

# Student Perspectives on Learner-initiated Exploratory Practice: Quality of Classroom Life

Tim CLEMINSON<sup>\*1</sup>

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## Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine students' perspectives on learner-initiated exploratory practice conducted in large size English language classes in a Japanese university. The foundational principles of exploratory practice and the associated concept of quality of classroom life are examined and attention is given to the co-creative and dialogic nature of the exploratory practice classroom. The practitioner introduces their practice and a set of student narratives about participating in the class. These narratives are analyzed to see what they tell us about student perspectives on learner-initiated exploratory practice and the quality of classroom life it enables.

## 1. Introduction

I have taught English in universities in Japan for almost 20 years. Over the years I have realized many students find studying English quite challenging, especially in high school. By the time I meet my students, many seem to have an 'English malaise' with little motivation to study or confidence to speak English. I realized I couldn't help my students unless I spent time listening to and understanding their learning experiences and expectations. I also felt students needed to help themselves and that sharing their learning experiences could help them do this. So, I realized I needed to create an environment that supported learner-centered reflection.

Exploratory practice (EP) is a transformative reimagining of the language classroom that puts quality of life (QoL) first and challenges learners to actively research personal learning puzzles in a spirit of inclusivity and collegiality<sup>1)</sup>. I could see the potential of EP to actualize students' sense of agency and help them understand their feelings about English, but would they feel the same? Would they be willing to share their experiences of learning? Would they value learner centered reflection, or feel their time was better spent learning practical English in teacher-led classes? I decided to find out by applying EP principles in my practice.

This paper is a reflection on my first EP classes. I hope to understand student experiences of the class and how they feel it affected their well-being as language learners. Firstly, I consider why addressing QoL in English education is important. Secondly, I examine how EP principles and the notion of quality

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<sup>\*1</sup> Department of Medical Secretarial Arts, Faculty of Health and Welfare Services Administration  
Kawasaki University of Medical Welfare, 288 Matsushima, Kurashiki, 701-0193, Japan  
E-Mail: [tim@mw.kawasaki-m.ac.jp](mailto:tim@mw.kawasaki-m.ac.jp)

of classroom life (QoCRL)<sup>2</sup> can help us understand the dialogic nature of QoL in the classroom. Thirdly, I introduce how I applied EP in my classes and present my students' experiences in the form of narratives based on post-course interviews. Finally, I reflect on what these narratives can teach us about EP and QoL in the classroom.

### 1.1 *Quality of life issues in Japanese English education*

Based on the university placement test, the students in my classes would be considered "basic users", around A1 and A2 in the CEFR scale. Research suggests lower-level learners can have motivation and self-esteem issues that begin in junior and senior high school<sup>3,4</sup>. The reasons for these feelings are complex, involving cognitive, social, and affective aspects of learning. Surveys show these students often have a negative attitude towards teacher-led, prescriptive methods of study, finding grammar drills boring and the rate of word and grammar memorization difficult<sup>3</sup>. These students may also feel shame when asked to display their English skills publicly, such as reading aloud<sup>4</sup>. Students often have a negative attitude towards teachers' ability to teach and relationships with teachers and peers<sup>4</sup>. Given the negative issues related to classroom life, it is not surprising that this can result in a sense of disengagement with English study and resistance towards the English language itself<sup>4</sup>.

Prescriptive, or *technicist*, approaches to English teaching focus on the effective transmission and retention of knowledge<sup>5</sup>. Knowledge is essentially decontextualized and universal. For example, when learning language for a test it matters not who answers the question, but only that the answer is correct. Good teaching then becomes a matter of following pre-determined "teaching points"<sup>5</sup> that transmit generalized information and aid recall efficiently. The requirement for efficacy prioritizes monological teaching practices that diminish humanistic aspects of learning such as expressing individuality or personal agency in playful or creative ways<sup>6</sup>. As can be seen in the negative responses above, it is arguable that technicist teaching practices are part of the reason lower-level students feel a sense of alienation and disengagement with English learning.

As English classes are often required components in university general curriculums, negative attitudes and feelings of resistance can be problematic for students. These high stakes requirements put extra pressure on students to perform. However, even when students try to continue learning English, negative experiences, feelings of pressure, embarrassment and alienation can cause them to lose motivation and feel like giving up<sup>3</sup>. These issues impact on the emotional well-being and quality of life of students and their teachers<sup>3</sup>. Given these negative dynamics, it makes sense to question whether purely prescriptive models of language education benefit this group. Proponents of EP argue we can help students re-engage with their language learning by moving away from prescriptive "teaching points" towards a *humanistic* approach based on rich "learning opportunities"<sup>5</sup>. Recent research has shown that learner-initiated forms of EP have the potential to help lower-level university students reinvigorate their language learning experience and rediscover their motivation<sup>7</sup>. In order to assess these claims, it first makes sense to examine to why EP principles could have such a transformative effect.

### 1.2 *Introducing exploratory practice*

EP is a form of fully inclusive practitioner research<sup>8</sup> in which "learners, as well as teachers, are encouraged to investigate their learning/teaching practices while concurrently practicing the target language" (p.2)<sup>9</sup>. EP challenges us to activate the agency potential of students<sup>2</sup> and reimagine teachers and students as 'key developing practitioners' who can make important insights about language learning that benefit the group<sup>8</sup>.

