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Reshaping the Secondary ESL Classroom: Using Exploratory Practice to Promote Student Participation at an All-Girls' School in Japan

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In this exploratory inquiry, I consider the use of Teacher-Initiated Exploratory Practice (TEP) as a tool in examining and investigating student participation in class activities at an all-girls' secondary English Conversation classroom in Kanagawa, Japan that I was teaching at in 2023. Beginning with a description of my journey as a native English speaking teacher (NEST) in Japan, I reflect upon starting a new job and how I could inspire my students to speak more in class. TEP influenced the framework of this research, in particular, the principles of getting everyone involved, bringing people together, and conducting the work in the spirit of mutual development (Allwright & Hanks, 2009). I then consider the puzzles I faced and how I came to use translanguaging and comprehension checks to achieve these goals. Initially, weekly classroom procedures are discussed as well as learner's reactions to these procedures including a flipped classroom approach, student-led greetings, and pair comprehension checks. In the final part of this inquiry I look in depth at learner feedback received via student surveys and an interview, particularly at how and why these contributed to an overall improvement in the student's output, which not only increased learner confidence but the quality of life of the classroom.

本探索的調査では、2023年に神奈川県の女子中等教育機関で担当した英会話のクラスにおける生徒の活動参加を高めることを目的とした教師主導の探索的実践（TEP）の活用について述べる。はじめに、日本でのネイティブスピーカーの英語教師（NEST）としての著者の経緯を紹介し、新しい職場で生徒がより積極的に授業に参加する方法を模索した経験を振り返る。この研究の枠組みはTEPの影響を受けており、クラス全員を巻き込み、生徒同士が協力し合って主体的に授業を進めるという原則が反映されている（Allwright & Hanks, 2009）。次に、直面した課題と、それらの解決に向けてトランスランゲージングと理解度チェックの具体的な活用方法について言及する。毎週、このクラスでは、反転授業のアプローチ、生徒主導の挨拶、ペアでの理解度チェックなどの取り組みが含まれる。生徒からのアンケートやインタビューによるフィードバックを考察し、これらの取り組みがアウトプットの向上にどのように貢献したか、また、生徒の自信とクラス内の学習環境の質の向上について考察する。

Keywords

secondary English education in Japan, teacher-initiated exploratory practice, translanguaging, comprehension checks, student participation

日本の中等英語教育、教師主導の探索的実践、トランスランゲージング、理解度チェック、生徒の参加

Setting the scene: New school, new students

On the first day of classes in a new secondary school I was teaching at in Kamakura, Japan, I walked into the classroom as I had many times before. Having taught in Japanese secondary schools for almost two decades, this was not my first time with a new group of students. I had worked all over the country and always enjoyed that first day of interaction. New students meant new possibilities to grow and learn, not only for the learners but also for me as a teacher.

The building of my new employment was newly constructed, fresh, and full of possibility. This sense could be felt in its hallways and classrooms. Older post-war Japanese schools that were built of concrete for earthquake resistance can be dark and unwelcoming. However, this place was none of those things. The light beamed through the windows, the shelves peppered throughout were dust free, all fixtures were devoid of scratches, and the building

was clean. I was inspired by the possibilities the school held and eager to form connections with my students.

Changing secondary schools is a matter of life for many contractual native English speaking teachers (NESTs) who live and teach in Japan, who are often given a maximum five-year contract. This stipulation, commonly referred to as the 5-year rule, was inspired by Article 18 of the Labor Contracts Act (2007/2018) that states from the sixth year, institutions must grant permanent contracts of employment for life known as *mukirodo keiyakyu*/無期労働契約 [indefinite employment contract]. Because of this, teachers often move around their prefecture or sometimes the country in search of their next place of employment. In April 2022, I was faced with this same challenge and, after careful thought, I decided to accept this position I had been offered at an all-girls secondary school in Kanagawa prefecture.

That first day in class, I introduced myself using a slideshow scattered with photos and passed out participation stamp cards which students would use to collect stamps during class. Participation was always something I strived for in my classes. I wanted students to speak and to speak a lot. In my mind, this is how they would acquire the skills needed to communicate in English. If students shared an answer to a question in class, helped the teacher erase the board, won a class competition, or did well during an activity, in the past, I would give the student a stamp as a reward for their effort. Sometimes this reflection of student involvement would be used to determine their participation score for their semester grade.

As this system was new to the school, I was eager to implement the stamp cards and see how my students felt about them. Several schools that I had worked for previously used stamp cards, and their use is popular in English conversation classrooms around the country. After its introduction, the stamp card had been successful in my junior high school (JHS) classes, and the students seemed excited and inspired by the stamp collecting to raise their hands and share answers. However, the senior high school (SHS) grade 1 students, teenagers who did not know one another, were reluctant to raise their hands or share answers, despite knowing participation was part of their grade. Perhaps, stamps cards were not the answer with this group of students, I pondered. Still unfamiliar with the school culture, I asked the head of the English Department his thoughts and he assured me that stamp cards were a tangible way for us to measure how often students spoke up in class. But that still didn't help me. There had to be a way that I could inspire my students to actively speak in class while ensuring that they felt comfortable to do so.

What follows is an account of how I used Exploratory Practice (EP) (Allwright & Hanks, 2009), a practice-based form of research, and the approach of translanguaging (Garcia & Wei, 2013) as tools to promote student participation in one of my SHS classes.

In this inquiry, I explain how EP and its principles were harnessed to inspire the learners and myself in the classroom. I outline how my students and I designed an interactive class in which we explored topics of interest in order to improve language skills and increase participation. Together using the students' first (L1) and second (L2) languages, we pondered puzzles such as if the use of translanguaging in pair comprehension checks would promote more student participation in our English class. Furthermore, we examined if student-chosen topics and greetings would also increase student participation. Using EP's Potential Exploitable Pedagogical Activities (PEPAs), which are "slightly adapted pedagogic activities that teachers and learners are familiar with" (Moraes Bezerra & Miller, 2015, p. 105), I designed lessons around our course textbook and employed the use of pair comprehension checks to get students talking more.

