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Educating the Future Foreign Language Professoriate for the 21st Century

Heather Willis Allen
Hiram H. Maxim
Editors



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Chapter 6

Beyond the Methods Course: Using Exploratory Practice for Graduate Student Teacher Development

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Graduate student instructors (GSIs) in foreign language (FL) departments typically take a seminar on theories and methods of FL teaching as preparation for current and future collegiate-level teaching assignments. Through the one-semester methods course, generally offered before or during GSIs' first teaching assignment in a graduate program, students learn about key issues in language teaching and have the opportunity to reflect on their own teaching experiences through the lens of a wider profession. After this course, however, opportunities to help GSIs continue reflective practice tend to be minimally provided.

In FL collegiate contexts, a number of models have been proposed to help graduate students engage thoughtfully with their teaching and prepare them for future professorial roles. They include, for example, supporting action research projects for GSIs (e.g., Dhawan, 2001; Rankin & Becker, 2006), providing greater opportunities for graduate students to teach upper levels (e.g., Byrnes, 2001; Byrnes, Crane, & Sprang, 2002), and offering advanced course work to support them in these teaching assignments, including especially the teaching of literature (e.g., Allen, 2009; Bernhardt, 2001; Melin, 2000; Mills & Allen, 2008). Yet, despite recent calls among FL educators for increased attention in fostering teacher development of graduate students beyond preservice training and methods coursework (e.g., most notably observed in responses to the 2007 MLA Report, e.g., Pfeiffer, 2008), limited research exists to date that provides evidence for continued teaching preparation of graduate students in FL collegiate programs (Allen & Negueruela-Azarola, 2010).

For those following the dialogue over the past decade and longer concerning the need to develop new curricular and departmental structures in FL programs (e.g., Byrnes, 1998, 2001; James, 1989; Swaffar & Arens, 2005), the fact that this research area has been little explored is unsurprising. Dichotomous thinking permeating many FL departmental programs today (e.g., language vs. literature; lower-division vs. upper-division courses; teaching vs. scholarship) has important consequences for how our future professoriate views FL collegiate education. Cultural disconnects within FL departments coupled with little curricular vision cannot but lead one to view graduate

student teacher education as one-dimensional, skills-oriented “TA training” to be mastered within a relatively short period of time, and with typically one person, i.e., the language program coordinator, serving as primary teaching mentor (Allen, 2009; Maxim, 2005; Walther, 2007). Yet, as graduate students advance in their studies, they are likely to teach increasingly diverse classes that differ in regards to language of instruction (e.g., target language or English), instructional format (e.g., discussion section, autonomous class or online format), course focus (e.g., literature and cultural topics, or particular modalities, e.g., writing or conversation), and even populations (e.g., heritage speakers; graduate-level reading courses, etc.). Moreover, as Allen & Negueruela-Azarola (2010, p. 388) observe in their extensive review of research on graduate student teacher development: “A one-size-fits-all professional development model does not reflect the reality of graduate students as diverse individuals with varied cultural and educational backgrounds and unique needs.” Recent work in second language teacher education has shown that the ongoing nature of teacher development demands curricula that can cater to the different developmental stages in teachers’ careers, requiring different types of engagement with different types of knowledge bases as they grow (Christenen & Noda, 2002; Graves, 2009; Wideen, Mayer-Smith, & Moon, 1998). In line with current trends within FL higher education, where there is increasing concern for fostering interdisciplinarity and building community to promote meaningful dialogue and understanding as well as a renewed focus on the contributions of the humanities, new models are needed to conceptualize learning to teach at the college level as a continuous, sustainable enterprise by which expertise is understood to develop over time and through a community of practitioners.

Reflective Practice in Language Teacher Education

Learning to teach is a complex, nonlinear process that involves a continuous exploration of individual beliefs and practices set against generalized knowledge, including theoretical understandings. Reflective practice, as much as it may be a “slogan term” (Burton, 2009, p. 298) in teacher education, is now considered an essential component for teacher professional development (Wright, 2010). In particular, action research and collaborative inquiry have been advocated as integral to teacher development, with numerous benefits cited including, e.g., effective problem solving, the sense of personal and professional growth, heightened awareness of an individual’s ability to explore and make sense of the classroom, and a developed understanding of the curriculum and institution within which one’s teaching is situated (Burns, 1999; Tedick, 2005). Moreover, action research is often described as an “emancipatory” process: a way of making underlying, often tacit assumptions of institutions and teaching transparent to stakeholders. Teachers find their observations confirmed, expanded upon, contextualized, possibly challenged by other teachers, leading to a more holistic

understanding of their experiences within a particular educational context (Cole, Raffier, Rogan, & Schleicher, 1998).

With increasing arguments for recognizing the contributions action research can make in the study of language learning and language teacher education, the standards for conducting such research have become more rigorous with systematic data collection and analysis. Despite unbridled support for this form of professional development, most researchers acknowledge the limited time teachers have to actually engage in reflection of their classrooms (e.g., Bailey, Hawkins, Irujo, Larsen-Freeman, Rintell, & Willett, 1998; Burns, 1999). Unless particular incentives are in place to help foster this reflection—such as coursework devoted to the practice or personal research ambitions—it is uncertain whether teachers, including active GSIs who are already struggling to juggle their multifaceted professional identities, are able and willing to engage systematically in action research and sustain this practice in their professional lives.

