

An Exploratory Practice Approach to Supporting a Hearing-impaired Learner in an English Language Classroom

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Introduction

There are increasing numbers of learners with special educational needs (SEN) choosing to enrol in mainstream university courses in Japan. Although there is support and training provided throughout different levels of education for teachers, there are generally fewer materials and training opportunities available specifically for language teachers charged with instructing SEN learners. As it is becoming more and more likely that SEN learners could take language classes at university, particularly English classes, individual teachers may have to undertake a process of continuing professional development (CPD) to ready themselves to offer sufficient support to SEN learners, by finding ways to make suitable adjustments to their classes and pedagogical approaches.

This paper explores the ongoing attempts of an English language teacher to support a hearing-impaired learner in a communicative English language class. Exploratory Practice (EP) is used as an approach to practitioner research, whereby the language classroom functions with the dual purpose of being a space for learning, as well as a chance for professional enquiry. This paper will begin by defining SEN, its position with regard to English language teaching (ELT), and how SEN-related issues have been actively documented by English language teachers. The paper then explores EP, and considers its relations to SEN. Finally, the paper will reflect on a teaching journal, written to capture the complex nature of this pedagogical process. Three insights from the author's own teaching journal will be detailed in this paper. As well as reflecting on his own understandings gathered from the teaching process, this paper will also demonstrate the collaborative teaching/learning process of co-enquiring with a hearing-impaired learner and a note-taker.

Defining SEN

In Japan, access to equal education features as a provision in the nation's current constitution. In order to provide equal education, institutions and educators alike may need to develop the attribute and ability of being

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proactively conscious of inclusive learning. There are a number of ways to go about approaching inclusivity of learners' individual and specific needs, such as through curricula considerations, cultural sensitiveness, and classroom practice. Although broad and undetermined in definition, 'inclusive education' as an umbrella approach, is one that is "concerned with achieving equity by identifying and addressing direct and indirect impediments to access, participation and belonging in school cultures, facilities and curricula" (Walton, 2011, p.85). Within an inclusive approach to education, a continuous focus could be said to be on how to foster and maintain an equitable learning environment for individuals or groups who have special education needs and require suitable adjustments to be made.

Although definitions may differ contextually and geographically, a SEN learner could be thought of as being someone who "has a significantly greater difficulty in learning than the majority of others of the same age; or has a disability which prevents or hinders him or her from making use of facilities of a kind generally provided for others of the same age" (Department for Education, 2015, p.16). There are various kinds of impairments that influence educational attainment, such as sensory and/or physical impairments; cognition and/or learning needs; communication and/or interaction difficulties; as well as social, emotional, and mental health difficulties (Connor, 2017). While these learners may be impaired to different extents, this should not lead to assumptions that they may be at a disadvantage to others. Scholars such as Kormos and Smith (2012) prefer the use of terms like 'specific learning differences' (SpLD), that function to emphasise the individuality and diversity in the ways that people experience and interact with the world around them. Inclusive approaches to working with SEN learners can be achieved through a careful process of planning and making appropriate provisions (see Ortiz & Yates, 2001), such as adapting classroom practice or implementing individual educational plans (see Young, Schaefer, & Lesley, 2017), and this is also highly relevant in English language teaching settings, too.

SEN and ELT

Like many other educational settings, ELT classrooms may include learners with special educational needs. Yet, in specific regard to ELT, SEN focuses have been marginal, save for a handful of books and articles that have approached associated issues over the decades. For example, Enjelvin (2009) details the teaching of blind or partially-sighted students, Strong (1988) provides an edited collection of chapters on the topic of deafness and language learning, Schneider and Crombie (2003) explore strategies for teaching language learners with dyslexia, and Wire (2005) offers a study on the teaching of languages to learners on the autism spectrum.