Exploratory Practice and how it helped strengthen my class

When I started learning Japanese as a second language when I was 16 years old in rural Wisconsin, USA, and then at the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities in Minneapolis, Minnesota, I first began to form my own attitudes towards the teaching and learning of an L2. Rarely, if ever, did I seem to pick up the language and grammar used in lecture style classes or from rote memorization. Upon moving to the country, my strongest teachers were not professors who were experts in teaching Japanese but people I would meet out in the real world: shop staff who helped me and inquired about my lifestyle in the country, friends at a picnic who discussed current interests with me, and co-workers who I worked on projects with. I learned more when I was engaged in the process of the learning. Naturally, after becoming an English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher myself, I wanted to find ways to avoid the traditional top-down teaching framework in my own classes and I found that Exploratory Practice (EP) was a fantastic approach to promoting this.

EP is a practitioner-based form of research that works directly with learners to address puzzles that may arise in learning environments. Just as I had wanted to solve puzzles in my Japanese language learning, I could use EP to investigate the relationship between myself (the practitioner) and the learners (my students) (Allwright, 2005). I had wanted to be involved in my language learning journey, and in the same way, my students are individual learners who can make contributions to their unique classroom setting. This means that instead of me designing lessons and then presenting them, the learners should be placed centerstage as they are "practitioners of learning" rather than "targets of teaching" (Allwright & Hanks, 2009).

Supporting this shift from teacher-dominated classrooms, EP consists of 7 key principles (Allwright & Hanks, 2009):

1. Put "quality of life" first.
2. Work primarily to understand the "quality of life"
3. Get everyone involved in the work for understanding
4. Bring people together
5. Conduct the work in the spirit of mutual development
6. Integrate the work for understanding into classroom practice
7. Continuously work for this understanding

I wanted to get everyone involved in the work for understanding (Principle 3) and to bring learners together (Principle 4) while working in the spirit of mutual development (Principle 5). I hoped that by asking students what they wanted to focus on in our class, they would feel more invested in actively engaging in the lessons.

My practice

As mentioned previously, I was searching for ways to promote active speaking in my class. This conundrum invited an examination of students' comprehension levels. Before, during, and after class, I would ponder: Do they understand what I'm saying? Do they have any questions they'd like to ask but are too shy to? How could I check their comprehension without putting them on the spot? If only there were a way that they could discuss with one another these questions. In the spirit of EP, I wanted to bring learners together (Principle 4) while everyone was involved in fostering mutual development (Principle 5). In short, I wanted my students to actively communicate with each other using all the tools available to them, whether that be their L1 or L2. Translanguaging seemed to be an easily accessible

solution to my problem as it allowed students to work for mutual development and understanding by using any language available to them.

Translanguaging, as originally defined by Williams (1994), is an approach that utilizes the switching between two languages to promote comprehension in active and passive language processing (Garcia & Wei, 2013). Though it may manifest itself as switching from one language to another as in code-switching, translanguaging is about using language to create an interaction and relationship between students and invites common understanding to take centerstage. Though the Japanese Ministry of Education (MEXT) instructs secondary teachers to conduct their English language classes in all English (MEXT, 2014), in reality, this rarely happens. Most Japanese teachers of English (JTEs), though not all, instruct students using Japanese as the language of instruction and Native English Speaking Teachers (NESTs) instruct in English. Naturally, this gap from zero English to all English causes confusion and unease amongst students. The medium of communication deemed acceptable in one class but demonized in the next is often a cause of ongoing frustration for learners.

After thinking about how students were interacting in their other English courses, I wanted to explore how I could combine these mediums in my own class. By allowing my students to use their L1 to confirm information and brainstorm in my classes, they could work together to understand the material. I certainly didn't want to punish my students for having an L1 or forbid them from using it. After some time experimenting with translanguaging and learning more about it, I realized that it was the best solution to my problem of student comprehension in that student pairs can verify information in a safe and comfortable environment while using the familiarity of Japanese. Using translanguaging, the learners could ask questions to their partners while gaining self-confidence through peer support increasing their willingness to communicate (MacIntyre et al., 1998). It was my hope by allowing students to do this, that they would start to naturally increase their English output.

This prompted me to formulate two puzzles:

- Could the use of translanguaging in pair comprehension checks promote more student participation in our English class?
- Could student-chosen topics and greetings increase student participation?

From April to July of 2023, over three months of classes, I used exploratory practice to discuss these puzzles with the students and how we could change the level of participation in our class. Our study was highly situational in the context of teaching and learning English in Japan, and, in order to understand the nuances of our exploration of the puzzles, I would like to set the stage by presenting some important background information about secondary English education in this country.

Setting the stage: Secondary English education in Japan

According to the current revision of the National Standards for JHS and SHS English language instruction, JHS English classes are to be held a minimum of four times a week with "the emphasis on language activities in which students express their own thoughts and ideas" (MEXT, 2021). At my school, JHS students take English Communication four times a week with a JTE and English Conversation once a week with a NEST. Though MEXT recommends that these classes be mostly conducted in English, where student-centered language activities and grammar and expressions are to be learned inductively, the reality is that English Communication is typically a lecture-style course in which students listen to grammar and expression explanations in Japanese in order to take monthly written tests and prepare for national standardized tests - such as Eiken Test in Practical English

Proficiency (Eiken Foundation of Japan, n.d.), an English proficiency test administered to JHS and SHS students consisting of a written and spoken test, or high school entrance exams which have no speaking tests. In English Conversation class, conducted by the school's NEST, the national standards set by MEXT (2011) can be observed more plainly. Students engage in various real-life language activities in a mostly all-English environment with grammar and expressions being learned inductively through the activities. In terms of grading, English Communication is a required graded course and English Conversation is classified as an elective, though it is not optional, and therefore, a scored grade is not given to students. Instead, a 1-sentence comment is written on their transcripts describing their performance in the class from a predetermined list decided by the school.

