

IATEFL ReSIG online discussion: Practitioner Research as a principled framework for continuing professional development for English language teachers

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1. Introduction

In February 2019, the IATEFL ReSIG hosted an online discussion entitled *Practitioner Research (PR) as a principled framework for continuing professional development (CPD) for English language teachers*. CPD is a topic of considerable importance in language education, particularly in higher education, where it is reflected in the institutional demands for teacher development. Engaging in research and scholarship is acknowledged by many as having a potentially powerful and transformative force upon the professional development of teachers. Hence, the investment by many in-service language teachers in their on-going development; through engaging in various forms of PR in the search for better understanding their classroom practice, they remain relevant and responsive to the needs of their own advancement and those of their institutions.

In this article, Assia Slimani-Rolls and Chris Banister of Regent's University London, two of the moderators of this ReSIG Online Discussion, which attracted teacher educators, researchers, teachers, and teacher practitioners from across the world, reflect on how the event shed further light on PR as a principled framework for CPD for language teachers. The event was inspired by a publication co-authored by Assia Slimani-Rolls (Slimani-Rolls & Kiely, 2018) on the same theme. This volume featured six language teachers' narratives about the experiences they lived during a longitudinal project in which they were mentored by the co-authors and which enabled them to implement a form of PR, Exploratory Practice (EP), in their classrooms. Chris Banister, the ReSIG Online Discussion Board Moderator at the time of the discussion, was one of the teachers who contributed a chapter to this publication.

There were three phases to this online event and each phase posed a series of questions for participants. The questions were all prompted by key themes and issues discussed in Slimani-Rolls and Kiely (2018). In this short article, we summarise and discuss some of the participants' responses and reflect on the insights that were shared.

2. Beyond teacher-teacher collaboration

Phase one asked participants: How can collaborative research involve collaboration with students rather than teacher colleagues and non-teaching research colleagues? One contributor, working in a Japanese context, agreed that there were opportunities for learners to be involved beyond their traditional role as a source of data collection. He also suggested that he was on the verge of embarking on a collaborative teacher-student research journey with his students. Other discussion participants from India, South America and the UK pointed out the clear opportunities they envisioned for collaboration between teachers and their learners. Teachers and teacher-researchers shared their successes with PR frameworks such as Action Research (AR) and EP to conduct collaborative research with their learners. Melissa Reed, working in an Australian context, stressed the collaborative value she saw in asking her learners for feedback as part of AR

cycles. Meanwhile, Yasmin Dar, based in the UK, explained how she had involved not only her learners, but also her line manager as part of a collaborative approach combining CPD, lesson observation and EP.

Key themes that emerged here were the positive signal that involving learners in setting and exploring PR agendas can send out and how this can inspire a virtuous cycle of positive affect-building amongst practitioners. Yasmin Dar, based in the UK, revealed that demonstrating her respect for her learners by involving them in her PR was a major part of EP's appeal. Richard Kiely, of the University of Southampton, and co-author of the volume on EP and CPD, picked up on this theme. Richard saw Yasmin's comments mirrored in the case studies from the book in which learners, asked about being involved in research, expressed feelings of pride in being positioned as mature in the eyes of their teacher. Responding to a regular contributor based in eastern Bulgaria, Richard agreed that viewing learners as "responsible agents" with "real and unpredictable contributions" to make was a stance that EP shared with the Freinet approaches to pedagogy from ELT's recent past (see Templar, 2014 for more details on Freinet). Assia Slimani-Rolls closed this phase of the discussion by stressing that the types of collaborative research discussed were all part of practitioners harnessing their community, opening communication channels and constructing their knowledge.

3. EP is a motivating force behind practitioner research

Phase two asked for participants' views about which dimensions shaped teachers' motivation and sustainable engagement in PR. This enquiry triggered various reactions from participants working in differing professional contexts. Some UK participants focused on the ethical, collegial and professional dimensions that have enriched their lived experiences and those of their students and peers. Yasmin highlighted EP's ethical approach to research, which kept her motivated and engaged her and her students in EP. To Ana Salvi, EP fulfils the aim of education, which she sees as essentially "creating space and time for students to explore their questions and doubts" in order to become aware of the constructive nature of knowledge and understand how this is mutually developed. Adding to these dimensions, Chris Banister highlighted some of the gratifying experiences that he lived when collaborating with experienced researchers: the "enjoyment and personal satisfaction" derived from the EP way of being in the classroom and the emerging "researcher identity" that he felt had regenerated his professional life following the public dissemination of his understandings. The above EP espoused attitudes represent a stark difference with the sociocultural dimensions that characterise the reactions of Maria Rodrimora (Argentina), Jani Reddy (India) and Elizabeth Bekes (Ecuador). Maria "envied" those privileged teachers who have the possibility of working with research committed colleagues and asserted that much work is needed to achieve such opportunities in her country. Absent in Jani's context, mentoring was stressed as crucial to inspire neophyte teacher researchers and empower them to make their work public. Elizabeth, a dedicated Exploratory Action Research practitioner, welcomed PR in teachers' lives but remarked that, in many parts of the world, PR is only in the realm of the privileged few, drawing attention to the "huge mismatch between expectations, requirements, and reality". The thrust of phase two of the discussion was that engagement in the search for understanding their classroom practice could, indeed, become a motivating force if teachers' efforts were systematically included in CPD.