In the following study, four coordinators representing four different FL programs examine how the reflective teaching framework of *Exploratory Practice* (Allwright, 2003) can benefit more experienced GSIs and provide a potential interdisciplinary model for professional development and beyond the first-year teaching methods course in collegiate FL education. Drawing on qualitative data analysis, we show how a teacher support group of graduate students and language program coordinators built on the principles of *Exploratory Practice* enabled two experienced GSIs to develop personally meaningful insights on their classrooms and learners. Findings point to opportunities afforded for the GSIs in understanding three interrelated areas of their teaching: (1) that reflection about teaching must involve learners; (2) that teaching is an inherently complex and dynamic process; and (3) that teaching communities both provide collegial support and promote deep understanding of classroom teaching.

From Action Research to Exploratory Practice

The framework of *Exploratory Practice* (EP) reflects a number of recent shifts within the field of second language teacher education (Allwright & Hanks, 2009; Crandall, 2000; Freeman & Johnson, 1998; Wright, 2010); a concern for the developing knowledge base of teachers, including their belief systems and the impact these have on instructional practice; a view of teachers as agents who think reflectively about their classrooms; and respect for teachers' localized understandings within their specific teaching contexts.

EP was developed in the early 1990s by language teacher educator Dick Allwright based on his own dissatisfaction with action research and the difficult, sometimes impractical demands he found it placed on teachers (Allwright, 2003, 2005; Allwright & Hanks, 2009). Wanting to move away from a behavior-oriented and technique-driven approach to language teaching, Allwright sought to refocus attention on the “quality of classroom life” and “mutual understanding” between teachers and learners, whereby teachers would not be expected to create new knowledge of their teaching, but rather deepen their understanding of the

classroom (Allwright, 2006). Meant to support *ongoing* teacher reflection without leading to teacher burnout, the EP framework views issues that arise in the classroom in terms of “puzzles” that teachers work to understand better—rather than as “problems” or “solutions” as often conceptualized in action research. Respecting teachers’ experiential knowledge of the classroom, EP also emphasizes the use of existing resources within a community that do not require outside research tools for interpretation (for examples, see Gunn, 2005 on the use of student feedback surveys, and Zhang, 2004 on the use of pedagogical activities like discussions in group work).

The seven principles guiding the EP process have a broad, straightforward appeal, highlighting educational values of inclusivity, collegiality, and sustainability:

- (1) Put quality of life first.
- (2) Work primarily to understand language classroom life.
- (3) Involve everybody.
- (4) Work to bring people together.
- (5) Work also for mutual development.
- (6) Integrate the work for understanding into the classroom practice.
- (7) Make the work a continuous enterprise. (Allwright, 2003, pp. 128–130)

The first principle with its interest in maintaining a healthy, constructive and harmonious life for both teachers *and* learners in the classroom is a central tenet to EP and provides support for the other principles. As EP is equally concerned with enabling learners to become active participants in the teaching–learning process, it sets itself apart from action research¹ (Allwright & Hanks, 2009) and finds much in common with ecological perspectives for thinking about FL education that are rooted in sociocultural frameworks, and where *all* participants in the classroom are considered active agents in the learning process (e.g., Kramsch, 2008; Walther, 2007). In sum, the seven EP principles suggest ways in which inclusive practitioner research can become a productive, sustainable part of learners’ lives. In this way, the framework is intended to serve both developing learner and teacher practitioners, enhancing mutual understanding and trust between them.²

Methods

Study Context

The current study investigates how EP can help experienced GSIs continue reflective practice beyond initial pedagogical training such as the “methods” course. Specific questions guiding the inquiry include:

1. Is EP a beneficial and useful framework for the professional development of experienced GSIs?
2. How do experienced GSIs develop through EP?

The study was conducted at a large public Midwestern university during spring 2010. Including GSIs and language program coordinators across four

different language programs (i.e., German, Japanese, Korean, and Swahili), the group met for approximately two hours four times in the second half of spring semester (once in March, twice in April, and once in May). At the first meeting, participants discussed potential topics and puzzles to explore, including the possibility of positively oriented puzzles (see Lyra, Fish, & Braga, 2003³), and brainstormed tools and resources available to teachers on campus and beyond through which they could gain insight on different issues emerging from classroom teaching experiences. For this first meeting, all participants read one of two articles on EP in order to familiarize themselves with the framework (Allwright 2003, 2005). There were no other required readings for the group. For the remaining three meetings, participants shared insights and reflections on a specific area that they were interested in exploring in relation to their teaching, i.e., the respective “puzzles” that interested them. Prior to each meeting, each participant prepared a one-page written reflection (see Appendix A for the writing prompt) to ensure that all group members would participate in ongoing reflection over the two months.