EP is based on the following principles (adapted from Allwright and Hanks, 2009 by Kato and Hanks)<sup>7</sup>:

1. Put 'quality of life' first
2. Work primarily to understand language classroom life (puzzling)
3. Involve everybody (inclusivity)
4. Work to bring people together (collegiality)
5. Work also for mutual development
6. Make the work a continuous and relevant enterprise
7. Integrate the work for understanding into existing curricular practices

In practice, these principles are used to stimulate curiosity about language learning and help students identify language puzzles they find intrinsically motivating. The puzzles are generally presented in the form of a 'why' question, such as 'Why don't I feel confident to speak English, even though I can read it?' Students then research these puzzles collaboratively and make poster presentations to discuss and generate new understandings of their language learning experiences with other students. EP values the *idiosyncratic* nature of learners, and supports their *agency* to follow their own *curiosity* with fellow students in a *spirit of collegiality*. In these ways, learning is not a form of knowledge transmission but a form of *ontological engagement* with learning that is intrinsically motivating and relevant<sup>6)</sup>. Learning becomes a *dialogic* and *co-creative* process in which participants contribute to the understanding and well-being of the learning community. In these ways, rich learning opportunities build a deeper understanding of quality of life in language learning and provide a basis for lifelong learning and continued language development<sup>10)</sup>.

### 1.3 The dialogic nature of quality of classroom life

It may first be beneficial to think about how conceptions of QoL in the EP community differ from general conceptions of QoL. WHO defined quality of life as, "individuals' perceptions of their position in life in the context of the culture and value systems in which they live and in relation to their goals, expectations, standards and concerns"<sup>11)</sup>. QoL is our sense of well-being, how we feel about our social position and connections, our autonomy to act and how these relate to our physical and psychological health. Although QoL relates to our *inner world*, it is often used as a form of *external assessment* by researchers to measure how a specific group of people feel. Hence, its application is essentially *etic*, outsiders make judgements about what constitutes QoL. In an educational context, assessment tools such as the quality of school life<sup>12)</sup> survey allow researchers to quantitatively assess student QoL in terms of satisfaction, commitment to work and attitude towards teachers. In contrast, EP conceives of QoL in qualitative terms, as an *emergent property of engagement within a community*<sup>2)</sup>; hence is essentially *emic* and *idiosyncratic*. QoL is not something that happens to subjects and can be measured objectively from the outside; QoL is something that participants co-create and must be *understood* from the *inside*.

Focusing on quality of life is listed as the first principle of EP. Exactly what that means in practice and how it can be achieved in the language classroom is the most fundamental meta-puzzle and remains open to debate. Stewart suggests that even within EP practice, QoL is unnecessarily broad and that it is better to focus on the concept of "quality of learning"<sup>13)</sup>. However, in a truly humanistic interpretation of learning, quality of learning outcomes is dependent on general aspects of QoL such as our sense of motivation, agency and well-being<sup>14)</sup>. The power of EP is that it enables us to broaden our conception of QoL in learning environments to include the generative power of authentic relationships<sup>15)</sup> and other ontological aspects of the classroom. As Gieve and Miller suggest, we should consider not only our learner and teacher roles but also how we relate to each other as "people who speak to each other" from real lives and:

...resist the colonization of the life-world by technologies of education by redefining notions such as motivation, anxiety, discipline, learners' and teachers' beliefs, or patterns of classroom interaction, in terms of life rather than work terms (p19)<sup>2)</sup>.

Gieve and Miller<sup>2)</sup> created the concept of Quality of Classroom Life (QoCRL) to articulate these ideas more fully. QoCRL focuses on the lived experiences and affective responses of classroom participants. The classroom is examined in humanistic terms and prioritizes process and the quality of our interactions<sup>2)</sup>. Process should not be seen merely as something that leads to a product (language development) but as an "inherent way of being in the classroom"<sup>2)</sup>. Hence, Gieve and Miller employ a Bakhtinian analysis to argue that QoCRL is a localized intertextuality that emerges from the dialogic interaction between participants. As classroom participants learn they build up "a shared repertoire of routines" that form a "continuity of connection between utterances" and deepen mutual understanding<sup>2)</sup>.

In order to understand the meaning of "inherent way of being in the classroom", it may be beneficial to differentiate between *instrumental* and *ontological* dialogue in the classroom. Instrumental dialogue is using dialogue as a tool to teach specific knowledge or a language skill. For example, a teacher could ask two students to perform a dialogue to practice the use of a set phrase. However, ontological dialogue is deeper, it is the idea that our form of life and sense of identity depends on a dialogic relation with others<sup>16)</sup>. Language, communication and self are dependent on the existence of others and our innate desire to commune with them:

Language is not an ontological condition of dialogue, but one of the consequences of dialogue...The need to give a name is inconceivable without the other human being for whose attention the name is intended (p21)<sup>17)</sup>.

