

Innovative Pathways to Proficient Writing: Examining Exploratory Practice's Effects

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Abstract: This article addresses the prevalent issue of deficient writing proficiency at the university level by introducing the impact of an innovative intervention known as the Exploratory Practice (EP). This experimental study was conducted in a Lebanese university to assess the impact of EP on enhancing students' writing skills. The research involved an experimental group and a control group. Quantitative data were extracted from students' writing drafts, pre and post-study, to gauge the effectiveness of the EP intervention. The findings demonstrated a significant enhancement in writing proficiency within the experimental group. This outcome underscores the potential efficacy of EP as a dynamic pedagogical tool for improving writing skills. Therefore, this study advocates for the strategic incorporation of EP, including its foundational elements, rationale, principles, and propositions, into writing classes. The implications of this study encourage the adoption of EP to facilitate the development of proficient writing skills among students in diverse educational settings.

Keywords: Writing Proficiency, Exploratory Practice, Practitioner Research

1. Introduction

In the ever-evolving landscape of education, the integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) has brought about transformative changes in how students approach their studies and research. With AI becoming an increasingly integral part of the learning process, students are presented with unprecedented opportunities for accessing information, automating tasks, and enhancing their educational experiences. However, this paradigm shift also raises concerns about over-reliance on AI and its potential implications for students' proficiency in writing.

In light of this context, this paper delves into a strategic approach to address the challenges posed by the growing dependency on AI in education. The study explores the concept of engaging students as practitioner researchers, empowering them to take an active role in their learning process. Specifically, the paper investigates the integration of Exploratory Practice (EP), a form of practitioner research, as a means to improve writing proficiency in the age of AI.

The central question underpinning this study is adapted to the emerging context: To what extent does learners' puzzling in EP help learners develop their writing proficiency?

This question serves as the impetus for examining how students can become co-inquirers in their educational journey, addressing the need to strike a balance between leveraging AI tools and nurturing essential self-directed learning skills.

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In the subsequent sections, the paper outlines the theoretical framework of practitioner research and delves into the principles and stages of Exploratory Practice. Through this investigation, the study aims to shed light on the potential of EP as a pedagogical strategy that enhances students' writing proficiency.

2. Background Research and Contextual Analysis

2.1. Exploratory Practice in Context

Exploratory Practice (EP) stands as a facet of professional growth, akin to other approaches like reflective practice (Farrell, 2015) and action research (Wallace, 1998), yet it harbors unique responsibilities. EP directs its focus towards the exploration of classroom dynamics rather than the teacher's self-awareness, troubleshooting, or technical prowess. Its primary interest lies in "puzzles" existing within language classrooms, evaluating their solvability. It aspires to assemble collective insights regarding conducive classroom environments and experiences (Zhou & Huang, 2023; Allwright, 2003). For practitioners of EP, understanding the phenomena assumes precedence. Problem perception inevitably leads to solutions and enhanced practices. The nature of the puzzle, whether a predicament or an issue demanding resolution, holds less significance. However, recognizing the problem undoubtedly enhances comprehension, diminishing stress and anxiety faced by educators and learners alike (Allwright, 2009).

In line with pertinent literature, particularly Allwright (2003), principles guide EFL instructors towards effective outcomes with EP. Core inclusive principles offer general direction—for instance, uniting students reaps greater rewards than segregating them. Subsequently, educators should deduce the implications of these conundrums; for example: 'How can students improve their writing skills?' Moreover, they should contemplate localized actions aligned with righteous intentions, fostering more contemplation of their comprehensive principles, ultimately aiding students in internalizing them—summarized as 'Think globally, act locally' (Gieve & Miller, 2006).

Within this segment, the concept of EP is explicated, along with an exploration of its principles and procedures. Throughout this discussion, frequent epistemological clarifications of EP's principles are provided, which will substantiate the rationale underpinning this study.

2.2. Defining Exploratory Practice (EP)

Exploratory Practice spotlights research in the service of teaching, endeavoring to enhance, rather than encumber, educators' practices and the teaching process. EP's description by Allwright and Hanks (2009) denotes it as follows: Exploratory Practice denotes a sustainable approach to conducting classroom inquiries. This method provides language educators (and potentially learners) with an organized framework to identify facets of language instruction for exploration. This framework refines their understanding and subsequently examines these areas through classroom activities—eschewing conventional academic research methods as investigative tools.

