

Chapter XVIII

**ADOPTING EXPLORATORY PRACTICE IN A COLLEGE
EFL CLASS: TOWARD RECIPROCAL COLLABORATION
AND REFLECTION**

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Abstract: As globalization is progressing, English has become an important subject in Japan. Although developing higher-order thinking skills through debates and presentations are emphasized, entrance examinations still require rote-learning and detailed grammatical points. Even in college EFL, many universities designate course syllabus and teaching materials in often traditional ways of teaching. Along with long years of teaching in both liberal arts and science fields, the author has realized the importance of teacher beliefs and how to reflect them in assigned classes. Applying a holistic way of teaching is one example, which includes reaction papers, discussion, presentation, and a group-project to raise learners' awareness and knowledge. This paper begins with a brief explanation of English teaching in Japan. Then, what exploratory practice means and why it is necessary in professional development is discussed. Next, how the presenter's teacher beliefs have reflected to actual teaching will be demonstrated with several concrete examples. Finally, it will be discussed that collaboration and reflection in exploratory practice works reciprocally; one way is for teacher's reflection on teaching, and for learners, it will be reflection on their own learning and hopefully their sustainable learning styles. Students' actual comments on reflection will be introduced. Thus teachers can learn from learners and eventually both can collaborate toward a better 'quality of life'.

Keywords: *teacher belief, collaboration and reflection, holistic way of teaching, exploratory practice (EP).*

Present situations of English education in Japan

The tough competition for entrance exams in Japan is often referred to as "examination hell" though it has been easing recently because of the decreasing number of children and increase of schools. Competition seems to become most severe at three different phrases: one in the beginning of first grade, which determines whether a child goes to a public school or a prestigious private elementary school; another at the end of 9th grade, which determines whether a student goes to a vocational school, a first-rate public college-preparatory high

school, a second rate high school, or an expensive private school; and finally at the end of the 12th grade to gain entrance to university (Hayes 2013).

Also, the rapid progress of globalization has alerted Japanese people to the need to master English since globalization is often taken to mean Americanization in Japan and therefore the use of English. Consequently, English language education is emphasized so much so that English will be implemented as a subject in elementary schools, and the nationwide entrance examination system, i.e., the National Center Test for University Admissions, will include private sector organizations which examine skills such as speaking abilities. As a result, English competence has become a marker to widen the gap among students' abilities.

On one hand, more and more speaking abilities are emphasized and eager parents do send their children to tutoring or crammer schools or to overseas programs to enhance their communicative competence, but on the other hand, a large number of high schools prepare students for university entrance examinations that require long hours of rote-learning and studying translation and detailed grammatical points because there are still a number of universities that require examinees to have that kind of knowledge.

Even in college EFL (English as a Foreign Language), many universities designate the course syllabus and teaching materials in often traditional ways of teaching for students who are required to take English for one or two years in college without any special motivation or purposes. At many universities, they offer courses only to prepare for standardized tests, which they believe are helpful in job hunting.

Overall, whether students are geared toward learning speaking English or to pass competitive entrance exams with rote-learning for vocabulary building and detailed grammatical points, students most often enter universities without having a chance to develop higher-order thinking skills through debates and presentations.

In the following section, to help teachers teach holistically with teacher beliefs, what exploratory practice means and why it is necessary in professional development is first demonstrated. Then how teacher beliefs can be reflected to actual teaching will be demonstrated from questionnaire results. Finally, I will show a case study from my class, with students' actual comments.

Exploratory practice in professional development

Earlier in the 1960s, research on teaching focused on the search for effective teaching behaviors and in the 1970s, this view of teaching started to be questioned because it missed the concept that teachers' mental lives played a role in their instructional choices. Also criticized was Scientific Research (SR),

which sometimes seemed to detach from teachers' needs. Subsequently, Action Research (AR) prevailed, which was expected to nurture teachers' development through practical research activities, yet it was still considered to be traditional classroom-based research with a hypothesis.