4. Relevance of the work context

Phase three enquired about the roles played by work context and work conditions and the role played by institutional frameworks to encourage and sustain EP, PR and teacher learning. The general consensus was that teachers' difficult working conditions are only some of the barriers that prevent PR activities. Familiar with India's primary and secondary sectors, Jani commented on the scarcity of PR presence in these sectors and added that although their 2005 National Curriculum Framework professes the teacher's role as "reflective practitioner", scant support is given to the development of this vision. The absence of PR was further highlighted in a different professional context by Michelle

Hunter, a German-based freelance business English teacher, explaining that her calls for developing CPD and mentoring activities have remained unanswered by her colleagues whose contractual obligations make extracurricular activities unviable.

Without support, establishing teaching associations (TAs) would be arduous remarked Elizabeth (Ecuador), whose country's TA, she said, is "dormant". To this, Bill Temper (Bulgaria) responded that this situation is, in varying degrees, omnipresent in many countries like Bulgaria where TA membership is dwindling and, in Germany, where there is no national TA. He focussed on the need for ministries of education to support some sectors and perhaps subsidise TA membership, TA workshops and encouraging PR in schools. Although Bill sees IATEFL membership and their annual conference fees as prohibitively high for many, he praised the exemplary role played by the ReSIG books in their attempts to facilitate PR practice and hoped that similar work could be encouraged by the IATEFL TA associates.

In support for a substantial collaboration involving all concerned, another UK-based participant Cliff Kast stressed that when so many stakeholders are involved in the negotiation of a better deal for teachers, most end up "tending their own patches". For a start, he praised access to precisely the type of online communication organised by ReSIG for how it helps bring together practitioners and researchers. Furthermore, he highlighted the creation of journals such as the *Journal of English for Academic Purposes (JEAP)* which promotes teaching practice as knowledge creation to enhance the interest in PR and the respect that needs to be given to PR. In this regard, Jani highlighted the efforts that some Indian universities and educational foundations such as Azim Prem Ji had made to sensitise teacher engagement in PR and publish their research outcomes. Back in the UK, Yasmin endorsed her university's assistance in sponsoring staff's PR engagement. Similarly, Richard Kiely reminded the participants that the book under discussion describes precisely such an initiative where the policy of the institution was matched with resources, especially time for meetings and mentoring.

It was fascinating to note the diversity of responses to the question of collaborative PR, whether it is learners feeding back on PR as reviewers or learners taking on a fuller role by setting their own research agendas. With hindsight, however, these assertions represented a dissonance with our own experience of running the EP project which led to the book under discussion. To start with, the teachers' consideration of the learners as co-partners in the research enterprise took a while to take off. Indeed, as expressed by Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2017), it was a matter of "re-position[ing] those who have been objects of research into questioners, critics, theorists, knowers, and communicators" (p.188). These shifts of identity posed a significant epistemological challenge to their reality. It took time, much mentoring and extensive group discussions with experienced researchers, before the teacher-researchers deployed their creative capacity to adopt their students as co-partners. Nevertheless, what was most interesting during the discussion was the idea of the important message sent out by collaborative PR. Such endeavours make more visible teachers' positive beliefs about and attitudes towards learners and their perspectives that might ultimately go beyond learners themselves and be noticed and picked up by other key institutional stakeholders, too, such as parents and administrators.

The contributions of the many keen practitioner-researchers to this online discussion testified to the fact that PR is not common practice across the world and language teachers share similar difficult working conditions. Indeed, heavy workloads and lack of resources including trivialisation of their profession and lack of respect for their investigative efforts are all live issues. The difference, however, is that their discussion is more visible in conferences and in many recent publications. Notwithstanding this, it can also be said that discussions have been on-going since the teacher research movement in the 60s and 70s (Stenhouse, 1975). Nevertheless, as acknowledged by some of the participants, IATEFL ReSIG and its associated teachers have done much work towards raising the profile of PR and facilitating its practice in Africa, Australia, India, Latin America, Turkey, UK and elsewhere (Bullock & Smith, 2015; Burns, 2010; Dikilitaş & Hanks, 2018; Smith, 2015). This development is not exclusive to IATEFL; the British Educational Research Association also has an active PR ReSIG. Yet, perhaps, more

influential than this commendable and often inspiring activity has been the call for research by UK universities which has made research part of many university teachers' contracts to engage in scholarship and research. This is clearly illustrated by the six language practitioners in Slimani-Rolls and Kiely (2018) whose university sustained their efforts to engage in PR and whose narratives attest to the profound impact that their CPD using EP has had on their professional lives.

References

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