Dialogic relations are the fundamental glue that makes our human form of life possible. These relations are best understood as an inherent responsivity we have to other people. Likewise, our utterances also have an inherent addressivity to others, to those we speak with and those who have spoken before us<sup>18)</sup>. Meaning is born not because something is uttered, but because something is addressed to someone else and meant to be heard by someone else<sup>17)</sup>. Meaning exists not by itself, but as part of a chain of utterances stretching backwards and forwards in time<sup>18)</sup>. When we communicate it is a link in this chain, a moment of co-creativity between speaker and listener, i.e., listeners not only hear an utterance, but shape it as it is being spoken. In order for this intertextuality to develop requires a degree of dialogic discourse among classroom participants<sup>2)</sup>. It could be argued that one of the aims of EP is to develop a distinctive spirit towards dialogue with others in the classroom that facilitates mindful communication and reflection. The character of this discourse and how it conceives of the addressee, our partner in conversation, is one of the defining aspects of our mutual practice in the EP classroom, a very localized speech genre<sup>18)</sup>. When we apply this highly context-dependent notion of language use to the EP classroom, QoCRL can be seen as emerging from reciprocity and dialogic engagement between participants expressed in an accent of inclusivity and collegiality.

To understand dialogic discourse, it helps to contrast it with monologic discourse. In monologic discourse, there is an *authoritative voice* that is not questioned<sup>19)</sup>. The listener accepts what is being said in whole, and retains it. Teacher-led instruction in which knowledge is clearly transmitted is an example of monologic discourse. In contrast, dialogic discourse is based on the *internally persuasive word*<sup>19)</sup>. The internally persuasive word does not unilaterally persuade the other person of a specific truth, but invites them to engage with the idea. In this kind of dialogue, speakers build on each other's ideas through mutual interaction. What they build is unique and multi-voiced - being 'half-mine' and 'half-yours'. As Sidorkin notes, for Bakhtin, truth is polyphonic - differences never fully merge, they co-exist in an engaged interaction<sup>17)</sup>. So, truth can be seen not as reducing complex and contrasting viewpoints to a singular and 'correct' view but holding them simultaneously in the moment. Bakhtin likens the polyphonic nature of truth<sup>18)</sup> as different musical notes coming together to form a chord. Truth is not dialectic, but dialogical. The aim of analysis is not to reduce difference and plurality in a generalizable synthesis, but to connect aspects of human plurality in a

greater understanding<sup>17)</sup>.

In these ways, Bakhtinian notions of dialogic discourse and polyphonic truth make sense of the necessity for mutual understanding of QoCRL as espoused in EP principles. We need each other's perspectives to help us see the complex truth of the situation. Hence, as Gieve and Miller argue, Bakhtin's dialogical analysis:

illuminates the relationship between linguistic interaction and life rather than pedagogic work, and allows a link between classroom work, classroom life and the lives of classroom participants (p29)<sup>2)</sup>.

Understanding is not something we can do on our own, it is something born in the moment when ideas and opinions are juxtaposed and held together in dialogue between people. Mutual understanding requires co-creative wisdom<sup>20)</sup> "holding ajar the potential and reality of difference without necessarily seeing resolution"<sup>21)</sup> and provides deeper insights into well-being in our language learning lives.

#### *1.4 Learner-initiated exploratory practice and quality of classroom life*

There are few studies that explore how learner-initiated EP support QoL in large classes with lower-level students in the Japanese university context. However, a recent study has shown learner-initiated EP can be used to reinvigorate learners in this context by reconnecting them with their curiosity about language learning<sup>7)</sup>. In teacher-initiated EP, teachers create the main focus of inquiry. However, in learner-initiated EP students choose their own focus of inquiry. Questionnaires showed that the combination of facilitating personal curiosity in a collegial atmosphere appears to provide a way for students to overcome past negative experiences with language learning and rediscover their motivation and self-efficacy<sup>7)</sup>. Furthermore, the practitioners noted at lower levels of language ability, the EP principle of inclusivity requires a positive attitude towards trans-linguaging during communication<sup>7)</sup>. Despite these positive responses, some students found it difficult to research, make and present their poster, due, in part, to their lack of confidence and ability in using English<sup>7)</sup>. Furthermore, although group work was viewed positively, some students found it difficult to communicate with students they didn't know. This study has shown the potential for EP to improve student well-being in lower-level Japanese university classes and also some of the challenges. However, why these students value EP classes, how it reinvigorates their learning and, why communicating about these issues can be challenging remains an under researched area worth investigating in more qualitative depth.

Indeed, transitioning from teacher-led classroom cultures to co-creative and dialogic forms of learner-initiated practice is likely to be challenging and require some form of scaffolding for teachers and learners alike. Making the most of EP requires a broad range of capacities not generally required in teacher-led classes. EP requires exploratory playfulness to explore our "praxis to the fullest, with curious and open minds" and identify meaningful puzzles<sup>14)</sup>. We need to be brave and trust each other when we discuss those puzzles and share our inner reasons why they are important to us. The emphasis on mutual understanding requires us to be present in our words and to tolerate periods of personal incoherence and ambiguity<sup>22)</sup> as we share and discuss personal experience. However, this isn't easy. As Hanks notes, this is essentially, a struggle, a struggle to share our learning experiences, remain open and work for mutual understanding<sup>9)</sup>. Opening up in this way could be especially challenging when dealing with students who have had negative learning experiences and when the participants have different cultural expectations of the classroom.