Participants

Participants of the reflective teaching group were three GSIs and four language program directors (also the researchers) ranging in age from 27 to 45, whose native languages varied from English (n=3), to Kiswahili (n=1), Korean (n=2), and Japanese (n=1). While teaching experience ranged from 3 to 21 years, all seven individuals had taught at least beginning and intermediate language courses. The three GSIs were Ph.D. students who had already taken a teaching methods course at the university. Two were teaching German; one was teaching Korean.⁴

Data Analysis

Analysis of data began after the final meeting. Each of the four meetings were transcribed by one researcher and checked for accuracy by a fellow researcher. In analyzing the data, we drew on established analytical qualitative procedures, i.e., description, analysis, and interpretation (Glesne, 1999; Marshall & Rossman, 1999). In the description phase, we read all questionnaires, discussion transcripts, and weekly reflections and jointly identified key themes and their relationships to the study, such as participants’ experiences with and understandings of EP, their puzzle identification and refinement process, perceived benefits and challenges of working with the framework, and future applications to their teaching as a result of the reflective process. In this phase, we used content analysis approaches to identify recurring themes and common patterns in the data (Glesne, 1999). This inductive approach to analysis allowed findings to emerge from the data rather than be influenced by predetermined typologies (Patton, 2002).

In teams of two, we then revisited the data to develop individual narrative portraits of the three GSIs’ teaching development over the two-month period. All narratives were checked by the entire research team to ensure authentic,

valid analysis of the data and updated to reflect agreement. Following this, we explored the common narrative threads across the GSIs' stories and returned once again to the data to develop common insights about the reflective teaching process. Again, interpretations for various findings were verified by the other researchers. This data analysis process allowed us to capture two perspectives of teacher development simultaneously: common experiences and themes among the participant group and GSIs' individual engagement with the EP model.

Both the graduate student teacher narrative portraits and subsequent discussions presented in this chapter contain numerous quotes in order to "take readers inside the contexts and allow them to hear the voices of the participants" (Hatch, 2002, p. 159). To establish the researchers' trustworthiness, authenticity, and accuracy of the data, verbatim transcript is provided for each quote by stating each data source, i.e., the graduate student participant (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The following abbreviations were used in reporting the data: "BQ" for background questionnaires; "M" for group meetings, followed by a number indicating the first, second, third, or fourth meeting; "WR" for written reflections, followed by a number to index the first, second, or third reflection; and "EQ" for end questionnaires.

Findings

Among the seven participants, a wide variety of puzzles were chosen with topics emerging from the individuals' teaching and coordination experiences. The GSIs developed puzzles on: (1) how students perceive a teacher's vocal performance in class; (2) why students speak so quietly in a language class; and (3) how to give feedback effectively. The language program coordinators focused their puzzles on their teaching assignments and curricular work. They included: (1) how to balance lecture and discussion in a graduate seminar; (2) how to make a small class with very quiet students cohesive yet interesting enough for each student; (3) how to motivate weaker students when all avenues of helping them appear to have failed; and (4) how to incorporate oral assessment into an existing FL curriculum.

The following section features individual case narratives from two graduate student participants in the study, Sunmi and Melissa (both pseudonyms). As will be demonstrated, the narratives illustrate both commonalities and differences with regard to the students' backgrounds, teaching experiences, understandings of EP, puzzles chosen, approaches to refining the puzzles, and resources used to explore the topics.

Sunmi

Sunmi, a 30-year-old Ph.D. student of Chinese history and native speaker of Korean, had been teaching beginning and intermediate Korean language courses for four years as a GSI in the Korean language program and would be teaching advanced Korean for the first time in the fall. Reflective teaching was not new to her, and in her beginning questionnaire, she identified three tools to

help her in her teaching: observations of other teachers in her Korean program conducted every fall semester, faculty observations, and mid-semester informal feedback from students. Sunmi took an academic approach to EP and explicitly drew on EP literature to guide her reflective process, frequently citing the Allwright (2005) article in her discussion of working towards “deep understanding” in teacher reflection and showing concern about following the “steps of EP” (MT-2).

Sunmi cited the principles of EP, particularly the focus on quality of life and working to understand classroom life, as motivations for joining the reflective teaching group and wanted “an opportunity to reflect on [her] teaching, students, and also share [her] puzzles” (MT-1). Aware that this work was not about problem solving, Sunmi hoped to eventually integrate knowledge gained from the experience into her classroom.

Central to Sunmi’s concern for teaching were her own learners, a motif that emerged in her beginning questionnaire when she was asked about her understanding of EP (e.g., “an approach to practitioner (teachers and learners) research” (BQ)) and one that would become increasingly relevant to her in her process of thinking about her puzzle on voice.

Sunmi’s puzzle concerned the perceived disconnect in her students’ voice levels in and out of the classroom, and she asked how it was that the students in her small but “very close” class seemed to “speak in a small voice inside the classroom” (WR-1). This was “a kind of mystery” to Sunmi “since [she had] been everyday emphasizing to [her] students that speaking loudly is very important in developing language abilities” (WR-1). Because Sunmi had taught 12 of her current 15 students the semester prior and the students “prepare for the class together outside the classroom before the class begins everyday, having a conversation with each other cheerfully” (WR-1), she found it especially perplexing that they spoke so quietly during instruction.