The adjective most aptly ascribed to EP is "sustainable." EP is tailored to integrate seamlessly into teachers' daily routines, evading the sense of bewilderment often associated with research procedures, as seen in action research (Dikilitas & Hanks, 2018). Moreover, this delineation elucidates the distribution of research authority, empowering both educators and learners to contribute to the inquiry process. EP's distinctiveness arises from its synthesis

of research and pedagogy, utilizing routine classroom activities to collect data, discuss issues, and fulfill the research endeavor (Allwright, 2006; Driscoll, 2007; Hanks 2017).

2.3. Principles Underpinning Exploratory Practice (EP)

The genesis of Exploratory Practice (EP) can be attributed to Allwright (2003), who conceptualized it during his involvement in consultancy programs focused on classroom research. Positioned as an alternative to his previously disseminated methodologies, EP was introduced as a framework for effective classroom investigations. The developmental journey of EP saw the emergence of seven core principles, elaborated below:

1. **Prioritize Quality of Life:** EP is distinguished by its focus on the classroom experience as a facet of life. This principle acknowledges the intricate and authentic nature of classroom dynamics. Recognizing the dual responsibility of teachers and learners to enhance this environment underscores EP's emphasis on "classroom life." By doing so, EP bridges the gap between individual and professional dimensions within the classroom (Gieve & Miller, 2006). Notably, EP offers a discursive platform to address the dichotomy between life and work (Allwright, 2006), transcending conventional dualism. Unlike action research, which often seeks quick solutions, EP delves beneath the surface, leading to a deeper appreciation of classroom existence.
2. **Pursue Understanding of Classroom Life:** Understanding stands as a pivotal attribute of EP. Instead of relying on conventional research tools, EP aims to attain a situated understanding of classroom life. Its core objective involves comprehending issues that impact the classroom experience, whether positive or negative. These issues, termed "puzzles," necessitate elucidation. The process involves peeling back layers to uncover underlying factors, ultimately enhancing the quality of classroom life. EP practitioners abstain from hastily proposing solutions, instead choosing to step back and contextualize problems. Understanding, as Hyland (2003) argued, serves as a foundation for evolving professionals and guides their ongoing investigations.
3. **Engage All Participants:** The principle of involvement within EP underscores two significant dimensions. Firstly, learners contribute to the investigative process, actively shaping classroom decisions and exploring puzzles alongside educators (Allwright, 2005; Hanks, 2015a; Hanks, 2015b). This inclusion acknowledges the social aspect of classrooms and promotes collaborative exploration, moving from a teacher-centric approach to a participatory one. Secondly, fellow educators are brought into the fold, challenging the conventional isolation within the teaching profession. EP endeavors to foster a culture of collegial dialogue, fostering a learning community (Hanks, 2015b).
4. **Foster Social Harmony:** Linked to the previous principle, the emphasis on "social harmony" highlights EP's departure from the traditional dichotomy between teachers and researchers. EP seeks to unite diverse learning communities, promoting cooperation among teachers within the same institution and facilitating collaboration between learners and educators. This principle promotes the synthesis of various learning contexts, unifying previously disparate domains (Hanks, 2019).
5. **Facilitate Mutual Development:** For teachers and learners engaged in EP, two overarching developmental activities come to the forefront: investigating practices

and consistently seeking to understand the adaptable nature of classrooms. Learners, actively involved in deciphering fundamental learning patterns, experience enhanced development. EP extends beyond individual growth, fostering institutional development through its inclusive approach (Kato & Hanks, 2022).

6. **Seamlessly Integrate Understanding into Practice:** An essential hallmark of EP lies in making the research process accessible to all educators. This integration involves utilizing standard pedagogical activities, yielding multiple benefits. Educators avoid the burnout often associated with early research endeavors. Learners become active participants in their learning journey, with research enriching every phase of learning. This inclusive integration defines EP as linguistically productive, effectively intertwining research with language learning and teaching (Gieve & Miller, 2006).
7. **Perpetuate Continuous Endeavors:** In contrast to many isolated action research projects, EP advocates for sustained research. Sustainability is achieved by designing feasible research projects that don't disrupt the learning process. This continuity ensures that research is not isolated from learning but rather a seamless part of it, ultimately contributing to long-term value. EP embodies an ongoing concern for understanding, surpassing the fleeting nature of one-off research initiatives (Allwright, 2005).

In summary, the principles underpinning EP, articulated by Allwright (2009), revolve around enhancing "quality of life" in the classroom, primarily striving to understand classroom dynamics, involving all participants, fostering social cohesion, promoting mutual development, seamlessly integrating understanding into practice, and perpetuating continuous research endeavors. These principles coalesce into three primary categories, namely 'what,' 'who,' and 'how' issues, collectively shaping the essence of EP (Slimani-Rolls & Kiely, 2018).

