

# TEACHERS RESEARCH!

**Edited by  
Deborah Bullock and Richard Smith**



**Edited by  
Deborah Bullock  
Richard Smith**

# TEACHERS RESEARCH!



# TEACHERS RESEARCH!

**Edited by  
Deborah Bullock and Richard Smith**



# Teachers Research!

**Edited by Deborah Bullock and Richard Smith**

IATEFL Research Special Interest Group



## Contents

**Teachers Research!**  
**Edited by Deborah Bullock and Richard Smith**

Published by IATEFL, No 2–3 The Foundry Business Park, Seager Road, Faversham, Kent  
 ME13 7F, UK  
 Authors of the individual chapters retain copyright over their work.

ISBN 978-1-901095-72-2

Published as a collected volume in 2015  
 Edited by Deborah Bullock and Richard Smith  
 Cover: Photograph of a poster by Katie Moran  
 Book layout by Şerikan Kara serikankara@gmail.com

The International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language was founded  
 in 1967. Registered as a charity (1090853) and registered as a company in England  
 (2531041).  
 For further information about IATEFL, please see the IATEFL website <http://iatefl.org>  
 For further information about the Research Special Interest Group, please see the ReSIG  
 website <http://resig.iatefl.org>



<b>The concept, and spirit, of ‘Teachers Research!’ .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<i>Richard Smith</i>	
<b>Introducing: A new kind of book for teacher-research .....</b>	<b>13</b>
<i>Deborah Bullock and Richard Smith</i>	
<b>1. Exploring ways to develop students’ oral fluency using technology.....</b>	<b>19</b>
<i>Jessica Cobley and Becky Steven</i>	
<b>2. The IDCA model: Creating a balance between examination- tionoriented activities and meaningful language learning.....</b>	<b>25</b>
<i>Cynthia C. James</i>	
<b>3. Outside the comfort zone: An experiment in group argumentative writing .....</b>	<b>33</b>
<i>Elena Ončevska Ager</i>	
<b>4. Attributions to success and failure in learning English at the Universidad de la Frontera, Temuco, Chile .....</b>	<b>39</b>
<i>Oriana Onate</i>	
<b>5. Preparing students for an academic presentation: Maximising class time .....</b>	<b>45</b>
<i>Akile Nazim</i>	
<b>6. Exploratory Practice: Investigating my own classroom pedagogy.....</b>	<b>51</b>
<i>Yasmin Dar</i>	
<b>7. Exploratory/action research to improve oral presentations with French engineering students .....</b>	<b>57</b>
<i>Katie Moran</i>	

8. Exploratory practice in initial teacher education: Working collaboratively for understandings ..... 65

*Inés Kayon de Miller, Thelma Christina Ribeiro Côrtes,  
Ana Flora Alves de Oliveira and Walewska Gomes Braga*

9. Some issues in practitioner-research ..... 73

*Ana Inés Salvi*

Coda: General Discussion at Teachers Research! ..... 77

*Deborah Bullock*

## *The concept, and spirit, of 'Teachers Research!'*

*Richard Smith*

'Teachers Research!' (henceforth, 'TR!') was a day-long IATEFL<sup>1</sup> Pre-conference Event on 01 April 2014 involving poster presentations of teacher-research; this evolved into a multi-media website providing a record of the day; now TR! is this book, and, as I write this at the beginning of June 2015, it will soon be a two-day conference in Izmir, Turkey, with its own follow-ups.

In short, TR! is developing as a 'concept' and with a 'spirit' that I'd like to try to capture provisionally here, not only to provide context for this book, but also as a possible reference point for those who'll be taking the process forward from now on.

**Event:** Teachers Research!  
(IATEFL Research SIG Pre-Conference Event)  
**Date:** 01 April 2014  
**Place:** Harrogate, UK  
**Billed as:** 'A special participant-centred day dedicated to research *by* teachers *for* teachers'  
**Programme:** [here](#)  
**Participants:** around 60 people

**Multimedia website:** *Teachers Research!: Posters, Talks, Discussions*  
**URL:** <http://resig.weebly.com/teachers-research-1-april-2014.html>  
**Compilers:** R. Smith with D. Xerri, Y. Dar & A. Inés Salvi  
**Publication date:** April–May 2014  
**Contents:** Abstracts of 01 April 2014 presentations; photographs of posters; video-recorded presentations; video-recorded discussions.

<sup>1</sup> IATEFL is the International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language. IATEFL has 15 Special Interest Groups (SIGs), one of which is the Research SIG. Members of the SIG receive our publication *ELT Research* twice a year, have access to scholarships, and have reduced rate admission to our events. However, non-members can also access various free resources via the SIG's website (<http://resig.weebly.com/resources.html>) and can participate in our social networking: <http://resig.weebly.com/social-networks.html>).

**This book:** *Teachers Research!*

**Format:** E-book

**Editors:** D. Bullock & R. Smith

**Publisher:** IATEFL

**Date of publication:** June 2015

**Contents:** Nine 'stories' of teacher-research derived from 01 April 2014 event, written in reader-friendly style, with photographs.

**Conference:** Teachers Research! IATEFL Research SIG Annual International Conference

**Dates:** 18-19 June 2015

**Place:** Gediz University, Izmir, Turkey

**Programme:** [here](#)

**Participants:** 150 people expected

## Starting principles

The best place to start *is* with the 2014 TR! event – in particular, with how and why it was organised as an innovative participant-centred event under the slogan 'Research *by* teachers *for* teachers'. Some of the practical decisions we took and the reasons for them are listed below.

Firstly, though, a few notes about key terms and 'principles':

### *'Teachers Research!'*

As some readers will recognise, this title references the Teachers Develop Teachers Research (TDTR) series of six conferences jointly organised by IATEFL's Teacher Development and Research SIGs from 1992 to 2005. After 2005 it proved difficult for the SIGs to organise a further full-blown conference together – however, when major attention in the Research SIG was again shifting to *teacher*-research (2011 onwards), it seemed appropriate to organise a relatively small-scale event to enable teachers to report on their research and its effects. I suggested 'Teachers Research' (the exclamation mark came later) as the title for our independent event rather than 'TDTR', since the latter series had lapsed for so long, but I hoped that the event would recapture some of the spirit of the early years of TDTR while innovating in new directions.

### *'Participant-centred'*

One way I hoped we could innovate was by placing the focus firmly on teachers' own experiences of teacher-research rather than on ideas or findings *about* teacher-research from academic experts. My experience in the JALT Learner Development SIG and IATEFL Learner Autonomy SIG – where I had been involved in previous attempts to get away from an 'outside expert focus' – influenced me in this direction (cf. Barfield and Smith 1999). Autonomy-oriented practice does not at all mean 'getting rid of' relevant expertise, however. Indeed, we wished to invite back Dick Allwright and Anne Burns, who had both facilitated successful workshops for us in 2013, this time in a role as critical friends rather than as leaders.

### *'Research by teachers for teachers'*

The emphasis on *for teachers* in this slogan was, firstly, intended to push back an increasingly dominant idea that academic quality criteria should necessarily be applied to teacher-research – instead, the quality of teacher and learner development involved might be just as important. In this respect, it was gratifying later to read Julian Edge's words, as principal founder of the TDTR series, about what kind of presentation he would favour at the then-upcoming first TDTR conference:

There is one main criterion which a participant presentation should meet: it must be in the nature of a report on the speaker's experience of carrying out some investigation into his/her own teaching context, along with a statement of outcomes in terms of personal and/or professional development.

(Edge 1991: 17)

Secondly, the slogan challenged us to find new, relatively teacher-friendly and non-academic ways to *share* teacher-research, and – as we shall see – this was perhaps the major area in which we did manage to innovate, in concrete terms.

The day was planned and advertised, then, as 'a special, participant-centred day dedicated to research *by* teachers *for* teachers'. There was also to be 'supportive commentary from outside experts'.



