kan were learners, was a 20-hours-a week English for University Studies (EUS 9) class at a private language school in England. It was for students hoping to gain a place in the institution’s Graduate Diploma course (GD), giving them the opportunity to progress to a master’s degree course at a British university. This trajectory was dependent on achieving an International English Language Testing System (IELTS) score of 5.5 overall, with at least 5.5 in each skill. For this reason, the dual aim of EUS 9 was to prepare students for the IELTS exam (12 hours per week) as well as introduce them to some of the academic and research skills they would need to successfully complete the eight-hour GD course. My remit was the latter, to introduce them to academic and research skills. The majority of the students came from China, with others from Saudi Arabia, Thailand, and Azerbaijan.

Course Objectives and Exploratory Practice

The language learning objectives for the course focused on the development of academic writing; planning of learning, time management, critical thinking, research, and reflection skills. One of the ways in which I sought to integrate these objectives was through working with the Seven Principles of EP, which is defined as an

. . . indefinitely sustainable way for classroom language teachers and learners, while getting on with their learning and teaching, to develop their own understandings of life in the language classroom. (Allwright, 2005, p. 361)

In EP, all work for understanding should contribute to, rather than detract from, the teaching and learning processes in the classroom. To do this, every-day pedagogic activities become the tools in our work for understanding, making it an inherently sustainable and pedagogically relevant enterprise. The focus is on the quality of classroom life (Gieve & Miller, 2006) rather than technical problem-solving, improvement, or efficiency (as measured in terms of exam scores or progression rates, for example). The principles are as follows:

Principle 1: Put “quality of life” first.

Principle 2: Work primarily to understand language classroom life.

Principle 3: Involve everybody.

Principle 4: Work to bring people together.

Principle 5: Work also for mutual development.

Principle 6: Integrate the work for understanding into classroom practice.

Principle 7: Make the work a continuous enterprise. (Allwright, 2003, pp. 128–130)

These principles position the learners as co-investigators (alongside the teachers) in the understanding process, recognising that they too have the right and the responsibility to become the best learners that they can be. EP encourages them to pursue their own agenda for inquiry while getting on with the work of learning (Allwright, 2005). The principles build on Dewey’s (1933) inquiry-based approach to education and Freire’s (1970/2006) critical pedagogy, which seeks to empower learners and include them as active participants in a problem-posing approach to education. They also move toward what Kumaravadivelu (2001, p. 545) describes as a “post-method learner,” that is one who is academically, socially, and critically autonomous.

My aim in using EP was thus two-fold: to foster a culture of inquiry in the classroom by allowing the learners to set the agenda, and to explore what was important to them; and to use the EP work to help fulfill the course objectives. These aims were based on both my own and others’ experiences (see, for example, Hanks, 2015a, 2015b) of using EP with EAP classes.

Putting EP Principles into Practice

The way in which I interpreted these principles for my local context was to use many of the activities that constitute the standard fare of EAP classes in the exploratory work: listening to a lecture, taking notes, and writing a summary; undertaking a survey or research project; writing a report; giving presentations; and undertaking independent learning tasks and reflecting on them. While we also used typical EAP topics (e.g., innovation, crime, and punishment) to practice these skills, the EP work (to which we dedicated two or three hours a week) allowed the learners to refine some of these skills as they investigated their puzzles. From the 40 or so puzzles generated

by the class (following an introductory lecture from me on EP), each student chose the puzzle he or she most wanted to investigate, and then formed a group with others who wanted to explore the same puzzle. The (unedited) puzzles chosen were:

- Why do I have so few ideas during IELTS speaking test?
- Why do I always speak English in wrong grammar although I know how to use grammar?
- Why I can't pay more attention in listening task?
- When I chat with foreigners, I feel more nervous and often make mistakes to organise my sentence. Why?
- Why does team 3 (which is near the door) always speak in Chinese?

Over the ten weeks, the students reflected on why they had chosen their puzzles, turned them into researchable questions, designed data generation tools, collected data and analysed it, presented their findings at a mini-learner conference to which other students and teachers in the Centre were invited, and wrote individual reports about the process (Table 1). The report and group presentations integrated much of the language work that we had done throughout the course and even incorporated IELTS-style tasks.