Of late, there is a developing and burgeoning interest in SEN, with the likes of Kormos (2016) bringing related issues to a wider audience, by pushing for more standardized recognition of learning differences with regard to language learning processes and assessment. In terms of professional communities in teaching associations, The International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language's (IATEFL) Inclusive Prac-

tices and SEN Special Interest Group, for instance, is also steadily growing in awareness and appeal in recent years.

Although there is an increasing awareness of SEN issues in ELT, for many instructors, publications and other resources may be just out of reach and mostly inaccessible, with many instructors lacking in institutional support. According to Lowe (2016), this extends back to limited coverage of SEN issues on pre-service ELT courses, with postgraduate courses also displaying similar shortfalls. These conditions may leave instructors inadequately equipped, unconscious to, and potentially oblivious of the task of supporting and instructing learners with special educational needs. In situations where instructors are presented with these situations, personal and collaborative journeys of puzzlement, enquiry, and continuing professional development may be sparked.

SEN and English Language Teachers' CPD

Having a SEN learner in an English language class creates new challenges and prompts questions for teachers. Instructors who find themselves in this position and are prepared to explore ways to greater foster an equitable learning environment, could see this as a chance for continuing professional development as a language teacher. CPD is defined as a "process by which individuals take control of their own learning and development, by engaging in an ongoing process of reflection and action" (Megginson & Whitaker, 2007, p. 3). Yet, as was suggested in the previous section, language teachers may feel underprepared and underexposed to these issues. In the case of higher education in Japan, recent years have seen increasing numbers of SEN learners choosing to enrol in undergraduate university programs (Japan Student Services Organization, 2017). This is due in part to the government's 2015 endorsement of the 'Basic Policy for Eliminating Discrimination against Persons with Disabilities.' A part of this act called for tertiary education providers, such as universities, to make efforts to ensure appropriate provisions are being made for SEN learners. This may result in increasing numbers of language teachers finding themselves working with SEN learners, and realising that a process of CPD may be required.

Language teachers in Japan have started to document their classroom experiences of attempting to support SEN learners in their lessons as CPD activities. For example, Lowe (2015) described lessons learnt from integrating a blind learner into a communicative English course by adapting approaches to materials, management, and personal sensitivity to better ensure a fair environment. In addition, Moriya (2016) set out to make his classrooms more suitable for and sensitive to learners with colour vision disabilities through awareness raising activities. Additionally, Turner (2017; 2018) documented a process of teaching a deaf learner, choosing to frame the role as a chance for personal professional development and growth. Others have also looked at the role of teacher collaboration in order to better address the challenge of instructing SEN learners, for example Turner, Kasperek, and McLaughlin (2017) found that working together as a team creatively supplemented and enhanced their learning process of attempting to support a learner with a social and communication difficulties. In Lowe (2016) a framework for English language teachers' CPD with regard to supporting SEN learners is proposed.

The final step in the framework calls for the recycling of knowledge between teachers in institutions and associated parties in a process of ‘cascade training.’ The projects provided here, while serving primarily as a way for the teachers involved to make sense of their own unfamiliar professional situations, may also serve as valuable insights for other language teachers in the wider community to learn from, thus showing how first-hand experiences can be recycled and shared for practical outcomes. These classroom experiences stand as examples of practitioner/teacher research; efforts often undertaken by educators as CPD towards making pedagogical decisions informed by sound research evidence, that have beneficial effects on both teaching and learning (Borg, 2009).

