

## Exploratory practice in action: EFL teachers' and students' collaborative engagement in intensive reading activities

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### Abstract

This qualitative case study aims to examine the perceived benefits and challenges of Exploratory Practice (EP) on classroom quality of life and mutual development, and investigate how EFL teachers and students enact (EP) principles in intensive reading courses at an Indonesian university. Drawing on classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and reflective journals, the research explores the pedagogical integration of EP's seven key principles, including puzzle-posing, mutual development, and reflective inquiry. Findings reveal that EP transforms the reading classroom into a space for shared exploration, where both teachers and learners co-construct meaning, deepen engagement with texts, and foster a supportive learning community. Teachers shifted from delivering fixed content to facilitating dialogic discussions around learner puzzles, while students became more reflective and agentive in their reading practices. The enactment of EP led to improved teacher-student relationships, enhanced metacognition, and greater emotional investment in learning. However, challenges emerged, including time constraints, discomfort with open-ended inquiry, and misalignment with standardized assessments. Despite these tensions, the study underscores the potential of EP to humanize reading instruction by centering learner voice, inquiry, and well-being. This research contributes to the growing literature on practitioner research in language education, offering insights into the enactment of EP in skill-specific domains and advocating for more inclusive, inquiry-driven pedagogy in EFL contexts.

**Keywords:** *EFL learners; exploratory practice; intensive reading; learner agency, reflective pedagogy*

## INTRODUCTION

In numerous EFL settings, intensive reading instruction focuses on detailed comprehension, vocabulary learning, and critical interaction with texts. While intensive reading tasks provide academic merit, they may also lead to a mechanical approach that neglects learners' perspectives and interests ([MacLure, 2024](#)). This mainly occurs as a result of pressures for tests and a rigid curriculum that leaves little room for learner input about classroom activities. Consequently, such reading tasks target students' perception of what a correct answer is rather than building deeper understanding or metacognitive awareness about their reading processes. Intensive reading courses are typically teacher-centered, focusing on products rather than processes, which limits opportunities to examine students' real questions, concerns, and perspectives on reading.

A potential approach to this limitation is Exploratory Practice (EP), a type of participatory practitioner research that invites investigation and collaborative growth as a seamless part of everyday classroom life ([Allwright & Hanks, 2009](#)). EP reframes research from something done in isolation or by experts away from the classroom, and instead, both teachers and students engage as co-investigators to engage in puzzles, concerns, or questions emerging from authentic teaching and learning experiences in the classroom ([Hanks, 2024](#)). Central to EP is a commitment to enhancing the quality of classroom life and cultivating sustainable and collaborative growth. Such commitment is embodied by collaborative inquiry, valuing all voices, prioritizing participant well-being over predetermined outcomes, and making understanding central to practice rather than quick problem-solving.

By integrating EP principles, reading instruction can be reframed as a reflective and dialogic process, enabling both teachers and learners to critically examine their practices, motivations, and classroom interactions ([Hanks, 2017](#)). This approach is consistent with the seven guiding principles of EP: prioritise quality of life as the primary concern, work to understand it before considering solutions, engage all practitioners in gaining their own understandings, try to unite people in a shared endeavour, collaborate for mutual growth, make it an ongoing endeavour, and lessen the load by incorporating the work for understanding into regular pedagogical practice ([Allwright & Hanks, 2009](#)). What is learned by working collaboratively with a teacher in reading instruction is the democratizing of knowledge construction, validating diverse perspectives on texts, and creating emotionally safe spaces where comprehension difficulties can be openly explored rather than hidden or penalized.

Although EP has attracted growing interest in language education internationally ([Slimani-Rolls & Miller, 2024](#); [Zhuo & Tang, 2024](#)), and the potential of EP has been explored relatively recently in studies conducted in Indonesia ([Nurhadi et al., 2024](#); [Ramdani et al., 2023](#); [Ramdani & Gao, 2024](#)) few empirical research works have examined how its principles are enacted within classrooms in EFL intensive reading courses, especially considering that academic rigor tends to overshadow learner voice and reflective practice in these latter contexts, with emphasis on comprehension accuracy, vocabulary mastery, and preparation for tests. Further, the implementation of EP in terms of how it can work in reading classes, to what extent, how it influences the relationships in the classroom, and what the perceived benefits and challenges of such enactment are, still needs to be explored. This is especially important because intensive reading, as a skill-specific area, has traditionally been characterised by transmission-based pedagogies, in which teachers are providers of information, and students are passive recipients.

Informed by these considerations, the current study responds to the research questions as follows:

1. What are the perceived benefits and challenges of Exploratory Practice on the quality of classroom life and mutual development in intensive reading activities?
2. How do EFL teachers and students enact the principles of Exploratory Practice in university-level intensive reading courses?