Other Ways of Implementing EP

It is important to recognise that there is not one prescribed method for “doing” EP. I have been working with the EP principles for several years, and the way the learners and I get started with “puzzling” varies. In contrast to the EAP example above, starting points in General English classes have included: a group-mingling activity based on different aspects of their language learning; group-brainstorming activities around what makes a good language learner under the headings “things you need to know,” “things you need to do,” “feelings and attitudes”; and general puzzles

TABLE 1. SEQUENCE OF EP WORK OVER THE 10-WEEK COURSE

WEEK	EP ACTIVITY
1	<i>Introductions, orientation</i>
2	Lecture on EP and note-taking, puzzle generation
3	Forming groups, unpacking puzzle, choosing data collection tools
4	Trialling tools in class and beginning data collection
5	Collecting and collating data, initial analysis
6	Start report writing ('methodology' – what we did and why)
7	Report writing – IELTS writing task 1 with data ('description'), peer feedback on writing
8	Poster making, report writing ('analysis' – what it all means and 'discussion' – what I have learnt)
9	Practice presentations, 'Learner Conference', final report submitted
10	<i>Exam Week</i>

(mine and/or the learners”) that arise from everyday life in the classroom that we explore as a group, such as “Why are some students always on their mobile phones?” The process of working to understand the puzzles has (mostly) common elements: an initial reflection on why that puzzle is interesting; an unpacking of the puzzle to decide what we might need to find out to help us understand the puzzle more fully; some sort of “data collecting” process (using a variety of normal classroom activities); and sharing the findings within the class or beyond (e.g., class wiki, presentations, or a summary of the class discussion).

Phappim’s Group

Our puzzle and why we chose it. I (Phappim) chose the puzzle “Why do I always speak English in wrong grammar although I know how to use grammar?” I joined with Eshrag and Bert, who also wanted to investigate this puzzle. Our reasons for choosing this particular puzzle were very similar: We all felt that we had studied a lot of grammar and understood how it worked. We also thought good grammar was very important for getting high scores in the IELTS exam. When we write in English, we have time to think about our grammar, but when speaking there is not so much time to think and to keep correcting yourself. This is especially true in the IELTS speaking exam, and we didn’t feel we had always shown our true ability.

What we did to understand our puzzle. We talked about our puzzle and wrote a lot of questions about it, such as: where and when we thought we spoke grammar the worst, to whom, and so on. We then decided what sort of information would help us understand our puzzle. We made a questionnaire with both multiple choice and open questions. We spoke to students of different nationalities, and also some teachers.

What we discovered. We discovered that a lot of people felt the same about grammar, and everyone thought it was important to use correct grammar, especially in presentations and exams. Most people said the way forward was to keep practising and not worry so much about making mistakes. Some people felt they made few mistakes and said it was because the grammar in their language was similar to English grammar.

Challenges and opportunities. We enjoyed working as a team, and because we were from different countries, we had to learn to listen to each other, understand each other’s ideas and, of course, we also had to speak English. This was a very useful experience and helps prepare us for university. Later, we were all in different classes, but we still helped each other when we had a problem or question. We learnt a lot about academic writing (it was a challenge to write 1,500 words in English, but a nice one), and also presentation skills. It also helped our critical thinking because we had to analyse the results and write about them.

These things were more important to us than understanding our puzzle. Sometimes in class we thought we were wasting time trying to understand our puzzle because we wanted to know how we could improve our grammar quickly before the next IELTS exam. We know we need to keep practising and have the confidence to speak to other people, but we still make lots of grammar mistakes when we are speaking and we didn’t find a good solution.

Kan’s Group

Our puzzle. I (Kan) worked with Vivi and Annie (who are also both Chinese), and we chose the puzzle “Why does team 3 (which is near the door) always speak in Chinese?” We had different reasons for choosing this puzzle. Vivi wanted to know if it helped students to understand the teacher better. Annie was surprised that teachers got angry when students spoke their own language, recognised she also spoke in Chinese a lot, and was curious to understand more. I chose

it because I think that all international students find it hard to speak in English all the time and thought research into this puzzle might help us understand why.

What we did. Our class was divided into three teams (groups) around tables. We decided to observe each team for five minutes at a time, once an hour during class. We recorded how many people spoke Chinese, how long for, and what they spoke about. We also wrote down what was happening in the class at that time. We then interviewed other students and teachers to find out why they thought people spoke their own language in class.