According to Hanks (2015), Exploratory Practice (EP) is a form of practitioner research in language education which aims to integrate research, learning, and teaching. Answering the needs of newer forms of conventional classroom-based research, EP promotes the idea of teachers (and learners) puzzling about their language teaching/learning experiences, using "normal pedagogic practices as investigative tools" (Allwright 2003: 127).

By incorporating itself into pedagogy, EP seeks to address the issue of the demands of research pulling practitioners away from their teaching and learning responsibilities (Hanks 2015: 2). 'Quality of life' for language teachers and learners is the most appropriate central concern for practitioner research in the field of EP (Hanks 2015: 3).

Table 1: Comparisons of SR, AR and EP made by Yanase (2008)

| | Scientific Research | Action Research | Exploratory Practice |
|----------------------------|-----------------------------------|----------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Period prospering | 1980s | 1990s | 2000s |
| Primary Goal | generate rules | problem solving | deepen understanding |
| Method | Experimental | Quasi-experimental | Open-ended |
| Central concern | Preciseness | Cyclical nature of self-inquiry | Quality of Life |
| Starting with | hypothesis | task | puzzlement |
| Work needs to be conducted | Prescription | Description | Mutual development |
| Concept of Learning | Cognitive behavioral | task | Life |
| Research period | Cross-sectional, | Longitudinal | Sustainable |
| Leaner | Participant | 'Problem' solver | Co-practitioner |
| Researcher | 3 rd person, neutral | 1 st person, singular | 1 st person, plural |
| Relationship Researcher/ | Researcher leads practitioner | Practitioner becomes researcher | Practitioner becomes explorer |
| Demerits | Too much focus on data collection | Intervene actual teaching | May end up in self-satisfaction |

Note: Original is in Japanese.

Overall, Yanase (2008) recommends EP as he explains, EP sees learners not as participants or 'problem' but co practitioner with whom teacher-researcher are involved in the work for mutual understanding.

Along with long years of teaching in both liberal arts and science fields, the author has realized the importance of teacher beliefs and how to reflect them in assigned classes, which will be mentioned in the following section.

Teacher beliefs and how to reflect on teaching

According to Borg (2009), teacher cognition research is concerned with understanding what teachers think, know, and believe. Its primary concern, therefore, lies with the unobservable dimension of teaching – teachers' mental lives (p. 1). For educational researchers, the questions being addressed now were not simply 'what do teachers do?' but also 'what do they think?', 'what decisions do they make?' and 'why?' (Borg 2009: 1).

Beliefs are one of the essential points of all fields in education and they deal with human behaviours and learning (Ajzen 1988). Teachers' beliefs influence their consciousness, teaching attitudes, teaching methods, teaching policies, teaching behaviors and finally, learners' development (Dogruer et al. 2010).

(OECD 2009: 89)

Teachers' beliefs, practices and attitudes are important for understanding and improving educational processes. They are closely linked to teachers' strategies for coping with challenges in their daily professional life and to their general well-being, and they shape students' learning environment and influence student motivation and achievement. Furthermore they can be expected to mediate the effects of job-related policies- such as changes in curricula for teachers' initial [undergraduate] education or professional development – on student learning.

Although it does not explain student achievement or changes in achievement, it highlights one of the factors which is related to their motivation and outcomes, and vice versa, teaching and teachers' life.

Aim of the research

As mentioned earlier, English seems to have gained in importance in universities in Japan so much so that many universities offer courses only to prepare for standardized tests and/or many universities designate course syllabus and teaching materials and procedures accordingly. In the previous study by

Sugino, Ueda, and Abe (2018), we investigated how college English teachers reflect their teacher beliefs and how much they reflect them in their actual teaching, within the limitation of designated teaching materials and approaches in liberal arts education curricula, trying to answer the following research questions.