Throughout the EP process, Sunmi shared her developing theory about these “small voices” and suggested that the students’ quietness related to their own comfort level and confidence in using Korean in the classroom. In reflecting on her puzzle, Sunmi considered a past interaction with a student that seemed to have helped her to see the development of voice, confidence levels, and language abilities as interrelated:

In the e-mail, [Sunmi’s student] said that it is very hard for nonnative speakers like her to study a new language, and the biggest obstacle to her is to overcome fears of the whole things related to learning a “new” language. Her e-mail makes me think about the whole things that she mentioned, and I believe that the whole things related to learning a new language is closely related to my puzzle. (WR-1)

Sunmi drew on a number of resources to understand her students’ behavior, including polling her students about their motivations for and fears surrounding learning Korean and consulting SLA literature on anxiety from a prior pedagogy course. She discovered that while her students were able to easily describe their

reasons for studying Korean, when she “asked several times” about their anxieties, “they just smiled” (M-3). Sunmi’s realization that her students had difficulty in identifying and articulating their fears about learning Korean led her to ask a number of questions:

How can the teacher identify students’ anxieties if they do not express their anxieties clearly? How can the teacher know who anxious learners are in the language classroom? How can we define anxious learners in the language classroom? If the teacher does not have one-on-one meeting with a student, how can the teacher know the student’s anxieties exactly? Does the teacher have to guess their anxieties from their class performances or their facial expressions? (WR-2)

Sunmi was especially concerned that her students’ lack of confidence in language learning, resulting in their “small voices,” would deprive her students of the “pleasures in learning language” (WR-2). Thus, she set out to raise her students’ awareness that speaking more loudly in class would benefit them.

In her final reflection, entitled “Please speak loudly,” Sunmi wrote of her ongoing efforts in getting her students to speak more loudly in class and found that her repeated reminders were beginning to work as students spoke up more. She hoped to instill in her learners both confidence and enjoyment in language learning and saw speaking with a louder voice as a sign of having attained these goals:

In my experience, speaking loudly during the class activity could contribute to creating a comfortable atmosphere for the class and above all speaking loudly can make a cheerful atmosphere through bringing us a present of laughter as well as increasing confidences. (WR-3)

Her efforts seemed to have paid off: Sunmi noted at the third EP meeting that her students were now taking it upon themselves to get each other to speak more loudly in order to hear each other in class. At the final meeting, Sunmi reported that one student had told her that although at the start of the semester he was “very shy at speaking and discussion in Korean,” he could now “speak in Korean with [...] confidence” (MT-4). Pleased with this, Sunmi concluded: “I think that this is very good, yes” (MT-4).

Throughout the EP meetings, Sunmi’s puzzle generated much discussion among the coordinators and graduate student participants, with questions directed at Sunmi about her specific classroom context, hypotheses and counterhypotheses for the students’ quiet voices in class, recommendations for further reading, and suggestions on how to amp up the voice level through classroom activities and discourse strategies. At the final meeting, Sunmi expressed gratitude toward the group that she had “found happiness in working and teaching” and that she “had a precious opportunity to think about the relationship between the teaching and life” (MT-4), something she reported not having considered fully before participating in the reflective teaching group. For Sunmi, quality of life included

everyone, especially her students, and she saw the puzzle metaphor extendable to her learners, citing Allwright's (2005) mention of "interpersonal trust" (p. 359) between teachers and learners and noting that there is more to teaching than just the learning of content (WR-1).

During the four group sessions, Sunmi was engaged, although she spoke much less than other participants. Outside of her own puzzle, she talked when questions about students from her program were discussed and when one coordinator shared her puzzle on teaching graduate courses, a discussion to which Sunmi contributed by bringing in a student perspective to emphasize the value of student contributions in the learning process:

I think students can find their own interests and their own interpretations outside of the articles and discussing it in the classroom. So they can share their different interpretations and interests, and I think this is very important. (MT-4)

The same aspects of EP noted at the start of the project as important, i.e., the principles of *put quality of life first* and *work primarily to understand language classroom life*, continued to figure strongly in Sunmi's understanding of EP and what it could offer her personally as a reflective teacher. In her end questionnaire, Sunmi defined EP as a "humanistic teaching model" that serves "to connect teaching and learning with life itself of teachers and learners" (EQ). She also now saw mutual understanding as key to classroom learning:

Above all, I realized that teaching is a continuous process and an important part in my life. Also, I believe that teaching and learning have to go with our real life and teachers and learners have to try and understand our life each other for a real learning and teaching. (EQ)

Finally, Sunmi found the community and sharing aspects of the group to be important for allowing her to "think about various ways to approach [her] puzzle" (EQ). Importantly, she saw the "collaborative nature of this group help[ing] all participants develop their own puzzle" (EQ), not just her own.

Melissa

Melissa was a 28-year-old Ph.D. candidate and native speaker of English with seven years experience teaching German as a GSI. Highly motivated, she always handed in her written reflections at least one week before the meetings and contributed regularly in discussions with supportive and funny comments and anecdotes from her own teaching and learning experiences.

As the most advanced graduate student in the EP group, Melissa was writing her dissertation on German literature and had the most extensive teaching experience among the participants, which included German and Swedish language classes and English-language courses on German and Scandinavian literature and culture. While she was not teaching during the semester when the EP group convened, she was slated to teach a German fairy tales course the following

summer and directed much attention during the EP process to applying insights to that teaching assignment.

