

Practitioner Research

Edited by Yasmin Dar, Paula Rebolledo and Ana Inés Salvi

In this new regular feature or 'space' in the newsletter we invite teachers, academics and postgraduate students alike to get involved in research into their own practice and to share their experiences, reflections and views on research they have done in their own classrooms. We believe that by doing so, apart from developing our own practice, we will be contributing to the development of a field within English Language Teaching that is still relatively new and needs to be boosted. We look forward to welcoming your contributions. Since this is the first in a new series for which together we'll be responsible, we begin by sharing a few of the ideas we three have shared together so far about advantages of practitioner research, and what we can do to encourage it, and the reporting of it:

There are different kinds of research. There is research done by a person who is investigating somebody else's classroom; there is research which is carried out by teachers themselves in their own classrooms; and there is research which is carried out by both the teacher and his/ her students (the kind of research advocated by Dick Allwright in his most recent publications). The last of these is the kind of research I have recently been involved in because I think both teacher and students have to benefit from this experience. Embarking on this kind of research has allowed me to get to know my students better, develop a closer relationship with them, and get to know what they need and enjoy the most; and to be much more in control of my teaching than ever before, which was satisfying for me, and beneficial for my students. (Ana Inés Salvi)

Without calling it practitioner research – or 'research' at all - one presenter I saw at the last IATEFL conference actually carried out research which would fit the definition of exploratory practice (though with some features of action research as well). If he and others wrote up such research, then the bottom-up teacher-led research which seems so hard to find actually published, would become accessible through the Research SIG newsletter. (Paola Rebolledo)

Research for me means carrying out an exploration of a classroom teaching and learning issue where the outcome of the investigation could lead to better understandings. I like the idea of being in control of my research in the sense that I can make decisions on whether practical solutions are needed or whether I wish to continue the investigation by engaging in mutual support with other classroom teachers via discussion forums and face to face workshops. Teachers are very busy and I imagine, like me, trying

to balance work and home life, so to save on preparation time, and to meet the needs of visual and auditory learning styles, perhaps other forms of communication (apart from the newsletter) could be useful for sharing information, for instance, teacher videos and podcasts. (Yasmin Dar)

We'd like to investigate the possible use of other media (e.g. via the Research SIG website) for encouraging oral reports of practitioner research in the future. For this issue, though, Yasmin Dar has agreed to write about her recent experiences with Exploratory Practice. Over to Yasmin ...

Exploratory Practice: Investigating My Own Classroom Pedagogy

Yasmin Dar (University of Leicester)

Introduction

The idea of carrying out research that would be directly meaningful to me and my learners really appealed to me when I had to choose from a range of approaches to carry out a research project for my MA dissertation (2009). Luckily for me, my supervisor Simon Gieve introduced me to the EP (Exploratory Practice) way of doing research which I found useful, particularly because it is a holistic way of investigating my classroom pedagogy. The aim of this article is to share with you how I applied the principles of EP and hopefully inspire other language teachers to either try it out for themselves or find out more about Exploratory Practice (Allwright, 2003; Hanks and Allwright, 2009).

What is Exploratory Practice (EP)?

Exploratory practice (Allwright, 2003; Allwright and Hanks, 2009) is an ethical way of doing research that is 'indefinitely sustainable' which promotes the idea of 'on-going' rather than experimental classroom research. For example, data is collected with minimal or no disruption to normal classroom teaching and learning, and most importantly the aim of EP is to turn issues and problems into 'puzzles' because, firstly, not all puzzles are problematic and, secondly, not all teachers are comfortable to admit that there is a 'problem'. Thirdly, puzzles may emerge from the following: a teacher's long term concerns, learner questions, or a direct prompt, for example, at an EP workshop/forum (Allwright and Hanks, 2009).

Exploratory Practice appeals to me because my personal priority is to use a research framework that allows me the opportunity to explore 'why' my classroom teaching and learning may not be working so well at times, in order to first increase my 'understanding' of the situation before thinking about what I should do next in terms of, whether I acknowledge that there is a problem that needs some practical solutions or if I decide to accept that the issue I have investigated will remain a classroom reality (Gieve and Miller, 2006:20-21) that is specific to me and my learners, instead of assuming from the start that me or my students are experiencing a problem that needs to be solved. Interestingly, EP also appeals to me because it also encourages investigation into why things are working well in a language classroom (Allwright, 2003:117; Allwright and Hanks, 2009:176-177).