- What are the background experiences or reason to form such beliefs?
- How do teachers reflect their beliefs within the limitation of designated teaching materials and approaches in liberal arts education curricula?

Methodology

Participants

Through the grape-vine of our colleagues, 13 participants agreed to participate in 2018.

Table 2: Participants' Background Information.

| | sex | age | L1 | level | class type | years | Employment type | Class size |
|-------|-----|------|----|--------|------------|-------|------------------|------------|
| 1. A. | M | 50up | J | Univ. | 2 | 11~ | Full tenured | 21-30 |
| 2. B | F | 50up | J | Univ. | 1 | 11~ | Part time | 31-40 |
| 3. C | F | 50up | J | Univ. | 1 | 11~ | Part time | 21-30-40 |
| 4. D | F | 50up | J | Univ. | 1 | 11~ | Full, fixed-term | 21-30 |
| 5. E | F | 50up | J | Univ. | 1 | 11~ | Full, tenured | 11-20 |
| 6. F | M | 50up | J | Univ. | 1 | 11~ | Full, tenured | 11-20 |
| 7. G | M | 30s | J | Univ. | 4 | 11~ | Part-time | 11-20 |
| 8. H | M | 40s | J | Univ. | 2 | 6-10 | Full, tenured | 21-30 |
| 9. I | F | 40s | J | Univ. | 1 | 11~ | Part time | 21-30-40 |
| 10. J | F | 50up | J | Univ. | 1 | 11~ | Full, tenured | 31-40 |
| 11. K | F | 50up | J | Univ. | 1 | 11~ | Part time | 21-30 |
| 12. L | M | 40 | J | VocTec | 1 | 11~ | Full, tenured | 11-20-40 |
| 13. M | F | 50up | J | Univ. | 1 | 11~ | Part-time | 21-31-40 |

Instrument

A questionnaire with two sections was used. The design of the instrument was done by the researchers. The first section was to investigate participants' background information such as their genders, ages, mother tongues, years of experiences, type of employment, and class sizes. The second section was composed of four questions: 1. What are your teaching philosophies/beliefs? 2. What are the reasons and/or experiences that have influenced you to have them? 3. How and how much do you apply them to your actual teaching?; 4. Please tell me your teaching philosophies/beliefs that are non-negotiable, if any.

Procedure

The questionnaires were distributed to the participants, who are colleagues of the three researchers. It started with a brief explanation stating the aim of the research. Through e-mail, 13 questionnaires were answered and collected. The questionnaire data was analyzed qualitatively. After all the data was put on the spread-sheet, the three researchers selected the salient answers to each question.

Results

All of the participants are college teachers except one (works at Vocational Tech).

Table 3: Results of Open-ended questions on Teacher beliefs

| | a) What kind of teacher beliefs do you have? | b) What are the background experiences to form such beliefs? | c) How/ how much do you apply them to your actual teaching? |
|----------------------------|--|--|---|
| Mr. A 50+ fulltime | To keep a balance between Communicative Approach and the traditional approach. | When I studied TESOL In the 1970s, this was the newest. | I spend much time on discussion. |
| Ms. B 50+ part-time | Do not pre-judge students and/or have stereotypical images toward them. | When I taught at public junior high, I realized it's important to be trusted by learners even before I started teaching. | At each class, I ask students to tell me the problems or questions to be solved beforehand, and if we feel we need to, then try to spare time for discussing further. |

| | | | |
|----------------------------|--|---|--|
| Ms. C 50+ part-time | Help students' self-study. | I've had students having little motivation to study English because of wrong way or not knowing how to study. | Students are given opportunities to do group project with presentations once a semester. |
| Ms. E 50+ full-time | First of all, I always teach students hoping that everyone can participate in the class enjoyably and interestingly. | It is due to learning about SLA in my graduate school and study groups. | I use collaborative learning for one third of my lesson. |
| Mr. G 30s part-time | I would like to be a starter who can offer learners to get interested in learning and enjoy it. | I myself do not want to do things I am not interested in. | For the first 10 minutes, I try to introduce topics to attract learners' interests or about recent popular events. |
| Mr. H 40s full time | It's balance. I teach 'language skills (cognitive development)' and 'world view (human development) | The most influential factor is 'middle way' in Buddhism. | In class, language use and for homework, more emphasis is put on skill based learning. |
| Ms. I 40s part- | To teach & learn everything with joy. Do not give up. | I would like to share happiness of knowing things. | Active learning approach |

