



The Use of Exploratory Practice for Teaching English in a Mixed-Aged Group

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Abstract

Exploratory Practice (EP) has been implemented in English language teaching to promote understanding and mutual development among students and teachers. Most reviews of the literature report on the investigation of EP in a formal classroom context; in contrast, little research has been conducted with a mixed-aged group of learners in a private educational sector. To have a better understanding of this uninvestigated context, this study adopted EP as a theoretical framework to explore puzzles of a group of learners aged from 16-51 years old. An individual semi-structured interview was used as a primary source of data collection and a teacher's diary as a supplementary source to identify the learners' puzzles in a remote agricultural area in rural Thailand. Then, all data was analyzed by using interpretive analysis. The results from this study produce an understanding of the puzzles learners face when studying English. The findings reveal new ideas for future research which designs activities for mixed-aged groups.

Keywords: Exploratory Practice (EP), puzzle, mixed-aged group, private education contexts



INTRODUCTION

Located in a remote area in northeast Thailand, BNS village (pseudonym) is a village where local people (natives) are highly motivated to improve their English. This extrinsic motivation is driven from their desire to communicate with foreigners visiting their village. To support their learning, a private English class is provided to these highly-motivated villagers whose age range is from 16 to 51 years old. One problem when teaching this group is the difficulty surrounding the delivery of effective lessons to improve their English, due to their low English proficiency. In addition, the location of the village in a rural area, insufficient educational resources, and the lack of opportunities to interact with foreigners all may have affected this village's language proficiency and led to delivered lessons being unsuccessful. Therefore, further research investigation to explore puzzles of learners they face in learning English is vital to gain more insight on learners' puzzles. The results from this investigation were also fruitful for designing more effective lessons to use with mixed-aged groups.

A review of the literature suggests a high level of effectiveness when using practitioner research to facilitate language learning (e.g. Allwright, 2003; Farrell, 2015; Wallace, 1998; Willis, 1996) as it promotes a better understanding of classrooms. In this empirical case study, Exploratory Practice or EP (Allwright, 2003) is adopted to explore learners' puzzles in learning English. The term, "puzzle" is used instead of the word, "problem." This is because EP seeks to understand learning before thinking about changing classroom environment to any solve problems (Allwright & Hanks, 2009). According to Allwright (2003), understanding a classroom is the first step in EP to improve the quality of a learner's life both inside and outside classroom, meaning that if teacher and learners understand the problems then they can together deal with it and can enjoy with any lessons that they co-created; moreover, this procedure focuses on mutual development among learners and teachers in specific context.

EP is beneficial to teachers for their professional development since EP allows them to have a better understanding of their own classroom and improve their classroom life, instead of focusing on problems or trying to change it. Learners also gain benefits from EP because they can explore their own puzzles and improve themselves (Zheng, 2012). Moreover, Allwright and Lenzuen (1997) stated that EP is a sustainable way of carrying out classroom investigations that provide language teachers (and potentially the learners also) with a systematic framework.

Most of the literature review reports EP as practitioner research to be investigated in a formal educational context; for example, at a university level (e.g. Hanks, 2014; Pandhiani, Chandio, and Memon, 2015; Chen, 2016; Chuk, 2003), or at a school level (Hiratsuka, 2016). Little research on EP has been conducted in informal education and with mixed-aged groups. Accordingly, it is expected that the findings from this case study will contribute useful information to gain a better understanding of this group of learners and give some fruitful suggestions for lesson planning.

METHODOLOGY

1. Research questions

This case study aims to answer the following questions:

- What are the puzzles around studying English for learners in a mixed-aged group?



- What are the learners' needs in a mixed-aged English class?

2. Significance of the study

•To find the puzzles, or difficulties and needs of learners in a mixed-aged group setting.

3. Scope of the study

This research study is focused on understanding an informal learning environment where learners have a high level of motivation to learn English. This classroom consists of eight mixed-aged learners from 16 to 51 years old.

4. Definitions of key terms

•Exploratory Practice is a name given to a sustainable way of carrying out classroom investigations which provides language teachers (and potentially learners also) with a systematic framework with which to define areas of language teaching that they wish to explore, to refine their thinking about these areas, and to investigate them further using classroom activities, rather than academic research techniques, as investigative tools. (Allwright & Lenzen, 1997: 73)

•Mixed-aged group is one in which learners of different ages are taught together in the same class setting.