Defining Exploratory Practice

Exploratory Practice (Allwright & Hanks, 2009) is a form of practitioner/teacher research in which “learners and teachers are encouraged to investigate their own learning/teaching practices” (Hanks, 2017, p.2). Unlike many other approaches to practitioner research that may typically see learners positioned as subjects, an EP approach, as Allwright (2006) explains, sees “teachers and learners simultaneously develop their own understanding of what they are doing as learners and teachers” (p.15). In this sense, EP attempts to link the sub-disciplines of research and pedagogy together as one social enterprise, in a combined and integrated approach that makes use of readily available pedagogical tools and spaces. EP emphasises the forming of collegial networks that primarily work together towards the chief aim of understanding, rather than looking to solve problems or establish absolute answers. EP involves everybody cooperatively, by bringing different stakeholders together in the unification of inquiry and pedagogy (Hanks, 2017, p.227). Additionally, EP researchers attempt to ‘publicly’ transmit and share any understandings made, through allowing research responsibilities to be extended to, and inclusive of learners, with learners potentially assuming co-researcher roles and increased agency. EP also extends its focus beyond aspects of classroom conditions as the sole realms of enquiry, by concerning itself with broader questions on the quality of life and the well-being of those involved (Breen, 2006).

EP studies have been carried out in the context of language learning and teaching, all with fundamental ‘puzzles’ at their core. Puzzles, for Allwright (2019), are “not a matter of asking ‘how’ we can change our pedagogic practices to solve a particular problem,” but “a matter of asking ‘why’ is the current situation the way it is?” By starting out from the view of a situation as being a puzzle instead of a problem, we may not be looking to reveal or find definite answers, but instead, looking to clarify and deepen our understandings and insights into a situation. Educators have documented their own EP studies, for example, within the context of Japan for example, Elliot (2017) investigated what he perceived to be a reluctance within his learners to proactively take responsibility for their learning in class by conducting an entire lesson in complete silence with very few instructions being given. Elliot then reflected on his observations and invited his learners to also respond to the conditions of the classroom he had previously created. Other studies in different educational settings, such as Rawson

(2019), observed whether the use of her learners' Italian mother tongue impacted negatively on their learning of French, while additionally questioning if this should be a point of concern. Rawson used peer discussions between her learners to allow them to co-enquire into this puzzle with her, before reflecting on the themes that emerged. Both of these studies exemplify EP in action, showing that inquiry into teaching practice can be carried out and explored with learners in a traditional learning setting, such as a typical classroom.

An EP Approach to SEN

When instructing SEN learners, it could be important to keep in mind that any provisions or adaptations made to pedagogy should be done so with a view to integrating SEN learners into the class. Subtle and indiscrete alterations may allow SEN learners to have an equitable study experience along with other class members without causing much disruption, attention, or difference. Reflecting on EP, the process of integrating SEN learners into classes, seems to connect with the way that this approach to practitioner research makes use of readily available pedagogical tools and spaces as methods of enquiry, in that while language learning activities are going on as expected, careful interventions are also taking place and being explored in unison.

As was suggested previously, English language teachers may be broadly underexposed to SEN-related issues and activities, requiring a great deal of support themselves. Where possible, a source of valuable insight may come through negotiating approaches with the SEN learners directly or indirectly, and if necessary, any additional support staff. Lowe (2015) and Turner's (2017) experiences with teaching learners with sensory impairments, found that SEN learners hold a reliable and strong position, and can guide and inform their teachers' approaches to classroom practice, given that they have lived all or a part of their lives with their disabilities. This seems to resonate with the ethos and tenets of EP, in that both the teachers and learners are dually exploring similar questions and concerns collaboratively. Teachers, for example, may find themselves pondering how a language learning class could be conducted in such a way that is inclusive of, and sensitive to a learner's special educational needs, with SEN learners being interested to know what actions their teachers are looking to take to better support them, and the possibilities that these provisions could bring.

Research Members and Classroom Settings

This study describes and documents the collaborative and explorative process of supporting a hearing-impaired learner (henceforth referred to as Yoko) in a compulsory communicative English language class related to the content area of tourism. A request was made to teach a group of learners that Yoko was a member of, given my previous experience of working with a hearing-impaired learner (Turner, 2017), and my interests in continuing with this line of professional enquiry. Including Yoko, there were 21 members in the class. In my previous experience, a way of working with a group of note-takers was developed in a similar communicative English learning setting. In the lead-up to the commencement of the course documented in this study, an additional re-