The event was attended by around 60 people, and was structured around 19 short poster presentations – spread out over the day – accompanied by informal discussion, and commentary by Dick Allwright, Anne Burns and another friend of the SIG, Donald Freeman. There was also a general discussion of teacher-research, and group discussions of more specific themes at the end, including how to get started, and how to sustain and support teacher-research.

In line with the starting principles outlined above, the major innovative characteristics of the event and the individual rationales for them can be listed as follows:

### Eliciting participants' expectations / questions



The day began with an invitation to participants to write down and hand in their own questions and expectations for the day. This was to help participants feel the event was 'for them', from the outset. The facilitators and guest commentators could consult and attempt to take account of the participants' ideas as the day went on.

### Posters



Rather than powerpoint slides, we asked presenters to prepare posters. The rationale for this and for the way they would be used was given in the following instructions sent to presenters beforehand:

*The major aim is to create an atmosphere where more interaction through discussion can be encouraged so that presenters and audience can have more opportunity to voice their ideas and clarify the critical points they might have regarding your research.*

*We will be asking you not to use powerpoint slides but instead to talk in front of a poster. You will have one side of a poster board whose dimensions are 90cm (width) x 120cm – so, plenty of space, which you can use as you like. What we're envisaging is you and the others in your group talking from different corners of the room for 5 minutes each (no more!) in front of your poster. This will serve as a stimulus for audience members to come round and look at / discuss your posters with you for 30 to 45 minutes (this will be followed by plenary comments and questions). So, we'd suggest you don't need too much detailed information on your poster, which should be more like a stimulus for discussion than a 'full' presentation. Also, please don't think that you have to produce a multi-coloured, large, professionally produced (and potentially expensive) 'academic conference type' poster – we're encouraging a relatively informal atmosphere so you could even just produce some A4 and A3 sheets (coloured paper perhaps) and stick them on poster paper. The more photos / pictures, the more attractive your poster will be. We hope this gives you enough of a feel for what we're expecting but please do get in touch if you have any questions in the lead-up to the event!*

Posters were displayed in different parts of the room rather than all being at the front (in fact we had set up the chairs in circles, anyway, and did not use a projector or whiteboard, so the room had no 'front'!).

## Short presentations of teacher-research in front of posters



There were next seven different poster presentations, strictly limited to three minutes each, after which there was plenty of time for participants to move freely around the room, approach the posters of their interest and engage in conversations with presenters and other participants alike. This process was repeated twice, once before and once after a morning coffee break, making for a total of fourteen poster presentations before lunch. For the rationale of this way of managing affairs, see the instructions to presenters reproduced under 'Posters' above.

## Dialogue with invited commentators



The morning poster sessions were each rounded off with 10 minutes of commentary by Dick Allwright, Donald Freeman and Anne Burns. We asked them for impromptu commentary rather than prepared plenary inputs to keep the focus of the day on (validation of) participants' own experiences. Immediately after lunch we had a lively general discussion of issues in teacher-research. Originally this had been planned as a Q&A session with Anne, Dick and Donald (for participants' earlier written questions to feed into), but we all decided to drop this idea on the day to allow for a more general, less 'expert-centred' discussion. Anne, Dick and Donald sat among participants and a range of voices were heard as a result.

## Valuing teacher educator experiences



After the engaging general discussion, five experience-based poster presentations on *supporting* teacher-research were introduced and participants were invited to look at them and talk to their presenters and/or engage in group-based discussion of other themes they were interested in (below). We wished to include teacher educators in the event but wanted – unlike in the TDTR conferences I had myself attended (in 1999 and 2001), where academic-style presentations were dominant – to encourage reporting of teacher educators' experiences of research into their own practice not just 'objective' research findings.

## Group discussions



Anne, Dick and Donald facilitated group discussions around themes of interest to participants as revealed by initial written expectations – 'Getting started with teacher-research' (Anne), 'Exploratory Practice' (Dick) and 'General issues' (Donald). Thus, we attempted to be flexible in meeting participant needs and respectful in acknowledging the expert insights Anne, Dick and Donald could bring to bear.

## Feedback received

Reflections handed in by participants at the end of the day indicated that, among other aspects, some *highlights* had been:

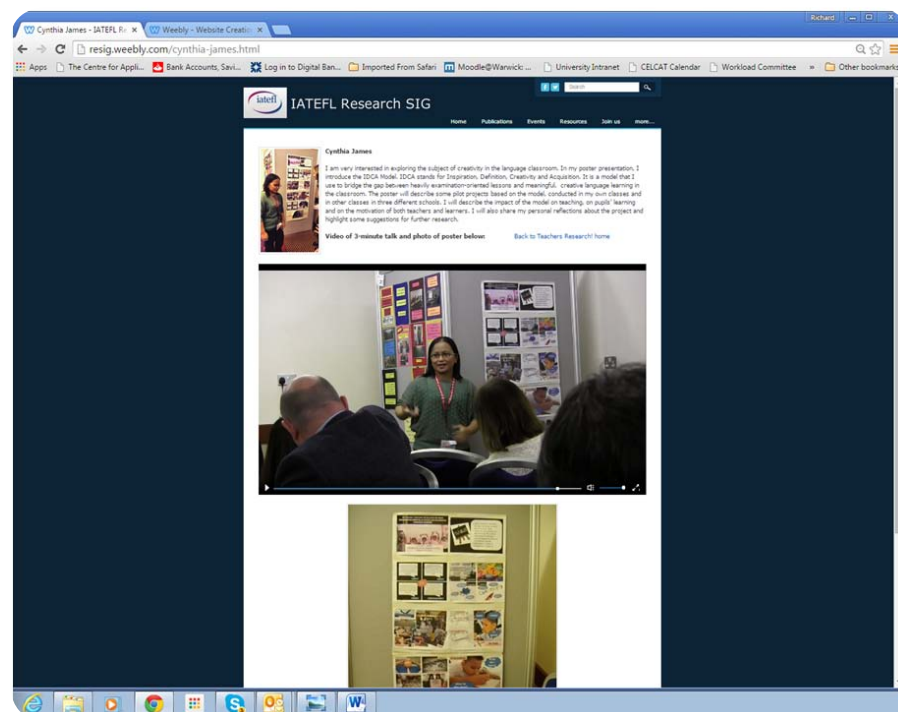
- the free-flow, participatory nature of the event;
- the varied and creative poster presentations;
- the opportunity to talk to our three commentators.

*What they had learned*, among other things, had been:

- ways of engaging in teacher-research;
- alternative, relatively informal, ways of sharing teacher-research; and
- that teacher-research is tightly intertwined with teaching and learning.



## Further sharing: multimedia website publication



With the permission of all participants, we video-recorded proceedings, and later made everything – videos, presentation abstracts and photographs of posters – available on a website: <http://resig.weebly.com/teachers-research-1-april-2014.html>. We advertised this via social media, so that SIG members unable to attend and others interested could share in the event, and we treated this as an innovative form of ‘publication’, giving an overall title to the compilation (*Teachers Research!: Posters, Talks, Discussions*). The video-recording, photography and construction of the website in addition to Tweeting and posting to Facebook during the day came from a desire to be inclusive by reaching out to the many who could not afford or find the time to attend the event itself. Also, there was a desire to push the boundaries of what might be considered ‘publication’, in other words, to see whether a multi-media style of oral presentation via website could start to be seen as a valid form of teacher-research dis-

semination. As will be explained in the next chapter, the present book pursues innovation for the same reasons, although in a different way.