5. Nature of the research

The 'interpretation of meaning' is mainly used to analyze data as it is both qualitative and exploratory in nature. This research also positions its stance as 'post-positivist.' The design of the research methodology uses triangulation (Bryman, 2004; Newby, 2010) to minimize the criticism of qualitative research on its generalizability, personal bias, or subjectivity (Dornyei, 2007, p.39-40). In this research, the individual, semi-structured interviews, teachers' journals, and learners' works used to triangulate data not only to increase the confidence of research findings but also to make the research more precise.

In terms of analysis, this research study follows a qualitative research tradition in which raw data are analyzed to make sense of the data collected. Moreover, generalizability is not mainly focused on here because this study uses in particular kind of class in particular area. In contrast, in-depth analysis is considered important to see individual puzzles and to create lesson plans appropriate to this classroom. It is expected that the people that will benefit from this research are participants and researchers, and the results of this study will make an invaluable contribution to guidelines for developing English courses for mixed-aged classrooms in the future.

6. Context of the study

To explore the research questions, the group of learners in BNS village were chosen to reflect a wide range of students in terms of age, educational background, and occupation. This group of learners consists of eight people who were chosen by using convenience sampling (Dornyei, 2007). Moreover, they need to be matched with the objective of the research study. There are one 16-year-old grade 9 learner, a 20-year-old first year university student, a 26-year-old bachelor's degree graduate who is a hotel manager, a 43-year-old farmer, a 44-year-old gardener with grade 6 certificate, a 45-year-old state enterprise employee with bachelor's degree in management, and a 50-year-old housewife. Moreover, there is also a 51-year-old house wife with her Bachelor of Political Science.



Most of villagers here do not have financial support in their study of the English language. This means that most of the learners have considerably poor English skills. There are however some students that can communicate in English, though they may not be effective in daily life conversations. On the other hand, some students can still read and write only basic words like garden, family, or snack.

7. Research Plan

To answer the research questions, the research plan is explained as follows:

Week Activities

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|-------|---|
| 1 | <ul style="list-style-type: none">•Meet the group of the participants•Introduce the research project and research objectives, explain what EP is, and how it will be adopted in classroom (i.e. activities, journal writing, and reflective paper), and other important issues (i.e. confidentiality and consent form)•Interview to explore their puzzles |
| 2 – 3 | <ul style="list-style-type: none">•Data analysis of interviewing |
| 4 - 5 | <ul style="list-style-type: none">•Write a report |

8. Research Methods

As practitioner-researchers, the data were collected by using an interpretative approach, working closely with learners as an insider of the village and simultaneously as a teacher. A multidimensional approach (Richards, Encel, & Shute, 2003) and triangulation were used in data collection procedures to confirm the reliability of the results. The primary source will be the semi-structured interviews of learners in Thai and Esan dialect. The other two, which are teacher's journals and students' works, were secondary sources. Teacher's journals from the former class were collected to support the interviews. Moreover, learners' works were also gathered from the previous class to ascertain their English skill levels and decide on lesson plans.

Guide of Interview

The interview questions were developed according to the works of Dornyei (2007), Patton (2002), Boyce, and Neale (2006). There are five parts to the questions. The first part is the researcher introduction, followed by interviewer information questions. The next part includes questions related to learner needs, puzzles, and background knowledge. The fourth part is related to classroom scheduling, and the last part of the interview is comprised of key closing components. All the questions were asked in Thai or Esan dialect for the best understanding of interviewees and to rid them of any language barrier while expressing their opinions about the class. This allows the study to extract as many puzzles and needs from the class as possible.

9. Data analysis

The data analysis procedure follows the nature of the research study (see Nature of Research). First, the learners' interviews were transcribed to text and translated into English by the researcher and then reviewed by English experts. Back translation (Brislin, 1970) was also used to see accuracy and cultural appropriation in the interviews, from Thai to English. In cases where there were errors, the researchers consulted with an expert to make sure the interview scripts were appropriate and equivalent to the original meaning and context. The interpretative approach was used to determine the meaning of transcribed interviews from individual learners (Corbin & Strauss, 1998). Then, teacher's journals, and learners' assignments were analyzed in



detail to find out students' English skills. Moreover, all data collected is grouped in categories to be analyzed using 'thematic analysis' (Braun & Clarke, 2006.)