quest was made for a note-taker to be present in the classroom. An arrangement was made between members of the faculty and the support centre for students with disabilities at the university, and a suitable note-taker was found (henceforth referred to as Hanaka). Yoko is a student in her second year of study in an international tourism faculty, and Hanaka is in her fourth year of study in the same faculty. Hanaka agreed to help with note-taking duties in response to an approach by a professor. Although Hanaka has some experience of interpreting languages, she is not a professional note-taker, but did receive some brief training from the support centre before starting note-taking in class. This included receiving training on how to use the computer software, for example. In Yoko's first year of study at university, she took two English classes, one reading and writing class, and another one-to-one communication class. Yoko communicates mostly through Japanese sign language (JSL), however, she can also express herself in spoken Japanese too. At the time of writing, and to my knowledge, Yoko is taking additional classes in American sign language (ASL) at a separate school specialized in the education of hearing-impaired learners.

I met the class featured in this study once a week on Monday afternoons, however the group members also share multiple classes with one another. The content of the class is centred around English tasks and content relevant to the tourism industry, with the course closely following a textbook that the learners are required to bring to class. All members of the class are on a professional program of study, meaning that their time is divided between university study, and participating in internship placements in companies within the tourism industry, such as hotels and travel agencies.

Puzzling Together

Before the course commenced, I held an informal meeting with Yoko and Hanaka. The meeting functioned both as a personal introduction to each other, but also as a way to let them both know that as well as acting in the role of English language teacher, I was also keen and committed to exploring and researching ways to support Yoko in his class, together with the help of Hanaka. From the onset, Yoko and Hanaka were invited to provide feedback and input to me throughout the process, both during the lessons and after. I also explained how I would like to document the collaborative support process that Yoko and Hanaka were a part of, with both giving their informed written consent to allow me to share the experience publicly here. Both students read and signed a consent form that was written in both Japanese and English, with additional information about the project being conveyed to Yoko via Hanaka. Given the nature of Yoko's disability, as well as legally being considered a minor at the time of this study, Yoko's parents were additionally asked to give their consent, to which this was provided.

As the English language course being embarked on was communicative in nature, we puzzled about how it would be possible to include Yoko in exchanges with other class members. This question was multifaceted and had different dimensions for myself as the teacher, Yoko as the hearing-impaired learner, and Hanaka as the

note-taker. As well as reflecting on this puzzle, the group were more generally concerned with how the lessons would operate and function. I assured Yoko and Hanaka that adjustments would be made to my lessons, and that the experience would be relatively new for everyone. Through the process of the course, these would be questions that would be explored, and although absolute answers may not be found, fresh understandings and insights could perhaps be made.

Using a Teaching Journal

To first recall and then reveal any insights made during the teaching/learning process, that this study is exploring, a teaching journal was maintained. Richards and Farrell (2005) argue the importance of keeping and using teaching journals, seeing them as a chance for practitioners to produce a “written account of observations, reflections, and other thoughts about teaching” (p.68). The writers claim that without such an apparatus, teachers “often have no substantial recollection of what happened during lessons,” and therefore may be unable to use teaching “as a source for further learning” (p.69). For this study, a reflective teaching journal was used as a way to document actions that took place in lessons. Intrapersonal aspects were also foregrounded throughout the journal too, such as details and descriptions of personal feelings and thoughts related to each teaching experience.

In total, six journal entries were made throughout the study period, with each entry being between 400 to 700 words in length. Journal entries did not follow a set format but were composed freely and immediately after lessons had ended, in order to capture as many thoughts in response to classroom experiences as possible. Once the teaching period had come to an end, the journal entries were read once again. In reading the journal entries in preparation for this paper, items such as overarching themes and epiphanies were coded, before being divided into appropriate sub-sections. Selected insights are explored in the following section.

Identifying Insights

The following sub-sections provide descriptions of selected insights that were made during this study’s teaching/researching process. Although many more insights were documented and could be explored, due to space limitations however, only three have been chosen for reflection here in this paper. It is hoped that that the three insights provided illustrate the applications of taking an EP approach to supporting SEN learners in English language learning environments.