## And so ...

There are two facets of TR! which are not treated above – this book, which is dealt with in the next chapter, and the June 2015 conference which shares the same name. In different ways, these, too, involve innovation based on the principles of inclusivity, interactivity, participant-centredness and exploration of new genres which have been highlighted above. Perhaps the common theme linking our TR! experiences so far is that innovation is needed – not for its own sake but to assure a better fit between medium (teacher development events and publications) and an espoused message relating to teacher autonomy which conventional forms of professional communication in fact so often seem to counter. Putting this another way, specifically in relation to teacher-research, if we believe that this is for the empowerment of teachers and their learners, then new approaches need to be found which do not subtly *disempower* them via top-down, ‘conventional’ expectations of what it means to do and share research.

Our next step is to see how the spirit of ‘TR!’ can be extended into our 2015 conference and the wider sharing that will ensue. One major challenge as we move into larger conference mode is how to (continue to) move away from an expert-centred / academic to a more participant-centred model which values experience and statements of outcomes ‘in terms of personal or professional development’ (Edge, cited above). In other words,

in relation to teacher conferences, one thing centrally at issue is: how can we become less dependent on experts, and more dependent on ourselves? [...] in practical terms, this entails the question: how can conference organizers enhance rather than (unintentionally) deny teacher-learner autonomy, providing better opportunities for shared decision-making, collegial sharing of experience, and reflection on experience [...]. In short, how can we begin to replace a top-down ‘applied science’ model with a ‘reflective model’ [...] in our attitudes to learning through conferences?

(Barfield and Smith 1999)

History, including the history of the TDTR conferences, shows that participant-centred innovations are not easy to sustain, and it is best to admit that they require an investment of more time, thought and energy than might be the case with formats which are 'received' and therefore not in need of conscious development.

I hope, nevertheless, that the explanations in this short chapter will help develop the kind of common understanding and collaborative commitment on the part of (potential) organisers which sustaining TR! into the future will require. At the time of writing, the signs are good that the June 2015 conference will be as great a success as the original April 2014 event was, and that similar, smaller events may even start to be held at workplaces across Turkey and beyond. This is very promising but, if the TR! spirit is to be kept alive, critical dialogue will need to continue with regard to how events and publications can best support teachers' rights to develop and inquire in their own ways, for their own ends and those of their students.

## References

- Barfield, A. and Smith, R. 1999. 'Teacher-learner autonomy: Ideas for conference and workshop design'. In *Proceedings of Teachers Develop Teachers Research (TDTR) 4* (CD-ROM). Whitstable, Kent: IATEFL.
- Edge, J. 1991. 'Teachers Develop Teachers Research'. *Research News: The Newsletter of the IATEFL Research SIG* 1 (June 1991): 17–18.

## *Introducing: A new kind of book for teacher-research*

***Deborah Bullock and Richard Smith***

The research stories included in this collection originated at the IATEFL Research SIG Pre-Conference Event (PCE) in April 2014 in Harrogate – Teachers Research! For reasons explained in the previous chapter, the event was advertised as 'a special participant-centred day dedicated to research *by* and *for* teachers'. About 60 people attended, coming together from quite a wide range of national and educational contexts.



After the event, we invited each of the poster presenters to prepare a written version of their story for publication. We had in mind a collection which would include photographs of classrooms and students, in addition to other visual support. We also intended the stories to be accessible to practitioners

and therefore much shorter than a conventional research report and written in a less formal style.

The concrete output we envisaged was for this to be an online / open-access publication in the first instance which would, primarily, be encouraging and interesting to other English teachers worldwide. In short, we wanted to innovate in producing a publication which would resonate well with the spirit of the day itself ('by teachers and for teachers'). This is perhaps best explained further by reproducing the guidelines we sent to presenters:

*We do not want to be prescriptive regarding what to include – we really appreciated the variety of the poster presentations. However, we understand that some of you may like some guidance or examples of what the stories could look like. So, we have a couple of suggestions for you:*

*One idea is [...] to transcribe what you actually said at the PCE. The 3-minute talk will probably produce 500–1000 words and be relatively informal/narrative in style – you could use this as a starting point. If your talk isn't on the [website] yet, it will be soon.*

*For those of you who were unable to attend the PCE (and for those of you who did), you may find it useful to take a look at this example of a teacher's story from a similar project/publication in Chile: <http://championteachers.weebly.com/andrea-roblés.html>*

These suggestions were influenced by ongoing experience within the British Council / Ministry of Education Chile Champion Teachers project (<http://championteachers.weebly.com/>) – in particular the way the poster presentations in January 2014 were audio- or video-recorded and then transcribed by teachers as a first step to producing written reports (see Smith, Connelly and Rebolledo 2014). The idea for this was Paula Rebolledo's, based on her experience of mentoring Andrea Roblés – the teacher whose resulting written story was provided as an example to our TR! participants in the guidelines above.

We don't know if any of the contributors did in fact begin to write by transcribing the video-recording of their three-minute presentation but we feel that overall a story-telling kind of style was achieved. Our editing interventions mainly focused on encouraging further reflection on the experiences described and on encouraging writers to find a personal 'voice'. In this we were inspired by the pioneering work of Andy Barfield and others in the

JALT Learner Development SIG in Japan (e.g. Barfield & Nix 2003 and subsequent publications), although they have experimented much further than us with collaborative reader responses and dialogic forms of writing. We were also building on a collective attempt within the Research SIG to deliberately encourage new genres of teacher-research presentation (<http://resig.weebly.com/teacher-research.html>). Partly to acknowledge this, but mainly to share good material more widely, we include here two re-edited versions of stories by Yasmin Dar and Katie Moran which first appeared in the SIG's regular publication, *ELT Research*.

We feel the collection has turned out to be innovative and, to date, quite unique particularly in its visual aspects and in the way it is integrated with a website where video-recordings of original poster presentations and additional material can be viewed. A teacher-friendly style of presentation – visually appealing, in non-academic format and featuring jargon-free writing – has, we hope, been achieved; we also hope the collection and its process of construction can serve as a possible model for future teacher-research publications.

\*\*\*\*\*

As the 'received' and relatively standardised genre of conventional research reporting has been, to varying degrees, left behind here, each of the nine stories has, we feel, turned out to have a unique feel about it. Apart from the various styles of writing and uses of visuals, the contexts referred to are very diverse: from Australia to Chile; from Brazil to Macedonia; from university students in France to primary learners in North Borneo. Methods include relatively traditional questionnaires, interviews, focus groups and surveys but also free writing, lesson studies and regular classroom activities. Explorations focus on diverse issues, for example developing oral fluency; balancing exam-oriented activities with fun and meaningful learning; improving collaborative academic writing; and attributions to success and failure.

However, underlying this variety, there does seem to be a common concern and approach. Each story starts with a puzzle or perceived issue related to learner needs. Indeed, generally learners are central characters, valued as active partners and co-contributors to knowledge and understanding. But it is when we look at the impact of these explorations that we find most inspiration. In seeking to understand learning, what each of these stories highlights is what can be learnt about good teaching. They are testimony

to the positive personal and professional impact of researching questions that arise from our practice and sharing what we find.

Interestingly, no fewer than three stories in this collection are concerned with the development of oral skills. The first story, by Jessica Cobley and Becky Steven (University of Western Australia), describes the trialling of web-based tools and mobile apps for formative feedback in the development of oral fluency. One thing that is interesting about their story is how they responded flexibly to student needs by refocusing and reformulating their original questions, which ultimately led to a more student-centred approach with an increased focus on learning to learn.

Two other stories focus on oral presentations. Katie Moran describes how she invited her engineering students at Efrei (Paris, France) to assess the value of in-class oral presentations, while Akile Nazim (UNSW Institute of Languages, Australia) explores how to better prepare students for oral presentations. Interestingly, both acknowledge their students as active partners and stress the importance of ‘drilling down’ further, i.e. genuinely exploring and understanding student perceptions and expectations.

