

## Co-constructing the curriculum through Exploratory Practice

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# Co-constructing the curriculum through Exploratory Practice

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In this paper, I outline the principles behind the development of an English for Academic Purposes pre-sessional programme, using Exploratory Practice as a framework. Through this framework, I argue, we are able to move beyond the issues of deciding what language and skills to teach, and when to do so, towards a more collaborative approach to language learning and teaching. This fits with the overall goal of EAP teaching, which is to meet student end need rather than work through arbitrarily created 'language levels'. By providing space within the curriculum for 'puzzlement' we move towards a 'praxis of not being sure' (Meyer & Land, 2005), thus encouraging students to take greater control of their own language learning journey and allowing opportunities for teachers to engage in scholarship within and through the curriculum, the syllabus and their own classroom practices.

## INTRODUCTION

Where do you start when developing a curriculum for language teaching? With the whole language system available for potential inclusion, it can be difficult to know where to begin (and end). This becomes increasingly problematic when you are teaching students who come from a wide range of educational backgrounds, with differing levels of proficiency both in terms of knowledge of the code itself and of the ability to harness the various communicative skills needed to demonstrate this knowledge. What content is used as a vehicle to further develop these skills and understandings? How much time should be dedicated to the explicit teaching of structure in comparison to development of fluency? When the focus of language learning is to develop an understanding of, and ability to study within, a specific academic discipline, as is the case in teaching and learning English for Academic Purposes (EAP), to what extent is it necessary for the teacher and student to study language within the disciplinary context and through that particular discourse?

In this paper I suggest a different approach to language (specifically EAP) curriculum development that removes the need to firmly answer the questions posed above and places the development and agency of both student and teacher at the centre. This moves the curriculum away from, as Lather (in Meyer & Land, 2005: 375) puts it 'one who knows' to a 'praxis of not being sure' or 'stuck places', where both student and teacher are conceived of as learners.

In order to do this, I argue that Exploratory Practice (EP), viewed as a pedagogical disposition, can become a principled underpinning for the theoretical and practical implementation of a curriculum. I also suggest that working through EP enables a move towards a more complex identity of multi-directional practices. With this position as a starting point, I outline here how, using EP as a framework to encourage 'curriculum as

practice' (Young, 1998), I attempted to encourage and develop a more scholarly approach to both teaching and learning within and through a Higher Education, EAP curriculum.

## **WHAT IS EXPLORATORY PRACTICE?**

Exploratory Practice is a framework of seven key principles upon which to base language classroom practice and pedagogy (Allwright, 2003; Allwright & Hanks, 2009). It works to combine research and practice within the everyday life of the classroom, encouraging collaboration between, and co-construction of learning amongst, teacher and learner; EP claims that this leads to both empowerment and greater quality of life for all involved. To date, Exploratory Practice (EP) has been described within this principled framework using language and concepts that speak directly to the (language) teaching and (language) learning practitioner. In this way alone it begins to act as a powerful tool in bridging the well documented gap between research and practice in education, arguing that it takes teacher research, action research and reflective practice 'a step further' (Hanks, 2015). By grounding itself so firmly in the everyday practice of the language learning classroom, it has been criticised for lacking theoretical foundations. However, EP does, in fact, claim connections with, and speak to, a strong, rich and eclectic theory base. This ranges from the more practically grounded work on language learner identity of both Kramsch (2009) and Norton (2000, 2016) to Freire's (1973) work on the dialogic relationship between educator and educatee. Whilst this is the most commonly cited influence on the development of EP (see Hanks, 2017), Hanks (2017) has also connected EP to Heidegger's concept of Dasein, or being-in-the world.

## **EXPLORATORY PRACTICE WITHIN THE EAP CONTEXT**

My own experience of working through EP within an EAP context had, I argue, encouraged both a re-invigorated interest in my students (Bond, 2017) and a questioning of my own role and identity as a scholarly teacher (Bond, 2015). I consequently began to wonder whether a curriculum with EP principles at its heart would encourage a similar questioning approach amongst other EAP teaching staff, as well as their students. This questioning converged with a need for curriculum change on a particular EAP pre-session programme, an institution wide strategic focus on the scholarship of learning and teaching, and a generally shifting landscape within UK EAP practices.