The six principles of EP can be divided into three areas: (Allwright, 2011)

'What'

1. Focus on quality *of life* as the main issue.
2. Work to *understand* it before thinking about solving a problem.

'Who'

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

'How'

6. Make it a sustainable enterprise.

PLUS two practical suggestions to keep going indefinitely:

- a) Minimise the effort involved.
- b) Integrate the work for understanding into normal pedagogic practice.

My puzzle: 'why don't my students take responsibility for their learning outside class?' (Principle 1).

I looked forward to applying the EP principles to explore an issue that had been puzzling me ever since I had started teaching international students on pre-sessional EAP courses in a university context between 2009/10.

Context

I decided to investigate my puzzle with a group of twelve international students that I had been teaching since January (2011) on a 10 week EAP pre-sessional course. They were aged between 18-30 (9 females and 3 males) from Saudi Arabia, China and Kurdistan, who needed to pass a total of four blocks of pre-sessional courses in order to enrol onto their MA programmes. They held BA degrees from their home countries and had a current English language level equivalent to IELTS 4.5/5.

Data collection using regular classroom activities (Principle 3 and 6)

My students seemed enthusiastic and eager in class which I thought I could use to maximise their learning outside class time by carefully picking out extra learning opportunities such as setting homework tasks where they had to do some research on classroom topics to write paragraphs. From the start of the course, they all seemed to look forward to receiving homework, but only a few actually completed it, and I needed to identify the underlying reasons before I made a decision about my next step (Allwright and Hanks, 2009).

As part of my 'normal' classroom pedagogy (Allwright, 2003:121), I carefully selected homework tasks so that the students could revisit and practice the target language that had been covered in each class. For instance, in the last 5 minutes of each class, I would explain instructions for their homework, for example, to follow a link for a website to practice a grammar point covered in class, and/or carry out specific research on a topic covered in class and write a paragraph which they must email to me so that I could check it and provide individual feedback. I would also email the group with these instructions.

To collect the data, at the start of each class I exploited my group's pair-work and group-work discussion activities (Allwright and Hanks, 2009:155-157) by including the following topic: "Ask your partner if they have completed their homework. If the answer is no, ask why?". My role was to note down the students' answers not only for data purposes but also for peer/tutor feedback on key pronunciation and grammar errors during the activity. During class feedback I would summarise the main reasons students had given for not completing their 'homework', and then ask the following question for whole class discussion, "Can you think of any ideas of how to solve these problems?" which generated key suggestions that I myself could have suggested but instead the students had to work hard to make their meaning clear by self, peer and tutor correction (Principles: 3, 4 and 5). The common answers (Allwright 2006, in Gieve and Miller, 2006:13) suggested that some students did not have enough time due to domestic commitments such as buying ingredients to cook fresh meals every night. However, I was surprised to discover that most students were not as computer literate as I had expected, as their feedback suggested that they needed to be shown step by step how to use the virtual learning environment (VLE) platform that is specifically used by the university.

Implications for me and my learners (Principles 2 and 5)

The data supplied me with findings that were available immediately and were relevant to my context (Allwright and Hanks, 2009:198). For example,

- Some practical changes were needed in my teaching practice. For instance, I decided to offer IT support by providing photo shots with step by step instructions on how to access specific resources, as well as using the classroom computer and whiteboard to carry out a demonstration.
- Some students seemed to show resistance to engage in extra learning activities outside class time. I decided to accept their resistance, but continued to gently encourage them to complete their homework.

Conclusion

I initially used the principles of EP to carry out a research project for my dissertation, but I found the whole experience personally more rewarding than researching my classroom with a problem/solution focus (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988, cited in Allwright and Hanks, 2009:144), so much so that I chose to continue using the principles of Exploratory Practice to regularly research my classroom practice after I had finished my MA. This case study has hopefully demonstrated that the nature of EP encourages data to be collected with minimum time and effort, which for me means less chance of reaching burnout whilst researching my classroom pedagogy, and I have also tried to show the benefit of doing research where the results from my data are immediate and relevant to my specific context (Allwright, 2003:118; Allwright, 2006:15).

If you are inspired or have critical comments about Exploratory Practice then perhaps you might like to ask a question or start a debate on the EP Yahoo discussion forum:

<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/exploratorypractice/>. I have set up this forum in order to continue an informal dialogue between teachers for giving and receiving ongoing mutual support, for example, by helping each other to turn a potential classroom teaching/learning issue into a puzzle, or for sharing EP stories.

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