For the question 4 [Please tell me your teaching philosophies/beliefs that are non-negotiable, if any],

Ms. C: I want to help students decrease resistance toward English learning.

Ms. C: I make it a rule to prepare well for a class because I do not just go and finish the class. That may be my non-negotiable point. I'd like students not to care too much about the points and find something interesting more through English. Because English is one language that is not static, I'd like them to enjoy learning without concentrating too much on the right answers.

Ms. E: Students change year by year, and so are teaching methodologies that are based on research that are changing (developing) constantly. I feel it is important to catch up the changes and I will try hard to keep up learning more and better teaching.

Mr. H: I feel strongly that the present condition of universities is "microcosm of the future world". The idea that our present condition of universities will decide our future makes me think how to improve the present situations.

For the research question 1, “What are the background experiences or reason to form such beliefs?” the answers in column b) match. For the research question 2, “How do teachers reflect their beliefs within the limitation of designated teaching materials and approaches in liberal arts education curricula?” the answers in column c) match.

To summarize, from the results of this study, we can say that to become aware of teacher beliefs can be beneficial for both teachers and students because the answers to RQ 1 (shown in column b) seemed to connect with the answers to RQ 2 (shown in column c) based on column a), that is “teacher beliefs”.

Collaboration and reflection in EP through actual classroom teaching

Class background

Now I will refer to the class I taught in the Fall Semester (Sept. 2018 – Feb. 2019). The class was taught at a mediocre private university in Tokyo known for Liberal Arts including Law, History, Japanese & Chinese History and Economics. Prior to 2016, the courses were loosely set and teachers (70% were hired part-time) were allowed to choose their textbooks according to their syllabi. However, starting 2017, teachers were to use designated textbooks and follow the set syllabus. Below is the description of this course with bold letters to highlight the salient points.

| | |
|--------------------|---|
| Type of Class: | Compulsory Freshman English. Once a week, one period (90”) |
| Students: | 25 students (14 male, 11 female) majoring in Law. Pre-intermediate (assigned). |
| Textbook: | Japan Goes Global (designated to Japan/Japanese culture) |
| Course Theme: | (Assigned) Make sure to master English basic vocabulary and grammatical points. |
| Attainment Target: | (Assigned) 1. As far as the phrases and expressions you learned in class, you should be able to explain them in Japanese, and to use them correctly in the future course. 2. Related to what you’ve learned in class, you should be able to explain or express your opinions in English about your daily lives, Japanese society and events , whether written or spoken. |
| Grading: | (Required) Covering 15 chapters in 15 weeks, students are given a chapter test (vocabulary, expressions, grammar points , reports), which accounts for 70%. No exams. Participation, class assignments account for 30%. |

My teacher beliefs

All the students in the class had six years of English education, three years in junior and 3 years in senior high school. Most of them had learned English by rote-learning and studying translation and detailed grammatical points. Upon entering college, they hope to learn communicative English though many of them who have entered this university dislike English or feel that they are not good at English. As mentioned earlier, students most often enter this university without having had a chance to develop higher-order thinking skills through debates and presentations in English.

My answer to Question 1: "What are your teaching philosophies/beliefs?"

Applying holistic teaching is one example, which includes (offering chances to the students to engage in) reactions papers, discussion, presentations, and group-project in order to deepen students' awareness and knowledge. In my case, I also try to teach about racism, sexism, linguicism every time related words or concepts are introduced in a designated textbook.