3. EP Procedures:

Following the elucidation of EP's principles, it is essential to delve into the operational aspects of applying EP. This section delves into the stepwise execution of EP, encompassing the seven stages of its implementation and the intricate dual process of its application.

3.1. Implementation Steps of EP

The process of conducting an EP project is initiated by a teacher's inherent curiosity and commitment to consistently enhance the "understanding" of classroom dynamics that contribute to effective learning and teaching (Allwright, 2006). As outlined by Allwright (2003), EP projects entail seven stages, though not all stages are obligatory. Teachers possess the autonomy to determine which stages are pertinent based on the prevailing context.

1. **Identifying a Puzzle:** At the onset, teachers, in collaboration with students, select an area or issue for in-depth exploration. This focal point could encompass teacher feedback, student engagement, or any dynamic unfolding within the classroom. Importantly, EP projects are driven by the aspiration to enrich the teaching experience and elevate comprehension of classroom life, rather than responding to weaknesses or problems (Allwright, 2006; Best et., 2015).

2. **Reflecting on the Puzzle:** This phase involves grappling with the chosen issue from both the teacher's and learners' perspectives. Reflection seeks a comprehensive grasp of the issue without immediate action. Reflection can be individual or collective, with a group of educators pondering an academic concern. Gieve and Miller (2006), exemplifying EP in Bangalore, engaged in collaborative reflection regarding managing large classes. They opted to observe each other's classes to discern patterns in their large classes and concluded that embracing diversity within classes offered an opportunity rather than a problem.
3. **Monitoring:** Monitoring involves naturally capturing data pertinent to the issue under investigation. Teachers pay close attention to the puzzle, probing whether enhanced understanding can be achieved. This can involve taking notes during group activities, avoiding constant intervention. Monitoring may culminate in sufficient understanding, prompting progression to subsequent stages (Hanks, 2015b).
4. **Taking Direct Action for Data Generation:** If the earlier stages fail to yield a comprehensive understanding of the issue, teachers can take direct action to gather data using standard pedagogic activities such as pair work or presentations. EP's distinctiveness lies in its reliance on typical pedagogical practices, saving time typically spent on intrusive research methods. This integration ensures research doesn't disrupt teaching routines (Allwright, 2005; Kato & Hanks, 2022).
5. **Considering Outcomes and Decision-Making:** This stage involves scrutinizing the puzzle from multiple angles. Teachers assess whether they possess adequate understanding to make informed decisions or whether further reflection and data collection are required. It serves as a phase for data analysis and interpretation, emphasizing logical inquiry and the capacity to draw conclusions (Hanks, 2015a).
6. **Moving Forward:** When an acceptable level of understanding is reached, teachers can chart a different course of action. This understanding might independently enhance classroom quality or could involve gauging learners' positive responses. At this juncture, both parties may respond to the pursuit of understanding by collectively refining their actions (Allwright, 2005; Kato & Hanks, 2022).
7. **Going Public:** The conclusions drawn at this stage can prompt teachers to share their insights publicly. If understanding is enhanced and classroom quality is enriched, teachers may choose to disseminate their experience. This could be done through various mediums such as publishing, blogging, workshops, or conferences. Alternatively, insufficient understanding might prompt educators to enlist others' collaboration in the pursuit of knowledge (Balducci et al., 2011).

It's important to note that these steps serve as initial guidance rather than rigid directives. While these steps provide a framework, it's crucial to contextualize and elaborate on their application (Allwright, 2009). In short, to initiate EP, practitioners first pinpoint a puzzle, refining their questions through discussions with colleagues or students. Subsequently, they select appropriate classroom techniques to explore the puzzle, adapting them as necessary. This phase encompasses data collection. Reflection and interpretation constitute the third step, wherein outcomes are dissected. Finally, implications are derived, decisions are made, and plans are formulated (Allwright, 2009).

3.2. The Integration of EP with Other Approaches:

Classroom Research and Reflective Practice The relationship between Exploratory Practice (EP) and other approaches like classroom research and reflective practice raises intriguing perspectives. Reflective practice primarily revolves around thoughtful contemplation to comprehend complex issues. In contrast, when an EP procedure is enacted, the practitioner's central objective is to devise actions that foster understanding of perplexing classroom matters.

Conversely, action research centers on implementing actions for transformative change (Allwright, 2003; Wallace, 1998; Farrell, 2015).

