

# 琉球大学学術リポジトリ

日本における深究的実践活動(EP)の一例：  
言語教師のエージェンシーに焦点を当てて

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# An Exploratory Practice (EP) study in Japan: Focusing on language teachers' agency

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## **Introduction**

Little is known about the ways in which teacher-initiated investigation, such as Exploratory Practice (EP) (Allwright & Hanks, 2009), affects language teachers' teaching practices and research activities. This paper reports the effects of an EP project on teachers' experiences, particularly related to their agency, in Japanese EFL team-teaching contexts. Data were collected from two pairs of team teachers in two public high schools, using a myriad of qualitative methods (i.e., classroom observations, pair discussions, group discussions, EP stories and individual interviews). Findings indicate that the teachers exhibited agency by becoming responsible teachers and researchers who are capable of making choices on their own and taking control of their practices. Based on the findings, this paper concludes with implications for language teacher education.

## **Exploratory Practice (EP)**

Exploratory Practice (EP) is defined broadly as a sustainable way for language teachers and learners to develop their own understanding of life in the classroom, while engaging in daily teaching and learning (Allwright, 2003, 2005; Allwright & Hanks, 2009). Its predominant aims are for teachers and students to better understand their teaching and learning as well as to enrich

their subsequent classes (Allwright, 2003). The conceptual origin of EP came about when Allwright and Bailey (1991) called for a pressing change to practitioner research. They questioned the scientific types of teacher-initiated investigation popular at that time and suggested that these traditions led to teachers not conducting research in their classrooms. Researchers in different contexts have since utilized EP as an important theoretical framework, and the characteristics and principles of EP have been re-examined and re-interpreted over the years (Allwright, 2003, 2005; Allwright & Hanks, 2009; Gieve & Miller, 2006; Yoshida, Imai, Nakata, Tajino, Takeuchi, & Tamai, 2009). Allwright and Hanks (2009, p. 260) formulated seven principles of EP for inclusive practitioner research as below:

*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.

The above EP principles have been used also by practitioner-researchers around the world to enrich their classrooms (e.g., Gunn, 2010; Rose, 2007; Slimani-Rolls & Kiely, 2014; Zheng, 2012). Like them, I bore the EP principles in mind and incorporated an EP project into my study. The following

research question was thus posed: What effects does an Exploratory Practice (EP) project have on language teachers' teaching practices and research activities?

### **Participants and Context**

I recruited two pairs of team teachers, each pair consisting of a Japanese teacher of English (JTE) and an assistant language teacher (ALT), from two public high schools in the north of Japan. Aitani, a female JTE with 24 years of teaching experience and an advanced level of English, and Matt, a newly-hired male Australian ALT with intermediate Japanese skills, worked at a vocational high school (all names of participants are pseudonyms). Takahashi, a female JTE with 23 years of teaching experience and an advanced level of English, and Sam, a newly-hired male American ALT with beginner Japanese ability, worked at a standard, non-vocational high school (see Hiratsuka, 2014 for detailed information of participants).

### **Data Collection**

The duration of data collection was from December 2011 to March 2012. It consisted of two phases: Phase 1, an Exploratory Practice project; and Phase 2, after an Exploratory Practice project. During Phase 1, the teachers participated in a variety of activities (see below) three times (i.e., Cycle 1, Cycle 2 and Cycle 3). Multiple types of data collection methods used in this study will be chronologically described.

#### **Phase 1: An Exploratory Practice Project (Three Cycles).**

*Classroom observation.* I observed and videotaped team-taught classes at each school at the beginning of each cycle. The main purpose of the observations with a video camera was not to collect data for this study per se

but to provide a springboard for the teachers to facilitate their reflection on classroom practices during pair and group discussions which took place afterwards.

