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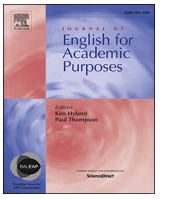

EAP practice

Harnessing learner research agendas to continuously explore EAP learners' needs

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1. Introduction

1.1. The challenge

In September 2018, our institution raised its minimum English language entry requirements for new undergraduates to IELTS 6.5 or equivalent. This presented an opportunity for students whose English language proficiency fell slightly below this level. These international students received a conditional offer, requiring them to pass a first-year EAP module. The challenge for myself and the EAP team was how to enhance their academic English and related literacies over a twelve-week semester and only 3 hours' EAP per week.

In this paper, I reflect on my experience of leading the EAP team's response to this challenge. I first explain why and how we embedded opportunities for our EAP learners to explore personalised research agendas by harnessing a form of practitioner research (PR) called Exploratory Practice (EP). I reveal how our adoption of EP-based learner research agendas was

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informed by EAP academic and practitioner research, recent professional development experiences, and encounters with reflective genres in our teaching. Finally, I identify the synergies achieved from this integration of research and practice.

Before the introduction of this new in-sessional course, our EAP provision consisted of pre-sessional courses, not-for-credit in-sessional modules and credit-bearing business English electives. The new course represented a local innovation that swiftly revealed itself as a high-stakes endeavour for teachers and learners alike. The university's insistence on a higher English proficiency level addressed concerns of key stakeholders. Faculty complained that some students' poor English language skills impacted the quality of their submitted work. Meanwhile, student representatives reported how poor spoken English skills hindered participation in groupwork. To their credit, the university was listening to these voices. However, with the module validated for imminent delivery, the EAP teaching team would now shoulder the responsibility of ensuring students progressed from the module, having achieved the learning outcomes and enhanced their academic English knowledge and skills.

1.2. Anticipating resistance and ensuring relevance

The EAP teaching team's recent experience suggested that these classes would present challenges above and beyond management expectations of retention and progression. Firstly, students might be English-weary, having typically progressed from general English at school via exam preparation courses and on to pre-sessionals. Having perhaps shed EAP facets of their learner identities, they might resist the provision, as previously referred students often had. Secondly, the new cohorts would be multidisciplinary, thus acculturating into diverse humanities, arts and social sciences fields. In many ways, this diversity was welcome, promising an enriched teaching and learning experience. However, it would also mean addressing a wider spectrum of learner needs, an area of inherent complexity. As Liu et al. (2011) suggest, there are three subcategories of needs: first, necessities, defined in relation to the knowledge, skills or literacies required to operate effectively in the target situation; second, wants, the expectations learners have about their learning; and third, lacks, the gaps between learners' current skill and knowledge levels and those required to operate effectively within the discipline. Teaching multidisciplinary groups would make adopting a discipline-specific approach more challenging and so we explored alternative ways to embed personalised learning opportunities. It was clear that the new EAP course should be distinctively different and intensely relevant to maximise student engagement and progression.

1.3. Influences: needs analysis research, professional development, reflective genres

Scholars (de Chazal, 2014; Hyland, 2006; Liu et al., 2011) agree that EAP teaching and learning should be needs-driven to achieve maximum relevance. Hyland (2006, p. 73) states, "Any course starts with the question: 'Why are these students learning English?'". While learners themselves can shed light on their perceived needs, these may differ from their actual needs, identified by language teachers and tests (de Chazal, 2014). Indeed, Liu et al. (2011) remind practitioners that learner needs are complex, multiple, and often conflicting. Thus, effective needs analysis must strive to be comprehensive and inclusive, involving not just EAP teachers and learners, but also subject lecturers, student representatives, university management and other key stakeholders. The ideal interrogation of needs is therefore co-constructed and continuous, though this is rarely achieved in practice due to resource constraints (de Chazal, 2014).

In addition to EAP need analysis research, our thinking was influenced by the EAP team's professional development experiences. The team had recently been mentored in EP, applying its framework of principles to explore our teaching practice and reflecting on the experience in a book project (see Slimani-Rolls & Kiely, 2019). At its core, EP strives to foster inclusivity and collaboration and to promote mutual benefits for practitioners' quality of life by integrating research and pedagogy in a way that proves sustainable (Allwright & Hanks, 2009). Hanks (2019) summarises some advantages for students that EAP teacher-researchers have identified: boosted confidence, enhanced research and critical thinking skills, and viewing classmates as legitimate resources for learning. EP's roots in learner autonomy and its emphasis on practitioner collaboration chime with research notions of partnership learning (Healey et al., 2014) and align with de Chazal's calls for co-constructed needs analyses (de Chazal, 2014). EP research centres around 'puzzling', the exploration of an aspect of language teaching or learning practice in order to better understand it (Allwright & Hanks, 2009). In fact, as Hanks (2020) suggests, puzzling can go even further, illuminating motivational and anxiety-related aspects of learners' lives. Hence, EP suggested itself as potentially powerful approach to illuminate EAP teaching and learning on the new module.