## **2. Methods**

### *2.1 Teaching method*

Having discussed how EP principles might relate to quality of classroom life, I would now like to address how I have tried to apply these principles in my local context. I taught two compulsory Practical English

classes for first year students in a Japanese university of welfare. The students would be classed as "basic users" on the CEFR scale who potentially had self-esteem and confidence issues with English. Given that I wished to learn from my students and also give them the autonomy to explore the issues that mattered to them, I chose to conduct learner-initiated EP. There were 28 students in each class and the class lasted for 15 weeks.

Table 1 Course workflow and student groupings

Weeks	Content	Student groups	Aim
1 to 5	Creative and imaginative activities in groups	Each week groups are randomized	Enable participants to mix, enjoy playful activities and reflect on their language learning together
6 to 13	Group puzzling: Deciding communication ground rules, identifying and researching language learning puzzle	Students choose 'puzzle groups' members and work in the same groups continuously	Develop understanding about language learning puzzles Develop research and discussion skills in groups
14	Poster festival: all posters are hung on walls. In 3 timed sessions groups can present and watch other presentations	'Puzzle groups' present to small audiences	Share research on their puzzle and discuss their ideas with the audience
15	Reflective report writing	Individual writing exercise	Reflect on course experiences and future language learning

The focus of the course is developing practical communication skills. As part of this process, the class is asked to reflect on their language learning and consider the skills and attitudes required to become active language users. As can be seen in Table 1, in the first five weeks, students are put into random groups to work on creative group activities. These activities require students to be playful, use their imagination and improvise word use to stimulate their curiosity in language learning and connect with each other<sup>21)</sup>. Examples of activities include creating colourful posters based on word association, or making Lego movies by writing scripts in English, building the sets and characters in Lego and then filming the movies on their smartphones. Other activities require students to reflect on their language-learning and share experiences and beliefs about developing communication skills. For example, reflective board games used to self-evaluate language skills and imaginative writing exercises such as imagining the English language as a person, 'Eigo-chan', and writing them a letter to express how you feel about your 'relationship'. The activities were used to share experiences, aid self-reflection and develop mutual understanding about language learning with classmates.

After the creative classes, learners spend 8 weeks on the puzzling stage. Students choose the groups (2-5 people) they would like to work with and stay in those groups throughout the remaining lessons. In the first lesson, communication styles are discussed and each group decides on a set of ground rules for discussion<sup>23)</sup> and L1 and L2 language use that will help them work together. Then, groups choose a puzzle relevant to their curiosity about language learning and research it. The choice of topic is free and varied among groups. The process of research is also varied and can involve researching on the internet, making class surveys and doing short interviews with other students. When the posters are completed, students

learn English phrases for making their presentations. In the penultimate lesson, there is a 'poster festival' and all the students present their puzzle posters to small groups. There is a permissive attitude towards L1 and L2 language use during the presentations. In the final lesson, students reflect on the course and write a report on what they enjoyed, what they found difficult and what they feel they have learned.

## 2.2 *Research method*

The research was reviewed and approved by the Kawasaki University of Medical Welfare Ethics Committee (Ref.21-103). All participants received a full explanation of the research in their native language and participation was voluntary. Written consent was received from all participants who agreed to take part. From the fifty-six students in the two classes, thirty-one agreed to their coursework being used as data. Of these students, eighteen indicated they would be willing to be interviewed. After the classes, ten of these students from a range of different departments were contacted and asked to come to interviews. Five agreed to be interviewed and their narratives form the data for this research. It should be noted the project was based on the courses I taught and so represents an opportunity sample. Furthermore, as participation was voluntary, the group is essentially self-selected. Hence, it could be argued these findings have inherent forms of selection bias. For example, students who researched negative feelings about English directly in their puzzles, did not reply to requests to be interviewed. Self-selection bias does not diminish the authenticity of the findings, only qualifies them as relating to these specific students and their experiences of language learning.

### 2.2.1 *Co-constructing the narratives*

The narratives were based on interviews between the teacher and the students. The interview questions focused on student experiences on the course, i.e. what they enjoyed, what they found challenging and what they felt they learnt. Students were also asked about how they understood the concept of QoL in the classroom. Narrative analysis was considered suitable because it aims to preserve the voice of the student and help the researcher understand how they made sense of their lived experience of EP<sup>24)</sup>. The narratives were co-constructed in a process of narrative knowledging<sup>25)</sup>. Narratives are stories that students can easily understand. This understanding enables them to edit the narratives and control how their experience is being presented. These narratives also enable readers to understand the lived experiences more fully. For this reason, there are five detailed narratives in this research.