Concerning the national standards for SHS, students are to take two English courses each academic year focused on autonomous learning with JTEs every year – English Communication and Logic & Expression. In addition, students take the graded course of English Conversation with a NEST. In English Communication, which is held four times a week, students focus on the 4-skills of reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Logic & Expression, which is held twice a week, is a course which focuses on speaking and writing through activities such as debate and discussion. Again, the amount of English spoken in these courses varies widely on teachers' personal preferences with the more traditional, grammar translation method being highly favored by JTEs for its perceived ease in teaching students the grammar needed to pass university entrance exams. Despite this, English Conversation, taught by the school's NEST, is conducted in English only and is a graded subject in SHS. In my classes, though, slight variance does exist from semester to semester, the grade is made up of participation, a speaking test, a listening test, and a writing test. The breakdown of these grades is decided between the NEST and a JTE at the beginning of the term.

How I stumbled upon partner comprehension checks

Japanese education is often based upon a top-down model of instruction, and students are not encouraged or expected to share their answers in class. At my school, students are typically not asked questions individually in their classes and can often become paralyzed when asked for fear of making a mistake. Though this issue is in large part based around the national and individual school culture, one NEST cannot expect to take this problem on alone and attempt to change a lifetime of expectations held by both Japanese teachers and students. However, English Conversation classes require just that – some form of communication between the members of the class, whether this be teacher-student or student-student. By taking the pressure off of the students to always engage directly with the teacher, pair checks are a way for students to utilize English to verify information with their peers without the social pressure of having to share an answer individually in front of the class. At least that was my hope.

Inspired by my new epiphany to implement pair checks, I began the class as always asking my students a few warm-up questions to begin, such as "What did you do this weekend?" After being met with silence, I instructed them in English to check with their partner. Some students hesitantly turned to the person sitting next to them while others seemed confused. As Japanese is my second language, I repeated the instructions in Japanese, and, after some smiles and a few giggles at their American teacher's pronunciation of their mother tongue, students turned to their partners and asked them the question. Walking around the room, I could hear that some students were asking the questions in English, some in Japanese,

some answering in Japanese, others answering in English. Some lower-level students were having an entire conversation in Japanese! However, even though it was not English that was being spoken, something became clear: My students are not shy or unable to speak about themselves. They were originally apprehensive because of the way in which I was asking.

After that, I began to experiment in all my classes with the ways in which I could promote my students to use both their L1 and L2 to increase student participation, and this inquiry is the result. I wanted to get the students involved and explore these issues with them, so from year 2, with permission from the head of the English Department, the students and I designed a class to promote an increase in student participation.

Measuring success: How I observed and got feedback from the students

Getting feedback from my students was vital in using EP to involve them in the planning process. I received feedback from my learners in the form of student questionnaires, interviews, as well as audio recordings of the instructional sessions. As explained below, four students in the class are members of the school's English club - English Speaking Society (ESS) - and joined a group interview after the study. This recorded and transcribed interview focused on translanguaging, in which students shared their thoughts in a mix of English and Japanese. All students participating in the study agreed via written consent to have their experiences shared, however, to protect their identities pseudonyms have been used throughout.

Narrowing in: Our school, our classroom

Upon entering SHS at our school, students are placed in one of two tracks: the international track (advanced) or the progressive track (standard). The international track class is determined by the score students receive on their entrance exam and Eiken test. In junior high school, two of the three homeroom classes are international track classes with one being progressive. However, in high school, there is only one international track class with the remaining four homeroom classes being progressive. Students take all of their classes with their homeroom class and the members do not change depending upon their level. Though rare, some progressive track students demonstrate higher English ability than international track students; however, after the entrance exam scores are calculated upon entering the school, students are not allowed to change from the standard track to the advanced track without undergoing a rigid screening.

The international track class that I discuss here consists of twenty-three 16- and 17-year-old students with four of the students in the class in ESS, the club activity I oversee with their JTE. I selected this class for its easy access, higher English ability as they are part of the international track, and their receptive, motivated attitudes to engage in non-traditional Japanese teaching styles. Prior to this study, I held an informal interview with the head of the English Department to discuss the puzzles my class were interested in exploring and how we could address these concerns. Through our discussion, it came to light that students struggle with expressing their opinions and critically thinking about passages in English. After consulting the current textbooks used, which are approved by the Ministry of Education (MEXT), I noticed that they do not include many opportunities for students to express themselves. Many of the grammar points listed in the textbooks explain the grammar in Japanese and have one-off example sentences as expansion. Relatability to real-life was non-existent, and, more often than not, the students bore quickly of the format

(Tomlinson, 2006). As the head of the English Department had previously mentioned that we could order a new textbook for the following year, I proposed using the global textbook *Reading Explorer Level 1* (Bohike et al., 2019) for its engaging visual materials, thought-provoking topics, and as a chance for students to use a new style of textbook.

In addition to using this new textbook, the head of the English Department and I brainstormed ways in which the students could become more involved in class and how to reduce teacher talk while increasing student-led discussion. First, to decrease teacher talk in class, we decided to use a flipped classroom approach. A flipped classroom does just as the name would suggest, whereby students work on activities outside of the classroom in order to create more time in the classroom for hands-on activities that emphasize pair and group work (Turan & Akdag-Cimen, 2019). This would give students more exposure to English spoken by a native speaker and would also be a way to indirectly extend the duration of the class as students would view the videos outside of the classroom. Students would receive, via *Classi* (Classi, n.d.), our intra-school communication network, a 3- to 6-minute video four days before class that they could watch multiple times at home. I made this video using *Canva* (Canva, n.d.) presentations and created a slideshow with my video recording. Each video contained a greeting, class announcements, introduction to a maximum of eight unfamiliar vocabulary words, and a listening activity in which I read a passage from a paragraph in *Reading Explorer.* After that the students were asked five questions, four of which were closed questions and one which was an opinion question. The questions were also written on the screen. Then, the class session would expand on the material presented in the videos and allowed us to delve more deeply into the subject matter with the time saved.

