# Exploring Practitioner Research with Yoshitaka Kato

Hugh Nicoll <hnicoll@gmail.com>,

Yoshitaka Kato <kato44taka@isc.chubu.ac.jp>

Introduction

The following text is an edited version of an email discussion with Yoshitaka Kato, currently a visiting academic at the University of Leeds, UK. This past June, I wrote asking if he would be interested in an email interview/conversation about his experiences and perspectives on Exploratory Practice and practitioner research in relation to learner and teacher development. I posed three questions that I hoped would allow us to puzzle out these themes in a collaborative fashion.
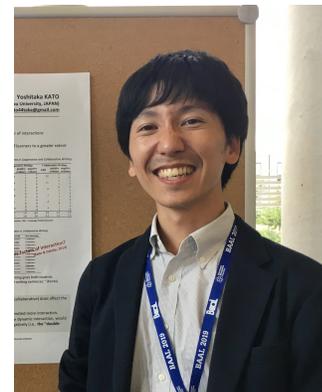
Yoshitaka Kato Ph.D. is a lecturer in the Global Education Center at Chubu University, Japan. His research interests focus on the ownership of learning in English education. He is especially interested in practitioner research through the application of frameworks in exploratory practice, team learning, and task-based language education.

Hugh: How did you get involved with/interested in Exploratory Practice (EP) (and related research questions re: learner and teacher autonomy, practitioner research, etc.)

Yoshi: As a researcher-teacher/teacher-researcher, I have always been interested in how I can develop myself as a language teacher and how I might possibly support the Continuing Professional Development (CPD) process of other teachers at any level. My first primary attempt to do so was through my research on interaction in the language classroom. I wrote my PhD thesis titled as "The Nature of Interaction in the Language Classroom: Towards Organic Collaboration Among Participants" in 2017, where I argued for the potential of every class participant, including learners and teachers, learning from each other beyond their fixed roles as "those who teach" and "those who learn/are taught." Throughout the research process, I learned a lot from my supervisor Dr. Akira Tajino. I was sort of "immersed" in his idea of team learning (Tajino & Tajino, 2000; Tajino, Stewart, & Dalsky, 2016) where class participants make a team in a flexible manner so that they can learn from each other based on curiosity and respect. He also set up a wonderful opportunity for us to hear a talk by Dr. Judith Hanks about EP at Kyoto University in 2013, and in the same year, I attended KOTESOL conference in Seoul where Dr. Dick Allwright, a former supervisor of both Dr. Tajino and Dr. Hanks, delivered his plenary talk. These experiences have naturally developed my interests in practitioner research, especially in EP. I have long wanted to take time to better understand EP, but last year, my colleagues at Chubu University kindly gave me the precious opportunity to apply for research leave abroad, and then I thought this would be a great timing to seek for insightful guidance from Dr. Hanks in Leeds. That is why I am here now.

Hugh: How have you applied your research interests in EP to teaching and/or administrative or curriculum development responsibilities in Japan?

Yoshi: I have tried to apply the framework of EP primarily in my own classroom context, though I struggled to do it at the early stages as I was so used to the "problem-solution" paradigm in academia. More specifically, at an early stage, I would generate my own puzzles as "how" questions (not "why" questions) and not share the puzzles with my students in a sufficient way. I felt a strong affinity for the ideas expressed in

EP's seven principles, but even so, I was not doing EP at that time. The change occurred quite recently in fact when Judith came to Kyoto as a plenary speaker for the JACET Joint Seminar in 2018 summer. Listening to her talk and discussing with her and other participants, I realised that students (as well as teachers) can also generate and investigate their own puzzles as "key developing practitioners" (Allwright and Hanks, 2009) in the language classroom. Soon I invited my students to create and explore their own puzzles (as "why" questions) in classes, finding that they so much engaged in and enjoyed the process of EP more than I had expected. I was convinced at that time that EP has a great potential to remind learners of curiosity in learning and, at the same time, remind teachers they can/should learn from their students. That was the "Moments of Transition" (Hanks, 1998) for me. I then came to Leeds with that impressive experience and, with the generous guidance of Judith, I am now also realising other potentials of EP as a catalyst for teacher/learner empowerment, research innovation and process-oriented education …

At this stage, I have yet to apply EP into any administrative or curriculum development (except my own classrooms), which I believe should initiate as a bottom-up approach. I just simply need more time to share the idea of EP with my colleagues and mutually deepen our understanding of its significance and process. Like other forms of practitioner research, I believe EP should not be something which "forces" somebody to engage in it.

Hugh: What do you see as viable strategies for EP/practitioner research for professional development in the Japanese education context?

