

Exploratory Practice (EP): A Case Study of Communication Arts Students at UBU

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Abstract

English in Communication Arts is a compulsory course at Ubon Ratchathani University, Thailand. The main purpose of this course is to promote the English language of communication arts students enrolled in the course. By adopting Exploratory Practice or EP (Allwright & Lenzen, 1997) as a theoretical framework for investigation, this empirical study aims to explore how EP supports the students' English language learning. In addition, insightful information on their difficulties in learning English and how they deal with those difficulties are discussed. In terms of analysis, this research study follows a qualitative research tradition in that raw data collected from different data sources, for instance, focus group interviews, reflection papers, and students' journals, are analysed to make sense of these data as well as to triangulate and validate the emerging themes. The results from this research indicate that most of students developed a favourable attitude towards EP and also that EP can be used to promote English language learning since it enhances the understanding of the learners themselves and supports them to design more appropriate activities to improve their English. When using EP, the students are motivated to learn English, have more confidence in speaking, and become more self-disciplined. The findings from this research study also provide insights for understanding students' puzzlement in learning English, contribute some ideas on language development, and make invaluable contributions to a future ESP course at tertiary level.

Keywords: Exploratory Practice (EP), English for Specific Purposes (ESP), Classroom Research

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Introduction

English in Communication Arts is considered a compulsory subject for students in Communication Arts Program at the Faculty of Liberal Arts, Ubon Ratchathani University (UBU), Thailand. The purpose of the course is to support communication arts students to use English more effectively. To be specific, the students should be able to write newspaper and television news, produce scripts for television advertisements and documentaries as well as design a magazine advertisement and a public relation flyer.

In 2015, I, as an English teacher responsible for teaching this subject, I designed my lesson plans, activities, and handout to support my students' learning, expecting that these designed activities would help to promote English improvement and more importantly achievement of the learning objectives previously mentioned. For example, I assigned them to do communication arts projects, like writing English newspaper scripts and television news, producing scripts for documentaries or creating slogans for printed and television advertisements. At the end of the term, I organized informal group discussions with the students, and the purpose of this discussion was to explore their opinions on learning while they were enrolling in the course. Apart from benefits they gained from their enrollment in the course, one issue emerged from our discussions; that is, they considered English as a very difficult subject, and their poor English skills directly affected their learning performance. More importantly, they stated that they encountered difficulties in completing the assigned projects (Translation, Group Discussions, May, 2015). According to my students' reflections on their problems, I profoundly puzzled my teaching and designs of the lessons and activities in that they may have not appropriately or successfully supported the communication arts students in learning English. In other words, alternative ways of teaching and learning should have been implemented for this group of learners.

As a teacher and a researcher, my review of literature on English language teaching and learning shows that Exploratory Practice or EP (Allwright & Lenzuen, 1997; Allwright, 2003) may be adopted to promote the students' learning in this context. Although EP has been predominantly used as practitioner research for professional development of teachers in their classroom life, the literature on EP suggests that EP could possibly be utilised for promoting the students' English language learning as it involves a group of practitioners, mainly teachers and learners (Allwright, 2003). Accordingly, EP could be adopted to promote students, a group of learners, to understand their own practice and support learning through their own designs of pedagogic activities (see e.g. Gunn, 2005; Po-ying, 2007). In addition to its use to promote their understanding, suggested ideas in doing EP (Allwright & Lenzuen, 1997) is adapted not only to create a set of guidelines and guided questions but also to support the students' exploration of their own puzzles, reflection on their own practice, and design of their own activities.

The main objectives of this empirical study are twofold. First, it aims at exploring the communication arts students' perceptions towards EP experience. Second, the students' perceptions on the impacts of EP in their English language learning are investigated. The findings from this research study can provide insightful information on the students' EP experience and contribute initiatives for language learning and

development.