In our recent professional development, the EAP team had established teaching puzzles and explored them alongside our learners. My teacher-initiated puzzle was: 'Why do I feel that it is a challenge to obtain meaningful feedback and evaluations of the learning experience?' (Banister, 2019). Later, conceiving puzzles as personalised research agendas, I scaffolded my business English learners as they explored their learner-initiated puzzles. Examples of these included: 'Why do I feel that my writing is not formal enough?' and 'Why do I lose my vocabulary when speaking?'. We utilised EP's notion of Potentially Exploitable Pedagogic Activities (PEPAS), EP's way of enacting research and teaching simultaneously and a constitutive part of its approach as a method of enquiry (Hanks, 2017). PEPAs are familiar language classroom activities reconfigured with an added exploratory dimension designed to illuminate the puzzle (alongside the language learning dimension). For instance, as a way into EP research, my business English students read about the value for companies of asking 'Why?' and discussed whether such questions could also shed light on language learning. Puzzling via PEPAs proved transformative by helping these students to inhabit a new role of learner-researcher, one which leveraged their curiosity and saw them build useful

connections between their business English and wider business studies. For example, Naomi developed understanding of why reading social media business digests could boost her financial vocabulary knowledge and Janice (an exchange student) gained insights into why oral competency was an important acculturating factor for life in the UK (Banister, 2018). Given EP's transformative impacts, I recommended that learner-initiated puzzling be incorporated into the new EAP module. Having found their own EP work similarly fruitful, my EAP colleagues agreed. Yet we anticipated a key difference: our new EAP cohorts would be new undergraduates in the earliest stages of disciplinary acculturation, making it potentially more challenging to establish connections between puzzling and their subject discipline.

A further influence emerged from the EAP team's encounters with reflective genres when teaching on business foundation courses, involvement with cross-cultural modules and participation on university validation panels. We noted that while the reflective genre was increasingly prevalent (see Nesi & Gardner, 2012), teaching of reflective writing skills and language was less evident.

1.4. Our response and innovation in practice

We decided that the module's oral skills component would be assessed through a presentation. For the written assessment component, students were instructed to set and explore puzzles. We would support their enquiry with carefully sequenced PEPAs, culminating in a written reflection in which students would summarise their explorations and understandings. The assessment criteria included content (depth and relevance of their explorations) and language use. Through extended, scaffolded puzzling, we aimed to mitigate the risks of assessing reflection too soon (Hobbs, 2007). We also resolved that the PEPAs would incorporate practice of the language of reflection and develop reflective writing skills, something that would prepare students for reflective assignments on other modules. We also anticipated that the novelty of this approach and EP's participatory principles would counter English language learning weariness and resistance. The EP-based puzzling, setting personalised research agendas, would align with learner expectations of tertiary level learning and, at the same time, offer scope for collaborative practitioner enquiry.

2. Methodology

In this section I outline three of the PEPAs used (Table 1 below).

2.1. Week 1–4 PEPAs: needs analysis, discussion, reading

Examples of previous learner-initiated puzzles were not made available to our learners before they selected their own focus to avoid biasing their choice. However, we did share our language teaching puzzles, not only to clarify the notion of puzzling, but also to highlight curiosity as an appropriate starting point for their own enquiry. We encouraged learners to be as specific as possible and to use 'Why … ?' frames for their puzzles to formulate what Hanks (2017, p.156) memorably calls an

Table 1
(Based on Hanks, 2017): Week 1–4 PEPAs (Ls = learners, T = teacher).