Melissa was already involved in reflective teaching prior to the EP group and displayed a wide awareness of resources that go into understanding classroom life, noting participation in workshops sponsored by the university's Center for Teaching Excellence, use of mid-semester feedback and faculty observations, and drawing on insights from applied linguistics courses (e.g., pragmatics). Melissa also considered informal observations of lecturers, for whom she served as a discussion leader, as a resource for "observ[ing] how the main lecturer teaches" and thinking about "habits [Melissa] would like to replicate in [her] own courses" (BQ).

When asked about her reasons for joining the group, Melissa "hope[d] to reflect on [her] teaching to make [her] performance even better for [her] students' experience." She also added that she was "struck by the organizers' wish to focus on quality of life" (BQ), a notion with which she initially grappled, asking at the first meeting: "Whose quality of life are we talking about? (M-1), and concluding: It's everything" (M-1). In the background questionnaire, where participants were asked to check off aspects of the EP framework that appealed to them, Melissa wrote comments and questions next to tenets that she did not understand or agree with. Melissa's questions and commentary revealed a consistent engagement with EP and a passion to make the reflective teaching process worthwhile for her and her students.

It did not take long for Melissa to determine her puzzle topic on feedback. Initially, she was interested in "exploring the topic of feedback both from the perspective of receiving and giving" (WR-1), but gradually shifted her focus to her students and their writing as she reflected on one particularly uncomfortable episode involving a past student (see below). It was clear from the beginning that Melissa had given much thought to the issue of feedback before participating in the EP group. In her first reflection, she used her own learning and teaching experiences to inform theories she had developed "on why students today have a hard time receiving feedback" (WR-1):

Here are my two major thoughts: 1) students today are used to belonging to what I call the "participant ribbon" generation. This age group has not been taught their weaknesses, but rather encouraged despite their lack of ability. 2) Students put a lot of time and effort into the projects they create and as such make their projects very personal. It is hard to get any negative feedback on a project that is rooted to that student's notion of self, whether that be in the classroom teaching or in their ideas in a paper. (WR-1)

In addition to her observations about today's students, Melissa discussed how teachers should handle feedback to their learners. An entire paragraph was devoted to "taking" these insights "to [her] classroom" (WR-1) and included maxims for herself about why feedback is important and how best to communicate its value to students: "Explain to students why feedback is given the way it is—make it transparent" (WR-1, this sentence was bolded and underlined in the

original). This tension between wanting to help students improve and understand the importance of feedback in learning yet not wanting to “demotivate” (M-2) them in the process was of central concern to Melissa.

At one group meeting, discussion of her puzzle led to a lengthy conversation about the role of grades in providing feedback. For her next reflection, Melissa drew on the EP meeting as a resource for deeper understanding of this topic (“From speaking with the group, I realized how much the final grade factors into this feedback”) and outlined “three ideas on how to handle this” by getting students actively involved in the feedback process (WR-2).

At the third EP group meeting, Melissa shared a story about an incident with a former student that seemed to serve as the underlying motivation for her puzzle. She had given written feedback on a paper to a student in an English composition course on fairy tales. Melissa “had written on [the] student’s paper that the concept he was coming up with in the fairy tales was like the economic law of diminishing returns” (WR-2), but the student, as Melissa put it:

thought this was an attack because he was an econ major. It was clear to me students were taking feedback *in a manner that I had not intended it to be*. This student came to my office hours and I was able to explain that I was not familiar with all my students’ majors, but that was excellent that I could then explain a literature concept to him in economic terms. For the rest of the semester, I felt the student did not trust my feedback because he took it all so personally. (WR-2, italics in original)

The story, as it illuminates the delicate and personal nature of feedback and its potential for miscommunication, “led” Melissa “into this area of where sometimes students interpret comments in ways that we don’t intend them” (M-3). Melissa concluded from this that “perhaps the student needed to understand the purpose of feedback” (WR-2).

Throughout the different stages of Melissa’s puzzle process, she discussed the importance of developing students’ awareness of the value of feedback and having them actively work with feedback so “that it’s not just something that they passively see and chuck into the waste paper basket” (M-3). As she wrote in her second reflection, “it is important to make students become reflective on their own writing and engage with it directly” (WR-2). Toward this goal of awareness building, Melissa thought up different classroom activities that could open students’ perspectives to feedback while acknowledging its “emotional” (M-3) side. One such idea was “put[ting] the students in the place of [the] teacher and giv[ing] them a mock essay [...] with certain mistakes embedded” for them to see “what it’s like to be the one giving feedback” (M-3).

In the final stage of the EP group, Melissa looked to scholarly literature on feedback and found confirmation for many things she had observed and thought about in her earlier reflections, such as the importance of providing critical feedback for student learning, communicating openly with students about learning goals, and aligning feedback with assessment. Through reading articles, new insights emerged for Melissa. She now considered how “the timing of the [teacher’s] feedback also plays a critical role in the students’ ability [...] to

process the information” (WR-3) and understood giving feedback to students as an ongoing process such that “it would be horribly naïve of [her] to believe [she] could have one discussion with [her] students on feedback that would magically fix all their problems” (WR-3). In many ways, Melissa’s final reflection served as a means for her to establish her own comfort level as a teacher in responding to student writing. This point is best exemplified in her closing paragraph, wherein she reminded herself to have courage in giving feedback because of its important relationship to learning: “Teachers should not be afraid of telling the student about needed improvements because this is an opportunity for their educational growth” (WR-3).