Cynthia James’ account differs from the others in that it centres primarily on teachers and tackles an issue faced by many teachers of children worldwide – how to ensure learners succeed in important national exams while making learning fun and creative. Using a model and ‘lesson studies’ – classroom action research which entails collaborating, planning, delivering and evaluating lessons together – she attempts to help teachers tap into their own interests and passions in order to increase creativity in the classroom.

In ‘Outside the comfort zone: An experiment in group argumentative writing’ Elena Ončevska Ager (Ss Cyril and Methodius University, Republic of Macedonia) describes how she deliberately created a potentially stressful environment by ‘interfering’ with student cliques to increase exposure to approaches to academic thinking and writing. Students reported a number of significant learning moments from the intervention but what is notable here is that on her return from Harrogate, Elena decided to revisit these findings with her students by sharing her poster presentation, and in doing so was able to gather yet more insights.

On the other hand, seeking to build on knowledge gained from a *previous* study, Oriana Onate (Universidad de la Frontera, Temuco, Chile) explores

her students’ reflections on reasons for their perceived success or failure in learning English. Various factors are identified which have led Oriana to re-evaluate her approach to lesson planning and course design to better tailor content and approach to the needs and interests of her students.

The final three stories in this collection centre on the use and principles of Exploratory Practice (EP). Yasmin Dar (University of Leicester) succinctly explains the principles of EP in her rationale for taking this approach to her own ‘puzzle’ – why her EAP students do not take responsibility for learning outside the classroom. She clearly outlines how she applied the principles of EP at each stage of her exploration, from data collection through regular classroom activities to her description of findings immediately available and relevant to herself and her learners. Her story provides practitioners who may be new to EP with a very accessible and concise account of this approach in action.

In a similar manner, the only group story in this collection – ‘Exploratory practice in initial teacher education: Working collaboratively for understandings’ – also provides us with a practical example of how EP can be used to explore everyday classroom situations or events. This story begins with a rationale and account of how EP has been incorporated into the Teaching Practice element of the teacher education curriculum at the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro (PUC-Rio), Brazil, and then goes on to describe the development of an investigation carried out by a group of 7<sup>th</sup> grade students and the authors (Inés Kayon de Miller, Thelma Christina Ribeiro Côrtes, Ana Flora Alves de Oliveira and Walewska Gomes Braga). What is striking about this story is the nature of the puzzle – disrespect in the classroom or more specifically ‘name-calling’ – an issue which will resonate among many teachers. Also of interest is the manner in which language goals were integrated into the search for ‘understandings’. By identifying a ‘potentially exploitable pedagogic activity’, in this case drawing and discussing family trees, the authors were able to address the issue implicitly and seek to *understand* the behaviour.

The final story in this collection ‘Some issues in practitioner-research’ also makes reference to the use of Exploratory Practice, but the focus of this report is more on some issues *arising from* the author’s experiences. Ana Inés Salvi (Warwick University) compares two of her practitioner-



research experiences to raise a series of questions. She begins by puzzling about what distinguishes research from good practice, and what, then, research 'is'. Some central and related concerns raised are who should decide on what 'qualifies' as research, what consent and dissemination issues arise, and the need – reflected in the TR! event itself and addressed by this book and associated website as a whole – to diversify *genres* of research dissemination in order to cater for a 'larger and more heterogeneous group' [of researchers].

Overall, this collection of stories illustrates the extent to which engagement in practitioner-research can have positive effects on teachers and learners alike. We call what follows 'stories' because they are personal, unique and engaging. We use stories to teach, record history, explore new ideas, share experiences, build community, and express creativity. What stories also give us is something to hold up to the light and reflect on carefully. We sincerely hope that these stories will inspire *you* to shed light on the questions that arise in *your* practice and maybe one day to share what *you* find.

## References

- Barfield, A. & Nix, M. (eds.) 2003. *Autonomy You Ask!* Tokyo: JALT Learner Development SIG.
- Smith, R., Connelly, T. and Rebolledo, P. 2014. 'Teacher-research as continuing professional development: A project with Chilean secondary school teachers'. In Hayes, D. (ed.) *Innovations in the Continuing Professional Development of English Language Teachers*. London: The British Council, pp. 111–128.

# 1 *Exploring ways to develop students' oral fluency using technology*

**Jessica Coble and Becky Steven**

We are Jessica Coble and Becky Steven, teachers at the University of Western Australia Centre for English Language Teaching in Perth, Western Australia, and this is our action research story.

As teacher researchers we set out to solve a common problem found in many classrooms, which was that class course books, board games

'After I listened to my own recording, I tried to speak again more fluently and with better intonation and pronunciation.'

and role plays were not sufficient to develop our students' oral fluency, something which we were keen to help them improve. We also wanted to encourage

self-directed learning so we explored ways of using technology as a means of formative feedback for analysing and evaluating fluency. What we found were web-based tools and mobile apps that could help our students to set goals, provide formative feedback, and enable them to reflect on their own oral fluency development. The students who took part in our action research project were all at Intermediate (CEFR B1–B1+) level and studying General English.

During our first research cycle we involved our students in using mobile phone apps, students' voice recordings, a class wiki and an online pronunciation bank.

What we trialled included:

- A mobile application (*iCounterClick*) for teachers which measures students' speech rates by counting words.

- A mobile application (*AhCounter*) for students which enables them to count each other's non-lexical fillers (*ahs, ums and ers*), and interjections (*and, but, you know, like*).
- Weekly recordings of students' self-reflections.
- A pronunciation bank for analysing speech samples.



After the first action research cycle we reflected on what had helped most in developing our students' fluency. Firstly, we found that measuring and recording our students' speech rates by using the *iCounterClick* app to count the number of words spoken per minute made students more aware of their speech rates (too slow, too fast). Secondly, The *AhCounter* app,

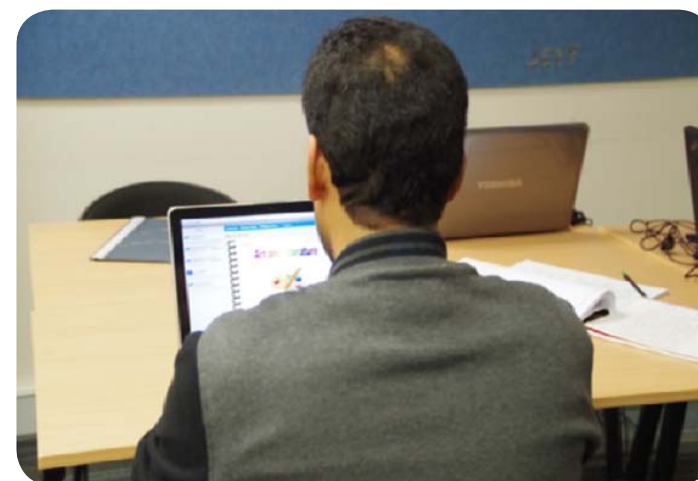
'I was very scary (sic) but now I'm comfortable'.

which students used to count non-lexical fillers and interjections, proved successful in that students found it engaging and an effective means of feedback. We observed that our students started to dis-

cover that their smart phones were not only extremely useful for measuring their partners' fluency development, but also for reflecting on their own fluency, through these activities. Most commented on how much they had noticed about their speaking from analysing and comparing their own weekly recordings. The online pronunciation bank the *Speech Accent Archive*, however, had shown limitations for targeting fluency so we decided to use the *IDEA accent archive* for highlighting features of different speakers' fluency.

Our first action research cycle had very much focussed on exploring technology that could be used to improve oral fluency; however, after

observation, we realised that our students did not know how to improve their own oral fluency and therefore reformulated our research focus towards exploring ways to develop a system for students to improve their



speaking fluency themselves. Firstly, we established clearer criteria for what fluent speech is by using the *IDEA accent archive*. Our students surprised us with their pre-existing knowledge of the metalanguage used when analysing the unscripted speech samples on the archive. We also continued with our use of counting words, non-lexical fillers and interjections,

'In my country the teacher just stands up at a whiteboard!'

wiki speaking exercises and weekly student recordings. What we observed was that these interventions became awareness-raising activities that fed forward to peer and self-evaluations of fluency

development within the class. We noticed that as a result of these activities, a lot of questions and discussion around discourse management was generated amongst our students.