Literature Review

1.1 What is Exploratory Practice?

Exploratory Practice or EP is considered a postmethod pedagogy (Kumaravadivelu, 2006, pp. 66-68) promoting local practice by employing the EP principles for understanding classroom life as well as promoting better teaching and learning. Exploratory Practice, first introduced by Dick Allwright in the 1990s and generally based on the work with teachers in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, is primarily employed as practitioner research (Allwright, 2003), and its main principle was to develop practitioners' understanding and investigation of their classroom life, rather than following scientific research methods (Allwright & Lenzuen, 1997).

The term "puzzle" is used rather than the term, "problem." In this theoretical framework, the term "puzzle" is considered more appropriate, due to its objective, promoting understanding and improvement in teaching and learning (Allwright, 2003; Allwright & Hanks, 2009), instead of finding ways to solve problems. In this research study, the term "puzzle" (Allwright, 2003) is used for students' explorations of their own problems as well as reflection on their own learning; moreover, the key is to support them to understand and improve their learning, rather than solve problems (Allwright, 2005).

EP, developed by Allwright and Lenzuen (1997) follows common steps in that it explores puzzles in a teaching and learning context. In order to gain more understanding of the puzzles, reflection is additionally needed before actions are taken. Furthermore, data are collected and further investigation is examined or explored if there is insufficient data for justification. In this research paper, this EP practice is adopted as the main theoretical framework. However, the practice is justified to make it appropriate to a group of students.

1.2 Research studies on EP

My review of the literature suggested that EP has been widely employed as practitioner research for teacher development, such as to promote understanding and practice of teachers (Bartu, 2003; Best, et al., 2015; Braga, Fish & Lyra, 2003; Dar & Gieve, 2013; Hanks, 2015a), as well as to explore their puzzles (Braga, Fish & Lyra, 2003; Dar & Gieve, 2013; Hanks, 2015b). For example, Dar and Gieve (2013) studied the use of EP in exploring the teachers' puzzles on their students' responsibilities outside class whereas others (e.g. Best, et al., 2015; Hanks, 2015b; Soomro, 2012) explored the experience of English teachers in EP at a tertiary level. EP is also used to promote team teaching for English language teaching, such as in Japan in which seven principles of EP were introduced to team teachers enhancing their team-teaching opportunity (Hiratsuka, 2016).

There is also literature on the employment of EP to promote teaching and learning (e.g. Gunn, 2003; Gunn, 2005; Perpignan, 2003). In these research studies, teachers and students involved in EP projects, aimed at developing their understanding in their English classroom. "Reflection", such as feedback writing (Gunn, 2010; Perpignan,

2003) or a reflective journal (Marquez & Wyatt, 2016) is used as a tool for developing understanding. Similar to abovementioned studies, Chuk (2004) highlighted the usefulness of EP in promoting learners as well as teachers in EFL classroom.

In addition, there is research on the use of EP with learners (e.g. Hanks, 2013; Ma, 2012). For example, Hanks (2013) introduced EP for undergraduate students in English for Academic Purposes courses. This study might be similar to my study in that EP is employed as a tool to promote English language learning. Unlike Hanks' study, my research focuses on the engagement of the students to study English in an ESP course. Another research focusing on learner development is conducted to promote learner autonomy in arts subjects (Ma, 2012).

Methodology

This section presents the methodological framework in this research study. It is composed of six main parts. The first part introduces the nature of this research study. The second part introduces the research questions, and the third part explains criteria to select a group of participants and the research setting, and the fourth and the fifth parts describe the research plan and the data collected. Lastly, the final part deals with the procedure for data analysis

1.1 Nature of research

This research study is qualitative and exploratory in nature, and the “interpretation of meaning” is considered important. Additionally, this study also positions its stance as “post-positivist”. The relativist view (see e.g. Gray, 2005; Johnson, 1992) also influences the nature of this research, believing in construction of knowledge and “insider meaning” (Dörnyei, 2007, p. 38). In this empirical study, students' perspectives on their experience in EP as well as their perceptions on the impacts of EP towards their English language learning are constructed and interpreted. Accordingly, “subjectivity” is considered significant in this research study, which is owed to the fact that I, as a researcher, am responsible for the design of methodology and interpretation of the raw data collected.