Week	PEPA and steps	Language/academic skills focus	Exploratory Potential
1	**Needs analysis question:** Ls respond briefly in writing to: 'What puzzles you (i.e., what would you like to better understand) about learning English, and in particular, about academic English?'	Ls understand and respond using their existing language resources.	Ls engage with key EP terminology ('a puzzle', 'to puzzle') and undertake initial reflection.
2	**Class discussion:** Ls read the brief about the language learning puzzles, PEPAs and written reflection assessment task. Ls share initial ideas for puzzles with classmates and identify opportunities for peer collaboration. Ls formulate puzzles as 'Why' questions. Ls conduct interviews for homework.	Ls relate previous language learning experiences using oral skills, articulate and justify their puzzle. T-led delayed feedback on L language use during discussion.	Ls use needs analysis as a starting point to formulate puzzle, share and compare ideas in groups. Ls delve deeper using 'Why … ?' frames.
4	**Jigsaw reading:** Two groups of Ls read a designated text about EP (puzzling, aims, principles). Text A: excerpt from a journal article (Hanks, 2015) in a formal academic style. Text B: in a conversational style, was an open letter from *The Developing Language Learner* (Allwright & Hanks, 2009). Allwright explains why puzzling could benefit language Ts and Ls. After reading and pooling ideas, Ls complete a template summarizing their text's key ideas, then work with a peer who read the other text to share, compare and co-write a summary.	Ls discuss text types they might encounter in their disciplinary studies and how language style in these might vary. T provides feedback on quality of language used in collaboratively produced summaries.	T uses class discussion to draw learners' attention to EP's key principles and reiterates the links to in-class work and homework required for the module, underpinning Ls' approach to this component with a basic grasp of EP's theoretical basis.

agenda "that cries out to be understood". To exploit the in-sessional EAP context, throughout the course, we directed learners to relevant EAP resources (e.g. popular EAP websites such as Nesi et al., 2020). Later, during tutorials and poster-making PEPAs (see Table 2)-and with puzzles by this stage more clearly formulated-we encouraged incorporation of relevant disciplinary research literature, adding both depth and breadth to learners' enquiry. Overall, the EP principles tapped into Freireian notions of learner agency potential (Hanks, 2020) and offered learners the opportunity to demonstrate that they could take their own learning seriously (Allwright & Hanks, 2009).

For brevity's sake, the in-class and homework PEPAs are summarised in Table 2 below.

2.2. Further PEPAs

2.2.1. Data collection, analysis and ethics

I gathered data from the following sources. Taken together they constitute a qualitative approach, appropriate for researching and sharing this insider account of learner-initiated puzzling on the new EAP module. First, I observed my students as they set and explored their puzzles via the PEPAs. I recorded these observations after sessions in a reflective diary. Second, I read learners' written accounts of their puzzles (weeks 5 and 12), using thematic analysis to identify commonalities and cross-referencing this data with my reflective diary entries. Third, I discussed learners' progress (or otherwise) internally during module development meetings and presented on learner-puzzling at two external conferences, reflecting further on feedback received from colleagues and audiences. Learners gave informed consent in line with the institution's ethical requirements, all data was securely stored, and pseudonyms used in this written account.

3. Findings

3.1. What did EAP learner-researchers puzzle about?

Learners classified the primary focus of their puzzles as part of the week 11 poster-making PEPA and Table 3 summarises the results for the 2018–20 cohorts. It shows that the three most puzzled about aspects of practice were: writing, reading and speaking. Therefore, the discussion in this section centres on these same areas.

Writing emerged as the focus of enquiry for many students. This aligns with researcher views of writing as fundamental and yet complex in EAP (de Chazal, 2014). Learners recognised that writing skills were a prerequisite for academic success at university. Donny noted, writing is 'important […] I will need to have [it] in my arsenal'. Meanwhile, Ilker hinted at its wider significance: 'We should be aware of how writing is located in our lives'. Learner-initiated puzzles relating to writing included: 'Why is my writing not fluent?' and 'Why my writing skill is not good enough?'. Like writing, reading is viewed as a challenge for many EAP learners. Learner-researchers expressed curiosity about interest, motivation and distractions encountered when reading. For instance, Mona puzzled: 'Why [do] I find it difficult to read something I'm not interested in?' Similarly, Eugenie wondered: 'Why do I find it hard to concentrate when reading academic texts?' It was more surprising to us as teachers that speaking should prove a popular focus of learner-initiated puzzles. For example, Ludmilla asked: 'Why can't I speak fluently in academic presentations?'.

3.2. How did learner-researchers explore their research agendas?

In class, I observed some learners struggle to identify a puzzle, but the discussion PEPAs (weeks 2, 6, 11) provided opportunities to share ideas, with the needs analysis offering a concrete reference point to help those who were unsure establish an initial focus. For homework, learners turned to their wider networks, interviewing family members, relatives living in English speaking countries and friends at other universities in Anglophone settings to illuminate their puzzles. Our learner-researchers found this sharing useful, as revealed in their written reflections. Abdi stressed that 'discussing puzzling is one of the important parts' of the process and Elena recalled how she appreciated the opportunity to consult a more knowledgeable other in addition to peers: 'Discussing a puzzle with anyone in the same field as me or with more experience will … help me

Table 2
Week 5–12 PEPAs, Ls = learners, T = teacher.