This study contributes to the literature on practitioner research by providing some insights into the integration of EP principles into EFL intensive reading practices. These include insights on the significance of learner-teacher partnerships and reflective pedagogical practices for more inclusive, inquiry-oriented language classrooms. Aiming to provide insight into how human-centered and inquiry-based approaches can further support EFL reading instruction while being aware of possible tensions created by institutions and pedagogy, this study explores the lived experience of the EP as a relatively new professional development and classroom research approach.

### **Exploratory Practice**

Exploratory Practice (EP) is a form of practitioner research that encourages teachers and learners to become inquirers into their own classrooms. Drawing heavily from the work of [Allwright and Hanks \(2009\)](#), EP fundamentally describes an educational research approach that nests inquiry in ordinary pedagogic practice and treats everyday classroom activities as tools for research, being sensitive to the lived experiences of those who are involved in the learning (and teaching) process. At the heart of EP is the view that instead of trying to technically solve problems, practitioner research should focus on improving classroom life – the emotional, social, and intellectual well-being of all actors – as a basis for understanding what they can do to develop their teaching and learning together through the collaborative process of reflection ([Hiratsuka & Nall, 2023](#); [Ramdani & Gao, 2024](#)).

According to [Hanks \(2017\)](#), EP allows learners to exploit the target language using Potentially Exploitable Pedagogic Activities (PEPA) in which regular classroom activities become occasions for not only language development but also collaborative exploration. It is based on seven principles that reflect the relational and developmental nature of classroom inquiry. These principles can be clustered into three key questions: what EP values, who participates, and how inquiry is done ([Hiratsuka & Nall, 2023](#)).

#### *The 'What' Issues*

The first principle highlights how quality of life should be placed at the heart of all classroom practices ([Allwright & Hanks, 2009](#)). EP contends that working on the emotional, social, and intellectual well-being of both learners and teachers – on positive emotional climates, meaningful engagement, mutual respect, and intellectual growth – needs to be a core aim of education. Research by [Steenberghs et al., \(2023\)](#) illustrated that a focus on quality of life increased student engagement and motivation. Principle two stresses learning about classroom life before solving problems ([Hanks, 2024](#)). Such a more reflexive position can facilitate practitioners' better understanding of what makes the experience of teaching and learning pleasurable or painful, as seen in [Kato \(2023\)](#), where the EP experience resided in a process of inquiry driven by wonder rather than the anticipation of finding solutions to problems.

#### *The 'Who' Issues*

In the third principle, everyone as a practitioner is constructing their own understandings ([Allwright & Hanks, 2009](#)). In addition, teachers and students are identified as co-researchers who have something important to share. In Joint Exploratory Practice, as [Hiratsuka and Nall \(2023\)](#) illustrated, the involvement of students as co-inquirers increased the likelihood of richer self-reflection and personal growth. The fourth principle makes a call to unite people in a common enterprise and to build community and trust in the classroom. Indonesian contexts showed that this communal aspect of EP impacted positively in terms of student engagement and commitment to learning (showing that finding similar effects in greater numbers ([Nurhadi et al., 2024](#))). The fifth principle highlights that we need to work together for each other's growth, where the classroom is space to share learning, and both students and teachers learn from each other ([Hanks, 2024](#); [Miller et al., 2021](#)). Meanwhile, a longitudinal study conducted by [Slimani-Rolls and Miller \(2024\)](#) provided insights from Brazilian teacher-participants on how mutual development through EP fostered more reflective and student-centered teaching perspectives and teacher resilience.

### **The 'How' Issues**

The sixth principle advocates for making EP a continuous enterprise rather than a one-time project. This sustainability is evident in [Ramdani et al.'s \(2023\)](#) study showing how Indonesian teachers maintained EP practices even during pandemic disruptions. The seventh principle calls for minimizing burden by integrating work for understanding into normal pedagogic practice rather than treating inquiry as separate or additional work ([Allwright & Hanks, 2009](#)). By embedding exploration into normal classroom activities, EP becomes a sustainable and organic part of the learning process, as demonstrated in [Zhuo and Huang's \(2024\)](#) study, where teachers successfully integrated EP into regular speaking lessons.

EP is also by nature reflective and evolutive. The framework itself is not fixed ([Hanks, 2024](#)) but should be adaptive through use, with educators continuously restructuring and refining the tenets based on their practical experiences with teaching. Even more recently, [Hanks \(2024\)](#) has contextualised EP more broadly as a type of practitioner research that contributes to the field of inclusive practitioner research that pushes towards social justice and equality in language education. These interrelated principles offer a comprehensive and inclusive framework for inquiry that aims not simply at better teaching, but at deeper, more humane learning landscapes.