Although there is criticism of qualitative research on its generalisability, lack of research rigour, or personal bias (Dörnyei, 2007, pp. 39-40), a design of methodology—i.e. provision of evidence from different data sources for triangulation (see e.g. Bryman, 2004; Newby, 2010) and careful data collection and analysis procedures—probably helps minimise this criticism. In this circumstance, the triangulation of raw data from different data sources—i.e. focus group interviews, students' journals and reflective writing papers—not only increases the confidence of research findings but also makes the research more rigorous.

In terms of analysis, this study follows a qualitative research tradition in which raw data are analysed to make sense of the data collected. Moreover, generalisability is insignificant in this research study because it is an empirical and small-scale study. In contrast, its aim is to reveal insightful information on experience of communication students in EP and the influence of EP on their learning. Accordingly, it is expected that the persons gaining benefits from this research study are participants involved,

and the results of this study will make an invaluable contribution to future ESP courses for communication arts.

1.2 Research questions

The research study will investigate the following questions:

- What were the students' perceptions towards their experience in using Exploratory Practice?
- In the students' perceptions, how did the EP influence their English language learning?

1.3 Participants

This research study adopts a purposive sampling (Palys, 2008) or judgement sampling as a technique (Tongco, 2007) to select a group of participants. As mentioned in the previous section, the objective of conducting this research is to explore the experiences of communication arts students in EP. The selected technique is considered appropriate as a group of students who met my research objectives and requirements were chosen. Accordingly, 36 students enrolled in the English for Communication Arts course at the Faculty of Liberal Arts, Ubon Ratchathani University, in the second term (January-May 2016) of the academic year 2015 were appropriately selected as a group of participants. Furthermore, to protect their confidentiality, pseudonyms were used.

1.4 Research plan

To collect data, I designed my research plan, as summarized in **Table 1** below:

Week	Activities
Week 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meeting a group of participants • Giving an overview of the course outline (i.e. learning objectives, mark distribution, lessons and activities) • Introducing the research project and explaining about the concept of EP, types of activities (i.e. journal writing and reflective papers), and other important issues (i.e. research purposes, confidentiality and consent)
Weeks 2- 15	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teaching • Doing communication arts projects • Implementing EP • Writing a student journal
Week 16	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Writing a reflective paper • Organising focus group interviews

Table 1: Research plan (January-May 2016)

The plan of this research study was designed to collect data in order to answer the research questions mentioned above.

1.5 Data collected

In this research study, three main data sources were collected for analysis and triangulation. These sources include (1) the focus group interviews (FG), (2) the student journals (SJ), and (3) student reflective papers (RP). First, the focus group interview (Birmingham & Wilkinson, 2003; Gray, 2005; Knobel & Lankshear, 2004; Newby, 2010) was employed for primary data collection. In this study, the focus group interview is considered appropriate, for to the reason that it provides shared information from different views of participants. In this study, each focus group interview was composed of 6-7 participants. To facilitate the interview, the focus group interview guide, consisting of guided questions was also prepared. Second, the student journal was a secondary source of data. The main objective of writing the journal was to allow students to reflect on their experience during the employment of the EP framework in promoting their learning. A list of guided questions was also prepared to support the students' writing. Third, to triangulate the analysis of the primary data source, I also assigned the students to write a reflective paper at the end of the term. The main purpose of this writing was to allow the students to express their opinions after their participation in the project, more specifically, the use of the EP framework. Guided questions were also provided for the students to answer.

1.6 Data analysis

The data analysis procedure follows the nature of this research study (see Nature of Research) in that the "interpretative approach", focusing on the interpretation of meanings (Corbin & Strauss, 1998) is adopted for developing core or emergent themes. To make sense of the data collected, the technique of line-by-line analysis (Cresswell, 2005) and categorical analysis (Knobel & Lankshear, 2004) were also adopted. In addition, the English-Thai translations were reviewed and edited by an English expert.

Results

This section is divided into two main sections. The first section reveals the findings from the analysis to answer the first question regarding the students' perceptions on their experience in EP. The second section reports the results of the analysis to answer the second research question on the students' perceptions towards the impacts of EP in their English language learning.