4. Previous Puzzles Explored and Their Relationship to the Current Study

In the course of preparing for my doctoral dissertation, I engaged in the exploration of several intricate pedagogical puzzles that significantly contributed to the body of knowledge in the field of writing education. These puzzles encompassed a range of areas, including oral versus written feedback, peer versus teacher feedback, teaching writing through group work, and plagiarism detection (Banat, 2023; Banat, 2022). While the depth and complexity of each of these puzzles are substantial, the current study is strategically focused on the theoretical framework of EP and its application within the context of the four aforementioned pedagogical challenges.

In acknowledging the significance of these earlier puzzles, it is important to underscore that the scope of this current study does not warrant an exhaustive discussion of each individual puzzle. It is essential to highlight that this study not only delves into the theoretical scaffolding that supports these puzzles but also extends its gaze toward the outcomes and implications of such theoretical applications. Specifically, this study endeavors to unravel the impact of the Exploratory Practice framework on the enhancement of students' writing proficiency within the context of the four aforementioned puzzles (Banat, 2023; Banat, 2022). By doing so, this research seeks to shed light on the educational efficacy of this approach and its potential to address multifaceted challenges faced in writing education.

4.1. EP Procedure

The subsequent section furnishes a comprehensive depiction of the methodology employed in executing the EP stages.

The procedure enacted for both the experimental and control groups in this research is outlined through the subsequent steps: At the onset of the fall semester, the students responded to a prompt within a diagnostic test by composing an essay. Subsequently, their performance in the diagnostic test essays was employed to evaluate their EFL writing proficiency post-intervention. For the experimental group, the dual process, comprising 7 steps for applying EP, was implemented. This encompassed the following:

1. Initiating action for comprehension: This step revolves around the processes themselves:
 - Identifying perplexing aspects of classroom experiences.
 - Engaging in profound contemplation with fellow practitioners (peers and/or co-participants) both within and outside the classroom regarding the puzzling issue.
 - Attending to ongoing classroom dynamics more intently.
 - Devising strategies for understanding by employing established pedagogic approaches to foster participant comprehension.
2. Engaging with emerging understanding: This stage centers on the substance of the process:
 - Expressing and evaluating personal and collective insights in a reflexive manner.
 - Analyzing and refining prevalent notions of 'change.'
 - Discoursing potential personal or collective actions.

- Sharing personal insights into processes to support others and encourage their participation in the EP community of practice.

This approach has been consistently applied across all four puzzles: encompassing the dynamics of oral versus written feedback, peer versus teacher feedback, teaching writing through group work, and plagiarism detection (Banat, 2023; Banat, 2022).

Upon the culmination of the semester, students within both groups participated in responding to a designated prompt, with their ensuing grades serving as a basis for evaluating their writing proficiency upon the conclusion of the intervention.

In the subsequent sections, the study will meticulously dissect the output of this study, unveiling the transformative potential of EP in the realm of writing pedagogy. Furthermore, the study will underscore the tangible outcomes that this study offers to the broader discourse on educational practices and interventions, fostering a deeper understanding of effective methodologies to elevate students' writing capabilities.

5. Findings and Discussion

The numerical outcomes were derived from the essays of students before and after the intervention. Initially, a thorough analysis was conducted using a scale. Following this, the cumulative scores for all grades were computed by summing up the individual item scores. Descriptive statistics encompassing means and standard deviations were calculated, followed by the implementation of a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA). This was carried out to examine the potential impact of the EP intervention on students' writing proficiency. The level of significance was juxtaposed with the predetermined threshold of α (alpha), which is set at a 5% error ratio, denoted as 0.05. In cases where the Sig value exceeded α , the disparity was considered as insignificant, and vice versa.

Table 1 presents the outcomes of the Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) assessment pertaining to students' writing proficiency in both the experimental and control groups.

Table 1. MANOVA Test Results for Numerical Results

Dependent Variable: PS								
Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared	Noncent. t.	Observed Power ^b
Corrected Model	2057.031 ^a	2	1028.516	26.704	.000	.597	53.408	1.000
Intercept	654.055	1	654.055	16.982	.000	.321	16.982	.980
Prestudy	759.705	1	759.705	19.725	.000	.354	19.725	.991
Treatment	951.532	1	951.532	24.705	.000	.407	24.705	.998

Error	1386.558	3 6	38.5 16					
Total	172800.00 0	3 9						
Corrected Total	3443.590	3 8						
a. R Squared = .597 (Adjusted R Squared = .575)								
b. Computed using alpha = .05								

As displayed in Table 1, the analysis indicates a statistically significant difference between the pre-study and post-study $F(1.4) = 19.72$, $p = .00$, Partial Eta Squared = .35. Furthermore, Table 1 shows there was no statistically significant difference in learner autonomy by the treatment variable $F(1.4) = 24.70$, $p = .00$, Partial Eta Squared = .40.