### **Previous Studies on Exploratory Practice**

The growing body of literature on Exploratory Practice (EP) has shown its significant contribution to language education, particularly in fostering teacher and learner development through collaborative inquiry. [Slimani-Rolls and Miller \(2024\)](#) found through their longitudinal study in Brazil that EP was a sustainable form of professional development when embedded in pre-service teacher education. They found that EP not only helped teachers manage institutional pressure but also encouraged more reflective, student-centered conceptualizations of teaching, such as knowledge of students' affective needs, the context of student learning, and the commitment of teaching's personal and ethical dimensions. In a similar direction, [Zhuo and Huang \(2024\)](#) showed that EP worked as a user-friendly tool for teachers to comprehend the challenges they faced in classrooms. Through EP, the students were empowered to voice their speaking challenges and collaboratively design interventions such as modelling and thinking time, thus confirming the practice relevance of EP.

In the Indonesian context, [Ramdani et al. \(2023\)](#) explored EP during the pandemic, showing how it enabled teachers and students to reframe teaching and learning puzzles that arose in their specific contexts of online teaching. That collaborative element resonates with [Nurhadi et al. \(2024\)](#), who observed that EP not only promotes group engagement but also encourages students to reflect more on their learning in both individual and group settings, resulting in higher engagement, understanding, and commitment to learning. These studies from Indonesia illustrate the increasing interest in using EP as a form of professional development within Southeast Asia EFL settings; however, the majority of those studies were general language skills based or online learning environments.

The principle of shared responsibility between teacher and learner also appears prominently in international EP scholarship in Japan. The study by [Hiratsuka and Nall \(2023\)](#), explored an approach they termed Joint Exploratory Practice (JEP) where university teachers and students in Japan jointly inquired into the English related beliefs, practices and experiences, and became more self-reflective, collaborative, and developed personally. This finding is echoed in the Indonesian experience and yet demonstrates cultural adaptations of EP principles.

Recent work on EP scholarship also deals with methodological issues that guide research design. Methodologically, [Kato \(2023\)](#) argued the real nature of EP was less about the type of puzzle itself (e.g. the framing of the puzzle question as "why") and more about a process and curiosity-oriented stance. [Uştuk \(2024\)](#) echoed this notion by noting that, although EP in the online flipped classrooms increased student autonomy in learning and

student motivation to learn, technical support such as access to reliable internet and training in online facilitating and emotional scaffolding, were needed to maintain student engagement. Within the context of inclusive practitioner research EP has been positioned as a social justice and equity project, adding value through its commitment to "equalising all voices", favouring understanding above evaluation ([Hanks, 2024](#)).

In EFL contexts, the interest in EP has increased; however, previous studies ([Ramdani et al., 2023](#); [Uştuk, 2024](#); [Zhuo & Huang, 2024](#)) have largely targeted teacher development, online learning contexts, or individual skill-related problems for students in a separate language skill like speaking or general reading comprehension. Nevertheless, it is not well-researched how EFL teachers and students jointly make or embody the principles of Exploratory Practice in the specific context of face-to-face intensive reading courses and how such involvement in the process contributes to the quality of classroom life and development for both teachers and students. Product-oriented pedagogies and assessment-driven instruction have embedded a product orientation into the very psyche of reading - particularly evident in intensive reading, which has been traditionally characterized by a focus on accuracy, comprehension testing and vocabulary mastery.

Thus, this study aims to fill a crucial gap by looking into EP within the particular pedagogical context of university intensive reading classrooms with a focus on the participatory role of both teachers and students. Unlike the teachers in this study, who all independently embedded EP principles in their practice and for whom EP-informed pedagogy could be observed naturally occurring, other studies rely on pre-specified and researcher-prepared EP-informed pedagogies. By considering both the perspectives of teachers and students, we offer an innovative lens through which to discuss Exploratory Practice in the context of EFL as a way to transform skill-based instruction more generally resistant to learner-centred approaches.

## RESEARCH METHOD

### Research Design

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore the benefits and challenges of EP and how EFL teachers and students enacted EP principles within intensive reading instruction context. Case study design is appropriate for EP research as it allows deep investigation of complex phenomena in bounded contexts ([Creswell & Creswell, 2023](#); [Ramdani et al., 2023](#)). The bounded context here is a single academic institution where both teachers and students collaboratively engage in EP-inspired activities. The study sought to uncover not only what participants did, but also how and why they engaged in certain practices related to mutual development and inquiry within intensive reading.