While using these web-based tools and mobile apps, our students commented on how engaging the activities were compared to those in their own education systems, and several students expressed an interest in using some of our techniques and tools in the future. In terms of fluency,

'It was a good way to learn'.

we found that most students' speech rates had increased by up to 20 words per minute after one cycle of five weeks, and we noticed that the confidence of all students had increased by the end of the second cycle, even among those who had been anxious at the start.

The peer evaluation activity involving counting each other's non lexical fillers and interjections using the *AbCounter* app was very successful, and most students managed to monitor and correct their own use of *ums*, *ers* and *ahs* to a level that they were comfortable with. We were surprised at how readily they embraced self- evaluation and how they naturally fed information back to each other about their performance.



First trial

Student	1 <sup>st</sup> Attempt	4 <sup>th</sup> attempt
Student A	6	4
Student B	5	was too anxious
Student C	8	2
Student D	4	7
Student E	17	12
Student F	5	3
Student G	7	2
Student H	6	4

Second trial: One week later

Students	1 <sup>st</sup> Attempt	Final Attempt
Student A	7	2
Student B	3	0
Student C	2	0
Student D	7	0
Student E	8	7
Student F	5	2
Student G	6	4
Student H	6	4

Student I	5	4
Student J	4	2
Student K	6	3

Student I	6	4
Student J	5	3
Student K	5	2

**Table 1:** Non-lexical filler counts in a one minute speech

Our action research project has not just impacted our students, but has also had a positive wash back effect on other areas. Firstly, it has greatly influenced our teaching styles, which have become more student-centred and focused on students being more aware of their learning. The project has made us more aware of targeting fluency in a systematic way. We have dug deeper and looked at speech rates, non-lexical fillers and interjections, and setting more effective criteria to establish a more student-centred approach.

In our readings we couldn't find much on oral fluency, which challenged us to develop ways to address this problem. Secondly, as teachers, we embraced technology, found more tools to teach with and explore, and felt more comfortable using them. As a result of our research, our language centre invested heavily in more technology to support e-learning, and our teachers are beginning to explore ways to use students' speech samples.

Finally, we can see that our oral fluency activities can be put to good use in other areas, such as preparing for presentations, and preparing for IELTS, TOEFL and TOEIC speaking interviews.

In future research projects, we would like to further explore the benefits of other technology, in particular speech recognition technology, and also apps that measure students' word stress. We hope that our action research findings will help other teachers who want to work with oral fluency and encourage teachers to use more technologies in the classroom.

## Reference

Brown, B, 2012. 'Raising student awareness of pronunciation and exploring out-of-class approaches to pronunciation practice, *Research Notes* 48: 18–23.

## Acknowledgements

Special thanks to Professor Anne Burns and Katherine Brandon for their guidance and to English Australia and Cambridge English Language Assessment for their sponsorship and support on the 2013 Action Research in ELICOS programme. Thanks also go to the UWA Centre for English Language Teaching staff for their ongoing support. A fuller report has appeared in *Research Notes* 56 (June, 2014) and a review of the mobile applications trialled in our research first appeared in *English Australia Journal* 29/2 (2014).

## About the authors

**Jessica Coble** ([Jessica.Coble@uwa.edu.au](mailto:Jessica.Coble@uwa.edu.au)) is an ELICOS Teacher, University of Western Australia Centre for English Language Teaching, Perth. **Becky Steven** ([Becky.Steven@uwa.edu.au](mailto:Becky.Steven@uwa.edu.au)) is an ELICOS Senior Teacher, University of Western Australia Centre for English Language Teaching, Perth. Together they were winners of the 2013 English Australia Action Research in ELICOS programme award.

See Becky's and Jessica's Teachers Research! poster presentation here: <http://resig.weebly.com/becky-steven--jessica-coble.html>

# 2 *The IDCA model: Creating a balance between examination-oriented activities and meaningful language learning*

*Cynthia C. James*

## Context

I teach in a national primary school in Kunak, which is a small and quite remote place in North Borneo. I have been involved in examination preparation classes for the past nine years. The UPSR is a big national examination that all primary school students have to sit by the end of their sixth year of primary education. 'UPSR' stands for *Ujian Penilaian Sekolah Rendah* in Malay, which can be translated as Primary School Achievement Test in English. It is taken by all students in Malaysia by the end of the sixth year of primary school. Students can take a minimum of 5 subjects and a maximum of 7 subjects. English language is a compulsory subject for all students.

As a result, the Year 6 pupils in my school and my district have to spend most of their school hours doing examination drills. There seems to be too much emphasis on the examination-oriented activities and less creativity and fun in learning. My research is focused on creating a balance between examination-oriented activities and meaningful language learning in the Year 6 classroom.

## Methodology

In order to understand teachers' beliefs and views about UPSR, I developed a questionnaire and distributed it to 40 respondents in 15 different schools in Kunak. I also conducted Lesson Studies in three different schools to experiment with the IDCA Model that I have



developed. A lesson study is a 'highly specified form of classroom action research' that has been in use in Japan since the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Dudley 2011). In a lesson study, teachers work collaboratively to strengthen and refine a lesson (Easton 2009). The main aim of a lesson study is to improve instruction and advance students' learning (Halvorsen & Lund 2013). I also interviewed four teachers and a Language Officer (the person in charge of co-ordinating the language activities in the District Education Office).

## The IDCA Model

The IDCA Model is a model that I introduce to Year 6 teachers in my district. It stands for *inspiration, definition, creativity and acquisition*.

*Inspiration* is the part where I get the teachers to think about what inspires them and their students. They can discover the source of their inspirations by looking at their students' aptitudes as well as their own, their teaching styles and their students' learning styles, their personalities and interests, and their abilities.

*Definition* is the part where I get the teachers to study the examination items and identify the language areas that they test. Teachers have to identify the skills that they want their students to focus on. They have to think about the language issues that their students are dealing with, the skills that need to be taught or polished and the content that they want to deliver to their students.

*Creativity* is the part where I invite teachers to combine *inspiration* and *definition* and come up with creative ways to teach the examination items to their Year 6 students. After identifying and defining the issues and problems that their students are having with the examination items, teachers think about how they can tackle them and how they can make it interesting for the students.

*Acquisition*: Here, teachers conduct assessment on the students' learning as well as on their method of teaching. Does learning take place? Do they manage to solve the problem? What can they do to improve?

## Findings

Through the questionnaire, I discovered that more than 60% of the respondents agree that excellent UPSR results will benefit teachers. Teachers believe that excellent UPSR results will give them a sense of achievement and satisfaction. They also think that excellent results please the school administrators and prevent them from being blamed by the parents. 75% of the respondents believe that excellent UPSR results will benefit the students. They believe that with excellent results, students will be able to enrol into better secondary schools and will have more chance of getting scholarships. It will also boost the students' self-esteem.

