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Biodata

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A report on the IATEFL Joint ReSIG and LASIG Pre-conference event (PCE)

Brighton 2018: 'Learner Autonomy and Practitioner Research'

Ernesto Vargas Gil

'Language learner autonomy' is a central concept in Western language education. Since its first conceptualisation in the 1970s (Holec, 1979), this concept has remained as a pedagogic guiding principle, a value, or a genuine aspiration in foreign or second language classrooms. As such, it has also been an area of interest in academia, discussed and sometimes challenged. In recent years, interest in language learner autonomy has been enhanced by the increasing use of new technologies within the digital classroom, as also by the increasing awareness of the realities and challenges in low-resource language classrooms, and the possibilities that the development of learner autonomy can bring in both contexts. However, despite its importance, there has also been a recognised lack of classroom-based research into learner autonomy in practice. The need to address this gap was the expressed motivation that brought together two IATEFL Special Interest Groups (the Learner Autonomy and the Research SIGs) in the Pre-conference Event Day (PCE) at the annual IATEFL Conference in Brighton, U. K. on April 9th 2018.

During this event, two plenary sessions and sixteen poster presentations were devoted to discussing different perspectives, methods and recent investigations in this research area.

In the opening plenary session entitled 'Spaces for autonomy', Professor Phil Benson (Macquarie University), using the concept of 'language learning environments', presented different approaches to exploratory collaborative research to help language learners develop autonomy inside and outside the classroom. Some of the contexts for such collaborative research he suggested included the use of students' diaries; out of class audio/video/photography projects; 'vox pop' interviews; 'bring a piece of language' to class assignments, and linguistic landscape/audioscape walks. According to Professor Benson, the joint (teacher/students) exploration of such learning environments can also help to improve our understanding of informal language learning, particularly beyond the classroom where frequently language learning takes place. His talk set the scene for the poster displays and further discussions that took place during the day.

After this session, sixteen teachers/researchers presented and exchanged ideas with the conference attendees about their classroom-based research on

learner autonomy through interactive poster presentations. The topics were the following:

- Using digital technology to foster learner autonomy – Amie Dussurget-Quesnell
- Exploring criticality development via Pedagogy for Autonomy, Practitioner Research and arts-informed research methods – Ana Inés Salvi
- Practitioner Research as a way to improve classroom practice – Anja Burkert
- Logbooks as a tool for Practitioner Research – Dorte Asmussen
- My journey as a researcher – Gamze Sayram
- Researching autonomy and identity beyond the classroom – Jo Mynard
- Action Research in preservice teacher education as a potential step towards autonomy – Katja Heim and Stephan Gabel
- How to be mindful listeners and artful inquirers in practicing and researching learner autonomy through stories – Leena Karlsson
- EFL and Online Community Platforms in secondary schools – Lesley Fearn
- A personal search for the missing links in the development of learner autonomy – Michelle Tamala
- Using technology to enhance teacher and learner autonomy – Micol Beseghi and Greta Bertolotti
- Learner autonomy as perceived by female teachers and students of English as a Foreign Language in Saudi secondary schools – Nouf Ahmed Alhejaily
- Enhancing learner autonomy through creativity and story-telling – Pablo Fernando Marchisio and Ana Laura Barbosa
- Technology for first generation learners – Rhadhika Chebrol
- Classroom and assessment research through the lens of Exploratory Practice – Rhian Webb
- Students’ visualisations of ‘independent-mindedness’ in the 12 university classroom – Tanya McCarthy

Later on, in a plenary session format, poster presenters had the opportunity to reflect on and report back their thoughts on the questions and comments that they received during their presentations from the conference delegates.

In the closing keynote session entitled ‘the Nimbus of Research: Learners and Teachers as Autonomous Explorers of Practice’, Dr Judith Hanks (University of Leeds) argued the case for Exploratory Practice as a form ‘of fully inclusive practitioner research’. In her talk, Dr Hanks first questioned the grounds upon which what counts as research and who should conduct it tends to be defined in Academia. She then argued in favour of a teachers’ and students’ joint and autonomous exploration of their own teaching and learning practices, working together to research issues relevant to them.

She vindicated the idea that both parts can conduct research and give origin to “robust questions, creative practices, and profound insights into their practice” without neglecting their language learning progress, but rather enhancing it. Dr Hanks elaborated then on the 7 core principles of Exploratory Practice for Practitioner Research (Allwright & Hanks, 2009) and finally, presented some samples of students’ views on Exploratory Practice.

After this talk, a ‘Follow-up on plenary talks’ session was held where both keynote speakers, Professor Benson and Dr Hanks, addressed comments and answered questions formulated by the audience. Finally, the attendees at the event, organised in small groups, discussed future action plans for the joint SIGs and ways of moving forward.