### Research Context and Participants

The research was conducted at a public university in Indonesia, specifically in the English Education Study Program, in which intensive reading was a core subject. This site was selected due to institutional support for reflective pedagogy and innovative language teaching approaches. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling ([Fraenkel et al., 2023](#)) Selection criteria were: (a) previous exposure to (or training in) EP, (b) voluntarily expressed willingness to participate, (c) enrolment in, or the teaching of an intensive reading course.

The study included 12 participants, among whom were two EFL lecturers, and 10 undergraduate EFL students. The lecturers taught intensive reading and had adopted EP principles in their teaching practice. The researchers observed their naturally occurring pedagogy and refrained from influencing any instructional decisions made by the lecturers. The student participants were in the lecturers' classes and had also taken at least one semester of academic reading classes. To preserve anonymity and to indicate role, participants were identified with codes (L1, L2 for lecturers; S1-S10 for students). Participants gave written and verbal confirmation that they had been informed about the ethics of the study.

**Table 1.***Participant Demographics*

Participant Code	Role	Gender	Years of Teaching/Study	Involvement in EP
L1	Lecturer	Female	8 years	Implementing EP in reading instruction for 2 years
L2	Lecturer	Male	10 years	Implementing EP in reading instruction for 3 years
S1	Student	Female	2nd year	Participating in EP-based class activities
S2	Student	Male	2nd year	Participating in EP-based class activities
S3	Student	Female	2nd year	Participating in EP-based class activities
S4	Student	Male	2nd year	Participating in EP-based class activities
S5	Student	Female	3rd year	Participating in EP-based class activities
S6	Student	Female	3rd year	Participating in EP-based class activities
S7	Student	Male	3rd year	Participating in EP-based class activities
S8	Student	Female	3rd year	Participating in EP-based class activities
S9	Student	Female	2nd year	Participating in EP-based class activities
S10	Student	Male	3rd year	Participating in EP-based class activities

This diverse group of participants enabled the researcher to investigate numerous insights and experiences about the way EP principles were enacted in the context of intensive reading. This was important as EP is reciprocal and collaborative, therefore needed both teachers and students.

**Data Collection Methods**

Data were collected using three techniques following EP research traditions ([Hanks, 2017](#)): semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and reflective journals.

Semi-Structured Interviews were conducted with both teachers and students ([Fraenkel et al., 2023](#)). Interviews explored participants' understanding and application of EP principles, perceptions of classroom inquiry, and EP's impact on their engagement and development. Teacher interviews focused on how they integrated inquiry into pedagogical practices, while student interviews explored their roles as active contributors to classroom research. Each interview lasted 45-60 minutes, was audio-recorded with permission, and conducted in Indonesian and English based on participants' preferences.

Classroom Observations were conducted over six weeks documenting how EP principles were enacted during 12 intensive reading sessions. The researcher acted as a non-participant observer ([Creswell & Creswell, 2023](#)), taking detailed field notes on teaching strategies, classroom interactions, student engagement, and moments of collaborative inquiry. Observations focused on how puzzles were raised, discussed, and explored as part of the learning process. Sessions were video-recorded with consent for detailed analysis.

Reflective Journals were collected from both lecturers and students following EP documentation practices ([Hanks, 2017](#)). These journals captured participants' ongoing reflections on classroom experiences, puzzles encountered, and perceptions of quality of life

and mutual development. Teachers wrote brief weekly reflections (8 entries each), while students submitted journal entries after selected class sessions (4 entries each). Participants received prompts including: "What puzzled you today?", "How did collaborative inquiry affect your understanding?", and "What moments enhanced the quality of classroom life?" Journals were written in participants' preferred language (Indonesian or English).

### Data Analysis

All collected data (interviews, observational notes, and reflective journals) were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the six-phase approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2021). We used inductive thematic analysis which enabled themes to emerge from the data rather than imposing themes based on pre-existing categories. All Indonesian data were translated to English using DeepL (translation tool), rechecked by the researcher and verified by a bilingual colleague. The analysis process involved: (1) familiarization with data through repeated reading; (2) generating initial codes inductively (Fraenkel et al., 2023) using NVivo 12; (3) searching for themes by grouping codes; (4) reviewing themes against data and research questions; (5) defining and naming themes in relation to EP principles; and (6) producing final report with representative quotes.

To ensure credibility and trustworthiness, triangulation (Creswell & Creswell, 2023) was employed by comparing findings from interviews, observations, and journals. Member checking was conducted by sharing preliminary themes with participants via email to validate interpretations and clarify meanings. Eight participants (both lecturers and six students) provided feedback confirming that the interpretations reflected their lived experiences.

## FINDINGS

### Research Question 1: What are the perceived benefits and challenges of Exploratory Practice in intensive reading instruction?