Table 2 below presents a summary of descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) by treatment, writing proficiency.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics for Numerical Results

Dependent Variable: PS			
Treatment	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Control	61.0870	7.97104	23
Experimental	72.8125	7.06370	16
Total	65.8974	9.51949	39

Table 2 displays the mean scores of students' numerical results: the control group had a mean score of 61.98 +/- 7.97 while the experimental group had a mean score of 72.81 +/- 7.06.

The research question explored in this study delved into the assessment of the effectiveness of employing puzzling techniques to enhance students' writing proficiency. More specifically: To what extent does the incorporation of learners' puzzling within Exploratory Practice contribute to the development of their writing proficiency?

The evaluation of the impact of employing puzzling strategies on students' writing proficiency involved an analysis that juxtaposed pre-intervention numerical grades with post-intervention numerical grades. Following this, composite scores were derived for each of these grades by aggregating individual item scores accordingly.

Benson et al. (2018) emphasize the efficacy of learner development programs in augmenting language-learning performance, provided these programs are adaptable to context, learning preferences, and styles, and not limited to a rigid set of strategies. Echoing this sentiment, Balducci et al. (2011) posit that the cornerstone for nurturing autonomy lies in affording students the agency to make decisions regarding their learning within an environment that fosters collaboration and support. Banat (2022) echoes a parallel sentiment, asserting that learning inherently thrives through interaction, underscoring that the freedoms constituting learner autonomy are intrinsically bound by learners' reliance on the support and collaboration of others.

As a result, the hypothesis posited by the research question stands validated: The integration of Exploratory Practice (EP) contributes to the enhancement of learners' writing proficiency.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, this study has illuminated the intricate interplay between the application of Exploratory Practice (EP) principles and the enhancement of students' writing proficiency within the context of various pedagogical challenges. The systematic examination of these challenges, encapsulated as puzzles, has underscored the efficacy of employing EP as a guiding framework. Through rigorous analysis and evaluation, the study has revealed the tangible impact of incorporating puzzling techniques on students' autonomy, collaborative learning, and, by extension, their writing proficiency.

The empirical findings of this study reinforce the assertion that autonomy is not an isolated attribute but rather flourishes within a collaborative and supportive learning environment. The insights gleaned from this research align with contemporary educational paradigms, which stress the importance of learner agency, engagement, and a synergy between students' independence and their interaction with peers and educators. The corroborative evidence from scholars such as Benson et al. (2018), Hanks (2015a), and Balducci et al. (2011), further substantiates the significance of fostering autonomy within an ecosystem of collaboration and guided exploration.

Building on the foundations established by this study, several avenues for future research and practical application emerge:

1. **Longitudinal Studies:** To comprehend the sustained impact of the EP framework, longitudinal studies can be conducted to assess the trajectory of students' writing proficiency over an extended period.
2. **Diverse Contexts:** Exploring the adaptability of EP across diverse educational settings and cultural contexts would enrich our understanding of its universal applicability.
3. **Assessment Modalities:** Investigating innovative assessment techniques to gauge the multifaceted dimensions of writing proficiency can provide a holistic view of students' progress.
4. **Hybrid Pedagogies:** Exploring the synergies between EP and hybrid pedagogies, such as blended learning, could potentially offer multifunctional approaches to writing pedagogy.
5. **Teacher Training:** Designing professional development programs for educators that integrate EP principles can facilitate the effective implementation of collaborative and autonomy-enhancing strategies.
6. **Technology Integration:** Investigating how technology can be harnessed to facilitate and enhance EP-based writing interventions could yield transformative approaches.
7. **Cross-Disciplinary Applications:** Exploring the transferability of EP principles to other subject domains can expand the scope of its impact on diverse areas of education.

As the field of writing pedagogy continues to evolve, the integration of EP stands as a promising frontier that holds the potential to catalyze transformative learning experiences. By embracing the principles of autonomy, collaboration, and guided exploration, educators can craft pedagogical landscapes that empower students to not only excel in writing proficiency but also to thrive as lifelong learners and contributors to the broader discourse of education.

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