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# Actualizing Exploratory Practice (EP) principles with team teachers in Japan



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## ABSTRACT

This paper reports on my personal inquiry in which I adopted Exploratory Practice (EP) to enhance the team-teaching opportunity in the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) program. Two pairs of team teachers and their students from two Japanese high schools participated in this EP inquiry, which consisted of multiple activities, including class observations, pair discussions, group discussions, EP story writing and reflective classes. This paper focuses on the experience of the team teachers. Relevant data were analyzed using content analysis. Findings suggest that the teachers came to understand and followed, or 'actualized' seven EP principles involving 'what', 'who' and 'how' issues. Factors affecting EP actualization and implications related to EP studies are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

Team teaching by local teachers and foreign teachers has been accepted in various countries. For example, in 1995 South Korea began the English Program in Korea (EPIK). It aims to improve the English speaking abilities of students and teachers as well as to develop cultural exchanges (EPIK, 2015). Against the backdrop of the pressing need to improve the quality of English teaching and learning, in 1998 Hong Kong similarly began hiring foreign teachers (Education Bureau, 2015). Taiwan has been following the trend and recruiting foreign teachers since 2001 (Islam, 2011). This particular team-teaching arrangement is not only relevant to Asian countries but also to other parts of the globe, such as Europe (Slovenia) (see Alderson, Pizorn, Zemva, & Beaver, 2001) and South America (Brazil) (see Corcoran, 2011). Several studies, however, have revealed thorny problems team teachers have faced; for example, lack of planning time for team-taught classes (Carless, 2006), the legitimacy of foreign teachers (Jeon, 2010), and insufficient collaboration between team teachers (Chen, 2009).

In 2001, I commenced working as a high school Japanese teacher of English (JTE) in a northern rural prefecture in Japan. One of the most salient characteristics of English as a foreign language (EFL) education in Japan at that time was the team teaching conducted by JTEs and foreign assistant language teachers (ALTs) hired through the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) program. Similar to team teachers in other countries, JTEs and ALTs are expected to team teach English together in public schools in order to promote grassroots internationalization and enhance foreign language education (CLAIR, 2015). The team-teaching arrangement was, however, introduced as a top-down governmental policy without input from local teachers (McConnell, 2000). Since JTEs neither suggested the idea of teaching with a foreign assistant nor had a concrete image of how to team teach, it was common for JTEs, including myself, to become indifferent, struggle with or even avoid team teaching. For

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many years, I wondered whether there were ways in which we could make the best of the team-teaching opportunity, within the given framework and constraints.

In Japan, researchers have thus far addressed team teachers' general perceptions of JTEs, ALTs and team-taught classes, for the most part through surveys (e.g., Adachi, Macarthur, & Sheen, 1998; Mahoney, 2004). Many suggestions from the studies concern macro levels (e.g., national policies and teacher education programs) that are determined by the government, rather than on micro levels (e.g., individual teachers and team-teaching pairs) that are embedded within the everyday practice of teachers and students. As much as it is necessary to make macro level changes, the changes are slow, and individual teachers and students do not dare reflect on macro discourses which they believe are beyond their control. On a micro level, however, teachers and students are able to influence changes that they want to make firsthand from the ground up. In other words, classroom teachers, in tandem with their students, should be centrally responsible for enriching their lessons by making decisions on their own, as opposed to uncritically accepting top-down guidance.

In order to pursue the potential of team teachers and their students in Japanese EFL contexts on a micro level, an Exploratory Practice (EP) experience was incorporated into the research design as it first and foremost puts local practitioners in the center stage of their research and development.

## 2. Exploratory Practice (EP)

Exploratory Practice (EP) is a sustainable way for language teachers and learners to develop their own understanding of life in the classroom (Allwright, 2003, 2005; Allwright & Hanks, 2009). In the realm of EP, learners, teachers, teacher educators and all of those who are involved with language teaching and learning are treated equally and together explore language classrooms by using usual lesson activities as their investigative tools. EP does not attempt to find absolute answers for classroom practices but to develop our understandings of the quality of them (Allwright, 2003). Gieve and Miller (2006) stressed 'quality of life' and encouraged us to prioritize the local understandings of our lives – both inside and outside classrooms – over such work-oriented matters as lesson productivity or efficiency. Hanks (2009) found it helpful to make a distinction between problems and puzzles: the former being something that simply calls for a solution and the latter being something that is itself interesting and warrants work for understanding. Based on these ideas, seven principles of EP were formulated (see Table 1).

These principles will be discussed in detail below with relevant studies as they became the springboard for conducting my study and helped me significantly to make sense of the participants' practices.

### 2.1. The 'What' issues

Allwright and Hanks (2009) underscored that placing an emphasis on understanding the intricacy of language classrooms is pivotal. Such understanding would allow for enriching 'quality of classroom life' that is intrinsically more important to teachers and learners than any classroom outcomes determined by external standards (Gieve & Miller, 2006). Attempts have been made to achieve the 'what' issues. For example, Slimani-Rolls and Kiely (2014), playing the role of consultants and co-researchers, invited eight teachers to participate in their EP research. The teachers videotaped three 50-min lessons in the 12-week term, identified their puzzles (e.g., "Why don't students engage with my teaching?"), and discussed these in three workshops. It was revealed that the EP experience guided the teachers to deepen their insights about their classroom interaction, led them to consider a new direction for reflective practice and acquire a set of classroom analysis tools. Hanks (2015) critically investigated the implementation of EP in an English for academic purposes (EAP) context in a British university. She illustrated the processes of two teachers experiencing EP with learners of EAP. It was clear that the EP innovation provided the practitioners with a wealth of opportunities for understanding the connection between teaching, learning and research as well as for discussing puzzling questions about learning and teaching. Lyra, Fish, and Braga (2003) examined a corpus of 88 language teachers' puzzles. By grouping the puzzles according to the content (e.g., motivation, anxiety, and institutional lack of interest), they discovered that understanding teachers' and students' actions in a holistic manner is a continuous and complex process and that EP enabled the teachers to go beyond technical teaching aspects and to tackle broader classroom life issues.

**Table 1**

Seven EP principles (adapted from Allwright & Hanks, 2009).

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**The 'what' issues**

1. Focus on *quality of life* as the fundamental issue.
2. Work to *understand* it [quality of life], 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. *Minimize the burden* [the extra workload to carry out EP research] by integrating the work for understanding into normal pedagogic practice.
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