I also tell students the concepts of world Englishes and tell them we should not feel inferior because of limited English abilities. I try to raise awareness of mother tongue, minority languages, and finally why Japanese students need to learn English and to what extent and which Englishes we should aim at.

My answer to Question 2: "What are the reasons and/or experiences that have influenced you to have them?"

My deep interests in history, geography and literature and experiences of studying abroad, have taught me the importance of knowing about those concepts. Though English is promoted strongly in Japan as a part of globalization, I feel students need to know knowledge of not having any 'isms' if they want to become true global citizens.

How and how much do you apply them to your actual teaching?

Unlike the class that I used to teach directly about language policies using the book I had written, "Ten Chapters to know the American Views toward Language: Through the Language Policies against Native Americans, African Americans and Hispanics", you could easily assume how difficult it would be to reflect my teacher beliefs because of designated syllabus and textbook.

In English classes in core education, therefore, every time we come across the words or concepts related to racism, sexism, linguicism in the designated textbook, I try to mention or explain them. For example, we came across the words, salarymen, OLS, and glass ceilings, in the chapter of 'Japan's Company

Culture: The Misery behind the Miracle’. About the word, ‘salarymen’, I introduced PC (Political Correctness) such as policemen, chairmen, and fireman. Then about OLs, I first explained that it’s a Japanese-English word for ‘Office Lady’, and since it can be interpreted as sexist word, I advise the students to simply use ‘office worker’. As for ‘glass ceiling’, as homework, I ask students to check it, and then ask those who had done the homework to explain the phrase in class.

Because time is limited time and course syllabus is set, I cannot assign students presentations directly on the concepts of ‘-isms’. As for the presentation, I asked the students to introduce Japanese or foreign cultures or ideas to the world. I assigned the group members in an alphabetical order, and in the group of three members, they first decided the theme. Their first choices were, for example, Valentine’s Day (because it’s very popular in Japan), fireworks (because Japanese fireworks are beautiful), Halloween, Christmas (because they are popular events in Japan), Tanabata festival (we like the star festival), kimono (because kimono is pretty), and rugby (because one member plays rugby).

Then in the next class, I asked them to examine the topics closely and critically. After discussing among groups in class or outside of class, they decided on the following themes.

Table 4: How the students’ themes changed from the 1st group talk to the 4th

| First theme | reason | Final theme | reason |
|------------------------|-----------------------------------|-------------------|--|
| Valentine’s Day | Popular in Japan | White Day | To think why a day to return gifts ‘White Day’ is not exercised abroad |
| Fireworks | Japanese fireworks are beautiful. | Compare Fireworks | Japanese can take it for granted that we can buy fireworks in the store. Consider restrictions overseas. |
| Halloween Christmas | Popular events in Japan | | Realized they are brought from overseas. |
| Star Festival | We like it. | Star Festival | As it’s originally from China, we’d like to improve relationship with China. |
| Kimono | Because it’s pretty | kimono | Should know about our own culture. Compare the present role of China dress. |
| Rugby | Play rugby | Maori in NZ | Found out Rugby’s Haka dance is Maori’s. This leads to respect Japanese ethnic minority groups. |

My answer to Question 4: “Please tell me your teaching philosophies/beliefs that are non-negotiable, if any”

Linguistic skills are basic but not all. I myself enjoy classes that can help students learn holistically and develop higher order skills, and also the classes where I can learn from the students.

Indeed, with a little suggestion, students can come up with better ideas, and their presentations are insightful to me, too.

Students’ comments

At the end of the semester, with a longer version of a test, I asked the following three questions about their learning.

1. What did you think of this class? (part 1) What did you learn, what was most helpful, and what developed most? What about presentation? (part 2) Reflection points, future goal.
2. Which activities in class were the most helpful and which would you like to continue by yourself? (presentation, reading aloud, writing down the words the teacher read, TOEIC listening, vocabulary test, writing lyrics, and other).