EAP currently occupies a liminal space within UK Universities. Units sit uncomfortably both within service departments and a range of academic Schools (linguistics, education, business, for example). Those working in EAP frequently self-identify as non-academic language teachers, yet find themselves working within an academic environment. We are therefore at the epicentre of neoliberal activity within a University; easily privatised as a service unit and the focus of strategies of Internationalisation (Ding & Bruce, 2017).

Increasingly, 'becoming academic' is seen as a means of resisting privatisation (ibid), but also as a duty to our students if we are to truly support them to develop an understanding of the academic discourses and cultures they will be working in throughout their own academic career in a UK university. There is an 'expectation that we do not keep secrets, whether of discovery or of grounded doubt' (Schulman 2000: 50) and also that we continue to engage and question our own practice: 'not only does scholarship potentially contribute to knowledge it also acts as feedback for the practitioner in providing critique and comments' (Ding & Bruce, 2017).

However, with a full teaching timetable, little or no time allocation for research or scholarly activities and conflicting identities, resistance to scholarly engagement can be strong. In order to overcome this resistance, there needs to be a perception of time being available and of any scholarship activity having a direct impact on practice. This directly echoes the principles of Exploratory Practice: that time spent on puzzling should not be burdensome and should reflect and be part of our usual classroom practices.

Arguably, scaling my own individual practice up into curriculum design for delivery by many could be seen as contradictory to the sense of agency and autonomy that are central to EP's theoretical principles. Yet, if we see the terms 'learner' and 'practitioner' (as used by Allwright & Hanks, 2009) as interchangeably referring to both teachers and students, the 5 statements about learners:

*'Learners are both unique individuals (1) and social beings (2) who are capable of taking learning seriously (3), of taking independent decisions (4), and of developing as practitioners of learning (5)'* (2009: 149-153, numbers added), and the principles for practitioners (2009:15):

- *Put 'quality of life' first;*
- *work primarily to understand classroom language learning life;*
- *involve everybody; work to bring people together;*
- *work also for mutual development; make the work a continuous enterprise;*
- *integrate the work for understanding into existing curricular practices (minimise the burden, maximise sustainability)*

also become interchangeable and applicable for all.

In this way, EP can be viewed as the underpinning, primary value on which the layers of curriculum design, curriculum enactment, syllabus development and individual lesson planning and teaching are placed. The enactment of the principles is phenomenological, requiring all participants to unlearn habits, to see strangeness in the ordinary and view classroom life differently. Teaching and learning practices become dynamic because they are not predetermined, dialectic through the need to synthesise contradictions without the obligation to become consensual, and dialogic as negotiation and puzzling for understanding takes place.

## **CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT**

Teaching English for Academic Purposes can be seen to be formulaic, with parallels having been drawn with working in a factory on a production line (Hadley, 2015; Ding & Bruce, 2017; Bond, 2017; Morgan, 2009). The EAP practitioner becomes viewed as a technician and the curriculum based on indoctrinating students via a study skills approach to academic language use. However, increasingly there is a body of work that argues against this approach to EAP, ranging from work on Critical EAP (Benesch, 2001); the Academic Literacies movement (Lea & Street, 1998), as well as more recent discussions around the wide knowledge base required to work within the field of EAP (ranging from Systemic Functional Linguistics, genre theory; discourse analysis to corpus studies) (Ding & Bruce; 2017).

Whilst much has been written about the pedagogical implications of this work, with suggestions for practical implementation by the individual practitioner, there is less literature on how this can be framed within a fully developed EAP (pre-sessional) curriculum. Where there is direct reference to curriculum design (Bruce, 2011; Alexander, Argent & Spencer,

2008) discussion is largely around analysis of theoretical approaches or suggestions are based around the division of teaching into skills sets, with practical examples. Alternative literature is in the form of coursebooks (Alexander & Argent, 2010; de Chazal & Rogers, 2013), which do not allow for institutional peculiarities. This does not generally, therefore, create a clear picture of how to develop a curriculum which draws all aspects of EAP teaching together into a coherent, principled whole, whilst meeting the specific contextual needs of individual students and institutions.