On the first day of class, I also asked the students via written survey what they wanted to work on in our class. Some common responses were more talk time with other students, group work, pair presentations, listening and speaking practice, writing practice, and more chances to talk with the teacher.

Based on this feedback, it became clear that the students wanted to increase their active speaking participation in class through group and pair work. In order to increase student confidence in speaking English, students could use translanguaging to verify information while speaking in the pair and small group settings.

The first way this was addressed is learner-led greetings were introduced. Traditionally in Japanese schools, each class begins with a student asking the other students to stand, bow to the teacher and ask permission for the class to start. Instead of the students bowing to me, I suggested that the students ran the greetings with materials they found thought-provoking. Students chose to introduce facts about topics of interest such as K-Pop music, other teachers at the school, and animals they were interested in.

Also, during the survey, students were asked to rank the topics from *Reading Explorer 1* in order of most interested in to least interested in. Students overwhelmingly chose animals as their most preferred topic, so in the spirit of principle 3 of getting everyone involved, we started with that in the first semester.

Start of class: Quiz and student greetings

As mentioned previously, class starts a few days before we meet. Students watch an all-English video I made which introduces the topic and useful vocabulary, as well as a short listening activity. After the listening activity, students are asked five questions regarding the passage.

At the start of class, students take a 6-minute multiple choice and essay style quiz in which they are asked the same questions from the video to verify that they have watched it and comprehended the material. After the quiz, students in groups of three (decided by lottery the first day of class) conduct a 3- to 5-minute greeting to the class. Students typically tell an original story, conduct a quiz, or ask questions to the audience.

The following is an example of a student greeting at the beginning of class conducted by Ai, Sakura, and Mei (pseudonyms) during lesson 4 in the unit. Translations of the Japanese spoken can be found in brackets. The three students stand at the front of the room with one of their iPads, a required purchase, plugged into the projector.

> Sakura displays the first slide and says, "Let's have an animal quiz!" A picture of a pig from the website Irosutoya (Irosutoya, n.d.), a free clipart website frequently used in Japan, is displayed.

> Ai: Question 1: What percentage of body fat are pigs? 15, 30, or 60 percent. The word body fat is displayed in Japanese [体脂肪率]. What do you think?

During this point, although the students observing the quiz were not asked to discuss with a partner, they naturally did so as I had introduced translanguaging earlier in the course. Their eagerness to discuss the answer was evident.

> Mei: Who thinks A? (hands raised.) Who thinks B? (hands raised.) Who thinks C? (hands raised.) The answer is C.

The class erupts with laughter, cheering, and comments are made about the answer.

> Haruna comments in Japanese, 生物学で聞いたよかった！[I'm glad I was listening in biology class!]

> Sakura: Question 2: How many hours a day do koalas sleep? 5, 10, 22. What do you think?

Again, the students turn to their neighbors to discuss their thoughts.

> Ai: Who thinks A? (hands raised.) Who thinks B? (hands raised.) Who thinks C? (hands raised.) The answer is C: 22.

Again, the class comments on the answer. Yuko jokes, I am koala too! (i.e,. I sleep as much a koala.)

> Mami says, そんな寝るは知らなかった。[I didn't know they slept THAT much.]

> Mei: Final question. How many eggs does a sunfish lay? Sunfish is written in Japanese [まんぼ]. A. 3 eggs B. 300 eggs C. 300 million eggs

The class starts to discuss sunfish.

> Mami again comments, まんぼうの英語が sunfish だ。知らなかった。[Manbo is sunfish in English. I didn't know that.]

> Sakura: Who thinks A? (hands raised.) Who thinks B? (hands raised.) Who thinks C? (hands raised.) The answer is: C.

> Ai, Mei, Sakura: Thank you for listening!

The class claps for the presenters and the atmosphere is light and energetic. After the greeting I ask students to use translanguaging to discuss with a partner their reactions to Ai, Sakura, and Mei's greeting and provide feedback. Ai, Sakura, and Mei also receive feedback and participation points after class from me. One student comments in Japanese, 英会話の授業でそのことを習うは面白い! [Learning that in English Conversation was really interesting!]

Delving deeper: student comprehension and translanguaging

After the student greetings, class starts with a warm-up question concerning the lesson's topic and students use translanguaging to discuss this topic. For example, Lesson 4 focused on color in the animal kingdom, so I asked students about animals and their camouflage. Fuka, who dreams of being a marine biologist someday, raised her hand proudly and stated that her favorite animal, the orca, is black and white. Everyone in class knows of Fuka's love for orcas, and I asked her, "Fuka, do you know why orcas have the color patterns they do?" She proudly proceeded in English to explain that the black and white pattern makes orcas appear smaller than they actually are and aids them in hunting prey. I smile in surprise at not only Fuka's ability to explain this fact to the class, but also at how insightful this information is. The class erupts in applause for Fuka and students praise her in Japanese. Fuka smiles and sits up a little higher, and it is visible that her confidence has grown after this interaction.

Next, students engage in a listening activity. A short listening passage is played, and the students follow along with the script. Afterwards, students are asked comprehension questions about the passage and encouraged to use translanguaging in pairs to confirm or check the information and answer questions displayed on the board. Then, I asked volunteers to share the answers with the class for participation points.

Noticing changes in student participation

In general, compared to the previous academic year, the overall participation scores of students in this class drastically increased. The number of students who raised their hand or were willing to share their opinions or answers to the class more than doubled. Students laughed more, were less inhibited as seen by their willingness to communicate, and were more engaged with the material despite an increase in difficulty. This can be seen in the participation stamp card scores and the number of stamps collected, as well as observations I made. Though the Japanese school year consists of 3 semesters, participation scores were collected only in Semester 1 and Semester 2 due to the shorter duration of Semester 3, which is only 2 months. As shown in Table 1 below, the highest average is Semester 2 (2022); however, this is the longest semester lasting 4 months. Comparing the first semester, which is only 3 months, in 2022 and 2023, for the same class of students shows that students were indeed more willing to speak up in class.