RESULTS

In the interview, learners were asked about their personal profile, their learning level, puzzles in learning English, motivations, topics, and scheduling class. These results of the interviews from the participants will be discussed here to understand learners' puzzles and aid in wise decision-making when teaching in similar classroom context in the future.

1.1 Personal profile and level of participants

In this study, there are 8 participants joining in the classroom. They are villagers in BNS village, Thailand. These participants joined in this project on a voluntary basis. They have a variety of age, education, English skills, and occupation. Pseudonyms are used to protect their confidentiality. Each participant's personal profile will be discussed below:

- Now

Now is a sixteen-year-old girl who is nearly finished with high school. She studies in a district high school. She is the quietest student in class (Teacher Journal, 2017). From the observation taken while interviewing her, she is not confident in her English-speaking skills, but she may be able to improve her speaking skill to conversational level if she receives good motivation from her teacher and classmates. She can read sentences but is not able to translate them. (Teacher Journal, 2017) She likes studying the English language depending on her teacher. She stated:

"If the teacher is kind and not too serious, I will be able to learn better than with strict teachers." (Now, individual semi-structured interview, December 6, 2017)

She also mentioned that learning with happiness is more effective. Moreover, a teacher should scaffold students for what will be taught. She also said vocabulary is the most important issue for her because even if she cannot form a sentence, she can still communicate simply using vocabulary word by word.

Her English skill is at A0. She can listen to very short and simple sentences at a very slow speed. In addition, she cannot form sentences on her own or answer questions with words. It is because she was not taught to speak English in her school. She can read only very simple words in daily life. But she cannot read signs, food menus, or short sentences. Mostly she understands signs by using the pictures on them.

- Nok

Nok is a 45-year-old bank officer who graduated with her bachelor's degree in General Management. Her English skills are the best in class. She decided to join this class because she wants to speak with foreigners with more confidence. She wants to present her own village to her foreigner friends, invite them to travel in her hometown, and be able to take care of them. (Nok, individual semi-structured interview, December 27, 2017) She also mentioned in the skill portion of the interview that she can understand written text but does not understand spoken language at a normal speed.

- Ploy

Ploy is a twenty-year-old university student. She decided to join in this project



because she wants to be able to have conversations with foreigners. She is good at reading and grammar testing but cannot speak with foreigners in daily life. Her experience learning English is good. She feels that learning the English language is fun and easy if the teacher has a well-designed teaching plan. (Ploy, individual semi-structured interview, December 2, 2017)

- Jub

Jub is a twenty-six-year-old resort general manager with a bachelor's degree in computer science. She joins in this class room because she wants to talk with her clients for better care taking. She also wants to learn about general spoken language. She can speak English with broken grammar. She finds it difficult to learn English with a strict, inflexible teacher. She was pilloried as stupid in front of classroom just because she could not spell a word correctly. (Jub, individual semi-structured interview, December 21, 2017)

- Wa

Wa is a fifty-one-year-old housewife who holds a bachelor's degree certificate. She was able to speak English when she was studying in university. She can read and understand short and simple articles but is not confident when speaking out loud or using English with native or other accents apart from Thai accent. (Wa, individual semi-structured interview, December 17, 2017)

- Jim

Jim is a fifty-year-old house wife with her high school certificate. Her English is quite good because she studied in an open university for a while, but she did not finish the degree because she had to work at the same time. She studied English language in the university with a mostly lecture-based approach via television. She said the good thing about taking class in the university was that she could choose subjects that she was really interested in. She was asked about the puzzles of her English, which she identified as vocabulary. She can only have a basic conversation. The skill that she wants to improve the most is speaking and listening with general topics found in daily life conversation or describing things. (Jim, individual semi-structured interview, December 11, 2017)

- Wee

Wee is a 43-year-old farmer with her grade 6 certificate. Her English is at the level of A0 according from self-test evaluation. However, she is interested in English because she wants to be able to talk with foreigners who sometimes visit our village. She said that she would like to learn about daily life conversation and focus on speaking and listening first. (Wee, individual semi-structured interview, December 17, 2017)

- Shom

Shom is a 43-year-old farmer with her grade 6 certificate. Her English is communicable by using word by word and easy sentence structures. However, she cannot read and write correctly.