***Pair discussion.*** Immediately after each classroom observation, each pair of team teachers and I discussed the observed class for about one hour on that day. The language used was English because that was the only language that could be sufficiently understood by all the teachers and is the medium through which JTEs and ALTs communicate with each other on a day-to-day basis. Since researchers and teachers can gain deeper understanding of their practices by mining a small amount of data over and over from multiple perspectives rather than by viewing an entire lesson once from one perspective (Fanselow, 1992), the teachers selected a five-minute video clip from the observed class after fast-forwarding, stopping and rewinding the video tapes several times. Once the clip had been selected, we carefully analyzed the activities in it. During Cycle 1, the teachers and I determined the *theme* which was going to be explored for the remaining cycles in order to narrow the topic as well as to have a degree of consistency over time. Matt and Aitani chose ‘Teacher instructions for student classroom activities’ as their theme. They wanted to understand the ways in which they gave instructions to explain activities to students in the classroom. Sam and Takahashi selected ‘Teacher feedback for individual students’ presentations’ as their theme so that they could understand how they gave feedback in class.

***Group discussion.*** A few days after the pair discussion was held at each school, all four teachers and I gathered and conducted a group discussion at a neutral venue (e.g., a community center). In the same manner as pair discussion, the language used in the group discussion was English. The length of each group discussion was about 90 minutes.

**EP story.** In concluding each cycle, the teachers and I wrote EP experience stories in English. The stories were sent, via email, to all the teachers so that there was an open process of sharing and discovery. Worthy of mention was that I, as an outside researcher, was also part of this process, during which I disclosed my honest emotions and beliefs about teaching and research, a process referred to as self-disclosure (Egan, 2000). The EP story writing also became a unique means by which the teachers and I could monitor the progress and direction of the EP project.

## **Phase 2: After an Exploratory Project.**

**Individual interview.** In order to inquire into the teachers' experiences of the EP project, I conducted individual interviews for about 90 minutes each after the project. The teachers could choose either English or Japanese in which to be interviewed (all of them chose their mother tongue).

## **Data Analysis**

I transcribed all the discussions and interviews, and translated JTEs' interviews into English. A *constructing grounded theory* approach (Charmaz, 2006) was employed to analyze the qualitative data. This approach treats data as co-constructed, and interpretive aspects of analysis are emphasized. Constructing grounded theory methods use at least two coding stages: (a) an initial stage where each word, line or segment of data is named and presented; and (b) a focused, selective stage where several salient and oft-repeated initial codes are sorted, synthesized, integrated and organized to create fewer (focused) codes (Charmaz, 2006). In my study the coding strategies were applied *within-case* to learn as much as possible about the experiences of an individual teacher (i.e., four teachers) as well as *across-case* to learn about the idiosyncrasies specific to each school (i.e., teachers at a vocational school and

teachers at a non-vocational school). The latter also allowed the identification of possible divergences and convergences between the JTEs (i.e., Aitani and Takahashi) and the ALTs (i.e., Matt and Sam). These strategies enabled comprehensive interpretation of the teachers' particularities and commonalities at the individual, school, and JTE/ALT level.

## **Findings**

Based on the results of the analysis referred to above and literature to date, agency in this study is defined as the teachers showing responsibility during the EP project for teaching as practitioners and for research participation as researchers. In particular, they did so by making choices (e.g., being highly engaged with the EP project; being serious about their future teaching) (Duff, 2012; Feryok, 2013; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; Smolcic, 2011; van Lier, 2008) and by taking control (e.g., providing alternative teaching practices; making suggestions for further EP studies) (Benson, 2011; Duff, 2012; Engeström, 2007; Feryok, 2013; Holland & Lachicotte, 2007; Johnson, 2009). It is worth noting here that the participants often displayed agency not only individually, but also *collaboratively*, in the midst of interaction with others. Smolcic (2011) explains that human agency is not “a characteristic or property of an individual, but it is a relationship that is constantly co-constructed and negotiated within the social system” (p. 18) (see also Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, Tulviste, & Hagstrom, 1993). Hence, the participants, individually or collaboratively, did not merely conform to the resource provided to them (i.e., the EP project), but instead seemed to have appropriated and reconstructed it to transform their experiences in an attempt to meet new needs and challenges (Donato, 2000; Johnson, 2009). In other words, they demonstrated agency in their particular settings, both intermentally through collaborative activities (e.g., pair discussions and group discussions)

and intramentally through self-reflective activities (e.g., video watching and EP story writing) during the EP project.

