

**Sometimes
I only understand a lesson
after having
exhausted the teacher
and my classmates.**

PUTTING 'UNDERSTANDING' FIRST IN PRACTITIONER RESEARCH

Dick Allwright,
Lancaster, England,
for Izmir, June, 2014.

r.allwright@lancaster.ac.uk

PUTTING 'UNDERSTANDING' FIRST.

- 1. More learners' thoughts about classroom language learning.**
- 2. First implications: and a big problem for learners.**
- 3. More implications, and three key questions for research.**
- 4. 'Understanding' and 'development'.**
- 5. 'Understanding' and 'knowledge'.**

6. A potential way through: asking 'why' instead of 'how'.

7. Ruwen Zhang's principled approach.

8. The principles involved: an introduction to Exploratory Practice.

9. Beyond Exploratory Practice, and back to my three key concerns about teacher research.

**1. SOME LEARNERS' THOUGHTS
ABOUT CLASSROOM LANGUAGE LEARNING.**

**Ah! A teacher is a teacher... they're
made to make trouble for us!**

**Even if one doesn't know
one must learn how to know.**

**If we could continue to explain
our errors it would be really good
because we'd learn better.**

**When I am interested in a topic
and I think out words
I remember them much better than
when the teacher throws new words
at us.**

**I don't want
to have the key to exercises
because if I didn't know the answer
I'd rush to the keys.
I prefer to think.**

**In class, for the marks,
I prefer what is easy,
but to learn
I'd rather have
those complex exercises.**

**I would like the marks to be given
less importance
so that we can concentrate
on learning.**

**I personally do not use this textbook.
I've got a book that I use regularly:
'English in 90 lessons'.
It's much better.**

**To be honest,
sometimes I don't pay attention
to the lessons
because they are not so good
for learning.**

**But I always manage
by using other books I have.
I find them more efficient.**

I normally revise in my room and I play the teacher. I do exactly like her. I take all the words that we wrote on the copy-book. I read them to see which ones I haven't understood. I read their explanations and I teach them to imaginary students. I teach them out loud.

**2. FIRST IMPLICATIONS,
AND A BIG PROBLEM FOR LEARNERS.**

**It's all confusing,
there is no structure in the lesson.**



'That will do for today's lesson.'

**I have no idea
why we're doing
this kind of exercise!
I know that teachers
have some idea in mind
but I don't know which one!**

**If the dialogue completion
is thought of as a useful exercise
then teachers should explain
the aim of it.**

**Nobody has ever explained
the techniques of these exercises!**

**Sometimes we're blocked by a word.
While we're thinking about it
the teacher goes on talking
about other things
and we can't follow any more
so we switch off.**

**If one day a student
happens to miss a word,
another day he won't understand
a whole sentence,
and then it will be whole paragraph.**

**OK you can tell us that
the students must ask the teacher
for whatever explanation.**

**But OK once, twice, often,
and the teacher will get very fed up.**

Sometimes

**I feel like asking the teacher a question
but just realising that perhaps
the rest of the class understand
I hesitate.**

**Sometimes
I only understand a lesson
after having exhausted the teacher
and my classmates.**

**If there is sufficient time
we try to understand, use logic...
if not,
we draw heads or tails!**

**All quotes so far from:
Dr Safya Cherchalli,
Lancaster PhD Thesis,
1988.**

3. MORE IMPLICATIONS, AND THREE KEY QUESTIONS.

- 1. Does this research pay sufficient attention to ‘understanding’?**
- 2. Whose understanding is this research aimed at developing?**
- 3. Is this research a good use of class time?**

4. 'UNDERSTANDING' AND 'DEVELOPMENT'.