Thematic and content analysis of the interviews, observations, and reflective journals uncovered various benefits and challenges observed by both EFL teachers and students. The implications of these findings are that the way exploratory practice (EP) is carried out, promotes engagement and development but brings with it actual and conceptual challenges.

#### Benefits

##### *Deepened Engagement with Texts*

Results indicated that instruction based in EP promoted more substantive, meaningful engagement with reading texts for both teachers and students. Rather than passively taking in information, students were prompted to investigate puzzling features of the texts, such as unfamiliar vocabulary, confusing tone or an implicit argument. S2 reflected: "I used to just read and answer. Now I try to find out why I do not understand something. It helps me read more carefully." (interview data) This method redirected the lens for students away from simply obtaining right answers to how they came to understand comprehension. Observational note revealed an increased sensitivity to textual nuance among the students, and their own attempts to develop critical questions. "During independent reading some students began to question the assumptions of an author without any prompting from the teacher" (Observation notes, Week 4). In addition, S5 wrote, "I pay more attention to how I read and not just what I read."

##### *Growth in Reflective Thinking*

Reflective thinking and metacognitive awareness increased dramatically according to teachers and students. As a result of puzzle-posing and classroom discussions, learners tended to become more aware of their own reading behaviours, including their strengths and difficulties. L1 explained: "The most important change is that students now pause and think about their own thinking. It's not just 'why is this hard' but 'how do I read, and how can I read better?'" S7 commented: "I know that I read too quickly and tend to skip over the details. In class when we talk about puzzles, I hear from other students that they too slow down or go back and read things a second time. Now I try different strategies." (Journal, S7). This metacognitive development allowed

students to think of reading not as a skill that they needed to master but as a cognitive process that they could reflect on and learn to refine.

#### *Improved Teacher-Student Relationships*

The exercise of sharing puzzles to think about and talking them through, developed a more trusting and partnership feel between teachers and learners. Students reported that their voices were heard, and teachers placed a high value on what students contributed about the experience of life in the classroom. S4 remarked: *"Before, I didn't speak much in class. But now when I share a puzzle, my teacher listens and even uses it for the next class. It makes me feel involved"* (interview data). S9 said: *"I am now like, 'I feel more comfortable asking questions. It's an honest feeling of teamwork in figuring things out together instead of teacher and students,"* (Journal, S9). Together, this collaborative development of classroom inquiry cultivated a sense of shared ownership amongst both teachers and students and provided the class culture with breathing space. According to classroom observation data, the nature of turn-taking during class discussions was more equitable and less dominated by teacher questions.

#### *Enhanced Collaboration and Peer Learning*

Through various means to foster a sharing of the same topic, the EP framework led to collaborative discussions and exploration where reading challenges were discussed together. There was increased willingness among students to connect with one another in terms of sense-making of texts and to approach varied perspectives. Journal Entry from S10: *"We had different answers about the main idea, but after listening to each other, I changed my mind. Group talk helps me think better."* This collaborative learning space was in line with the underlying EP principle of bringing people together to work and it had a mutual evolving nature in practice. Student 3 said, *"The ideas from my classmates help me see other perspectives that I did not get"* (Interview).

### **Challenges**

#### *Uncertainty about "Correct" Answers*

Some students were confused or uneasy when the classroom moved away from providing clear answers. In this test-oriented context, many learners were familiar with clear right-or-wrong outcomes, making the open-ended nature of EP confusing for some. In interview data, S6 stated, *"Sometimes it feels like we don't know the real answer. I'm not sure if I'm learning the right thing or just talking."* Teachers recognized this tension but noted that learning to tolerate ambiguity was a learning objective of its own. As L2 explained, *"Some students report feeling nervous at first. So they want to know immediately whether they are right or wrong"* (Interview). However, they struggled to balance inquiry with the demands of the curriculum.

#### *Time-Intensive Implementation*

Both teachers reported that using EP in their intensive reading classes facilitated a greater amount of time than traditional teaching did. Class discussions about puzzles frequently required sacrificing textbook coverage, and going more slowly. For example, L2 explained: *"It takes longer to explore puzzles together. I sometimes worry that we don't finish the planned topics."* This worry was acute in settings with inflexible syllabi and assessment criteria, where limited time made deeper exploration a luxury. L1 stated: *"I have to choose set content (what to address and what to go into in depth)."*

#### *Difficulty in Sustaining Student Inquiry*

Not all students were excited about questions of inquiry – or perhaps even more importantly, the act of raising puzzles, formulating questions, and critically engaging with texts. It was obvious that the inquiry skills were also developing at different rates across the students. As one lecturer commented *"Some students catch on quickly, but others are passive or just wait for me to explain. Encouraging everyone to participate in inquiry is not easy"* (Interview, L1). This is the definition of finding it hard to encourage everyone to get on with inquiry. This suggests that though EP is a quality that facilitates learner autonomy, it needs scaffolding and continued support for inclusivity. In her journal, S9 wrote, *"I have a really hard time developing good questions. I'm not sure what to ask."*