I can conclude that many teachers agree that UPSR is important, and yet they are concerned about the lack of creativity in their classrooms. Here are some excerpts from the interviews with the teachers:

*Teaching UPSR classes makes me feel guilty all the time. I wish I had more time for more communicative activities, but no, I don't have time. We don't have time. (Teacher F)*

*I've always wanted to do something fun and creative. But I don't think my headmaster will like [it]. We have to focus on drilling, my students are very weak. (Teacher S)*

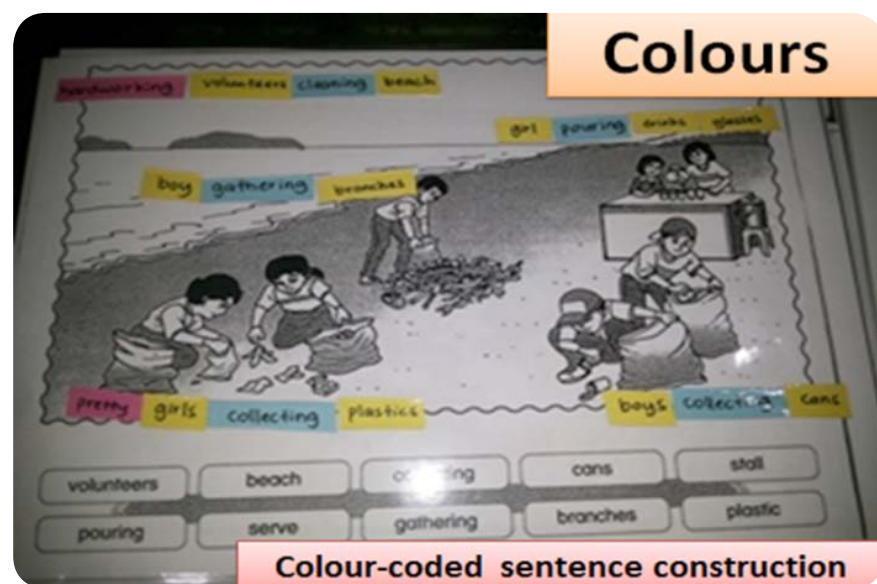
*Fun learning? For level 1, yes. But not for Level 2. Definitely not for Year 6 ... too much work, expectations are high. We are pressured. (Teacher C)*

## The intervention

With the collaboration of a few teachers and the Language Officer in my district, I conducted a 'UPSR Roadshow' where I got teachers in three different schools to try out the IDCA Model. The roadshow consisted of a series of visits to each of the schools involved in this research. In the first visit, I talked to the teachers and introduced the model to them. I shared some ideas on how the model can be implemented, based on my own experience. The main purpose of the first visit was to get the teachers to think about their passions and interests as well as their students'. The teachers tried to find out how these passions and interests could be translated into a lesson that would focus on one of the examination items.

The teachers were given the opportunity to try out the model through Lesson Studies that we conducted together. I collaborated with the teachers to plan, conduct and assess a lesson based on the IDCA Model. Throughout the roadshow, I conducted a total of three visits to School 1, five visits to School 2, and four visits to School 3. Here are brief summaries of what I found out on these visits:

In School 1, the teacher discovered that colours are what inspire her students. So, she developed what she calls a 'colour-coded sentence construction' technique to teach sentence construction to her students.



In school 2, the teacher uses a lot of hands-on activities. She believes that the students learn best when they are actively involved in activities that require them to make something, or do something with their hands.



The teacher in School 3 uses stories to teach narrative writing to her students, because her students told her that they love stories and they would like to have more stories in the classroom. She also uses a lot of songs in her teaching because music is what she is passionate about.



## The impact

After the UPSR Roadshow, I conducted another interview with the teachers involved. Here are some excerpts:

*I like the fact that the model emphasises what I like as much as what the students like. In order to inspire students, I have to inspire myself first. (Teacher C)*

*The colour-code approach works! I know now that my students are visual learners and they learn best when I use colours. Now even my weakest students can construct structurally correct sentences. (Teacher F)*

*We can't ignore UPSR, too many things are at stake. Yet, creativity in the classroom is important, too. .... using the model is one way we can bridge the gap.* (Language Officer)

*Creativity in the exam [classes] is not something impossible. I know that now.* (Teacher R)

The impact:

- Classrooms activities are no longer confined to repetitious drills.
- Teachers who use the model report a significant decrease in their need to depend on workbooks and worksheets.
- Students' test scores may improve and they are more interested in learning.
- Creativity in the classroom motivates both teachers and learners.

## Reflection

From the interviews and the Lesson Studies conducted, I can conclude that it is possible to bring creativity into the classroom while still aiming for good results in the examination. I also learned that when teachers bring passion and interests (their students' as well as their own) into the classroom, creativity soars. Another conclusion that I can derive from this project is that the best learning (and teaching) takes place when it is customised. Last but not least, when teachers and students are having fun in the classroom, it facilitates learning in more ways than one. Too often, teachers focus too much on making learning fun for their students and forget that it is important for *them* to have fun too. It is true that a great teacher inspires, but he/she has to be inspired first.

*If our students can't learn the way we teach, maybe we should teach the way they learn.* - Ignacio Estrada

*The best teachers...are the ones who are able to think outside the box and put themselves in the mind-set of the children they teach.*  
- Ron Clark

## References

- Dudley, Pete. 2011. *Lesson Study: A Handbook*. Online: <http://lessonstudy.co.uk/lesson-study-a-handbook/>
- Easton, L.B. 2009. *An Introduction to Lesson Study*. Florida and the Islands Regional Comprehensive Centre (ETS) [sic]. Online: <http://www.ets.org/flicc/pdf/Nov4LessonStudyPacketOne.pdf>
- Halvorsen, A.-L. & Kelser Lund, A. 2013. 'Lesson study and history education'. *The Social Studies*. 104/3: 123–129.

## About the author

**Cynthia C. James** ([cindyjbj79@yahoo.com](mailto:cindyjbj79@yahoo.com)) is a primary school English teacher in Sabah (North Borneo), Malaysia. She taught in the rural areas on the east coast of Sabah for ten years before moving to the state capital, Kota Kinabalu, in 2015. She uses her blog 'Beyond Chalk & Talk' (<http://cindyjbj79.blogspot.com>) as her primary platform to share creative classroom ideas with other teachers in her state. Cynthia was the winner of Onestopenglish's 'Creativity in the Classroom' IATEFL Scholarship in 2014.

See Cynthia's Teachers Research! poster presentation here: <http://resig.weebly.com/cynthia-james.html>

# 3 *Outside the comfort zone: An experiment in group argumentative writing*

*Elena Ončevska Ager*

## **Problem**

It all started when I noticed that my students tended to form cliques when working with their friends on academic writing tasks which required group work. This cliquing seemed to negatively impact both the class dynamics and the students' academic work (e.g. similar writing problems recurred among the members of a clique). To get my students exposed to a wider repertoire of approaches to academic writing away from their cliques, I set out to conduct an informal, week-long classroom writing experiment.

## **The experiment**

To put this experiment in context, my students were third-year English language majors studying at the Ss Cyril and Methodius University in the Republic of Macedonia. All of them were at the time attending my academic writing classes, which were designed to support them to develop an argument in writing while citing relevant sources. My students first read two short academic journal contributions, Thornbury (2001) and Clemente (2001), both on the topic of the teacher's roles, however espousing conflicting views on the subject. The students were asked to get into small groups of three to four, taking care to work with peers they had never worked with before. They were then asked to (a) discuss their views on the teacher's roles in the EFL class, (b) agree on a group opinion and (c) collaboratively develop an argument by writing a group mini-essay. I risked being seen as interfering with their friendship patterns, which often function as a powerful source of motivation and potentially jeopardising the humanist principles of learning in a relaxed environment. Nevertheless,