What we discovered. The two teams with a mix of nationalities spoke little or no Chinese. However, the third team (all Chinese students) spoke Chinese in almost every slot. They spoke about the IELTS exam and the train times to get to their IELTS exam site. Once, they discussed English words in Chinese during a class competition. We found the main reasons people speak their own language is because it is easy. Also, because of a similar cultural background it is easier to find topics for conversation. Annie said that understanding these reasons had made her more aware of when and why she might speak in Chinese, and she was making a conscious effort to speak more English. We concluded that both teachers and students should work together to encourage people to speak more English in class: the teachers and administration can help by setting rules about speaking English; classmates can set a fine for speaking a language other than English and then buy treats for everyone at the end of term; each student also needs to regulate their own speaking and not just do the most comfortable thing.

Challenges and opportunities. The main challenge was doing observations in class because the teacher sometimes mixed the groups up, and we also had to concentrate on the lesson at the same time. We had to think about how to overcome these issues.

Interviewing students from other classes was a good experience as it gave us confidence to speak to others, and helped us to make friends with other nationalities. Working the puzzle helped our academic skills, and using our own data as practice for IELTS writing Task 1 helped us see the relevance of that test to our future studies. Repeating our presentation many times to different groups helped our confidence a lot, so we relied less on our notes each time.

Susan's Perspective and Conclusion

The high-stakes nature of the class meant that achieving the required IELTS score was the students' priority. In fact, many students were openly annoyed at anything not specifically IELTS related, and this included the EP work about half way through the course. I believe this overwhelming concern also accounts to some extent for the focus on finding immediate solutions (Phappim's group) rather than a willingness to work primarily for understanding (EP Principle 2).

If I were to judge the outcome of the work purely on the depth of understandings produced, I would be disappointed. In fact, this brought into sharper focus my own ongoing puzzle, and one which I am still working to understand: "Why is the pull of solutions so attractive to learners?" To try and understand this, I have talked to learners and colleagues, examined learner reflections, and investigated the academic and IELTS cultures of the learners' home countries. My thoughts so far include: the need for the EP work to be relevant to their personal academic goals; the self-imposed and parent-imposed need to succeed academically; student expectations of what an EAP course will help them achieve; and the pressure of a limited time frame (imposed by visa regulations and finances) in which to achieve their goal.

The EP work required a different way of thinking about teaching and learning. Learners are not necessarily comfortable with the ambiguity arising from "creating possibilities rather than certainties" (Morgan & Ramanathan, 2005, p. 155), and perhaps it is unrealistic to expect them

to embrace (or appreciate) such new concepts within a limited time frame. It is interesting that in follow-up interviews a few months after the course, many learners said how useful the EP work had been in helping them develop a more critical, confident, and inquiring approach to their studies. As teachers, we might not see the immediate fruits of our efforts, but we might be able to plant something that can later flourish and grow: for example, a longer-term perspective on “quality of life” (EP Principle 1).

For this reason, it would be misleading to focus on the immediate product alone; the process itself is also a journey of understanding and development. Earlier, I cited Kumaravadivelu’s description of a post-method learner as one who is academically, socially, and critically autonomous. In giving the learners time (even though they sometimes rebelled against it) and intellectual space to pursue their own questions, I observed hints of growing independence, evident in their reflections on the process. Academically, many discovered new strategies for learning and grew in confidence in their academic work:

““ Before that I often feel fear on listening, because I always can’t catch the point and afraid about that I can’t understand, however through the puzzle I found that listening is not difficult like I thought. ”” (Leo)

““ It helps me learn some academic skills about research and understand the difference of essay between UK and China. ”” (Annie)

Socially, some of the students experienced teamwork for the first time, discovered the importance of peer-support, and conquered their fear of speaking to students from other countries:

““ The puzzle work has helped me to understand how important teamwork was. ”” (Kan)

““ Thirdly the presentation helps me enhancing speaking skills and not making me feel nervous or shy when speaking with other overseas students. ”” (Vesper)

Kan’s group showed the most critical awareness, questioning the use and role of native languages in class and recognising the mutual responsibility of teachers and students in reconciling differences of opinion.

It would be presumptuous to claim that these things could be achieved only through working within the EP principles, or that deep understandings could be developed within a 10-week course. Yet by integrating the work for understanding with the learning objectives (EP Principles 6 and 7), we were able to foster a culture of inquiry in the classroom that focused on the questions that were important to the learners themselves and in which they could work together to develop their own unique understandings (EP Principles 3 and 5). In this sense, the work contributed towards what Davis and Sumara (2006, p. 135) describe as the principal concern of education: “expanding the space of the possible . . . [and] ensuring the conditions for the emergence of the as-yet unimagined.”

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