### *Assessment Misalignment*

The second substantial challenge had to do with what appeared to be a disconnect between the principles of EP and their assessment practice in formal evaluation contexts. Perhaps most glaringly, standardized tests and grading remained largely rooted in factual recall and linear comprehension answers, a stance at odds with EP's focus on process and exploration. Interview data from S8 revealed, *"I enjoy puzzles, but when exams come, I feel like I have to stop thinking that way and just memorize answers."* In response, teachers reported a similar concern and indicated that EP often could not be fully implemented due to institutional expectations. I thought of one comment from L1: *'the exam isn't the sort of thinking that we learn through EP'...* Although EP leads to rich understanding and critical thought, traditional assessment systems ignore or fail to assess such process gains, placing pressure on classroom practice and assessment.

The findings of RQ1 indicate that while Exploratory Practice enhances critical thinking, engagement, collaboration, and classroom relationships, it also presents challenges related to student readiness, time constraints, and assessment pressures. Both teachers and students recognized the transformative potential of EP, but also highlighted the need for institutional support, ongoing reflection, and adaptation to local contexts to sustain its implementation in intensive reading instruction.

### **Research Question 2: How EFL teachers and students enact Exploratory Practice (EP) in intensive reading instruction**

By considering these EP principles, the results demonstrate how EFL teachers and students can enact Exploratory Practice that embodies this shared, collaborative, inquiry-based, and reflective nature. This engagement was expressed in puzzling, dialogic, routine, and reflection on practice, which collectively fostered an active, learner-centred space.

#### *Integrating Puzzles into Regular Instruction*

In both cases, L1 and L2 worked hard to incorporate "puzzles" - real questions or curiosities around teaching and learning - in their everyday intensive reading classes. Instead of presenting inquiry as an isolated activity, they naturally brought puzzle-posing into lesson openings and follow-up discussions through PEPA (Potentially Exploitable Pedagogic Activities). L1 started one class with a question: *"Why do some students easily identify the author's purpose while others struggle with it?"* An enigma they toutsled with across many classes through activities like think-aloud reading, collaborative text annotation, and small group discussions. This was an embodiment of the ideal of embedding work for understanding into everyday pedagogic practice.

This was a very active approach in which the students engaged. In her interview, S5 said *"We are invited to think, not just answer. When the teacher asks a puzzle, we feel that the answer is not fixed. It motivates us to explore more, not just rely on the textbook."* Students become co-inquirers, not passive recipients of knowledge with this change in classroom culture. It does not happen overnight - it unfolded as students started to get comfortable with the unknown and started asking questions of their own regarding reading processes.

#### *Promoting Mutual Development through Dialogic Interaction*

Although the principle of working together for reciprocal growth was clear and present through the teacher-student dialogue and peer collaboration, some moments clearly established this principle amongst the observations. Responding to the changes, lecturers said their role became more of a facilitator than a director did. Therefore, while they would sit down with the same lecturers and then convey that *"I don't give immediate answers. I let students debate and come up with possible interpretations. That's when deeper learning happens for both of us."* These opportunities were similarly valuable for students for mutual exchange. Another student, who was S3, said, *"Sometimes our answers are different, but the teacher doesn't say wrong. We discuss it together. I feel respected, and I learn more."* Another student (S10) added, *"Before, I believed that the teacher knows everything. Now I realize we are all in this together"*. These facilitated understanding and created trust between the two partners, one of the conditions required to engage in meaningful joint inquiry.

### *Enhancing Quality of Classroom Life*

The EP-based approach – organizing instruction to investigate genuine puzzles – was identified as a means to raise the overall quality of their classroom experience by participants. In particular, he noted the focus on asking good questions (rather than filling out a blank or matching exercises without discussion) that was seen as more stimulating and intellectually satisfying. As L1 said: *"I used to focus too much on outcomes – correct answers, test scores. But now I see that students are thinking more critically, and I'm learning from them too."*

Similarly, students shared that their attitudes changed. S6 commented on more emotional engagement with materials: reported similar shifts in attitude. S6 described feeling more emotionally connected to the material: *"Now we talk about why we misunderstand a text, not just what the answer should be. It helps me feel less anxious because I know other students struggle too."* This implies that Exploratory Practice contributed to a safe and empathic learning space. Increased student participation was confirmed through observation data, as students seemed more relaxed within the classroom environment and were willing to share their confusion.