To help students recall the class and reflect on their experiences, they received copies of their learning journals and reports one week before the interview. To recreate the feeling of being in the class during the interview, the posters and creative group work they produced were hung up in the room. The students and teacher reviewed these materials as they discussed the classes. The interviews were recorded on an IC recorder and transcribed. The transcriptions were uploaded into MAXQDA 2022 software for analysis. Notes made during analysis referenced aspects of the lived experience of the students including their affective responses to classroom activities, their feelings about working with others, and their perceptions of language learning and quality of life. Based on this analysis, the researcher wrote narratives that focused on:

1. High school English experiences
2. The creative activities
3. Making the puzzle and presentation, and,
4. Student perceptions of QoCRL

The narratives were written in English, then translated into Japanese. Both English and Japanese versions were sent to the students for review. Students edited the Japanese documents to ensure authenticity. The researcher then made these changes in English and agreed the scripts with the students. The narratives

presented in the next section are the final versions approved by the students. Pseudonyms are used to protect anonymity.

### 3. Findings – student narratives

#### *3.1 Mari's story- Mari is a first-year student majoring in clinical nutrition.*

##### *3.1.1 High school experiences*

In my high school, we had communication classes with foreign teachers, but it was mainly study for tests. I don't really like sitting down and studying, so high school was tough. At that time, I remember helping a foreign person in a convenience store. So, I also had positive experiences with Eigo-chan.

##### *3.1.2 Creative activities*

To be honest, I hadn't done any creative group work before. At the start, I was a little confused, but got used to taking the lead and being active. We moved around which made it easier to communicate, like playing with the Lego blocks. We had to communicate to understand each other and make a good story. It was difficult to get used to talking with people from different departments. But, that was also really good. If you just stay with your friends, you only hear the same opinions. But when you meet other people, you hear lots of new ideas. I feel I connected with people through English and could build a close relationship to work together.

##### *3.1.3 Making the puzzle poster and presentation*

At first, it was difficult to understand 'puzzle' because it reminds me of a jigsaw. I got it eventually. I am not sure how to speak with different people, so I was puzzled by trying to understand native speakers. I wondered why we didn't use more English TV dramas for listening. You can learn cool phrases from dramas to use yourself. In my group it was difficult to agree on the final conclusion. I also wanted to use more English, but we mainly used Japanese making the poster. I wanted the teacher to check my English more because I didn't want to make an embarrassing mistake. I was a little nervous making the presentation. But, I realized that I didn't have to worry so much about grammar before I spoke. I could just communicate a little and the other person would understand me and respond. So, I relaxed a bit about speaking.

##### *3.1.4 Quality of life in the classroom*

I am not sure I really understand what QoCRL is, but I like lessons that have lots of communication. It's challenging to do that in English because none of us really know English well. But it's fun to make contact with lots of different people and build genuine connections.

#### *3.2 Kiyo's story –Kiyo is a first-year student majoring in radiological technology.*

##### *3.2.1 High school experiences*

English lessons in high school were mainly studying for exams rather than for the future. So, we read long passages in textbooks and studied grammar. I am not against traditional teaching methods, but it was boring. I want to learn more practical English and phrases native speakers use in their daily lives. Overall, I think I have a good relationship with Eigo-chan.

##### *3.2.2 Creative activities*

I want to do things perfectly, so my natural instinct is to worry about details and think before I speak. But if it's fun group work, like when we made the Lego movie, I communicate proactively. In class, we changed groups a lot. I liked that, but sometimes people didn't actively cooperate. That was a bit difficult. I thought, "Someone has to make this work!" So, I helped people talk. I didn't realize it at the time, but I was often taking the lead to help the group. Although, sometimes, I wanted more clarification from my teacher



about what I should do.

### *3.2.3 Making the puzzle poster and presentation*

Our idea of a 'puzzle' is a jigsaw! So, at first, my group found it hard to understand what to do. Even when we understood, we still weren't sure. We were curious about real English and English use in SNS. So, we decided to research slang. We never had a chance to do this before, so it was exciting to research English we found intriguing. I learnt a lot about communication and working with others making the poster, like you need to communicate proactively to move the project forward. We talked a lot in-group, but we didn't talk much to other groups. I think it might have been fun to do that, but we were a little shy about making contact. Funnily enough, I wasn't nervous to present our poster as there weren't many people watching. We tried to make it like a conversation. We had a section for people to write the slang they liked.

### *3.2.4 Quality of life in the classroom*

I think QoCRL is about making people aware of the need to communicate, but in a relaxed environment. If you are worried about being wrong, you don't get actively involved. So, it's important that people don't worry and just communicate during the activities. You need to be free to speak about the things that interest you. I felt through this class that group work is important for this.

## *3.3 Aya's story - Aya is first-year student majoring in medical technology.*

### *3.3.1 High school experiences*

When I heard I had English classes at university with a native speaker, I didn't want to do it. My image of English from high school is that we have to remember words and study them for tests. We had 'communication' classes too, but it was just reading conversations from a text book. Not communication at all! We were only allowed to use English to communicate and I felt a lot of pressure. I had a lot of negative feelings. This is a bit contradictory; I love words, but I hated English study and Eigo-chan at high-school.

### *3.3.2 Creative activities*

I really like working in groups, so it wasn't difficult to transition to the university classes. I was ready to work actively in a less pressurized environment. It was like we were playing with each other in English. I liked the word play, as we were playing with words. If I didn't know something, other group members would tell me. And I liked freely researching words.