Melissa described the insights gained through the EP process as both simple and complex. At the final group meeting, she explained:

Well, after some very intense thoughts, I’ve come to learn about feedback. It’s there for improvement. And that sounds so basic, but it has taken me weeks to get to that point. So, I’ve kind of realized through this how complex feedback is, you know? There are so many issues. There’s my own personal side to it. There’s the teacher side of it. I mean, there’s just—it’s more complex than I even imagined when I set out on this project. (M-4)

The most significant learning moment, Melissa reported in her end questionnaire, was her realization that “feedback is personal both as a student and as a teacher” (EQ) and that her “own experiences in both roles” could be used “to see how [her] experiences as a student were shaping the way [she] approached [her] teaching” (EQ). In the end, Melissa felt she had deepened her understanding of classroom life and was excited to apply her new insights to her summer course, which she had previously taught as a GSI but where she would now have more liberty to modify instructional materials and the syllabus. In her end questionnaire, she shared a variety of new ideas for the course related to feedback, noted new questions on her puzzle, and hoped to explore how her “new implemented changes work or don’t work in [her] future classroom” (EQ).

Discussion

While the two narratives illustrate unique experiences for the GSIs, several commonalities across their stories are also evident. In this section, we discuss three major themes that emerged in their accounts: (1) the importance of learners and teachers as coparticipants in the learning process; (2) the complexity of teaching and the continual process of reflection; and (3) the sense of community that the group created.

Learners and Teachers as Coparticipants

As shown in each narrative, the puzzles of the two GSIs have great relevancy for learners. Sunmi, for example, explored why her students spoke so quietly in her Korean class, while Melissa investigated the topic of feedback from the

perspectives of not only teachers who give, but also students who receive feedback. The source of their puzzles was a specific encounter with their students. In Sunmi's case, it was a student e-mail message that revealed fear of learning a new language; for Melissa, it was her student who had been upset with her feedback on his writing.

In exploring their individual puzzles, the GSIs discussed how their own students could help them understand their teaching, though to different degrees. First, both Sunmi and Melissa actively sought out the opinions of their students. At the second EP group meeting, Sunmi reminded the other participants of EP's focus on learners:

According to EP [...], practitioners include learners and teachers, right? So I think my students might be developing their own puzzles, like in the classroom. So I'm curious about teachers and learners, and practitioners need to share their own different puzzles. If so, how and in what way can they share their puzzles? (MT-2)

Furthermore, Sunmi's puzzle led her to directly ask her students repeatedly in class about their anxieties and motivations in learning Korean:

So I asked my students "Do you have any anxiety?" So I asked several times, but they didn't answer. They just smiled. So then I asked what motivated you guys to learn Korean. In that case, they answered my question clear. One example was: "I want to learn Korean because of Korean dramas." (MT-3)

Melissa, too, revealed an understanding that her students can be active participants in their own learning. Though not teaching at the time of the EP group project, she explored concrete pedagogical activities she could use in future classes to help her students learn the value of feedback without their egos becoming bruised in the process. She considered, for example, having students write responses to teacher feedback on how they plan to incorporate comments into future work (WR-2) and hoped to have "an open discussion" with her class about the purpose of feedback (MT-3).

Thus, Sunmi and Melissa showed increased awareness of their learners' roles in the teaching-learning process and set out to engage their students as practitioner-researchers, viewing students and themselves as mutually constitutive in the learning process.

Complexity of Teaching and Working Toward Understanding

Also emanating from the narratives was an understanding that classroom teaching and learning are inherently complex and dynamic processes that necessitate continuous reflective practice by practitioners. Both GSIs discussed at length in reflections and at meetings their efforts towards understanding as a central goal.

The construct of EP was viewed by the GSIs as particularly complex at times, especially with its central emphasis on seeking to understand issues within teaching as opposed to providing solutions to them and the blurred line between the two. Melissa, for example, found it “interesting” (M-1) early on in the reflective process that the word *problem* was not used in the EP framework. But she pointed out that a puzzle could still provide a sort of solution “just by the act of reflecting,” such that “just the process of doing it kind of is the solution even if you don’t work it out for the solution.” In her final reflection, she noted that the real purpose of her exploration was to develop deepened knowledge about her teaching and her students:

I chose my area because I feel I needed to understand it better for myself and then to understand the impact my feedback had on my students. In this way, I believe the word “understanding” is the most critical part. (EQ)

For Sunmi, the EP process helped her to think about the closely tied relationship between teaching and life, something to which she noted she had not given in-depth thought to before participating in the study. This was also evident in her end questionnaire, where she focused on the connection between classroom life and the lives of teachers and learners, especially EP’s “humanistic teaching model approach” (EQ).

By the end of the EP project, Sunmi and Melissa came to a deeper understanding of their own puzzles, the complexities entailed in them, and the larger teaching and learning process. In describing the insights that she gained through the experience, Melissa noted that they were simple yet complex and involved both personal and professional aspects of her identity. She emphasized that understanding these complexities was vital for enhancing classroom life and learning in general.