### *Building a Collaborative Classroom Community*

Building a community was another common thread within these submissions and the role of EP with this. Through collaborative post-analysis conversations – examining puzzles collectively in discussion and individual written text – and reflective dialogue, teachers and students developed a sense of connection to one another. Intensive reading sessions embedded peer discussion into their deep discussion of the reading where students helped one another through puzzles of *"Why do we misinterpret the same paragraph differently?"* One group activity that S9 remembered was, *"We all read the same passage, but had different views. Then we discussed, and finally understood each other's perspectives. I realized that learning is not only about reading but also about understanding people."* In his journal, S4 wrote, *"I feel less alone when my group members express the same confusion as I. We help each other."* Another student, S7, said, *"The class feels like a team these days."* This was exactly the type of work the team had come to do, and it also highlighted the importance of knowledge that was co-constructed.

### *Making Inquiry Work Visible and Evolving*

In conclusion, both teachers planned intentionally to make their inquiry work public. Hence, at the classroom level, we showcased student reflections, puzzle summaries and group discussion outputs. Students made posters showing the puzzles their group investigated: e.g., *"Why are some paragraphs more difficult to read than others?"* These posters remained in the room for future reference. They also had journals and class blogs in which their ideas evolved.

As L2 emphasized, T2 mentioned, *"The process is important. Even unfinished ideas are valuable, and we talk about them as a class."* This led to a relatively open atmosphere and a practice of continual growth. S1 noted *"When we see each other's work, we learn different ways of thinking. We also get ideas for our own puzzles. We also obtain inspiration for our own puzzles."* Examples of student puzzles obtained – *"Why do I understand stories better than argument texts?"* or, *"Why are words of academic vocabulary harder to recall in comparison with daily words?"* But: *"How do my emotions influence my reading?"* which is reflective of the EP principles of public work and iterative practice and learning.

In summary, EFL teachers and students enacted Exploratory Practice in intensive reading by embedding puzzles into regular lessons, promoting dialogic interactions, enhancing emotional and intellectual engagement, fostering community, and making reflective inquiry an open and evolving process. These enactments not only adhered to the core EP principles but also reshaped the pedagogical dynamics of the intensive reading classroom, moving it toward a more inclusive, reflective, and collaborative space.

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to investigate perceived benefits and challenges of Exploratory Practice on quality of classroom life and mutual development in intensive reading activities as well as EFL teachers and students' EP enactment in intensive reading

classrooms. Based on the Principles of EP (Allwright & Hanks, 2009), the results provide a valuable understanding of the complexity of embedding EP in classroom use. We structure the discussion under three broad headings: pedagogical enactment of EP; impact on teacher and/or student learning; and opportunities to learn, perceived constraints, and contextual tensions of enactment and impact.

The results demonstrate that EP was not just a method of research, but a practice fully integrated into the daily cycle of reading instruction. The puzzles that drove inquiry in their classrooms came directly from students' engagement with texts, allowing teachers to create lessons that centered around real-life struggles and crafted a culture of inquiry that was deeply related to students' everyday – real-life – experiences with reading (Lammert, 2023; Trinter & Hughes, 2021) This performative enactment illustrates Allwright and Hanks' (2009) third principle with respect to a work-for-understanding approach being blended with routine pedagogic practice.

By inviting students to ask questions, like, "Why do we read this same paragraph differently?" or "How do we sense a text as impenetrable?", the reading classroom transformed from a space for question accumulation to a space for meaning construction. This agrees with prior studies from [Gillies \(2020\)](#) and [Miller et al. \(2021\)](#) drawing from the work of [Hanks \(2021\)](#) we argue for the importance of collaborative puzzling and the dialogic teaching these practices invite in EP-based classrooms. Drawing on past research that examined diverse formats for engaging with pluralist texts, the present study builds upon these insights by demonstrating how a pluralism-in-practice can be integrated into the framework of a commonly used reading genre – intensive reading – that has traditionally been marked by narrow goals and skill-based instruction.

[Steenberghs et al. \(2023\)](#) drew on EP principles to show teacher-student relationships deepened, and participants reported both emotional and cognitive involvement with their teachers and classmates. When students shaped the questions which drove the inquiry together, they felt seen, heard, and empowered and teachers shared learning from student insights and reflected on their own pedagogic choices in ways which were more critical than before.

These results speak to the dialogic and ethical dimensions of EP as a form of shared agency ([Hanks, 2021](#); [Miller et al., 2021](#)). Co-constructing puzzles flipped the roles: rather than just teachers leading inquiry, students were the ones driving their own learning. According to [Davis and Parmenter \(2021\)](#), students who engage in epistemic participation, are intentional and involved in the process of constructing knowledge and doing so, they gain more interest and ownership in their learning pathways. In the context of reading instruction, the current study finds ways in which reflective spaces reinforce this claim and illuminate the development of learner agency and collaborative learning through authentic engagement.