TRAINING

EDUCATION

DEVELOPMENT

TRAINING



SKILLS

EDUCATION



KNOWLEDGE

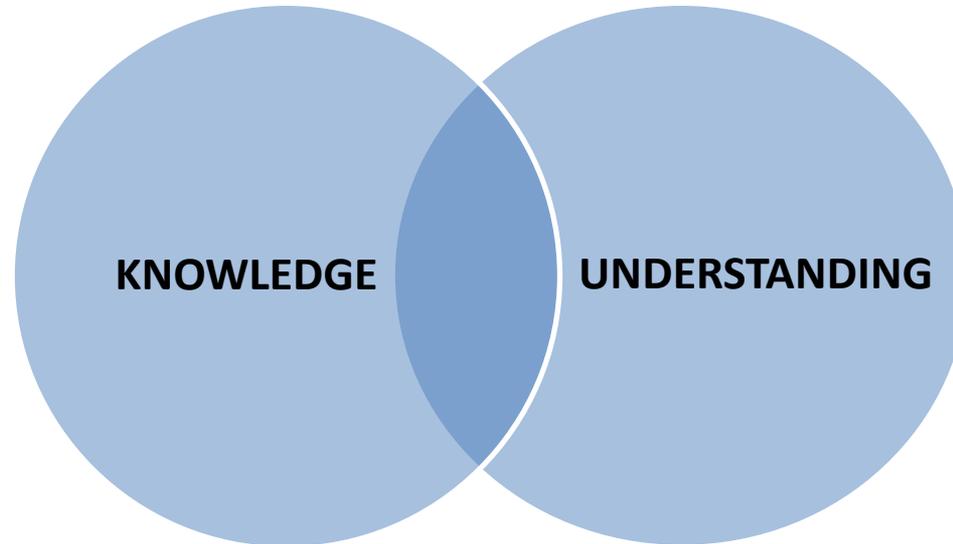
DEVELOPMENT



UNDERSTANDING

**It's not doing something new,
it's understanding what we already do.
And this gives us a lot of pleasure.**

5. 'UNDERSTANDING' AND 'KNOWLEDGE'.



**I keep on getting my contract renewed
so I must be doing something right.**

6. A POTENTIAL WAY THROUGH:

ASKING 'WHY' INSTEAD OF 'HOW'.

From:

HOW

**can I stop my students from using their
mother tongue when they should be
practising their English?**

To:

WHY

**do my students switch to their mother
tongue when they should be practising
their English?**

**Understanding 'why' is surely
a pre-requisite for
any intelligent decision-making.**

7. RUWEN ZHANG'S PRINCIPLED APPROACH.

**Frequent modifications
to my teaching methods
did not produce positive results.**

**I had been so worried
about the teaching outcomes,
in other words,
about the examination results,
that I never cared
about whether my students
enjoyed the class or not.**

**It suddenly occurred to me that the
only way out
was to emphasise
‘the quality of life in the classroom’.**

...EP principles not only help the learners to understand one another, but also help teachers and learners develop a mutual understanding that was never achieved before.

**Only by continuous exploration,
only by successful co-operation
between teachers and students,
can we navigate
the complexities
of the language classroom
effectively.**

**8. THE PRINCIPLES INVOLVED:
AN INTRODUCTION TO EXPLORATORY PRACTICE .**

Exploratory Practice

**is an indefinitely sustainable way
for classroom language teachers and learners,
while getting on with their learning and teaching,
to develop their own understandings
of life in the language classroom.**

Seven Principles for Inclusive Practitioner Research.

The 'what' issues:

1. Focus on *quality of life* as the fundamental issue.
2. Work to *understand* it, before thinking about solving problems.

The 'who' issues:

- 3. Involve *everybody* as practitioners developing their own understandings.**
- 4. Work to bring people *together* in a common enterprise.**
- 5. Work co-operatively for *mutual* development.**

The 'how' issues:

6. Make it a *continuous* enterprise.

7. *Minimise the burden* by integrating the work for understanding into normal pedagogic practice.

**A teacher's view of EP,
as we saw before:**

**It's not doing something new, it's
understanding what we already do.
And this gives us a lot of pleasure.**

Walewska Braga, Rio, 2009.

A learner's view:

**I think I like everything
and I intend
to keep on
practising EP questions
for a long time.**

Mariana Pompilho de Souza, Rio, 2009.

9. BEYOND EXPLORATORY PRACTICE

**‘Research’ and ‘development’
are both essentially about getting
understanding, so teacher research needs
to be centred on working to understand,
rather than on finding immediate solutions
to practical classroom problems.**

**Learners need (and want) to understand
at least as much as teachers do.**

**But they do not think
they get much help from teachers in this.**

**Our learners deserve
all the help we can provide
for them to develop their understandings.**

The three risks that worry me most about teacher research:

- 1. The risk that ‘developing understanding’ will be sacrificed to ‘getting practical improvement’.**
- 2. The risk that, even if teacher-researchers’ understandings are developed, the learners will not be encouraged to develop theirs.**
- 3. The risk that precious class time will be wasted.**

**The three questions I hope you will ask
of any practitioner research:**

- 1. Does this research pay sufficient attention to 'understanding'?**
- 2. Whose understanding is this research aimed at developing?**
- 1. Is this research a good use of class time?**

THE EXPLORATORY PRACTICE NETWORK

r.allwright@lancaster.ac.uk

ENJOY!