Finally, the participants noted that when all practitioners are involved in addressing inherent complexities in learning and view the process as being continuous, the gains are significant. In reflecting on approaches of how to address the complex nature of learning and teaching, the graduate students noted the importance of building an engaged learning community that creates space for all stakeholders to be involved.

Developing Community

A final motif that emerged across the GSIs’ stories was the importance of community in reflective practice. In many ways, this is not a surprising finding given EP’s understanding that collaboration and collegiality are essential ingredients for deeper awareness of classroom life (Allwright & Hanks, 2009; Lyra et al., 2003). Both GSIs chose topics that dealt with interpersonal relationships between themselves and their students, and as such, their puzzles reflect a concern for creating harmony and respect in their respective classroom communities.

Indeed, this EP group represented a true “community of practice” (Lave & Wenger, 1991), with as participants worked together to listen to and support each other through the sharing of ideas and stories that reflected the personal and public lives of teachers. The sessions themselves were filled with laughter, at times reflecting a shared sense of identity as teachers with a common purpose and at other times revealing participants’ awareness that their reflections on teaching were hitting sensitive nerves.

All participants—both language program coordinators and GSIs—reported benefits from working collaboratively as a group to gain deepened understanding of their puzzles. The teaching community played an important role in fostering Melissa’s understanding of feedback and keeping her energized in her teaching. She noted frequently that the group dialogue and the sharing of puzzles with each other “motivated” her in her teaching and “added more depth” (EQ) to her own puzzle, and she expressed appreciation for being privy to faculty’s candor in their teaching ups and downs: “As a grad student, it is nice to have professors share their own struggles with the classroom and have that type of honesty” (EQ). Similarly, Sunmi valued the exchange of pedagogical ideas that helped her to “think about various ways to approach [her] puzzle” on voice (EQ). She also recognized that other participants’ understandings benefited from the sustained dialogue: “I believe that the collaborative nature of this group helped all participants develop their own puzzle” (EQ).

In academic contexts outside of the EP group, the GSIs also found communities that helped to develop greater understanding about their puzzles. Melissa noted the valuable insights that faculty mentors helped her see in relation to how the issue of feedback pervades all aspects of professors’ lives, teaching and research, and both Sunmi and Melissa engaged actively with scholarly texts. Sunmi revisited SLA literature on anxiety from previous coursework, while Melissa sought out answers through new academic articles on feedback. The GSIs’ attempts to develop localized understandings of their classrooms and negotiate these with more generalized insights found elsewhere helped them expand their views of teaching and learning in a personally meaningful way (see Breen, 2006, for further discussion on the importance of finding meaningful rather than merely relevant classroom understandings).

Teachers’ lives are enhanced greatly when they are allowed and encouraged to engage with colleagues in matters that they view as deeply important, and studies on second language teacher education (e.g., Brandl, 2000) have shown that informal conversations with fellow teachers can serve as an important tool for learning to teach. The topic of collegiality has also surfaced at professional conferences and publications within the humanities (see, for example the 2006 issue of *Profession* devoted to this topic). If graduate students are preparing to become teachers in the profession, then it follows that developing students’ collegiality, what Gerald Graff defines as “sustained, satisfying engagement with our colleagues about issues we care about relating to our work” (Block, Dubrow, Goldfield, Graff, Howard, Ottenhoff, & Yandell, 2006, p. 101), should be considered an important goal for GSI educators in FL departments to consider.

Conclusion

This study set out to chart the experiences of participants in a teacher support group based on the principles of EP to see how such a reflective process could foster the professional development of experienced GSIs. Both graduate students reported positive experiences in exploring their puzzles through EP and gaining deepened knowledge about their topics. As the narratives illustrate, Sunmi and Melissa entertained hypotheses about learning, drew on people and resources across multiple communities to understand their puzzles, and cited changes they would make to their own classes based on the EP experience. Among the common themes that surfaced in their narratives were understandings that quality of life refers to *all* practitioners, including importantly learners; that teaching is a complex phenomenon and requires ongoing reflective practice; and that community building is important for teachers at all stages of development. Returning to the topic of GSI development and the major shifts currently occurring within higher education that impact the preparation of graduate students for future professorial roles, we observe that the EP model provided an important space for the two GSIs to explore insights on teaching that reflect key desiderata outlined by FL educators for the twenty-first century (e.g., 2007 MLA Report): sustainable practice, collegial discussion, and a focus on understanding over problem solving and skills training.

It might be the case that the EP framework—at least as it was carried out in this project—is most useful for more advanced GSIs as they are likely in a better position to situate their puzzles within a broader educational landscape and may be familiar with reflective teaching practices. Evidence in support of this comes from one of the original participating students in the group who, with less university teaching experience under her belt, dropped out early from the EP project. This student later reported leaving because she felt discussions at the first group meeting were too advanced for her. Interestingly, both students who left the EP group were M.A. candidates, while the three GSIs who continued participating were Ph.D. students. As seen in the narrative accounts, Melissa and Sunmi were experienced teachers and came to the group with puzzles already somewhat established in their minds. Melissa's topic was personally meaningful to her and she was able to effectively draw on past and current learning and teaching moments to develop a fuller picture of feedback. The topic itself, given its current and popular status within the fields of education and applied linguistics, also offered Melissa plenty of literature to make use of and many interested colleagues to talk with on the subject. Similarly, Sunmi was able to link her puzzle on small voices to well-known SLA literature on student anxiety and motivation. In this way, both GSIs were able to develop their inquiries into researchable puzzles and draw on different resources available to them.