Table 1. *Participation Scores Taken from Stamp Cards*

Semester 1 (2022)	Semester 2 (2022)	Semester 1 (2023)
Average: 8 stamps	Average: 13 stamps	Average: 11 stamps

How the students felt about the new class style: Survey results and student interview

At the end of the semester, I gave students a blank piece of paper and asked them to write their feedback and any opinions concerning the course. Students were told they could

write in either English or Japanese and that the feedback would remain anonymous. Both negative and positive comments were encouraged, and the students were assured that this feedback was being taken for me to improve the contents of the class. As Japanese students are typically surveyed at the end of each semester via a multiple-choice questionnaire, they are accustomed to giving feedback and were able to provide their thoughts within the time frame of 5 minutes.

Here is a summary of the results of the surveys. The Japanese portion has been translated into English here and a full list of the survey feedback can be found in Appendix A.

Student-led greetings at the beginning of class were a major topic of discussion in the survey feedback. Students mentioned how this activity improved their confidence, curiosity, and knowledge of not only English vocabulary, grammar, and sentence structures but also, their overall worldly knowledge. Manami comments that she "enjoyed listening to the stories and quizzes that everyone made up and was able to focus more during class because her brain could switch to English." Shiori mentions that she enjoyed learning something new from her classmates, while Yu wrote that the greetings allowed her to learn more about her classmates as individuals because each group chose their topic of discussion. Furthermore, she writes "... there were words and phrases that I would never have looked up unless I had this opportunity and there were grammatical expressions that I didn't know. It was fun to learn because we 'looked it up' ourselves."

Touching upon the contents of the greetings, Rika shared that preparing for the greeting was enjoyable because they introduced their favorite things to the class. In addition, she observes "since I made the draft myself, I think it's good practice for my English writing." Kairi furthermore comments that the greetings were sometimes redundant because the style was usually the same - making a quiz or telling a story.

Concerning listening, Haruko comments that she was "able to actively listen to and try to understand her friends' presentations" and that this helped her towards her personal goal of improving her listening skills.

Aoi, on the other hand, writes how much she enjoyed the group activities after not being able to converse due to coronavirus regulations at school and how this increased her confidence.

As mentioned in the student questionnaires and interview, students overwhelmingly enjoyed being taught by their classmates and developing their English. Listening to their peers' student-led greetings helped them turn on their "English-thinking brains" and inspired them to pay more attention to what was being said. As one student noticed, this increased their vocabulary, worldly knowledge and confidence. In particular, after the COVID-19 pandemic regulations were lifted, students, who yearned for interaction with their classmates, genuinely looked forward to discussions. As most of their other classes throughout the day were lecture style, in our class they could converse with their friends and increase their confidence in speaking with others, not only in English but in Japanese too.

Students also commented on pair comprehension checks and the use of translanguaging. Being allowed to verify information via these checks increased their confidence and, by involving, this enabled everyone to develop their skills mutually.

Student interviews

Outside of class, I conducted an informal qualitative interview with four students in the class who are members of the school's ESS club. I have been co-advisor for ESS for two years and have gotten to know these four students quite well during that time. We have organized club events, gone shopping for materials, and chatted about our lives together. Our

relationship is positive and open, and they have commented several times how comfortable they feel chatting together. Yuzu, in particular, who spent 13 years living in the U.S., is open and honest with her opinions and comments. Because of this and their easy accessibility as the club meets twice a week, the four students were chosen for an interview. At the start I explained to them that they could answer in either English or Japanese, and that I was conducting this interview to gather student opinions about the new class style. What follows is a summary of the interview and key points that pertain to the class. The full transcript of the interview can be found in the Appendix B.

On May 17, 2023, after the ESS club, Yuzu, Lulu, Aozora, Riri and I sat down for a 13-minute interview about our class. We sat in a circle and I did my best to create a relaxed atmosphere with lots of smiles and laughs. I also used translanguaging to make them feel comfortable.

Upon being asked what they think about pair checks, Yuzu comments that "it's a good thing because if one person doesn't understand the question or answer, they can check with their partner." Lulu agrees, saying "there's a lot of things I don't understand or catch so I think pair checks are really good."

Yuzu mentions that she wished pair checks were used in another class she finds particularly challenging. The lack of pair checks makes her feel uncomfortable and sometimes even petrified.

Concerning the use of translanguaging during the pair checks, several interesting comments were made. Yuzu makes the point that during the beginning of the semester, her classmates and her said the answer to their partner in Japanese and then translated it into English. When a question was asked, they translated my question into Japanese and then discussed the answer in Japanese before translating it to English.

However, after knowing that my class has a lot of pair checks, the students now sit closer together and do everything in English, depending on who they are sitting by. Yuzu states, "If the other person in the pair is not at the same comprehension level, I tend to start the discussion in Japanese." Riri mentions that she is sometimes apprehensive to say the answer quickly because she wants to give her partner time to think. She doesn't want to "show off" her English level. The students also commented that the timing and length of the pair checks were adequate.

The interview with the four students in ESS reflected upon the spirit of working for mutual understanding and how this manifested itself in class. Students mentioned that they observed the level of their partner and, depending upon this, made a decision about translanguaging – using Japanese with students that may struggle to understand and English with those who did not. This point illustrates that students were not only concerned about their own levels, but also the proficiency of their peers.