### *3.3.3 Making the puzzle poster and presentation*

Our puzzle ended up being about why we don't study English related to music. We became fascinated by all the different music genres and the words to describe them. I think the thing that made the biggest impression on me was the poster making. None of us were really active communicators who give our opinion clearly. So, deciding ground rules for discussion was good. It allowed us to say, "OK, let's discuss things actively in the group." We all researched what we wanted and had to talk a lot to get the work done. We felt a sense of achievement to research something and communicate it to other people. I really liked the small audience because I could relax when talking. In this lesson, I realized I am actually quite motivated to speak English. I now think I want to study for English tests, which is amazing, because I never thought I would feel positive about tests.

### *3.3.4 Quality of life in the classroom*

The best thing about this class was the feeling of connecting with others when we worked on a project. It's important not to be uptight and communicate naturally, like a normal conversation. We should be accepting of mistakes; not get angry when they happen! And know, learning comes from within you, not from a textbook.

### *3.4 Shinji's story - Shinji is a first-year student studying health and sports science.*

#### *3.4.1 High school experiences*

I didn't like English so much in high school, because of tests. I was worried about my performance and getting lots of red marks! So, I didn't really feel a strong connection with Eigo-chan.

#### *3.4.2 Creative activities*

Before the lessons, I was a little worried about whether I would be OK. I don't think I am good at English, so I worried I might not be able to communicate well with other people. I remember the teacher's life story from the first lesson. He went to another country without knowing the language and overcame challenges. I tend to avoid challenges, so the teacher's courage made a big impression on me. I was really impressed with the Lego lesson too. It's easier to talk when you are making something together. And, you're learning English at the same time. During that activity, I was surprised by the power of other people's imagination. I don't think I have that imagination. I am just happy to contribute in any way I can.

#### *3.4.3 Making the puzzle poster and presentation*

We didn't really have a 'puzzle' about our learning. We are in the sports science department and wondered how professional Japanese players could manage to live overseas. So, we decided to research that. We talked a lot about it in a group. I am not really talkative, but gave my opinion when asked. It was a good challenge to make a poster and present in English. It was difficult to communicate and answer questions, so I wouldn't really say it was fun, but I really enjoyed these classes. I didn't think "I don't want to come" once.

#### *3.4.4 Quality of life in the classroom*

I am not sure I understand what QoCRL is, but I would say in a good class, it matters that you come to the class. In some classes, you don't have to participate, you can just ask your friends for the class notes. In a good class you have to be there, think for yourself and present your ideas. That's what I mean when I say it matters that you come to the class and communicate with other people.

### *3.5 Tsubasa's story - Tsubasa is a first-year student studying social work.*

#### *3.5.1 High school experiences*

I am really interested in English words, but I didn't like studying at high school just to remember them for tests. We always had to speak in English. That's difficult and put pressure on me. I didn't use English much, so even if I thought it was fun, I felt study was tiring. But I actually like English and have a good relationship with Eigo-chan.

#### *3.5.2 Creative activities*

I really enjoyed the Lego lesson. It was fun to work with people whilst making something and moving my body. But it was difficult to get consensus during the task. Everybody had different ideas and so, it felt chaotic at times. I wanted more time to agree on what to do. Sometimes, it was difficult to understand the rules, or to know what was expected. I had to work with different people. I'm shy, so that was a challenge, but I got used to it. I learnt to communicate using simple words.

#### *3.5.3 Making the puzzle poster and presentation*

I was interested in why Japanese musicians used English words. English phrases can be used in a nuanced way to add extra emotion or meaning to a song. I think we do that in conversation in Japanese too. During research, I could look up words I was interested in; not words for study. I'm curious about English words, so, I liked having the freedom to do that. You know, more than anything, I think I learnt about how to collaborate with others. On projects we had to talk about our skills and work out a suitable way to do it together. We had to communicate proactively to get things done. So, I learnt a lot through that. In the

presentation, I researched how to explain it in English. But in the Q and A, I mainly used Japanese. I'm normally shy when speaking, but it was small groups, so it wasn't so bad because we could use English or Japanese.

#### *3.5.4 Quality of life in the classroom*

QoL is not focusing on the things you lack in language; you should relax and express yourself more freely in an individual way so that you can explore language that is meaningful for you and use it to communicate about things that are important to you. I think that's real QoL in the classroom.

### **4. Discussion**

In this section, I will review the experiences of the students to find interesting points of convergence and divergence. I will relate it to the concepts discussed in the introduction. Finally, I will make some suggestions regarding practice and future research.

#### *4.1 High school experiences of English*

The student narratives make it clear that the prescriptive and passive methods of study at high school were tough experiences and this supports previous findings<sup>3,4</sup>. Shinji talks about his dislike for "red marks" on his test and Kiyo talks of how "boring" study was. Tsubasa and Aya say how they "hated" the pressure of always having to talk in English and having to repeat textbook conversations instead of having genuine ones. Aya had clearly negative emotions about English at this time, and Shinji is ambivalent. However, what is surprising is that despite the negative experiences and poor quality of language learning life, the students retain a positive attitude towards English and retained a sense of hope about their English study. This personal resilience is important for practitioners to keep in mind as it shows there is still potential to reignite their interest and rekindle their positive engagement with English language study.