**Becoming responsible by making choices.** The EP project seemed to have encouraged all the teachers to become more responsible language teachers and/or researchers. This was particularly evident in: (a) Matt and Aitani choosing to participate in the project with high levels of engagement as researchers; and (b) all the teachers becoming serious about their future teaching as practitioners and announcing those intentions.

*High level of engagement with the EP activities.* Matt and Aitani at a vocational school in particular became highly engaged with the EP project. For instance, in the third pair discussion, Matt and Aitani were extremely careful about choosing a five-minute video clip of their class. They stopped, rewound, played the clip several times, and wanted to know precisely (by the second) where the video clip that they were about to choose began. This was rather surprising, considering that during Cycles 1 and 2 they quickly chose five-minute video clips without much consideration. They might have begun to understand more about what being an EP practitioner involves, i.e., understanding that the minute details of their practices are of paramount importance.

It was noticeable from her comments that Aitani was becoming a responsible teacher-researcher. During Cycle 2, Matt was unsure about whether the video clip they had selected was appropriate for their chosen theme: teachers' instructions for class activities. However, Aitani did not share his uncertainty and appeared very willing to present her ideas to him: "But you [Matt] did instruct and explain the things that we were going to do. So that should be included as an instruction" (Pair discussion). There was further indication in her interview that Aitani was highly committed to the EP

opportunity. She told me that she had made a decision to take part in the project with her usual English II classes: "I decided to invite the ALT to my usual English II classes for this project rather than Oral Communication classes. I felt the need to do something different" (Interview). According to Gorsuch (2002), the majority of JTEs do not team teach English I or English II with ALTs. Aitani's case might serve as evidence that JTEs are in fact willing to take the initiative with their teaching and try something new in their team teaching if they are given an opportunity. Aitani also described how she and Matt began to make the most of their pair discussions and had richer conversations as time went by:

We had three pair discussions, and initially we just exchanged information that we could not take time to talk about during class, and that was it.... So the first time and second time, we could not really figure out what to talk about, so the discussions were not deep enough. But in the third discussion, we could talk a lot more.... We not only talked about the students' reaction to the activity, but we also talked about a lot of ideas for lessons and our experiences. (Interview)

As the cycle progressed, the teachers at a vocational school became more open about discussing their students' reactions, teaching ideas, and respective classroom experiences with each other. This was something which they had not been doing prior to the EP project.

***Serious about future teaching.*** The EP project appeared to have led all the teachers to become more serious about their future teaching and they expressed their particular intentions for it. In order to fully understand the teachers' experiences and development, it is important to focus not only on how they came to be what they are (retrospectively) but also on how they can become what they are not yet (prospectively) (Vygotsky, 1978). Exploring the

teachers' intentions for future teaching in this study is therefore as essential as investigating their current practices. Having experienced the EP project, for instance, Matt decided that in the future he would make sure not to leave his students at a loss because of complicated instructions: "My experience ... made me see the importance ... of simple, clear instructional delivery. At this point in the conversation, regardless of what language is used, instruction should be succinct and understandable and should avoid freaking the students out" (Interview). He was determined to apply what he had learned in the project to future teaching ("instruction should be succinct and understandable"). Although Aitani sometimes revealed some tentativeness during the project, she was assertive about her teaching practice in her interview:

We don't want to use only pre-planned expressions from the teaching plan or textbooks. When we have new activities, it is natural to run into new expressions. In the future, I would like to achieve a right balance in introducing known and unknown expressions. (Interview)

The teachers at a non-vocational school also declared their intentions for future teaching. In one group discussion, Sam addressed his interest in pursuing appropriate ways to deal with wait time: "If you go too fast, then that kind of puts them off, but you can't wait all class for them to come up with an answer. I'd like looking at that and trying to figure out what's most appropriate" (Group discussion). During the final pair discussion, Sam, Takahashi and I examined teacher feedback for students in class. Sam noted: "hopefully to some extent I want to provide students with corrections to help them realize their mistakes". Takahashi added: "I want to think about how to give feedback when it comes to writing activities as well" (Pair discussion). In other words, they will continue exploring various feedback techniques for their students.