Yoshi: As Prabhu (1990) once discussed in his paper, I agree that there is no best method for language teaching. What practitioners can do is probably to constantly develop their own "sense of plausibility." Teachers, especially after gaining experiences and when they are busy, are likely to stick to their own style of teaching to make it efficient and minimise their burden (which is not always bad of course) but they need to reflect on their teaching in a continuous way. That may sound tough but it is in fact worthy and fun part of teaching. Practitioner Research (PR), whatever form it may take (e.g., EP, Action Research, Reflective Practice, Lesson Study), facilitates the CPD process of teachers, but EP can be a strong candidate in terms of its sustainability as it can be integrated in their normal teaching. As far as I know, however, EP is still not widely known in Japan with some exceptions such as, but not limited to, Tajino & Smith (2005), Stewart with Croker & Hanks (2014), Dalsky & Garant (2016), Hiratsuka (2016), Dawson with Ihara & Zhang (2017), and a couple of vignettes encapsulated in Hanks (2017). These studies show that EP has the potential to make a greater contribution to practitioner research in Japanese institutional settings. To realise this, teachers and researchers will have to share and mutually develop these examples of EP with their colleagues through articles, workshops, websites, and SNS platforms. As written above, I believe these movements need to be done in a steadily bottom-up manner rather than a quick top-down one. In addition to explaining EP philosophy such as seven principles, we may need to share more concrete examples (case studies) as well.

Personalizing the discussion

I responded to Yoshi's answers to my starter questions with two follow-up questions. Yoshi's responses (below) are the product of two cycles of me asking for further elaboration.

Hugh: First, I am curious about your identity as a language learner, from earlier periods in your life. I am assuming, of course, that there must have been something—in your character, in early encounters with teachers and/or classmates or friends that led you to undertake advanced level studies as well as aspire to becoming a teacher and researcher in the first place.

Yoshi: My parents were both public school teachers. My father was teaching science at junior high school and my mother used to be an elementary school teacher. My father then decided to explore his interests in educational technology and is now working at the tertiary level in Japan. He often asked me questions like "Why do you think the sea is blue?" and waited for my immature answers without giving his thoughts immediately. He would also let me in his office at the university and take a peek into his life as a researcher. My mother, on the other hand, often told me how the life of teachers was like and gave me a sort of realistic perspective on teaching. In Japan, for example, many teachers are now suffering from doing both work and housework at the same time, but I was learning it from her life. I am sure my parents had a great influence on me shaping my career. Naturally, I got curious about their jobs and took the path to become a teacher.

After entering Hiroshima University, however, I met a lot of great friends in the School of Education (most of them were going to be teachers in Japan) and thought I might want to contribute to education from a different angle. I knew that teaching at a university would allow me to do both teaching and doing research, which I thought is an ideal job for me.

Hugh: Why is research an ideal job for you? Something about your character? Research as a way of achieving a satisfying kind of solitude?

Yoshi: After entering university, I was still interested in becoming an English teacher in Japan. At that time, however, I noticed I could not draw a picture of my 40-year career as a teacher. Teaching was a really attractive job for me, but I knew it would be extremely busy (as my mother often told me) and I knew I was the type of person who wants sufficient time to stop and think about things in education. I am sure great teachers are doing both even though they are super busy, but I was not confident enough to do so. I was also probably curious in exploring the different path from my friends, who are now up-and-coming teachers at schools in Japan. Being familiar with the job of researcher (thanks to my father), I thought at around this time teaching at university might allow me enough time to do both teaching and thinking (or doing research). Becoming a researcher was thus an ideal job for me.

Hugh: Can you say more about this?

Yoshi: To be honest, when I decided to be a teacher, the subject (e.g., math, social studies, English ...) could be anything. However, my decision to be a language teacher was very right because, by using English which has now become an international language, I can communicate with millions of people and broaden my perspectives. Fortunately, I was also able to find a space to do both teaching and researching at the tertiary level from my early career. I am now developing myself and (hopefully) helping my students to do so as well, which was what I wanted to do for a long time.

Hugh: Second, I wonder if you can give more details about your struggles to develop pedagogies for learner development, i.e., the learning together that students and teachers can do together if we are able to transcend standard institutional constraints, and the boxes that a "problem-solution" approach can imprison us in.

Yoshi: This may be off topic, but I was not originally interested in interaction at all. I did not like pair or group work as a student and almost always preferred to learn by myself. I thought it was the most efficient way to learn by myself although what I meant by "learning" was primarily for entrance exams and not for our real life in society. When I took a course provided by Dr. Yosuke Yanase (another mentor of mine) at the university, however, I realised how much I could "learn" in a real sense from my classmates and gain different perspectives in our discussion. Another striking experience occurred when I was a graduate student. I was a teaching assistant of an English class at that time and noticed that students would often show their smiles

and enjoy learning while they were talking with their classmates, not while listening to lectures. At this time, I felt peer interaction has a great potential in (language) learning as it certainly makes the classroom atmosphere brighter. These two critical incidents let me pursue the meaning of interaction in the (language) classroom.