My own reflections on the class

As teachers, we all have that one class that sticks out in our mind each semester, that group of students who not only strive to do their best and grow as learners but also transform you as a teacher. The students in this study have definitely been that group for me the past two years. They responded so well to our activities in class and strove to push themselves until they could comprehend the material. I honestly believe that this was because of the exploratory practice principles that I tried to follow – valuing collegiality and inclusivity of learners as partners in the teaching and learning processes – and because of the translanguaging we employed. By asking students what they wanted to do and how they wanted the class to be conducted, I took away the teacher-centric atmosphere and shifted the focus onto them. They

chose the topics, they discussed the materials, and, for the greetings, they created the PEPAs that we used. Over the course of the semester, the greetings became more engaging as each group strived to match the level of effort of the previous group of presenters.

Concerning the use of translanguaging during pair comprehension checks, the output of students increased ten-fold. At the beginning of the semester, when asked a question, the room would remain silent and students hesitated to speak up. After changing the flow of the class to include pair comprehension checks without restricting them to English, the classroom was filled with student discussion. It was such an honor and a privilege to go on this journey with my students, and I felt very proud of them for their continued efforts.

Summary and looking forward

This study utilized exploratory practice to assess student needs from a teacher-led stance of EP. The collaborative work instigated by the EP principles of collegiality and learner inclusivity have contributed to making the class more student-led with less teacher talk, I used translanguaging to help students to engage more fully with listening and reading materials. The results show that translanguaging and pair comprehension checks can increase student motivation and participation. Looking forward, I would like to continue to use EP and have students design the class even further. Instead of having student-led greetings only, we could, using the principles of EP, have the entire class be student run. Students could choose the listening materials based off of a topic they decide, and we could base the class around that. We could determine the topics by survey in the beginning of class and put students in groups according to their interests. The list of possibilities is endless when employing EP as each student can contribute something unique to the class based on their experience and desires. I look forward to trying out different ways of designing future classes with my students and would encourage other language teachers to do the same.

Review Process

This article was open peer-reviewed by Anita Aden and Jim Ronald of the Learner Development Journal Review Network. *(Contributors have the option of open or blind peer review.)*

Author Bio

Annie Minami, MSEd., received her master's in TESOL from Temple University, Japan, and currently teaches at Kamakura Women's University Senior and Junior High School, where she designs and teaches the English Communication courses. Her research interests include designing curriculum, Exploratory Practice, self-efficacy in the classroom, and increasing student participation. She hopes to transition to university teaching in the near future.
南アニーはのテンプル大学院日本東京キャンパスでTESOLの修士課程を取得し、現在は鎌倉女子大学高等部・中等部で英語教師として、英語コミュニケーションコースの企画と指導に携わっている。現在の研究テーマは、カリキュラムの作成、Exploratory Practice、授業における生徒の自己効力感・参加意識の向上など。近い将来、大学教員への転身を希望している。

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Appendix A
Student Survey Results

Note: The surveys are written as they appeared on the paper with translations provided in brackets. If the student wrote in English, no translation is given.

Student 1: 授業で扱うトピックが興味深く、取り込んでいて楽しかった。もう少し英検のスピーキング練習の回数を多くしてほしい。[The topics covered in class were interesting and fun to take part in. I would like more speaking practice for the EIKEN test.]

Student 2: 今年も去年も最高です。[This year and last year are very good!]

Student 3: 今年は1年のときよりもう少し難しかったなと感じましたがアニー先生が盛り上げてくれたので、楽しく学ぶことができました！！また、3人グループでの発表があったことで以前よりも目が覚めた状態でのスタートができていると感じています。次の学期からはもっとグループの活動がしたいです！！マスクは付けていてもコロナ対策が緩くなったのでもっとコミュニケーションを取りたいです！あと、単純にみんなで英語ゲームみたいなのをしたいです。夏休みにNESTの先生たちとやったみたいにミッションっぽくして楽しい思い出作りたい！！いつも楽しい授業をありがとうございます。[I felt that this year was a little more difficult than the first year, but Annie Sensei made it exciting and fun to learn! I also feel that having to present in groups of three has helped me focus on English more actively than before. I hope to do more group activities next semester! I would like to communicate more because the regulations against coronavirus protection have loosened and we are wearing masks! I also want to play some kind of simple English games with everyone. During summer vacation, I want to make fun memories with the NEST teachers by doing some challenges! Thank you for your always fun classes.]

Student 4: I think you teaching was very good, but I want to speak very well. So more chances please. 今年も一緒に楽しい授業にしましょう！！ [Let's make a fun class together this year!!]

Student 5: 今年は去年なかったgreetingがあったり、前日までに動画を見てくるquizなどがあったから、授業のスピードが昨年より速かったように感じた。もうちょっと英検の面接の時間がほしかった。Greetingは3人・1組でできるのは楽しかったです。みんなが作った話を聞いたり、クイズを考えたりするのも楽しかったし、脳が英語に切り替えられるので、より授業に集中できた。今年は難しかったけど、アニー先生が楽しく授業してくれたので、昨年に引き続き楽しく学習できました！いつも楽しい授業をありがとうございました。[I felt that the speed of the class was faster with the greetings, quizzes, videos we watched before class. I wish we spent more time practicing for the EIKEN interview test. The greeting was fun because we could do it in groups of three. I enjoyed listening to the stories and quizzes that everyone made up, and I was able to focus more in class because my brain could switch to English. It was difficult this year, but Annie Sensei made the class fun, so I enjoyed learning again as I did last year! Thank you for always making the classes enjoyable.]

Student 6: Compared to last year's class, I think it is better. For example, I think the greeting is the best thing. It might be hard for everyone to speak in English, but I think it will improve everyone's English.

Student 7: This year's class is a little difficult for me, but very interesting. I want to talk English more, so this year's class is good for me. I want to speak well too, so I will study harder than last year.

Student 8: I like the greetings that my classmates do first in class. It's fun to learn what I didn't know and listen to the new story. Also, I enjoy communicating with my classmates during class.

Student 9: This year's class was helpful for me to study English. For example, the quiz was difficult for me, but the video helped me to improve my listening skills and to think about many kinds of natural phenomenon. It was fun and I enjoyed the class.