1.1 Students' perceptions towards their experience in Exploratory Practice

To answer the first question, the analysis of the verbatim data indicated that the students had both favorable and unfavorable attitudes towards their experience in the use of EP in promoting their learning of English.

According to the analysis, for a group of students with favorable attitude, they pointed out that doing EP supported their English learning (B, D, E, F, H, I, M, P, Q, R, S, U, X, Y, Z, AA (FG)). For example, Z mentioned that EP helped improve her writing skills. She said:

“It (EP) is a very good activity. I have never believed in myself that I can write English news.” (Z, FG, 30 May 16, my translation)

In addition, E stated that she developed her favourable attitude on EP, because of its benefits on developing understanding of her own puzzles. She said:

“...after using EP. I know what my problem is and what I should do to solve it.” (E, FG, 19 May 16, my translation)

In contrast, some students had an unfavorable attitude towards EP (B, P, Q, R, S, W (FG)), and the verbatim data showed that they had different reasons why they disliked it. First, the data analysis showed their puzzlement in doing this EP activity (A, B, W (FG)). For instance, W said:

“At the beginning, I was puzzled about why I was asked to do this activity [EP]. Why do I have to reflect on what puzzles or problems I encounter from my study and how I should solve them? I think it is childish.” (W, FG, 25 May 16, my translation)

Other students like Q and S (FG) also felt bored and did not want to participate in the EP activity while R (FG) expressed her laziness in doing it. More interestingly, three students, that is, B, P and S (FG) developed depressed feelings when they were assigned to do EP. Additionally, T developed a feeling of discouragement after doing EP. She said:

“...I feel that my problems [in English] have not been solved. I have faced the same problems, and I don't really know what to do... Although I have tried different ways to improve my English, I don't succeed. I feel so discouraged.” (T, FG, 25 May 16, my translation)

Moreover, due to unsuccessful practice of EP in promoting their English, some students had a negative attitude towards EP (C, AB (FG))

Despite that fact that some students had an unfavourable attitude on EP, the analysis of the data indicated that there was a group of students who changed their attitudes on EP, which happened after their successful experience in EP. For instance, B, P, S and Z (FG) stated that at the beginning, they had an unfavourable attitude for EP; nevertheless, they gradually developed positive attitudes towards the use of EP after their participation in this research project. This change was caused by the fact that EP helped them notice their own puzzles and find their own ways of learning, and more importantly this strategy promoted their improvement of English language learning, as shown in the following example:

“...at first, I was puzzled why the teacher asked me to write... what are the benefits and the effects of EP writing?... But on the second week, I realised that I could use my own suggested ideas of learning to improve my English...” (P, FG, 25 May 16, my translation)

In conclusion, this section suggests that in the students' perception, they had a more favourable attitude towards the use of EP for their English language improvement.

More importantly, as evidenced in the abovementioned data, their favourable attitude develops from their successful experience in using EP to promote their language learning.

1.2 Impacts of doing Exploratory Practice on the students' English language learning

This section presents the analysis of the data to answer the second question on the impacts of EP on the students' English language learning. According to the analysis, in the students' perceptions, most of the students agreed that they gained benefits from EP in that it promoted their English language learning.

Firstly, the students mentioned that EP helped them explore and understand their own puzzles (A, D, E, L, P, Q, R, S, T, U, V, Y, Z, AA (FG)). For example, A said:

“EP helps me explore and understand my own problems [in English]. If I don't understand some lessons, I will explore my own problem by writing it down in my journal...” (A, FG, 19 May 16, my translation)

The analysis of the students' reflective papers showed a similar finding in that EP promoted understanding of themselves (18 students) as evidenced by the example excerpts in their journals:

It [EP] is an activity that supports me to have a better understanding of myself. (AC, RP, 24 May 2016, my translation)

It [EP] helps me have a better understanding of myself, knowing my weaknesses and strengths... (AD, RP, 24 May 2016, my translation)

And:

It [EP] helps me explore my own puzzles in learning and know how to solve those puzzles... (AF, RP, 24 May 2016, my translation)

In addition, the data from the students' journals, as summarized in **Table 2**, showed the common puzzles of the students.