The EP project thus seemed to have motivated the teachers to apply the lessons of the EP project to various facets of future classes.

**Becoming responsible by taking control.** The EP project seemed to have also helped the participants become more responsible teachers and researchers by taking control. All the teachers generated alternative teaching ideas and sometimes implemented them in practice. Furthermore, they made suggestions for further EP studies.

*Alternative teaching ideas.* Dewey (1933) maintains that it is through an attitude of open-mindedness and a willingness to seek alternatives that teachers come to understand their own assumptions about themselves, their students, and the nature and impact of their teaching practices. In a similar vein, Fanselow (1987) recommends language teachers be reflective and find alternatives for their teaching practices: “Only by engaging in the generation and exploration of alternatives will we be able to see. And then we will see that we must continue to look” (p. 474). We can therefore argue that the generation and offering of alternative ideas regarding teaching practices on the part of the participants is an indicator that they are taking responsibility for their own teaching and research activities as practitioners/researchers. For instance, Matt mentioned in the third pair discussion with Aitani an alternative method for giving instructions because he thought the method he used in class during Cycle 3 was too complicated: “I think mainly the fault was mine in that it was just far too complicated.... What I was wishing I had done was, simple, minimal, using some visual aids, perhaps” (Pair discussion). In the second focus group discussion, he discussed an alternative method for how to run a particular aspect of his lesson. In the class during Cycle 2, a student was nominated to write her answers to a particular exercise on the board. The other students were not engaged in any activity at this time and were left to sit and wait until the nominated student finished writing. Matt suggested that while the

other students were waiting for the student to finish writing, they “should’ve been writing something down themselves” (Group discussion). As a result of reflection, therefore, Matt was able to examine the team-teaching practices employed and proposed alternatives.

During the second group discussion, Aitani reconsidered her first language (Japanese) use in the classroom:

I should have used less Japanese.... Maybe I shouldn’t have said or explained all the things they should do in the activity in Japanese. Maybe I should take time in explaining it so that they can understand, and use simple English and give them more chances to listen to English. (Group discussion)

Aitani regretted the amount of Japanese she used in class and started to consider alternative practices (i.e., taking more time for explanation and using less Japanese and more English). She shared these potentially effective alternative practices with others in the group discussion.

In the final pair discussion at a non-vocational school, Takahashi, Sam and I watched a video clip of their class during Cycle 3 and discussed teacher feedback in response to students’ comments. The teachers began by saying that recasting (see Nicholas, Lightbown, & Spada, 2001) is the most appropriate technique to provide feedback in communicative language classrooms. I followed this up with a question, and our conversation continued:

Hiratsuka: OK, but I play the devil’s advocate here. What do you think could be the disadvantage of recasting for this activity, if any? What could be the possible problem if you only give them recasting feedback?

Takahashi: Some students want to listen to clear explanations in Japanese.

Sam: Yeah, in Japanese.

Takahashi: So, for such students, recasting is to be unclear, not understandable. They need more clear explanation, grammatically in Japanese....

Sam: ... like she said, for students who want to know why what they said was wrong, it might be a problem. (Pair discussion)

After being prompted, Takahashi and Sam saw the potential negative side of recasting and commented that some students might prefer to receive direct explanation in Japanese. This shows how dialogic and collaborative activities within the EP project can promote teacher learning (Johnson, 2009) as well as how context-sensitive pedagogic knowledge can emerge from classroom teachers who have substantial knowledge about their students and their situated circumstances (Kumaravadivelu, 2012).