The first question is for the students to reflect their learning. The second part is to help them learn by themselves with sustainability. This will help them continue their learning outside of school and for the future course. In the Table 5, I will show some of the examples.

Table 5: Selected Answers for the Reflection Sheet

| 1. (part 1)What did you learn, what was most helpful, and what developed most? What about presentation? | |
|--|---|
| Mr. E | Since the entrance exam, I have forgotten many words. Vocab. Tests remind me of them. As I had never done presentation in English, I was very nervous but gave me a good opportunity paying attention to pronunciation, too. |
| Mr. S | This class was most difficult of all college English classes because of lots of listening practices which I had not done. Listening over and over helped me listen better. I tried to use simple words for other students to hear easier for my presentation. |
| Ms. O | Pronunciation and listening practice was good. I learned things from actually attending the class instead of just translating over and over like last semester. |
| Ms. T | As for presentation, I felt it was very difficult because group members had to make sentences from scratch, and memorize them. |

| | |
|--|--|
| Mr. K | As it was the first time to make presentation all in English, it was a very good experience. As a leader, through deciding a topic & roles, I felt I got matured. Listening was also helpful. |
| Ms. M | I had never done a presentation in a conversation style. It was more difficult than I had thought while communicating in group, which I felt very important. |
| 1. (part 2) Reflection points, future goal | |
| Mr. E & S | Could not do well TOEIC listening. Will study for TOEIC in the future. |
| Ms. O | Reviewing. In the beginning I did both preparation and reviewing but soon I was too busy reviewing. |
| Ms. T | We paid too much attention to just finishing presentations. Next time, if we have a chance, I'd like to pay more attention to the audience-friendly presentation. |
| Mr. K | I need to increase vocabulary. When we had a chance to write, I often could not find appropriate words. I need more words for successful communication. |
| Ms. M | I only knew English that was taught in school, I never thought of communicating with foreign people that the teacher encouraged. Bear this in mind; I'm going to learn English further. |
| 2. Which activities in class was the most helpful and you would like to continue by yourself? (Presentation, reading aloud, writing down the words the teacher read, TOEIC listening, vocabulary test, writing lyrics etc.) | |
| Mr. E | I'm very bad at listening. Listening and pronouncing confusing words was very helpful. It was good to have a rare experience of getting information and changing it to English and doing presentation. |
| Mr. S | Writing down English words while listening was the best for long-term memory. |
| Ms. O | Read aloud was most helpful. It keeps me motivated and good for pronunciation. |
| Ms. T | Writing down English words while listening was most helpful. |
| Mr. K | Presentation was most helpful. When we were making a draft, we could learn not only words or grammar but also commonsense in the society. |

What is important is not what the students answered but rather that students have to think and reflect on their learning.

Conclusion

In this paper, I first mentioned English language education in Japan. Though communicative competence is called for, it is clear that most students have spent their learning time on preparing for entrance exams with memorizing vocabulary and grammatical points.

It is also clear that teachers have their own philosophy and beliefs about teaching, and try to reflect them in their actual teaching. Teacher beliefs, we believe, will help teachers or future teachers to become reflective practitioners as well as develop learners' cognitive abilities to become active members of this multicultural and multilingual world.

As I mentioned before, collaboration and reflection in exploratory practice works reciprocally. When teachers ask students to reflect their own learning, it will be beneficial for teacher's reflection on teaching, too. By employing many teaching activities, teachers can offer activities suitable for students' learning styles, and for learners, they can reflect their own learning and learning styles, and hopefully can find a sustainable way of learning. Instead of a class evaluation form that is given by school, in this way, teachers can learn from students' actual comments reflecting the class and their learning, and thus teachers can learn from learners and eventually to have a "quality of life" as a teacher, researcher and learner as EP (Exploratory Practice) suggests.

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