Puzzles	Examples	Numbers of students
Writing	Slogans, scripts, news	35
Vocabulary	Technical terms, words used to write scripts, slogans or news	27
Pronunciation	Accent	23
Grammar	Sentence structure, verb tenses, adjectives, part of speech	
Listening	TV ads, news	13
Reading	-	4

Table 2: Common puzzles of the students

Secondly, the understanding of their own puzzles directly influenced individual designs of their own preferred learning strategies or techniques to be most appropriate to their learning styles. Furthermore, they suggested that these strategies and techniques helped them to improve upon their English language problems (A, D, G, T, Q, R (FG)).

For instance, some students said that they employed technology like the Internet (T, U, W (FG)) or media, such as English films or series (G, F (FG)), for English language practice, as shown in the example verbatim data below.

“...to improve my grammar, I use search engines like Google to search for grammar rules that I have problems with after class...” (T, FG, 25 May 16, my translation)

And:

“...in the past, I didn’t understand about English structures and tenses. But now, I know that if I write the subject followed by the present tense verb, it indicates the present tense. If I write the subject followed by the past tense verb, it tells the situation at present. I found these rules by searching Google...” (U, FG, 25 May 16, my translation)

Apart from technology application, some students developed other techniques to improve upon their English language problems, such as how to increase their English vocabulary (R, W, Y (FG)). For instance, R used the memorisation technique:

“...After class, if I don’t know some words, I will practise my vocabulary learning by memorising those words. I kept doing this until I could remember them, and it works...” (R, FG, 25 May 16, my translation)

Moreover, they found that peer teaching and learning was also an effective tool that significantly facilitated their English learning (T, Y, Z, AA (FG)). The following example shows how T used this strategy to support her learning:

“...I am a slow learner. I solve my problem by working with my classmates. We chose the topic to study individually and then we shared our knowledge later. Working with friends helps me learn faster. I could understand the lesson more when I listen to the teacher’s lecture in class. (T, FG, 25 May 16)

As shown in **Table 3**, the data from the students' journals revealed different activities that they implemented to solve their problems.

Activities	Numbers of students
Writing activities	23
Peer teaching/Group study	20
Self-study and review lessons	14
Project work	10
Grammar learning	9
Pronunciation practice	6
Vocabulary learning	5
Application of technology	2
Listening activities	2
English-Thai translation practice	2
Reading activity	1
Speaking	1

Table 3: Activities the students did to improve their English

Thirdly, the students suggested that EP was used as a tool for lesson reviews. Under this circumstance, they indicated that doing EP provides an opportunity for them to review the lessons learnt in class (A, C, D, E, F, H, K, R, T (FG)), and this review helped improve their English, especially grammar (e.g. verb tenses) and vocabulary (e.g. jargons in the communication arts). For example, D said:

“EP helps me review lessons I learnt from the past weeks. By doing EP, I know what I had studied in previous weeks, and what lessons I should review...” (D, FG, 19 May 16, my translation)

The data from the students' reflective papers also supported this emergent theme, as evidenced in their writing (B, D, F, K, AD, AG, AH):

[By using EP], I can review the lessons learnt in class as well as improve myself in English. (AG, RP, 24 May 16, my translation)

And:

By doing EP, I am aware of my learning in that I have to review the lessons I don't understand or do my homework. (K, RP, 24 Ma 16, my translation)

Another benefit the students gained from participating in this EP activity was that they were more interested in studying English (B, D, F, K, R, Y, AA (FG)). For instance, F shared her opinion on her interest in learning English:

“I am more interested in English because of EP. After I explored my own puzzles, I had to do what I wrote in my journal. For instance, I started to watch BBC news. I have never done this before. EP opens my world, and it encourages me to be more interested in studying English. This learning

experience is totally different from my previous English classes.” (F, FG, 19 May 16, my translation)