During the second group discussions, Takahashi and Sam *collaboratively* generated an alternative guiding method for their students. After watching a video clip of their second observed class where groups of students had to choose a pet's name from three possibilities, stating either their agreement or lack thereof with their previous group, they entered into the following exchange:

Sam: So every group said, "I agree", and every other group said, "I disagree".... They have maybe 10 different ways of saying this but they all used the same expressions.

Takahashi: Actually we covered all different expressions in the first part of this class. We should have had them use the other expressions.

Sam: They have their textbook open so we would be like, “If they say this, you cannot repeat, you have to try something else”. (Group discussion)

Reflecting on the class by watching the clip, they realized that all the students repeatedly used the same expressions (“I agree” and “I disagree”). It became clear to them that they could have provided their students with an alternative, i.e., having the students use different expressions in the textbook. The teachers were able to develop the alternative teaching practice as a result of mediational activities, i.e., watching video clips of the observed class (Golombek, 2011) and interacting with their teaching partner.

***Suggestions for further EP studies.*** Providing suggestions for further EP studies might serve as an indicator that a participant has taken ownership of the project as a responsible researcher. All the teachers seemed to have understood and taken control of their research activities. Matt, for example, suggested that the EP project might involve a greater number of participants: “Having more groups may be interesting but maybe not as efficient in sort of intimate sharing of information. It would take longer for more people to become comfortable enough to talk. Given more time, it might work” (Group discussion). He also suggested that the number of *themes* explored could be increased: “Each pair could afford to look at two themes” (Group discussion). Further examples of him being a responsible researcher came from his interview. Firstly, he showed aspirations for conducting a similar kind of EP project with different participants: “As this sort of one-off project at this point has done, it has been so valuable, but if we had the opportunity to continue to

do it with other combinations of people, we would gain so much” (Interview). Secondly, he proposed an alternative method of class observation: “the presence of a third teacher ... could be eliminated. Ideally if you could just have cameras ... they [the students] would be less aware of the observation ... less likely to behave differently” (Interview). He felt it would be less intrusive for the students if the external researcher (in this case, me) could be excluded from class observations. He also talked about possibilities with different project members, the optimal number of the cycles, and the potential of a similar EP project as a teacher development opportunity:

it would be fun, for example, to interact with the same pair a number of times. It could be a pair from the same district, so you could come together more easily and more often.... I think it would be interesting to try and do it on a more regular basis. If the board of education could involve this type of project as part of their team-teaching curriculum ... I’m sure the students will really be able to value from that. (Interview)

Aitani also suggested an alternative method for conducting EP studies. In the interview, she commented:

I wanted to watch Takahashi’s class in person in the classroom. Even though I watched the five-minute video clips and listened to the flow or organization of the classes, sometimes I was not able to get a grasp on the whole class. So the discussion would have been more to the point if we could have directly watched their classes. (Interview)

Aitani wished that she could observe an entire class of the other pair in person in order to have discussions which are “more to the point”. She seemed to have become a responsible researcher picturing in her mind an EP project which

could be more meaningful for her personally. Her comments clearly point to the importance of taking into account both the teachers' available time and various types of class observations when planning professional development opportunities for language teachers.

In the third group discussion, Sam provided his suggestions for how themes could be chosen in an EP project: "it would be interesting to compare if two groups chose the same theme of doing, like, instructions to see what they do and compare them" (Group discussion). In his interview, he reflected on the whole EP experience and proposed other possible ways to conduct an EP project. He seemed more certain than before about what an EP project could entail for its participants:

I think that alternatives that you can consider as to what to add or take away would be if me and Takahashi would actually go and see their class or even switch classes. Like you plan for our class and I plan for your class and teach your class to see how and what the students think and be confronted with a completely different style of teaching.  
(Interview)

Like Aitani, Sam wished they could watch the other pair's classes in person. He also proposed that they plan and conduct classes in the other pair's school so that they and their students could experience various teaching and learning approaches and broaden their perspectives. Sam also suggested narrowing the focus of the research: "Maybe it [the goal of the project] was a little broad, maybe we could have been a little more focused. But at the same time because it was broad, it allowed me to explore a lot of different possibilities" (Interview). He thus offered three alternative suggestions for an EP project: (a) participating pairs choose the same theme and compare their thoughts and

results; (b) participating pairs teach each other's classes; and (c) the research focus be narrowed down more rather than being so open-ended.