In addition, the environment of EP also promoted an atmosphere of inclusiveness and encouraged a supportive classroom community. The cohort not only worked together to solve puzzles but also benefited from hearing each other as they brought their own unique perspectives and differed reading processes to the table. These are in keeping with social constructivist ideas that knowledge arises from interaction and negotiation, as in dialogic inquiry environments ([Gillies, 2020](#)). Here, the bridge for this kind of development is EP.

Although the findings indicate a number of pedagogical advantages, they also suggest important challenges in the integration of EP as part of an intensive reading-focused learning environment. Most notably were tensions between the open-ended, discursive nature of EP and the realities of curriculum pacing, assessment systems, and student desires for "right answers."

Students reported discomfort with ambiguity and uncertainty, which revealed a tension between inquiry-driven learning and exam-based assessment systems. This is consistent with studies by [Persky et al. \(2020\)](#) who stated that many learners conditioned by traditional schooling connected learning with correct answers and rote memorization as

opposed to discovery and meaning. Teachers were also faced with dilemmas when considering how time-consuming conversations over EP were to their content coverage and the complexity of mind test preparation, as discussed in [Hanks's \(2017\)](#) assessment of EP within educational settings that could limit transformative teaching and learning through institutional demands.

Another structural constraint that emerged was the difficulty of aligning EP with standardized assessment frameworks. Since the success of reading education at all levels is typically measured through fixed-response reading tests, and thus through speed and accuracy and the recall of facts, EP's sumptuous, value-laden, and process-oriented mixing of the meaning with the delivery – which values intelligence over the answer, reflection against speed, and a range of perspectives over a single interpretation – is too easily at odds with institutional evaluation strategies. Some studies also notice the oppositions of inquiry-based pedagogies and test-based assessment in the EFL context as evident in this observation ([Song et al., 2024](#); [Huang et al., 2024](#)). It requires institutions to recognize other indicators of learning, such as growth in reflection, collaboration, metacognition, and inquiry, as just as legitimate indicators of learning progress as traditional measures of learner comprehension

## CONCLUSIONS

This study demonstrates that Exploratory Practice (EP) can be effectively integrated into university-level EFL intensive reading instruction, transforming it into a collaborative, reflective, and inquiry-driven process. Guided by Allwright and Hanks' Seven Key Principles, the research found that EP implementation led to significant benefits including deepened engagement with reading texts through authentic puzzle exploration, enhanced metacognitive awareness, strengthened teacher-student relationships built on trust and partnership, and improved peer collaboration through communal inquiry. However, the study also identified substantial challenges: student discomfort with open-ended inquiry especially among examination-oriented learners, time-intensive implementation requiring careful curriculum balancing, variable student readiness necessitating differentiated scaffolding, and tensions with standardized assessment practices that prioritize recall over reflection. These findings reveal the complex reality of implementing innovative pedagogies within traditional institutional structures while affirming EP's value as both a pedagogical and developmental framework.

For practitioners, the study offers actionable strategies including gradually modeling puzzle-posing to develop student inquiry skills, creating regular collaborative exploration opportunities, making inquiry work visible through displayed reflections, designing assessments that value process alongside product, and seeking institutional support for flexible pacing. Teacher educators should incorporate EP principles into training programs, allowing teachers to experience EP as learners before classroom implementation. For institutional leaders and policymakers, the findings call for systemic changes: recognizing alternative learning indicators such as metacognitive development in assessment frameworks, providing professional development focused on facilitation and inquiry-based pedagogy, allowing curricular flexibility for student-generated puzzles, and creating communities of practice for teacher support and development. These implications emphasize that successful EP implementation requires coordinated efforts across individual, pedagogical, and institutional levels.

Future research should address this study's limitations – small sample size, focus on experienced practitioners, and specific institutional context – through several directions: longitudinal studies examining sustained impacts on reading proficiency and learner autonomy across multiple semesters, comparative studies across different proficiency levels and cultural settings, investigations of teacher training's influence on EP quality and sustainability, and exploration of EP in digital or hybrid learning environments. Additionally, research should examine how individual learner differences influence EP engagement, how EP principles might inform assessment design to align with inquiry-based

pedagogy, how EP varies across different language skills or integrated skill contexts, and how institutional culture affects EP sustainability. Student perspective studies using longitudinal interviews or diaries could provide deeper insights into learners' transitions to inquiry-based pedagogy and their development as reflective practitioners over time, ultimately enriching understanding of how EP can create more inclusive and transformative language education environments.

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