I then decided to work on this topic as my PhD project. During the course, however, I faced with another turning point. When I presented my talk in an informal research meeting, a teacher-researcher I greatly respect challenged me with two insightful questions. "Where are the teachers? What are their roles?" he asked. At that time, I focused primarily on students working together and almost forgot (or at least did not emphasize) the roles of teachers in the classroom. I then started reviewing the literature on the teacher role in student-student interaction, but the role has often been described as a "facilitator," which was somehow not enough for me … or probably not interesting to me (because it is a cliche maybe). The word "facilitator" has a nuance of "third-party" or "division of labour" point of view; students learn and their teacher teaches/facilitates. This state of so called "students dancing on the palm of teachers" through teachers' facilitation was not the ideal form of collaboration for me. In a parent-child relationship, for example, parents often say, "I am learning from my own child" or "Our children make us true parents." This mutuality seemed essential to me when people learn. I had this kind of idea naturally as I was literally "immersed" in my supervisor Dr. Tajino's way of thinking at that time, when I began to realise the potential of Team Learning (Tajino & Tajino, 2000; Tajino et al., 2016) and Exploratory Practice (EP) (Allwright and Hanks, 2009; Hanks, 2017) where class participants learn from each other based on respect, trust and curiosity.

Trying to get back to your original question, I think a "problem-solution" approach is not necessarily a bad approach. But the current (language) education worldwide tends to seek for quick outcomes in a relatively short period, often pressured by outer sources or power such as private tests or the government. I do not like the pressure on teaching at all. I do not believe that sort of approach functions in a healthy and sustainable manner in education because every teacher and learner have their beliefs or values about their learning and teaching. Without respect for them, nothing will succeed.

In reality, however, it is true that teachers cannot escape from this "problem-solution" approach or institutionally defined programs. Teaching thus can be done with every sort of negotiation among different values. For me, for example, as one of the language program coordinators at the university, I always have to negotiate teaching/learning values with my colleagues and find a compromised point we agree with. Likewise, as a classroom teacher, I need to ensure sufficient time and space to listen to student voices/values and actually reflect on them in teaching during the course. Teaching always involves a dilemma as everybody is different in nature, but that is probably one of the reasons why we teachers need formal and informal practitioner research such as EP to step back, become curious again, and seek better understandings of what we are doing as practitioners with the help of all those involved (i.e., learners, colleagues, teacher educators, researchers, etc.).

Hugh: … I suspect our readers could also benefit from hearing how your projects in the UK are going. I wonder, for example, if any of the work you are doing with Judith has provoked reflections on similarities and differences between Japan and UK teaching/learning contexts. Are there approaches to either learning, research, and teaching in the UK that you feel are transferable to Japan? If so, what limitations do you see in bringing those ideas/practices home? Any other puzzles your current experiences in the UK may provoke you to wrestle with as a learner? Researcher? Teacher?

Yoshi: I am now very honoured to be working with Dr. Hanks on practitioner research, especially EP. With her insightful guidance as well as constant support from advisers in the field, we are now making a platform

(e.g., homepage) of fully-inclusive practitioner research (FIPR) including EP, Action Research, Reflective Practice and Lesson Study. Dr. Hanks and her colleagues will also host a symposium on FIPR at the AILA 2020 World Congress of Applied Linguistics in Groningen, the Netherlands. I believe practitioner research can become more meaningful by disseminating its concepts and frameworks and sharing empowering episodes in unique classrooms. I hope these opportunities help practitioners around the world to do so.

Also, what I realised when living in the UK is that we might have more similarities than differences in education. Regarding the environments surrounding language teachers, for example, their overwork and burn-out is one of the common issues in both (and probably other) countries. These "problems" may not be able to be solved quickly but at least we can share these stories and work together to make our situations better. It is at least empowering only to know that it is not just me/us who is/are suffering.

From an academic point of view, practitioner research including EP seems to face the difficulty/dilemma in the field of applied linguistics (more than I expected) as some people do not regard it as "research." In that sense, we may need to enhance the presence of practitioner research in academia by redefining the meaning of "research" in language education and rethink about who creates knowledge in our field. Working at the University of Leeds has let me notice the necessity to think about such an issue. I would love to (and have a responsibility to) share what I am learning now after coming back to Japan.

Follow-up: Reflections and future steps

As we were juggling our schedules at the beginning of September—and trying to wrap up our collaborative discussion, the latest issue of *Language Teaching* (Volume 52 part 2, April 2019) arrived in my mailbox. The "State-of-the-Art Article" is Judith Hanks's contribution of a "meta-analysis" of exploratory practice and practitioner research: "From research-as-practice to exploratory-practice-as-research in language teaching and beyond." Curious as to why the April issue had arrived in September, I asked Yoshi if there was a backstory. In short: yes, the publication of the journal was delayed. I also asked if there is a launch date for the Fully-Inclusive Practitioner Research (FIPR) website mentioned above. Short answer here: *"We are planning to roll the FIPR website out this autumn (probably in October), but we are going to improve it constantly after the launch, listening to the feedback and suggestions from everyone."*

I am still in the re-reading/processing stage with Judith's recently published article, so also asked Yoshi if he'd be interested in continuing our discussion in a future issue of *Learning Learning*. We conclude this starter conversation with an open invitation to members of the SIG to join with us in responding to questions raised here, in Judith's article, and in working together to explore ways in which practitioner research might be further developed in Japanese learning and teaching contexts.

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Call for Contributions

Deadline for the Spring issue: February 15th, 2020

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