Student 10: This year's class is better than last year's. This year's class is fun and interesting. I want to improve my English ability this year's.

Student 11: Listining [sic] and reading are few [sic] difficult for me. But, this class is fun. I like the greeting. I knew something. It is intelesting [sic]. Thank you for teaching.

Student 12: 今年の授業はグリーティングがあったことが印象的だった、自分たちでストリーや講成を作るのが楽しかったし、他のチームもみんな個性がでていて面白かった。こういう機会じゃないと調べることのなかった単語があったり、知らなかった言いまわし文法があった。そういうのを「自分で調べた」ので楽しく学べた。スタンプをもらおうと積極的になれたし、スタンプが増えることで自信にもつながった。[This year's major change is that we have the greetings in the beginning of class. It was fun to make our own stories and lectures, and it was interesting to see the individuality of the other groups. There were words and phrases that I would never have looked up unless I had this opportunity, and there were grammatical expressions that I didn't know. It was fun to learn because we "looked it up" ourselves. I wanted to be proactive to get stamps. The more stamps I got, the more confident I became.]

Student 13: 英語で話す機会や自ら考えて話すことが増えたことがよかったです。友達の発表を見ていても積極的に聞きとったり、理解しようと努力できました。リスニングも頑張りたいです。映画をリスニングできたり、話が理解できるように力をつけたいです。[It was good that I had more opportunities to speak in English and to think and speak on my own. I was able to actively listen to and try to understand my friends' presentations. I also want to work on my listening skills. I want to improve my ability to listen to movies and understand what is being said.]

Student 14: 授業は色々な文章を読めたのがすごく楽しかったです。今度も面白い文章を授業で取り扱ってほしいと思いました。グリーティングもクラスの皆の発表もとても良かったのですが、一人ずつの発表でも良いと思いました。[I really enjoyed reading a variety of texts in the class. I hope that the class will cover interesting texts in the future. The greeting and the presentations by everyone in the class were very good, but I thought it would also be good to have individual presentations by each student.]

Student 15: 自分が好きな動物に関するクイズがあって、楽しかったです。グリーティングもチームのみんなで協力して、どうやったら、クラスのみんなが興味をもってくれるかと考えながら作成するのも楽しかったです。他のメンバーの発表の中でもおもしろいオリジナルの物語や、初めて知る事もあったりして、たくさん学びがありました。アニー先生が作ってくださった小テストの動画も見るのが楽しみで、小テストで良い点がとれるように対策できました！スピーキングのテストが難しかったので、授業でもう少し対策したかったです。[It was fun to have a quiz about my favorite animals. It was also fun to work together as a team to create a greeting, thinking about how to make it interesting for the class. I learned a lot from the other members' presentations, including some interesting original stories and things I had never heard before. I also looked forward to watching the quiz videos that Annie-sensei made for us, which helped me to prepare for the quiz so that I could get a good score! The speaking test was difficult, and I wish we could have prepared more for it in class.]

Student 16: もう少しゲームもしてみたかった。となりと話す時の時間を少しだけ長くしてほしい。時間が足りなくて最後の問題までいけなかった。[I would have liked to play a few more games. I would liked a little more time to talk with the person next to me. I often didn't have enough time to finish discussing the final question you asked us.]

Student 17: 今年の英会話のクラスは楽しいです。授業の前に、自分が好きなものとかを紹介させてもらえるのが良いと思います。自分の興味があることを発表するので、準備するときも楽しいし、自ら原稿を作ったので、英作文の練習にもなると思うのでとてもよいと思います。発表することによって、発音するのが苦手な私でも、スタンプがもらえる機会ができるのでありがたいです。[I am enjoying this year's English Conversation class. I think it is good that we are allowed to introduce our favorite things to the class, because we present what we are interested in, so it is fun to prepare for it. Since I made the draft myself, I think it is good practice for my English writing. Concerning the presentations, I appreciate the opportunity to get stamps even though I am not good at pronouncing words.]

Student 18: It was so much harder than last year, but so much fun making posters and talking with everyone!

Student 19: 授業の内容は英語だけじゃなく、他のことも学べるので楽しかったです。[I enjoyed the class because I learned not only English but also other things.]

Student 20: I think this year's new class style is not bad. But I don't know greeting is needed. The reason is we usually make quize [sic] and story. It is good but I think we will make something is good...? Sorry, I have no idea.

Student 21: みんなの発表を聞くのと動物の範囲の時の動画を見たり、クイズに答えるのが特に楽しかったです。英検は私には少し難しかったです。間違えるのが怖くてスタンプチャンスの時手をあげれなかったので、来学期は手をあげたいと思います。[I especially enjoyed listening to everyone's presentations, watching the video during the animal unit, and answering the quizzes. The EIKEN style speaking test was a little difficult for me. I was too afraid of making a mistake so I hesitated to raise my hand during the stamp chances, so I would like to raise my hand more next semester.]

Student 22: I think this year's class is nice. I like student greeting. It is fun and I can get interesting knowledge. And one more, the videos sent to Classi are also interesting.

Student 23: 文章がよく分かっていないことがあった。クラッシの動画は単語がところどころ分かるけど、内容がつかめないことがあったから、リスニング力をつけたいと思った。グリーティングはチームの人と内容考えたりするのが楽しかったから、次の学期もやりたい。[Sometimes I didn't understand the sentences well in the reading passages. About the Classi videos, I want to improve my listening skills. I could understand some of the vocabulary words but could not grasp the meaning of some of the sentences. I enjoyed making the greeting as a team and thinking about the contents, so I would like to do it again next semester.]

Appendix B

Transcript of Student Interview with Yuzu, Lulu, Aozora, Riri (after ESS club May 5th, 2023): 13-minute interview

Annie: Now, I'm interested in improving my classes and I have some questions for you. In our class, when we do a listening activity or I ask you a question, I say "Pair check" and you speak in pairs. Sometimes in Japanese, sometimes in English. それどうですか？そのみたいなやり方？ [What do you think about that and the way its conducted?]