#### *4.2 Getting used to working in groups: Creative activities*

This study supported the findings by Kato and Hanks that group work is problematic as students find it difficult to communicate with their classmates and manage tasks<sup>7</sup>. During the creative play activities and the poster making, all of the students had struggles to discuss their ideas. Shyness and a concern about their English ability seemed to be an issue for Mari, Kiyo, Shinji and Tsubasa. They found it difficult to communicate with people they didn't know. As the students had to work in different groups each week, this shouldn't be surprising. However, all the students found the sense of fun and bodily movement in the creative activities helped them relax and communicate more proactively. Kiyo said that despite her natural instinct to overthink speaking, "if it's fun group work...I communicate proactively". Aya even said the transition to these classes wasn't difficult because "It was like we were playing with each other in English." This suggests playful activities could be a way to help people relax and build a sense of community<sup>21</sup> and *collegiality*<sup>9</sup> before doing group work later in the course.

Working with others during creative activities also opened the students' eyes to the potential of other students. Shinji was amazed by the power of the other students' imagination during Lego work. Mari notes that although the communication could be difficult, communicating with people she didn't know opened her eyes to new ways of thinking: "If you just stay with your friends, you only hear the same opinions. But when you meet other people, you hear lots of new ideas." Mari also felt that these activities helped her to build relationships with other students that helped on project work. This shows students value dialogue with others as a way to form new perspectives on the world<sup>17</sup>.

However, the playful activities were also seen as a little "chaotic" by Tsubasa who wished for clearer instructions during some of the activities. From the teacher's perspective, the creative activities are

designed to add space for students to express autonomy and find creative ways to interact. However, it is clear that some learners require clearer explanations of the aims and structure of the activities to help them engage more proactively in open-ended dialogue. Even given these reservations, initial findings suggest playful activities could help students develop confidence to be more proactive in group tasks.

#### 4.3 Making the puzzle poster and presentation

One of the most obvious things that Kiyo and Mari commented on was that the metaphor of a 'puzzle' wasn't intuitively easy to understand because in Japanese it has the nuance of jigsaw puzzle. In classes, this phrase had to be supplemented with the Japanese phrase *'fushigi ni omou'*, which means finding something curious or intriguing, to help students understand. This confusion suggests in a Japanese context the existing metaphor of puzzle is problematic and there must be a better metaphor to help students pick-up the spirit of EP inquiry.

As with Kato and Hanks' study, it is clear the freedom to choose puzzles in learner-initiated EP is motivating for students and facilitates self-efficacy<sup>7)</sup>. Personal curiosity enables students to study language they feel is relevant to their lives and this supports meaningful study and well-being in the classroom. Both Tsubasa and Aya expressed their interest in English words and the joy of being able to research words *they* found meaningful. As Aya comments, "We became fascinated by all the different music genres and the words to describe them." Kiyo also enjoyed researching '*slang*' words as she often encountered them in her daily life surfing SNS sites. These comments are expressive of intrinsic motivation and the importance of *ontological engagement* with themes and content of study<sup>6,15)</sup>. However, rather than a critical interrogation of the self or the language learning practice, most studies seemed to focus on curiosity evoked from a sense of wonder. This allowed students to explore a deep interest through English that reignited their motivation and sparked positive feelings about the classroom.

One interesting occurrence was some groups struggled to find a specific language puzzle. In Shinji's group, despite the teacher's helps and several weeks of reflection a 'why' question about language didn't emerge. These students were sports science majors and loved baseball. However, they were very wary of the idea of living abroad. They couldn't understand how their idols, major league baseball players, could leave Japan and go and live in America. So, they ended up exploring the cultural mystery of why anyone would want to leave Japan and make a new life in America. Although this puzzle didn't focus on language specifically, this group found researching the puzzle, making the poster and presenting on the topic worthwhile. It opened up possible spaces of thinking<sup>21)</sup> about language and life that weren't obvious to them before. This suggests that even without a language puzzle, EP's *collegial* and *curiosity-driven* method of learner-initiated study stimulates language use and positively impacts on well-being.

Furthermore, what students seem to value most is the atmosphere of *collegiality* and being able to work together on projects in an autonomous way. All the students felt positively about learning how to work with others and communicate during group work. Tsubasa was pleased about learning "how to communicate proactively to get things done". Aya talks about how deciding ground rules for group conversation helped them "discuss things actively in the group". She speaks with a sense of pride about researching something as a group and communicating their findings to others. It seems the students respond to the spirit of collegiality and see working together, building relationships and communicating as *interdependent*. These ideas resonate with Gieve and Miller's notion of intertextuality emerging from classroom interaction and generating an idiosyncratic sense of community that can only really be understood from an emic perspective<sup>2)</sup>.