Week	PEPA
5	Writing: Single paragraph summaries of puzzling so far
6	Comparisons: Sharing exploration of puzzles with peers and T
7	1-1 T and L tutorials: Opportunity to probe Ls on their puzzles
9	Webquest: Ls explore puzzles using recommended EAP resources (websites, webtools).
10	Reflective writing: Longer summary of exploration to-date with language support
11	Poster presentations: Final chance to share and comment on puzzles
12	Lightning tutorials & final reflective writing (800 words): Evidenced summaries and reflections on puzzling

Table 3
Primary focus of learner puzzling (2018–20).

Primary focus of puzzling, autumn 2018 to spring 2020	Number of puzzles
Writing	24
Reading	8
Speaking	8
Vocabulary	7
Others: spelling, grammar, listening and note-taking, studying abroad, thinking, formality	6
No puzzle formulated	8
Total (N)	61

… to find the causes' (of the puzzle). Fellow EAP tutors agreed that these discussion-based PEPAs helped learners gather ideas and subsequently articulate puzzles in class.

Learners' written reflections recounted how interviewees and popular EAP websites (e.g. Nesi et al., 2020) suggested useful language learning strategies to enhance knowledge or skills in the area they researched (e.g., practise timed writing to write more fluently, learn chunks not just single words to expand vocabulary for speaking). While, as teachers, these were common-sense suggestions, other learner explorations yielded more intriguing results. For instance, Denis, a business student, researched how the notions of brain and hand memory might prove relevant to his puzzle about staying focused on his writing. Silva, also a business student, deepened in-class work with digital academic word lists, suggesting ways these could enhance the vocabulary content of her writing. Meanwhile, Mona drew upon disciplinary concepts of physical and cognitive distraction from her psychology study and connected these to her puzzle about reading 'uninteresting' texts.

3.3. How was learner-initiated puzzling received?

Learners' sustained engagement with their research agendas as they shared, researched, and reflected saw many of them develop a deeper understanding of their puzzles. The in-class discussions and tutorials (week 7 and 11) assisted in the building of inter-practitioner rapport. The positive results obtained in the formal module evaluations indicated that setting learner research agendas contributed to improved student engagement and management praised the teaching team's approaches which had prompted these responses, including learner-initiated puzzling. The vast majority of learners met the learning outcomes and passed the assessments and, whilst we were unable to formally track their progress on their subsequent academic journey, interestingly, none were referred back to EAP, although some later elected business English modules taught by the EAP team.

In the next section I discuss in greater detail why I believe that this innovation in practice was effective in helping learners better understand their academic and language needs, whilst simultaneously offering them opportunities to develop their academic English skills and knowledge. I also provide further examples of the mutual benefits that EP-based enquiry can offer both learners and teachers (Allwright & Hanks, 2009).

4. Discussion

4.1. Why puzzling helped learner-researchers better understand their academic journeys and language needs

Through their puzzling, learners identified, articulated and better understood their past, present and future academic journeys. For learners enquiring into speaking and writing, exploring a puzzle shed light on requirements of their new academic culture and the requisite language skills and knowledge. Cem's puzzle focused on the need to acculturate to a new university system, one in which different skills were valued: 'In my country, finishing universities is easier if we compare to the UK. Universities in Turkey don't care about creativity … memorizing an subject … is okay for them to pass you'. Similarly, Celia wondered why new critical and analytical skills, ones that had been overlooked at earlier stages of her academic career, were now prized. She reflected: 'I realized that during my high school years I was just educated to memorize.' Learners like Cem and Celia who puzzled about the academic disjuncture they were facing in their transition from secondary to higher education, benefitted from in-class work on genre awareness (Nesi et al., 2020). This unpacked the purpose and structure of university writing. Meanwhile, reflecting on the value of puzzling itself, Ian, a film studies student whose research focused on grammatical aspects of writing, identified why puzzling would be instrumental at future stages of his academic and professional journey. He conceived puzzling as a transferable skill, seeing opportunities to apply it in creative settings: 'I can use this method [puzzling] to analyse … 'Why is my crew showing bad results in … filming?'".