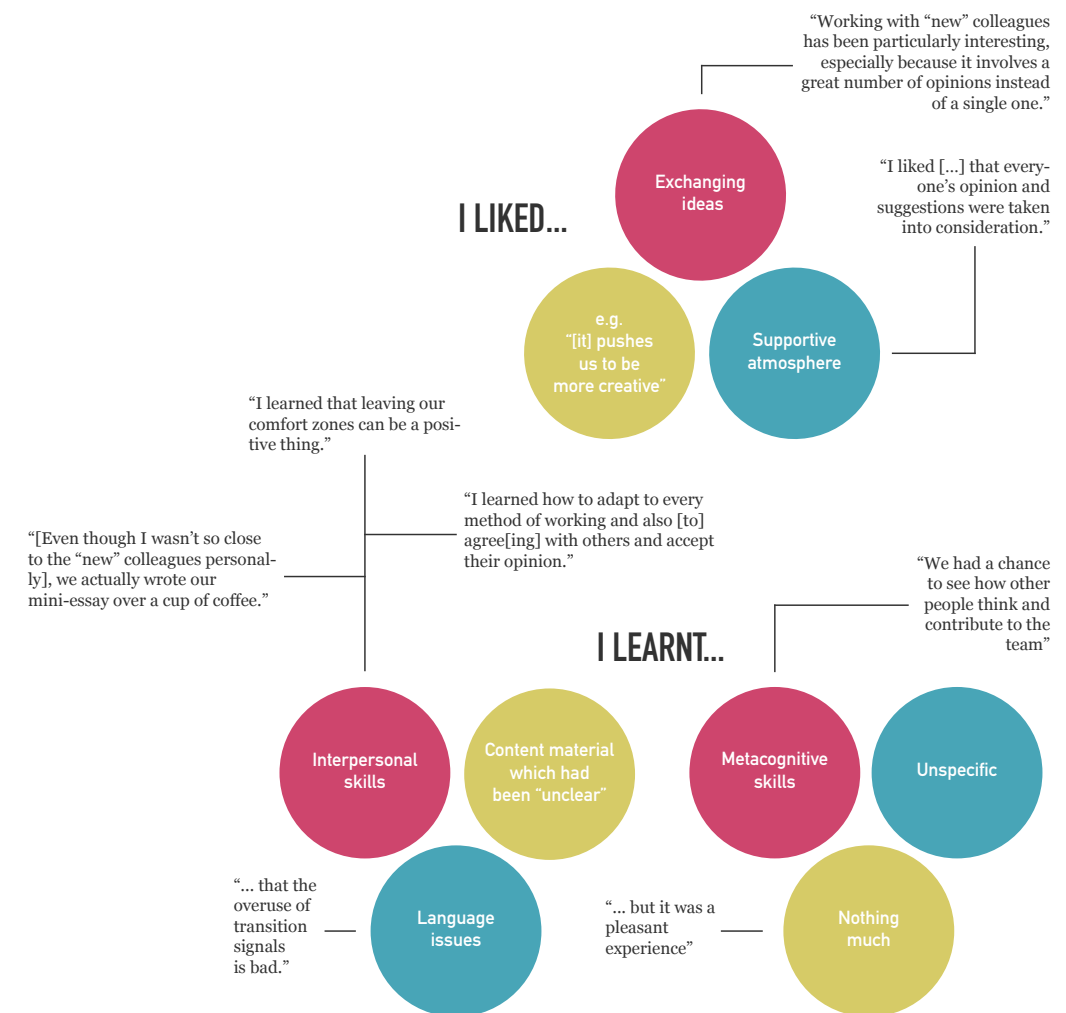


I set out to explore the value of getting students to work outside their comfort zone, that is, in a potentially stressful environment, for the sake of additional exposure to ‘new’ approaches to academic thinking, learning and writing. In other words, I attempted to explore the value of (potentially) stressing students into a (new) ‘harmony’ – with their colleagues and with the course material.

## Findings

Once the experiment was over, the students anonymously reflected in writing on two open-ended questions: (1) ‘How did you find working with your “new” colleagues?’ and (2) ‘What did you learn from that experience?’. I then analysed their answers by coding and seeing what the main categories were that emerged. It transpired that out of the 30 students involved in the experiment, the majority (23) reported positive impressions, 5 students reported negative impressions, one student had mixed feelings on the topic and one student did not provide any answers.

The students who welcomed the initiative to work with ‘new’ colleagues on their writing tasks reported appreciating: (a) the opportunity to exchange ideas with colleagues whose viewpoints were novel to them and (b) the supportive atmosphere, which according to one of the students ‘push[ed] [them] to be creative’. The students reported a number of learning moments related to: (a) language issues, (b) content material which had previously not been sufficiently clear, (c) metacognitive skills, that is, ‘how other people think and contribute to the team’, (d) interpersonal skills, such as learning to negotiate a group opinion and establishing team rapport, for instance by ‘actually writ[ing] our mini-essay over a cup of coffee’ (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1**

The students who remained sceptical about the learning potential of the proposed collaborative writing experiment supported their reservation with: (a) feeling embarrassed to speak their mind in the presence of peers who were not their friends, (b) not being able to reach an agreement, (c) peers depending on others to do the job for them, (d) struggling with logistical issues, such as arranging a date/time/place to meet up and (e) not having a leader, which some referred to as being ‘challenging’. These students felt they had not learnt much during this experience (see Figure 2).

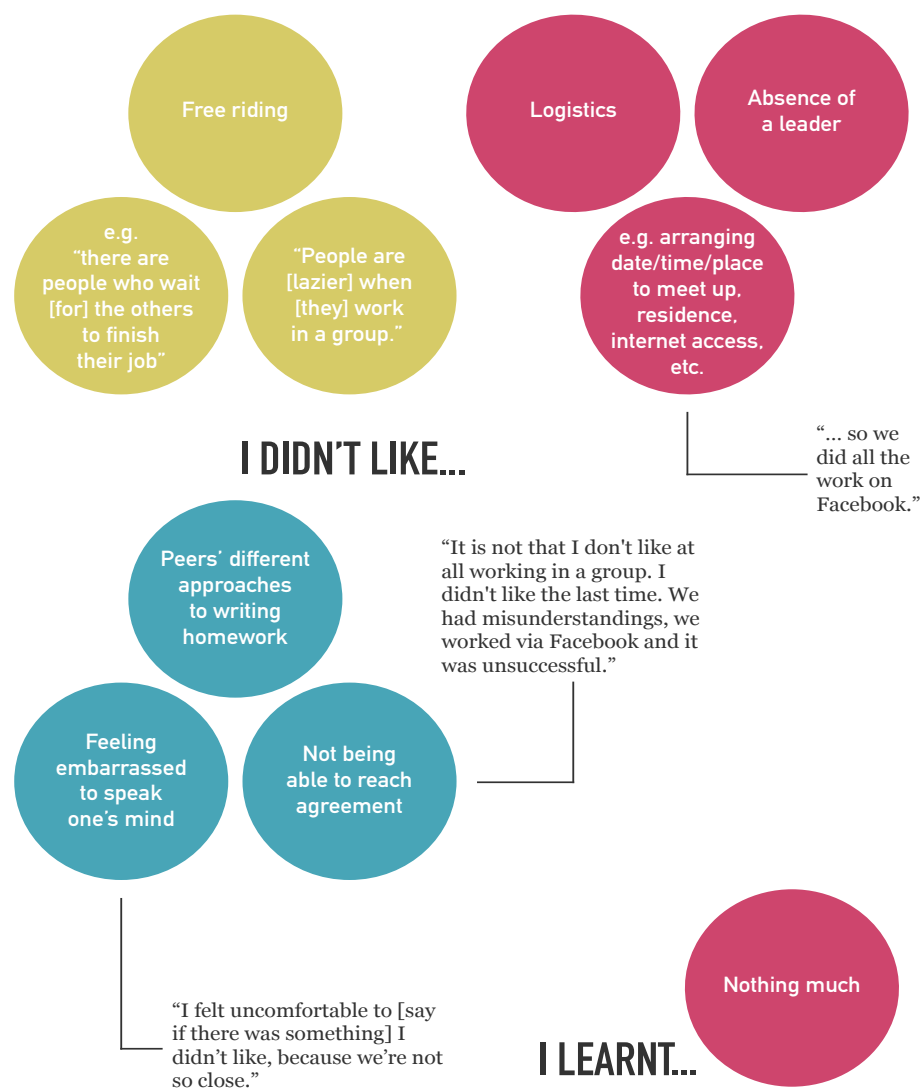


Figure 2

## Revisiting the experiment: lessons to be learnt

I am a firm believer in the potential of informal action research to improve the rapport in the classroom because it contains at its heart a story with the students as its main characters. Therefore, upon my return from the Harrogate conference I presented the poster I had used (Figure 1 above) to my students, asking them to anonymously put on paper anything that stood out for them from my summary of findings. The students were generally glad that most of their peers enjoyed the collaborative learning experience and interpreted it as a feature of a bonded/bonding group. Others acknowledged the arguments of the students who did not quite enjoy the experience as being 'bulletproof' and definitely something to be previously discussed, if the experiment was to be repeated. Yet others admitted that even though they had reported overall positive impressions, they *did* experience some of the reported drawbacks and were able to connect to those who found the experiment not particularly enjoyable. Personally, I was glad to see some of the students questioning the 'absence of a leader' argument. Namely, they suggested that when working in a team there is always at least one member who spontaneously (if not formally) takes over the role of a leader and draws the team towards the successful completion of the project at hand. Indeed, such student initiative can be seen as an important step away from teacher-dependence and towards interdependence, the final aim being achieving learner independence.