As a conference attendee, by the end of the day I was convinced that the main objective of the event had been accomplished as this conference showcased an important number of diverse and interesting samples of classroom-based research into learner autonomy in practice. At the same time, the conference offered attendees different opportunities to network, converse and learn from each other, even though perhaps the format of this dialogue could be improved in future editions. One way to do this would be to make session materials available in advance. This practice has already proven to be an effective way to improve the quality of the participants’ dialogue and interaction at different academic events, like for example the Ethnography and Education Conference, held every year at the University of Oxford. Finally, in terms of the plenary talks, both formulations on learner autonomy (put forth by two specialists approaching the topic from different angles) clearly represented a step forward towards a more fully evolved conceptualisation of empowered, self-conscious, and inter-independent learners (and teachers) inside and beyond their educational environments.

I think that, in times like the present, dominated by audit cultures, standardised assessment processes and technocratic rationality in language education worldwide, such formulations on learner autonomy (and the research displayed and the dialogue that followed it at the conference) become particularly relevant. However, it is precisely the nature of these times that also makes important the explicit consideration of the broader context(s). Otherwise, there is always a risk of being left with asocial, apolitical, or ahistorical abstract discourses, or rather discourse practices, with a reduced potential to affect change.

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My reflections on Teachers Research! Istanbul 2018

Mariana Serra

IATEFL Research SIG scholarship

Since I received an Aptsis Action Research Award (British Council) in 2015, I have been inspired by the idea of teachers as researchers in their classrooms as a way to pursue Professional Development. The ARAS scheme which enabled me to implement my first Action Research study in a low resource classroom in a rural state school in Argentina, provided me with an opportunity to develop my professional practice and to receive feedback from a team of international mentors. It made me realise that teacher-initiated research is a powerful way for us to learn about our own teaching as well as to become more experienced at investigating our own practice.

As soon as I was informed that I had been awarded an IATEFL Research SIG scholarship to enable me to attend the 'Teachers Research!' 2018 conference in Turkey, I did not hesitate to fly from my country to Istanbul to attend the event. This was with the hope of being able to share the results of one of my action research case studies and to apply the knowledge I would acquire during the conference back in Argentina; my goal is to contribute to Argentinian education, especially in rural and poor areas. I knew it would be a professionally rewarding experience. I was absolutely right! As well as the previous Teachers Research Conferences in Chile (2016) and Buenos Aires (2017) that I had participated in, Teachers Research! Istanbul 2018 was an invaluable opportunity which exceeded my expectations.

Day 1 and day 2

After welcoming remarks and opening speeches, June 8th and June 9th achieved the goals of the conference as it was a participant-centred event during which there were plenary talks, workshops by keynote speakers and poster presentations by teachers and prospective teachers from Turkey and beyond. During both days, the activities developed smoothly in a pleasant and informal atmosphere with coffee breaks and intervals providing

fruitful opportunities for attendees to meet people in the field, to interact and to get new and innovative ideas.

On day 1, Gary Barkhuizen's plenary talk on the importance of short stories in teacher research was particularly inspirational as he encouraged us to use stories of our teaching practice to explore our own teachers' work while 'On Noticing', the workshop by Angi Malderez which took place on day 2, was a sixty-minute unique experience. That renowned researcher made us reflect on the meaning of noticing and observing, of reviewing, and on the importance of becoming attentive teachers and better noticers while teaching. Erdem Akbas and Kenan Dikilitaş' workshop on 'teacher researcher reflective writing' as an emerging genre was memorable to me, as I became highly enthusiastic about trying it as part of my own personal development. I soon realised that I could see my written outputs as written representations of the level of understanding that I achieve every time I implement a research project: some sort of proof of my depth of learning. There were other memorable workshops, according to many teacher attendees, with clips recorded live and uploaded by one of the organisers. Last but not least, I was impressed by the hard work carried out by prospective teachers, which was reflected in their poster presentations, their commitment and desire to share their Action Research case studies and to get feedback from the audience.

My poster presentation

Being a poster presenter myself, I was very passionate when giving my presentation on the "Effectiveness of Praise-Question-Encourage commenting guidelines during teacher-written feedback on EFL learners' rewrites". While talking about it, I remembered the happy faces of my student participants during the implementation of that project, our one-to-one written conversations in their journals, my comments of praise on their positive progress in their drafts, my further questioning and my encouragement through feedback. I reported that my students became successful writers and that *P-Q-E* commenting guidelines provided me with a useful strategy to help them improve their writing skills. I concluded that the implementation of formative teacher-written feedback in supporting the developing writers helped to encourage the skills and habits needed for draft revision at a deep level as well.

After our five-minute talk in front of our posters, there was time for interaction with the audience, which consisted of academics and teachers. It was an excellent opportunity to get feedback, to ask for advice, to get valuable insights and to learn from each of the attendees. Our poster presentations were followed by a round-up discussion led by a moderator. I was delighted to have learnt so much from my teacher partners, as regards for example, the implementation of technological tools during teacher feedback, that I recorded many of their ideas for future projects. Such a lively discussion was taking place that we did not realise that time was