Learners who puzzled about reading academic texts recognised the need to embrace their reading challenge: 'I have a lifetime of reading in front of me, not only documentation and work … also […] my day-to day-leisure reading' (Celia). Another learner-researcher, Aznar, resolved: 'It is essential to be able to read, analyse and understand a text, whether it is of interest or not'. On the causes of reading difficulty, Eugenie warned: 'we are not aware of the cost of distractions, such as new technologies.' However, other learners entertained the possibility that, in addition to the distractions of social media and smart devices, competence in the language might form part of their reading challenge. Mona reflected in her final writing:

'When I first started to investigate my puzzle, I always believed my issue was a distraction problem. However, my problem may be a language difficulty instead'. She noted that her reading habits, and that of many peers she had consulted, was limited to bite-sized Top 10 lists, a staple genre of social media and webpages, yet far removed from academic texts. The insights in these reflections prompted interesting tutorial discussions in which we probed students on why they felt they were being asked to read texts that were not of interest in the first place. These dialogues hinted at issues of motivation, the possible influence of parents, and perceptions of future employment.

4.2. How and why learner puzzling helped the EAP team better understand our learners' needs

What became increasingly evident as learner-researchers conducted their enquiry was that using the needs analysis as a starting point was sustaining a continuous interrogation of these learner needs. Learner-initiated puzzling thus emerged as an opportunity for us, the teachers on the module to spark a prolonged and mutually beneficial dialogue which afforded insights into our learners' needs, wants and lacks.

Because we knew the focus of our learners' puzzles as the course progressed, as teachers, we were able to leverage this as a motivational tool, highlighting individual learners' puzzles at relevant points in sessions. For instance, during genre awareness-raising activities about the structural differences between essays and reports, we encouraged engagement by linking to learners' puzzles about writing. Learner-initiated puzzling also informed curriculum development. After the first run of the module, we were considering changing the oral presentation assessment component to a reading-into-writing task. However, the surprising amount of puzzling about speaking skills prompted a reassessment. Learner puzzling in this area suggested that it was a want (and for some also a lack) and this contributed to our retention of the oral component.

Learners' articulations of their puzzles revealed unexpected aspects of language that required teacher attention. For example, two learners discussed their struggles to identify and use appropriate academic vocabulary in their university writing and speaking. However, one student**,** Lucy, used the word 'academic' in class discussion as if it was interchangeable with 'professional', repeatedly referring to the need to use academic vocabulary in job interviews. Another learner in the same class (Silva), puzzled about academic vocabulary and confused the words 'academic' and 'formal'. This presented a teaching opportunity and demonstrated further value in the way puzzling helped to draw out learners' actual language needs and problematic areas, prompting teacher-student discussion and clarification.

Finally, as EAP teaching practitioners moving beyond our established links with business learners, learner-initiated puzzling provided us with valuable insights into the needs of learners in disciplines about which we were curious to learn more. For instance, we were unaware of the emphasis placed on the delivery of oral presentations within Art History pathways or the extent to which Acting students were required to write theory-based essays. Through our discussions in class about puzzles, the teaching team and learners in these multidisciplinary groups gained insights beyond our established knowledge.

5. Implications

In laying out the implications for those who may be interested in adopting learner-initiated puzzling as a means of continuous needs analysis in their own teaching and learning setting, I also identify several ongoing tensions within the process.

Use of needs analysis: This was an effective springboard to formulate puzzles. However, learners tended to focus on their perceived weaknesses and equated a puzzle with a problem, an issue documented in the literature (Banister, 2018; Hanks, 2017). Teachers scaffolding learner-initiated puzzling should remind learner-researchers that puzzles can legitimately focus on strengths. Alternatively, teachers could design PEPAs which draw out explicit/implicit positive aspects (e.g. 'Why can't I speak fluently when presenting -but I can write fluently?') or change the negative frame to a positive one (e.g. Why do I struggle to remember new words?' = 'Why do I remember certain words?').

Embedding EP in EAP: Where practitioners are constrained by existing assessment design, learner-initiated puzzling could be integrated into formative assessment or form a reflective element of a larger assessment task (essay, report, presentation, etc).

Experience of teacher-initiated puzzling: Based on my personal experience, scaffolding learner puzzling was easier having previously explored my own teaching puzzles. Certainly, concurrent puzzling (teachers alongside learners), as enacted in this module, benefitted inter-practitioner empathy-building.

6. Conclusion

In this research into practice paper, I have argued that EP, and its notion of learner-initiated puzzling, can be harnessed to continuously explore and illuminate learners' academic and language needs, sparking a dialogue which benefits not only the EAP learner-researchers conducting the puzzling, but also their teachers. This can feed into curriculum development and advantage future cohorts. This approach will interest EAP teaching practitioners, practitioners working in English for Specific Purposes and Languages for Specific Purposes settings, indeed, any language learning domain which foregrounds learners' needs.

Declaration of competing interest

None.

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