However, the discourse does seem to suggest that curriculum design needs to allow for teachers and students to develop a more reflexive, investigatory and agential approach to their learning. This again connects to the EP propositions around 'learners' (Allwright & Hanks, 2009). Taking this approach to EAP, curriculum design needs, therefore, to consider both the teachers, the students and the context or purpose for learning. This includes the knowledge base of our students' future academic discipline, including its epistemology and ontology. Essentially, an EAP curriculum needs to account for the agents involved in meaning making, and how they do and will interact and engage with each other.

Taking the principle of puzzling through EP as a starting point for a curriculum review, then, I re-framed the question 'How do we best teach EAP?' to the more grounded, practice-based and contextualised question of 'Why do we teach EAP the way we do in Leeds?' Through removing the theory-led, *best practice* question, a more reflexive and collective questioning was encouraged, basing work around *current practice* (Lefstein & Snell, 2015). Again, through integrating 'the work for understanding into existing curricular practices' (EP principle 7, Allwright & Hanks, 2009), this question also worked through the other EP principles of: working to understand classroom language learning life; involving everybody; working to bring people together and working for mutual development (Allwright, 2003;



Hanks, 2017). In this way, the development of the curriculum took place within a shared and negotiated space, where all practitioners were given a voice and we worked together to develop and frame our understanding of what EAP meant in our own specific context.

## **CURRICULUM ENACTMENT**

The curriculum itself also incorporated the principles and propositions of EP. One of the main truisms of EAP practice is that the curriculum should be based on a needs analysis. Yet this is fraught with problems and contradictions. The needs of whom? The students, who come from diverse educational backgrounds, with a range of linguistic strengths and weaknesses? Or the receiving departments, who have an equally diverse range of discourses, technical and conceptual vocabulary? A truly needs based curriculum cannot, therefore, predict and formulaically reproduce materials or plans for learning prior to the registration of a specific cohort of students. It is, however, possible to conclude that students *need*: to understand the expectations their specific subject will have of them both academically and linguistically (at Masters' level this includes the ability to carry out research); to develop their abilities to think both independently and critically; to find ways of taking control of their own language learning within and through their disciplinary studies. In short, the aim of an EAP curriculum should be to support students in a way that empowers them through the knowledge and understanding they develop on our programmes. Again, these broad 'needs' correlate directly to the EP propositions about learners.

By including a specific EP project in Term 1 of a 4 term pre-sessional programme, students are encouraged to develop an understanding of all of the areas outlined above. They are encouraged to identify their own puzzle around their own specific language learning journey, within a new UK HE context and work to investigate and understand this puzzle. This

removes the focus on pre-planned formulaic language teaching which may or may not be useful for the cohort, and places the responsibility for learning directly with the student. The teacher works to support a diverse range of needs – moving from working as a technician towards the more demanding role of expert advisor, meanwhile also working to understand their own puzzles around the work carried out within the classroom.

Understanding their own language learning puzzles encourages students to take ownership of their learning and moves understanding away from language as seen as something learned in a linear and structured fashion. Working through Exploratory Practice also speaks to the principles of task-based language learning and moves students towards an understanding of what a research-led pedagogy might look like. This transition towards student-as-researcher continues throughout the curriculum in Terms 2-4 as students move beyond the language classroom towards a more specific focus and investigation of the language, discourse and cultures of their chosen discipline.

My own current research suggests that this work is vital in helping students make a shift across the liminal space of language as a threshold concept (Meyer & Land, 2005), where they begin to see their L2 not simply as a code or an 'inert crust' (Voloshinov et al, 1973:48) but as carrying underpinning 'psychological and ideological elements' (Pilcher & Richards, 2017) that can only be constructed and understood within specific contexts.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

EP began as a novel approach to language practitioner research that worked to directly include students as powerful actors in the process of learning and teaching, rather than as objects of study. I would argue that at its most powerful, EP is (both simply and complexly) an attitude and approach to teaching and learning which embeds the principles of co-

construction and co-operation that are increasingly highlighted as a goal of higher education practices. By using EP principles as a central focus of curriculum development and enactment they become a constant; the work becomes 'a continuous enterprise' (Principle 6). These principles are vital in order to meet the specific needs of specific students within a general EAP curriculum, and to maintain teacher engagement, development and scholarship. Allowing scholarship and development to take place both within and through the curriculum and teaching practices, the perceived burden of time is removed and the natural ebb and flow of interest and engagement made allowance for. The curriculum becomes a dynamic space for empowerment and for dialogic and dialectic learning and scholarship to take place.

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