In addition to have higher interests in learning, some students viewed EP as a tool to enhance their confidence in speaking, as shown in S’s verbatim data:

“EP supports my English language learning in that it makes me more confident to speak English with a teacher. Before coming to this class, I studied with a foreign guest lecturer. He asked me a question in English, and I could understand what he said. In the past, I could not understand at all...” (S, FG, 25 May 16, my translation)

Lastly, the analysis showed that they increased their self-discipline in learning, and this encouraged them to improve their English. For instance, G stated:

“EP promotes my responsibility in learning. I have increased my discipline because of doing EP.” (G, FG, 19 May 16, my translation)

Despite the benefits of EP, a few students experienced difficulties in implementing it for their language learning. For them, not having experience in EP made them encounter problems surrounding how to explore puzzles or find ways to improve their learning; accordingly, they developed unfavourable attitudes towards EP (A, D (FG)).

Although the analysis of the data indicated that most of the students gained success in using EP to promote their English language learning, there were a few cases of students in which EP was not be successfully employed. However, the unsuccessful stories may not be due to EP itself; in contrast, as evidenced from the students’ verbatim data, self-discipline in learning of students became the main factor influencing their successful implementation of EP (I, L, M, O (FG)).

To conclude, the findings from the analysis suggest that EP has positive impacts on the students’ English language learning as it motivates students to understand their own puzzles, encourages students to design their own learning English activities, provides a tool for lesson reviews, promotes students to interest in English, increases students’ confidence, and helps students become more self-disciplined.

Conclusion

The findings from the data analysis suggested that EP should be considered an alternative approach to promote English language learning for communication arts students at UBU. Regarding the first question, the result suggests that it is possible to use EP as most of the students developed favorable attitudes on EP. Although the analysis indicates that some students had unfavourable attitude, the findings on the changes of the students’ attitude towards EP, due to successful EP stories shed light on the possibility of using EP even with a group of students who have unfavourable attitudes. For example, introduction to successful stories of students in EP may influence students with unfavorable attitudes to be interested in EP. More importantly, this could provide ideas for unsuccessful students in EP to use to design their own activities for learning English.

The findings in response to the second question also shed light on the use of EP to promote English language learning in this context. The first reason is that EP supports individual learning as it allows a learner to explore their own puzzles or difficulties they face. In addition, the understanding of their own learning or puzzles directly leads the learner to find their own ways of learning to improve their English, that is, planning their own preferred lessons or developing their own activities.

Secondly, the analysis also indicates that EP promotes learners to become more reflective. As evidenced in the data collected, it is found that doing EP enhances the students' ability to consider their learning process through their exploration of puzzles and reflection on their practice. The tool to support this reflection is feedback writing on the student journals (see e.g. Bartu, 2003). Under this circumstance, the students will gain more benefits from being more reflective in that they notice their problems in English and develop their own ways to improve it. Additionally, the ability to plan or design their own preferred activities further illuminates the impact of EP on how to become a more autonomous learner, being responsible for their learning. The findings also echoed Chuk's study (2004) and Ma (2012) on the employment of EP in promoting learner autonomy.

As reported in the result section, there was a group of students encountering difficulty in doing EP. Collegiality (Allwright, 2003) between a teacher and students should take part in their explorations of puzzles as well as suggestions of ideas on learning. For example, the discussions among students should be organised to support this group. By doing so, the students facing problems with EP will gain benefits from their participation in the discussions in that they learn from other students sharing their EP experience. In addition, the teacher should take part in this activity. By receiving guidance and suggestion from both the teachers and their classmates, it is assumed that the students would be able to learn from each other as well as receive some ideas of how to design their own learning strategies or solve their own problems.

However, there is the limitation of this research study on its generalisability since this is an empirical study, dealing with a particular group of participants and in a specific context. To increase its generalisability, a mixed methods approach should be employed for investigation. In addition, this framework should be implemented with different groups of learners or another ESP course. The findings from this research study also build upon on the literature of EP in that it supports English language learning in an ESP course.

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