Takahashi also provided a suggestion at the end of Cycle 1 about the use of the five-minute video clips:

It took me time to understand the other team's teaching because I didn't have any information about it [the observed class] beforehand, like whether it was at the beginning of the lesson or the end of the lesson. It might have been better if both teams had chosen the same part of the lesson, such as the presentation of the new material or the explanation of the rule by ALT. (EP story)

Takahashi wanted to compare the same phase of classes from both schools as it took her a while to figure out what was going on when she watched the video clip of the other pair in the first group discussion. She thus assumed the role of a practitioner-researcher who is in charge of her own research by devising an alternative method for choosing the five-minute video clips. When I read her comments, I, as an outside researcher, had to immediately make a choice as to whether or not I should incorporate her suggestion into the ongoing EP project. In the end, I did not do so because: (a) the two pairs had already chosen different themes, requiring them to focus on different phases of the classes; (b) Takahashi was the only one who made the suggestion, and the other three teachers did not respond to her comments after having read her suggestion; and (c) I presumed that as the project progressed she would get used to the existing process for recording and reviewing video clips and that transcripts of the classes and explanation provided by the other pair would help her understand what was happening. However, at the same time I felt like I was defeating the purpose of teacher-initiated investigation (EP) by not having integrated her idea into the project. The incident showed me how complicated it is to strike a

balance between the aims, needs, views, and abilities of the researcher and those of the participants.

### **Implications and Conclusion**

As a result of experiencing the EP project, all the teachers evidently displayed their agency by making responsible choices, i.e., participating in the EP project with a high level of engagement and/or being serious about future teaching. They also took more control of their teaching by generating alternative ideas and by making suggestions for further EP studies. My study might thus serve as a beneficial addition to the field of language teacher education particularly because it has inquired into the possible positive relationships between teacher development opportunities in the form of EP and the increase of teacher agency. Notwithstanding time and resource constraints, therefore, I suggest that language teachers, preferably with support from school administrators and teacher educators, embark upon teacher-initiated investigation (EP) through which they can locally and personally engage in issues meaningful to them, as opposed to many of the current professional development opportunities which normally come in the form of one-day or two-day workshops outside the school.

It is expected that there would be differences in the manner in and extent to which an EP project affects participants' agency. They might derive from participants' individual differences (e.g., perceptions and experiences associated with research), participating pair discrepancies (e.g., their experiences and relationship as a pair), contextual factors (e.g., workloads and school/class research culture) and research-related matters (e.g., focus and goals of the project, duration of data collection, and outside researcher). Nonetheless, various outcomes and influential factors that further EP projects might reveal will help us better understand and have clearer expectations about

what participating in such projects entails. I hope that this paper will engender more examination of the utilization of EP for language teacher education.

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## 論文要旨

### 日本における深究的実践活動(EP)の一例： 言語教師のエージェンシーに焦点を当てて

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教師主導的実践研究、特に探究的実践活動(EP) (Allwright & Hanks, 2009) が言語教師の教育活動や研究活動にどのような影響を与えるかはあまり知られていない。本研究では、独自に開発された EP プロジェクトが EFL ティームティーチング環境下で働く言語教師の活動、特に彼らのエージェンシーにどのような影響を与えるかを検証した。データは2つの高等学校で働くティームティーチングペア2組から授業観察、ペアディスカッション、グループディスカッション、EP ストーリー、そしてインタビューといった質的手法を通して収集された。その結果、その EP プロジェクトは先生方の教師・研究者としての主体性を促し、責任感を増幅すること、つまり彼らのエージェンシーを高めることが判明した。本論では最後に言語教師教育に関する提言を行う。