EP provided an important space for them to discuss topics about which they had already been thinking.

While our study looked at more experienced GSIs, we believe the EP framework can benefit FL teachers at varying levels of experience but caution that

different developmental stages (e.g., novice versus more advanced teachers) may make certain aspects of the EP model (e.g., formulation of puzzles, inclusion of learners) more difficult to realize than others. Moreover, we recognize that the voluntary nature of the EP group attracted highly motivated students who were willing to put in the time and effort to look critically at their teaching and share those insights with others. The question remains how to support GSIs who could benefit from more collegial mentoring but may be less willing to seek out opportunities such as teacher support groups which could be perceived as intimidating.

Integrating EP into a FL pedagogy seminar may serve as a first step in getting novice GSIs to think about reflective teaching practice in sustainable terms beyond the methods course (see Allwright & Hanks, 2009, for discussion of how EP can be used as a pedagogical model within the classroom).⁵ In line with theories on “legitimate peripheral participation” (Lave & Wenger, 1991), where newcomers go through a process of “learning how to talk (and be silent) in the manner of full participants” (p. 105), graduate students who have taken a methods course but have not had as much teaching experience might benefit in the early stages of EP from more direct guidance from faculty mentors or more experienced GSIs.

Of course, the findings from this study report on a limited period of time, two months over four meetings, and represent thus a mere “snapshot” of reflective teaching development. Future research on the effectiveness of EP in reflective teaching groups would benefit from a more longitudinal perspective of teacher development that also considers follow-up reports for group members. Moreover, given that an important goal of EP is to foster *sustainable* reflective practice, future EP groups might wish to meet for a longer period of time and begin at the start of the semester rather than halfway through as our group did.

Finally, on a personal note, we, as coordinators and group facilitators, benefited greatly from this experience, as we were encouraged to examine our own assumptions about classroom learning and, importantly, rediscovered our passion for teaching. This professional development opportunity brought home to us the enormous gains such a group can offer *all* teachers, regardless of expertise and experience. Future EP groups therefore would likely profit from the participation of faculty members beyond coordinators, especially those that teach upper levels in FL departments (e.g., in the spirit of departmental conversations as those detailed in Byrnes, 2001).

The opportunity to talk with colleagues from other FL departments additionally allowed us to learn from each other about preferred pedagogical practices across different languages and curricula. Due to the nature of many language programs requiring language-specific attention to their operations, it is often not easy for language program coordinators, not to mention GSIs, to collaborate in this way. Interdisciplinary teaching reflection through the EP group helped us to see our own puzzles through a wider lens, as well as allowed us to develop a shared common understanding of classroom life. Given that GSIs were part of

this process, we believe the EP group served an important mentoring function for these students and led them to see teaching from a broader educational perspective in line with the needs of the twenty-first century.

Notes

1. Allwright & Hanks (2009) point out that while proponents of action research have advocated learner-oriented approaches to reflective practice, in most reports on action research learners are not treated as true participating agents of their own learning in the learning-teaching process. This may be due to hierarchical structures within research paradigms that view learners as subjects.
2. Given that EP is a rather new framework, research on the model is still in its beginning stages. Readers interested in learning more should consult the 2003 special issue of *Language Teaching Research* on Exploratory Practice, as well as Allwright & Hanks' (2009) book-length treatment on the subject.
3. Lyra et al. (2003) show how the gathering of more than 100 puzzles from teachers in Rio de Janeiro of state, private, and language schools were able to gain an overview of shared pedagogical concerns and work together towards deepened understanding on their institutional contexts.
4. Five students teaching L2 German, Japanese, Korean, and Swahili classes initially expressed interest in participating in the group. Two graduate students dropped out during the process, leaving only data from the three graduate student teachers who regularly attended meetings and completed their reflection papers and questionnaires to be analyzed for the study.
5. One of the researchers of this study (Crane) developed an "Exploratory Practice Portfolio" as a major assignment for her FL pedagogy seminar. Graduate students wrote five reflection papers over the course of the semester on a puzzle topic of their choosing. Written reflections addressed: the development of the student's puzzle, different resources used to explore the puzzle (e.g., interviews with experienced teachers, classroom observation, feedback from students, faculty, or supervisors), insights from published research on topics related to the puzzle, and the EP process.

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Appendix A: Writing Prompt for Exploratory Practice Support Group

In preparation for each of the four meetings of our Exploratory Practice support group, please write a single-spaced, *page-long* reflection on your experiences developing insight into your individual “puzzle.”

For example, you may want to comment on any of the following elements:

- What steps you took to gain knowledge about your topic, or puzzle, over the past two weeks
- Any challenges that you encountered in the process thus far and, if applicable, how you dealt with them or plan on dealing with them
- Any insights that you developed about your puzzle thus far
- Thoughts about the process of reflective practice
- New questions and inquiries that have come up

These written reflections should serve as a record for your professional development as a teacher and help to formulate the process before each of our three subsequent group meetings. Good luck and have fun!