*Collegial learning* is strengthened by a sense of *inclusivity*. As suggested by Kato and Hanks, when working with lower-level students inclusivity requires an accepting attitude towards translanguaging and

as part of a speaker's communicative repertoire<sup>7)</sup>. Restricting communication to L2 can inhibit classroom interaction as students concern about speaking with perfect grammar diminishes reciprocity between them. Students reacted positively to the acceptance of L1 and L2 in the classroom, and an acceptance of imperfect English. Accepting 'mistakes' enabled students to relax and actually speak English more and feel more natural in their communication. This was also facilitated by the small group presentation model in the class. As Aya said, "I liked the small audience because I could relax whilst talking." Mari, Kiyo and Tsubasa noted that the relaxed atmosphere meant they didn't think so much before speaking and spoke more naturally. Mari commented how, "I could just communicate a little and the other person would understand me and respond." This suggests that being inclusive and allowing L1 and L2 not only facilitates communication in the target language but also can help develop a sense of collegiality and support in the group as a whole.

#### 4.4 Student conceptions of quality of classroom life

Student ideas about the nature of quality of life in the classroom are interesting, in part because QoL is not an idea that comes naturally to them when thinking about classrooms. In the interviews, the concept of '*a good class*' was used as a primer to help students talk about the concept of quality of classroom life. For students, QoL involves making an environment that is easy to talk and build relationships in. Mari suggests that although English communication is challenging, it provides a way to build *genuine connections with others*. Kiyo and Aya pick up Mari's point that communicating in English is difficult and stress the need to create a *supportive and inclusive environment*. Aya says we should accept mistakes and "not get angry when they happen!" Kiyo says "If you are worried about being wrong, you don't get actively involved". So, from the students' perspective, quality of life in the classroom is about creating an inclusive environment that is accepting of mistakes and that this acceptance facilitates communication between learners. Though not directly expressed, these comments emanate from a fear of getting things wrong and the need to forgive not only others but also ourselves. When people feel freer to talk, they can develop that sense of connection and collegiality with the people around them. In this sense, QoCRL is a *spirit* of interaction, a *mindful attitude towards the addressee* that informs communication and relationships building in the classroom<sup>2)</sup>.

*Ontological engagement*<sup>6,15)</sup> with their learning and feeling a sense of *relevance*<sup>8)</sup> is also central to students' perceptions of QoL. Kiyo says "You need to be free to speak about the things that interest you." Tsubasa says you should "relax and express yourself more freely in an individual way so that you can explore language that is meaningful for you." Shinji makes a similar point when he said that "it matters that *you* come to the classroom." Participation requires you to "*...be there, think for yourself* and present your ideas." These ideas support the notion that students value *authenticity in their learning*, and this authenticity requires them to be present in the classroom not only as learners and students, but as "people living their lives"<sup>2,15)</sup>. As Aya says, "learning comes from *within you*, not from a *textbook*." This doesn't necessarily mean serious dialogue, it can be playful, but it must be a genuine response. In these ways, students' comments focus on the ontological: the importance of each student *being present* and speaking authentically when they engage in dialogue<sup>19)</sup>.

This also supports the critical importance of *mutual understanding*, as truths are not realized dialectically as generalizable understandings, but dialogically as polyphonic and lived understandings between people<sup>18,19)</sup>. Speaking as their teacher, my personal understanding of students was constantly growing through reflection on their work and conversations about learning. I started off thinking about their issues of low self-esteem and confidence, but through our interaction came to see how deeply they cared about language learning, how resilient they were, how they were filled with hope. This was incredibly motivating. It's not just a cognitive understanding about my students, it's something I felt as a shared and lived experience when working together. It is felt like a disruption of the norm, an insightful comment, or joke that punctures the moment between us. Taken out of the moment, it is something remembered or known; in the

moment, the truth is experienced as a connection with the other person, a lived space between us<sup>19,21</sup>).

By reflecting on QoCRL, I have come to think of EP as a combination of *focus*, *spirit* and *mode of interaction* that leads to *ontological engagement*. EP *focuses* the group on curiosity about learning puzzles that are relevant and intrinsically motivating. By promoting inclusivity and collegiality it fosters a *spirit* that enables learners to trust each other when sharing and reflecting on their learning experiences. The *mode of interaction* is dialogic reflection that enables students to connect with each other authentically and reach mutual understanding. EP's combination of focus, spirit and mode of interaction does not just support QoL; EP participants define QoL together through the intertextuality that emerges from their authentic interactions and the insights they co-create about their language learning lives.

## 5. Conclusion

Although these are only initial findings, students' experiences in the classroom show that learner-initiated EP in conventional classes can support the quality of life of lower-level language learners and reignite their interest in learning. The focus on individual curiosity makes learning relevant and enables feelings of self-efficacy on tasks. The spirit of collegiality and inclusivity, especially in regard to translanguaging, helps students communicate with each other and build relationships. The reflective dialogue between participants helps to develop a sense of authenticity and students feel that it matters they come to the class and contribute. This kind of environment helps students to reassess their own conceptions of QoL in language learning and start thinking about ways to develop sustainable learning practices that facilitate lifelong learning and quality learning outcomes.

## Ethical considerations

The research was reviewed and approved by the Kawasaki University of Medical Welfare Ethics Committee (Ref.21-103).

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