Insight 1 : Approaching Communication with Learners

In the first teaching journal entry a large segment was spent reflecting on an in-class activity that required interaction between students. Being that this was only the second class into the course, I wanted to get a sense of what physically and practically could, and couldn’t be done at an early stage. I encouraged Yoko to try to articu-

late words, however this was met with some resistance and reluctance. On concluding the class, myself, Hanaka, and Yoko met to share our thoughts about the lesson. Yoko told me about her educational history, which I had previously not known about. Yoko wrote on the class board that she had received special education throughout her childhood. In response, I wrote in my teaching journal that being required to verbalise in English is perhaps something that Yoko is unfamiliar with doing. To address this, additional technology was introduced to the next class in the shape of electronic memo pads. In place of pushing Yoko to articulate her words orally, I offered the chance to Yoko to use the electronic memo pads to communicate what she would like to say. Hanaka also reflected on what her roles would be in this process, with a suggestion from me that Hanaka could reproduce Yoko's written messages orally. Gradually throughout the initial lessons a communication loop emerged between the group. The process began with either myself or a class member saying something, which would then be recorded on Hanaka's note-taking software on her computer. When Yoko had read the message and was ready to respond, she used her electronic note pad to write a response. The final stage would see Hanaka verbally delivering this message to the other members of the interaction.

Insight 2 — Approaching the Whole Class

In becoming so focussed on looking for ways to support Yoko and work with Hanaka, my attentions may not have been fully on the rest of class members. In the second teaching journal entry, I chose to reflect on how the class were doing as a whole, describing the characteristics of the class. The 21 members of the class are a cohort of students doing professional internships with different companies related to the tourism industry. The members mostly participate in internship activities in the morning, and attend classes in the afternoon. As a result of the members choosing this route of study at university, levels of English ability differ greatly among the members of class, with the option of dividing the members into different language ability groups not being possible. In the second teaching journal entry, I expressed frustration about not being able to fully control the class and attend to all the possible variables. With the learners all working at different paces, some being more focussed than others, as well as keeping an eye on Yoko and Hanaka, I considered ways of attempting to relieve myself of the feeling that all things needed to be tightly controlled in the class. I recalled what Elliot (2017) had previously experimented with in his EP study, by handing over greater responsibility to the class members. For a period of lessons, I split the members into small groups and divided the class into three or four stages, signalling the instructions and duration of each stage on a projected slide. Reflecting on this class adaptation, I remarked how much freer I felt to move around the room and offer individualised support to different groups of students. I also commented on how much energy and motivation there seemed to be in the room, something that I suggested had been lacking in previous classes. I also remarked that my focus on what Yoko was doing lessened, noticing that the learner she was partnered with took a more active role in interacting and coordinating activities with her by using the communication loop pattern that had been previously established. As with previous peri-

ods of lessons, Yoko and Hanaka were offered the chance to comment and reflect on the lesson. Yoko conveyed that she had nothing to say about the recent lessons, with an assumption being made by myself that this could be a positive indication that the recent lesson approach was beneficial.