'I want to know that the word like 'can' which alphabet is coming first and follow by what.'
(Shom, individual semi-structured, 2017)

She is always available and ready to learn at night between 6-9 p.m. She prefers to study for 2 hours.

1.2 Puzzles of learning English



- Forgetting the lessons easily

Ploy, Jub, Nok, and Wa stated the same puzzle wondering why English can be forgotten easily if you don't use it. (Individual Semi-structured Interviews, 2017)

Ploy and Jub said that she learned every grammar lesson, speaking and listening skills, reading and writing skills, but still cannot use English in her daily life. One of the reasons is that she forgot what she had been taught already. She also mentioned that there is hardly ever a chance for her to use English. Nok added that she used to be communicable in English, but her English gets worse when it is not being used.

- Lack of self-confidence

Nok, Ploy, and Jub have the same puzzle of wondering how to build their confidence in speaking English.

- Cannot catch up to the class

The puzzle of Wee is trying to find out how to catch up with friends in the class.

- Being able to communicate but not spell words

Shom has an interesting puzzle that she can communicate orally but cannot read and write, due to her working experience with foreigners. So, she wants to improve her speaking skills along with reading skills.

1.3 Motivations

Participants of this research are very motivated and looking to learn more English. Wa (semi-structured interview, 2017) mentioned that she wants to study English to increase her confidence speaking English. Ploy (semi-structured interview, 2017) also added that the English language is important now, when everyone in the world can connect to each other by using the English language as a tool. The English language is also adaptable for her working life (nok, semi-structured interview, 2017). Shom, Wa, Jub, Wee and Now want to take care of foreigners and introduce them to their village, way of life, and regular routines. (semi-structured interview, 2017)

1.4 Learners' needs

1.4.1 Improve their speaking and listening

From the interview, all participants want to learn about speaking and listening. For example,... (semi-structure interview, 2017) said that her listening and speaking skills are not very good while her reading, writing and grammar are quite good. Jib (semi-structured interview, 2017) added that she wants to learn how to speak. It can be more useful in her daily life than reading and writing. Wa (semi-structured interview, 2017) also stated that she knows grammar and some basics of reading and writing already. What she wants to be able to do is speak with foreigners smoothly.

Nok pointed that

“Reading is guessable and there are many tools that can help you when you read, but when you have a conversation with people there are not many tools that can help you. So, you need to learn speaking and listening first.”

Wee and Shom want a teacher to start from the beginning and would love to learn every skill at the same time. Yet, after I asked them to prioritize the skills, listening and speaking are the first two skills that they want to learn. So, the skills that are tough for this class were



speaking and listening under the topic of daily life conversation.

For now, since these students work full time, most of them want to study at night time. However, Nok suggested setting the class on a weekend during the day because there is a meditation activity in our village each night that everyone is a part of. So, the class time was decided according to the majority of participants is held every two days at night time from 6 p.m. to 8 p.m.

To summarize, the needs of learners and the teacher resulted in a seven-people basic speaking and listening class at 6 to 8 p.m. in every 2 days at BNS village.

Discussion and Conclusion

- What are the puzzles around studying English for learners in a mixed-aged group?
- What are the learners' needs in a mixed-aged English class?

According to the result, learners want to learn a basic conversation to use in their daily lives. So, the lesson plan is formed out of the learners' need combining with teacher convenience. The lesson plan then delivered under the topic of daily life conversation. Due to time and distance, learners and teacher have full-time job, teacher will use flipped classroom and peer teaching as a main approach along with Exploratory Practice research. Technology, such as Youtube and language teaching application, might be used in the classroom for 2 hours in each workday. So, after work or school, learners can study by themselves under the guidance of teacher (via online) and friends. At the end of each week, there will be a 2 hours class meeting for students to consult with teacher, doing projects, and share puzzles with classmates. The 40 hours class will start in the 1st to 29 December 2018. This class co-designing between learners and teacher will help learners to cover their puzzles. For example, have

Limitations and implications for further research

There are few limitations of this research study. The first thing is time arrangement. Both teacher and learners are full time students/employees. So, it is quite difficult to find the best matched time for everyone. The result of this research is a localized understanding, it may not be generalizable to every classroom. However, those teachers who have the mixed language ability students may find it useful.

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