Yuzu: I think the pair check thing is a good, because when you ask a question, you always do the pair check. If one person doesn't understand the question or answer, they can check with their partner, you know? I think it's a good idea.

Annie: Thank you, Yuzu. How about other girls? 日本語でもいいですよ。[If you want to answer in Japanese, that's ok too.]

Lulu: Me too. ゆずと同じだから分からないことがいっぱいからそうやってチェックするはめっちゃいいと思う。 [I'm the same as Yuzu. There's a lot of things I don't understand or catch so I think pair checks are really good.]

Annie: OK. So, そのチェックする時にだいたい英語か日本語か？ [During those checks what language do you mostly speak, English or Japanese?] []

Yuzu: だいたいはじめに日本語だね。[At first in Japanese. And then with English.]

Annie: Japanese first? And then English? Ok. Why?

Yuzu: Because first we think about the answer in Japanese. And then we can translate to English.

Annie: なんか日本語で喋る時に do you feel like Ahh, 日本語喋ってるからあまり良くないとか。逆で日本語で最初落ち着いている and then like どう思いますか？ [Well, when speak in Japanese, do you ever feel it's not good because we are in English class? Or does speaking Japanese first help you to gather your thoughts and then what do you think?]

Yuzu: Yeah, I think most students feel more comfortable speaking in Japanese first and then like translating to English.

Annie: 日本語で話す時にどんなことについて話すの？ [When you speak in Japanese, what are you discussing?]

Yuzu: First, we check what Annie Sensei's question translates to in Japanese, and then we think about the answer in Japanese.

Annie: So first you translate the question. And then you say the answer in Japanese.

Yuzu: And then we do English.

Annie: OK. Do you ever do everything in English first?

Yuzu: (laughing) Now, we sit closer to each other because we know Annie Sensei's class has pair checks. So we say in English first now. Because we sit close to each other.

Annie: OK. Do you think it depends on who you are sitting by? Does it change depending on who you are sitting next to?

Yuzu: Yeah, yeah. It changes. For example, if the person who sits next to me doesn't understand English that much, I would translate the question to Japanese first, and then tell them and explain. But like Ai and Aozora, if they understand English, then first I'm going say it in English.

Annie: Do you feel embarrassed or shy to say the Japanese quickly in case your partner may not understand?

All: Hmmmm……

Annie: Do you think that or no?

Yuzu: We don't think that.

Lulu: Ummm. No.

Annie: It's totally fine?

Riri: A little.

Annie: (to Riri) A little bit?

Riri: Yeah. 確かに。ちょっとだけたまにあまりすぐあのこれはこうだよって教えない方がいいかなって。[Sometimes, I am careful a little bit. I don't want to quickly say "This is the answer!" so I might wait awhile.] I want to give my partner a chance and 英語のレベルあまり見せたくない [I don't want to show off my English level.]

Annie: How about Aozora?

Aozora: I don't remember so much, but recently, I sit next to Yuzu and Riri so I don't remember.

Annie: OK, what about the timing? I often show the question on the slide, and then I ask you to talk with a partner. Do you think I do too much? Do you want more? Or less pair checks?

Lulu: うん。うん。うん。[Yes. Yes. Yes.]

Annie: It's good?

Lulu: Yes.

Annie: Do you ever think – なんでアニーが今回しなかった？寂しかったな？ [Why didn't Annie do pair check this time? Do you feel disappointed from lack of pair checks?]

EVERYONE LAUGHING…

Annie: Is it too long or short?

Lulu: 今の方がいい。[It's good now.]

Annie: And 自信について聞きたいですけど。どうですか？ [And I want to ask you about your confidence speaking in English – do the pair checks help increase your confidence?]

Yuzu: うん。[Yes.]

Annie: How? For example, in other classes if the teacher doesn't ask you pair check do feel confused?

Yuzu: Oh, it means like, if in the other class if the other teacher asks you a question and then like don't do pair check, do I feel uncomfortable?

Annie: Uncomfortable or confused? Or do you have low confidence?

Yuzu: Oh yeah yes, yes, for like example, in classic Japanese class, our teacher always asks us a question but he goes by the 出席番号 [calls on us by our student number] and I know it's coming but when he asks suddenly, I don't understand. First of all, I don't understand the story and I don't understand the question, I'm so confused. But like he, you know, asks me over and over for the answer. なんで分からない？ [Why don't you know the answer?]

Yuzu: 怖くて、怖くて [It's so scary. It's petrifying.] and I'm like so embarrassed.

Annie: So even though you know it's coming, the pressure.

Yuzu: The pressure.

Annie: Of having to share without checking with other people is...

Yuzu: Is so embarrassing and confusing. Uncomfortable.

Annie: And how does that make you feel about the subject of classic Japanese?

Yuzu: I hate it.

Annie: So it decreases your motivation.

Yuzu: Uh-huh.

Annie: Because you can't.

Yuzu: Yeah, because he keeps asking me even though I don't understand it. マジで怖い。 [Really, it's so scary.]

Annie: OK. I see.

Yuzu: Another teacher calls on us in order by student number, but he helps us. He gives us a hint. And stuff so that makes me feel a little bit more comfortable.

Annie: OK. That's really interesting. Thank you. What about pair check sometimes I don't tell you the answer. Sometimes I don't say the answer – what do you think about this style? Is it still helpful?

Lulu: Um...

Annie: Do you want the answer said every time? For example, What's the biggest animal? My question is "What's the biggest animal in the world? – Pair check."

Lulu: Umm...

Yuzu: It might take time, but maybe you should say the answer after every pair check.

Annie: OK I see. What about if it's an opinion question? Do you want the teacher to ask a few groups their opinions or is that too much pressure?

Yuzu: We need to practice speaking English and maybe sometimes you need to ask a pair to share.

Annie: OK, thank you. Any more comments? No, ok? Thank you so much – you helped me so much.