Insight 3 — Approaching Teacher Instructions

As might be expected from a hearing-impaired learner, Yoko is unable to hear verbal instructions. This makes it challenging to follow the transitions of activities smoothly, with Yoko having to rely on Hanaka to relay instructions to her. However, if the instructions are not presented clearly or come across as underprepared, this further adds to the challenge. In the previous section, an approach to class management was explored. Although this was considered successful on my part, this brought up new puzzles with regard to the learners' ability to follow instructions for themselves. In handing over more responsibility to the group members, I recalled in the fifth teaching journal entry that more questions were generated about the meaning of the instructions that appeared in the textbook being used. I noted how learners do not naturally follow a teacher's logic consistently, in that they are unfamiliar with how one activity informs or flows into the next, for example. In addition, the commands that textbooks give about how to complete exercises are not always that straight forward, seeming not to be designed for learners to use by themselves. This meant that Hanaka, as well as taking notes, was also asking questions of her own about what was expected of each activity, thus giving Yoko a feeling of confusion, detachment, and lack of engagement in the class. On reflecting on these issues together after a lesson, I wanted to address these points in the lessons that followed. I decided to maintain and continue with the previous approach, whereby the groups worked through different stages of the lesson at their own pace, however more support was supplied on the projected slides, rather than the minimal instructions used previously. I decided to scan the necessary textbook pages onto slides, and annotate them with carefully worded instructions. This approach had some ramifications. Firstly, it meant that most class members had a clearer understanding of what to do, reducing the amount of uncertainty and questions being asked. It also meant that Hanaka's roles in taking notes was reduced, owing to the fact that everything the teacher was explaining was almost identically presented on the projected slides. This led to Hanaka remarking that Yoko seemed more attentive in the class, was looking down at her screen far less, and could personally follow the teaching instructions without any distractions.

Taking Stock

Unlike other practitioner research papers, this paper does not look to report any definite conclusions. However, what can be said with some certainty, is that the decision to adopt an EP approach as a lens through which to develop support strategies for a SEN learner in my class has been very useful. An EP approach is about openness, transparency, and unity between teachers and learners, and about gathering insights from readily available pedagogical tools and environments. The teaching of SEN learners is highly complex, nuanced, and very indi-

vidualised around a student's personal disability and learning difference. An EP approach has concurrently guided and supported the process of teaching and research, ensuring a raised sensitivity and awareness, thus helping me to pay closer attention to, and understand language learning conditions as activities influenced and characterised by authentic curiosities and puzzles shared among the study's members.

Through openness, honesty, and close collaboration with Yoko and Hanaka, tentative insights and understandings have been made about how to better support and provide an inclusive and equitable language learning course to SEN learners. Through regular classroom interventions and experiments, and continuous feedback interaction with two co-enquirers, I have better learnt how to go about facilitating genuine communication between Yoko and her peers, found ways to attend to the whole class, and present my instructions in a more coherent and calculated manner. Along the way, many other insights were also made too. This section acts as a brief pause to this CPD process rather than a conclusion, as there are many more insights to be gained and lessons to be learnt. It is hoped however that the process documented and reflected upon here will be of some use to the wider language teaching community with regard to support for SEN learners, and goes some way to contributing to the growing examples of first-hand experiences with language teachers developing provisions for SEN learners in their classrooms.

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【Abstract】

聴覚障害を持った英語学習者支援に向けた
探求的実践活動（Exploratory Practice）アプローチ

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本研究の目的は、授業内の聴覚障害を持った英語学習者支援の探求である。実践活動アプローチ（EP）を導入した理由は、英語学習の授業は学習するための場所であり、また教室内の実践を研究する場であるという2つの役割がある実践研究のためである。本研究の狙いは、今までの授業内実践を記した教育日誌に基づき、この教育課題の複雑な本質を解明することである。そして、共同調査の可能性を探るため、聴覚障害を持った英語学習者と教員の間で行われた共同作業の報告である。

キーワード：特別教育支援、探求的実践活動、専門能力開発、教育日誌、英語教育

This paper explores the writer's ongoing attempts to support a hearing-impaired learner in a communicative English language class. Exploratory Practice (EP) is used as an approach to practitioner research, whereby the language classroom functions with the dual purpose of being a space for learning, as well as a chance for professional enquiry. Reflecting on a teaching journal, this paper aims to capture the complex nature of this pedagogical process. This paper also documents the collaborative efforts that took place between related members, namely the hearing-impaired learner and a member of support staff, in order to explore the potential of co-enquiry.

Key words : *Special Educational Needs, Exploratory Practice, Professional Development, Teaching Journals, English Language Education*

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