## Implications for the collaborative writing classroom

Looking back on this experiment myself, it has certainly made it possible for some important classroom issues to surface, some of which I had not anticipated (for instance, the concern with absence of a leader). This initially casual experiment has been truly educational for me as it has enabled me to more confidently suggest (in note form) the following directions for the improvement of my own and, potentially, others' academic writing instruction if/when organised along similar, collaborative lines:

- Prior to the start of the project, students to brainstorm potential benefits and problems of engaging in a mixed group experiment, possibly by discussing a past (poster) summary of findings

- Students to be trained in basic group dynamics issues – e.g. group psychology, conflict resolution, etc.
- Collaborative experiment to stretch over a longer period of time (e.g. a month)
- Students to document their progress and thoughts for the duration of the experiment by keeping log books
- Log books to be complemented by teacher—student conferencing to ensure all groups are on task and not experiencing difficulties
- Summary of the project to be prepared (by teacher, students or by both) in the format of a poster, Powerpoint presentation, book, etc. for class bonding and as a record for future training sessions with students.

## References

- Thornbury, S. (2001). 'The unbearable lightness of EFL'. *ELT Journal*. 55/4: 391–396.
- Clemente, A. (2001). 'On Thornbury's 'unbearable lightness''. *ELT Journal*. 55/4: 397–402.

## About the author

**Elena Ončevska Ager** ([elena.oncevska@flf.ukim.edu.mk](mailto:elena.oncevska@flf.ukim.edu.mk)) is an EFL educator at the Ss Cyril and Methodius University (UKIM) in Skopje, Republic of Macedonia, and a teacher trainer. At UKIM she teaches general and academic English as well as teaching methodology modules. She holds an MA in Education from the University of Leeds (UK) and a PhD in Applied Linguistics (teacher education) from UKIM. Her research interests also include group dynamics, motivation, learner autonomy, e-learning and language assessment.

See Elena's Teachers Research! poster presentation here: <http://resig.weebly.com/elena-oncevska.html>

## 4 *Attributions to success and failure in learning English at the Universidad de la Frontera, Temuco, Chile*

*Oriana Onate*

Having taught English as a foreign language in college for twenty years, a prevailing question of mine has been why my students are not able to improve their English levels in spite of remedial help, plenty of available online resources and the need to learn a language, which will enhance their professional opportunities. A previous study<sup>1</sup> has led me to see motivation as one of the determining factors for my students' learning English.

In order to gather more information on the problem, I asked thirty students from four different classes to report the reasons why they think they had succeeded or failed in learning English prior to entering college.

I gave students a survey which was divided into two parts:

1. Personal Information: gender, age, program, number of years practising English, practice frequency (hours a week)
2. Students were asked to write four reasons for their success and four reasons for their failure in studying English by ranking them in order of importance.

I invited my students to complete the survey and sign the consent form.

This exploratory survey was given to a total of 102 students; however, the data presented here corresponds only to the thirty students who were in the classes I taught.

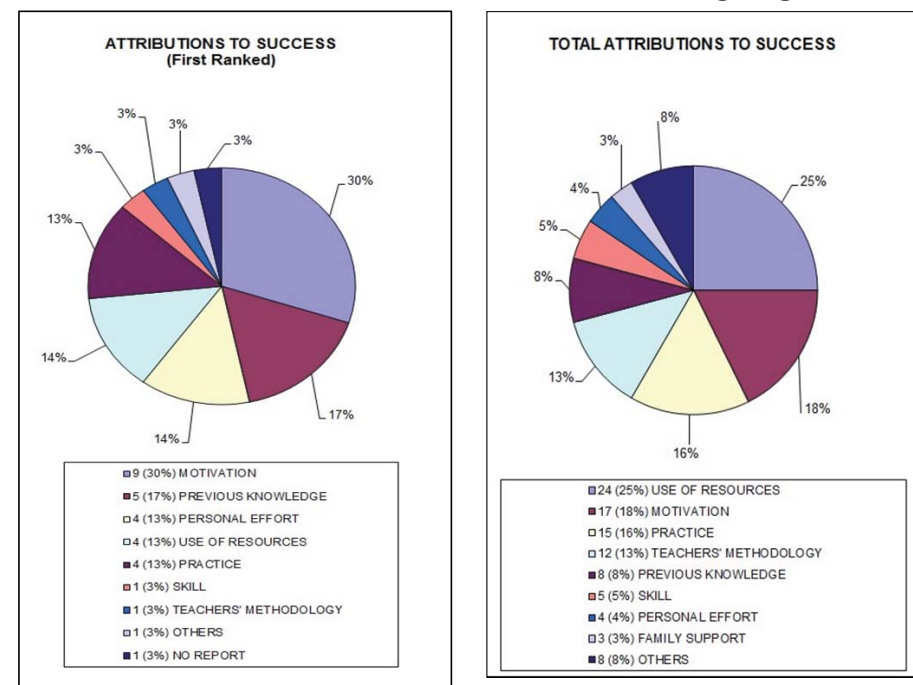
<sup>1</sup> *Factores de los estudiantes de la Universidad de La Frontera de Temuco que inciden en el Producto de la Actividad Curricular Inglés bajo un Programa Flexible Segundo Semestre 2009*. Thesis for Master Degree in University Pedagogy and Higher Education. Universidad Mayor. Temuco. Chile. 2010.



- *Class 1* consisted of six students (4 juniors and 2 seniors) completing the Compulsory Intermediate Level Course, General English. Four students were studying Nursing, Social Work, Biotechnology, and Education with a specialty in Mathematics, respectively. The other two were studying Education with a specialty in Science. Students attended three one-hour lessons per week and ranged in age from 21 to 24. The class was made up of one male student and five female students.
- *Class 2* consisted of seven students repeating Elementary English, a course required for the English-Teacher Education Program. They attended one two-hour lesson per week that focused mainly on Writing. The students ranged in age from 18 to 26 and there was one male and seven female students.
- *Class 3* consisted of ten sophomores taking an elective course called Pre-intermediate Business English. Seven of them studied Engineering, two of the students studied majors related to health and there was one Education major specializing in Spanish Language and Communication. They had three one-hour lessons a week. The 8 male and 2 female students ranged in age from 18 to 23.
- *Class 4* was composed of seven senior students taking an elective called Intermediate Business English. They were all studying various Engineering majors. They had three one-hour lessons per week. The students ranged in age from 22 to 25, and there were six male students and one female student.

Once all the surveys had been given, data was entered in a grid for analysis. The results are shown on the following two pages:

## What has contributed to students' success in learning English?



**Figure 1**  
The ranking of the N° 1 attributions to success from the 30-student sample. One student did not report any success when learning English.

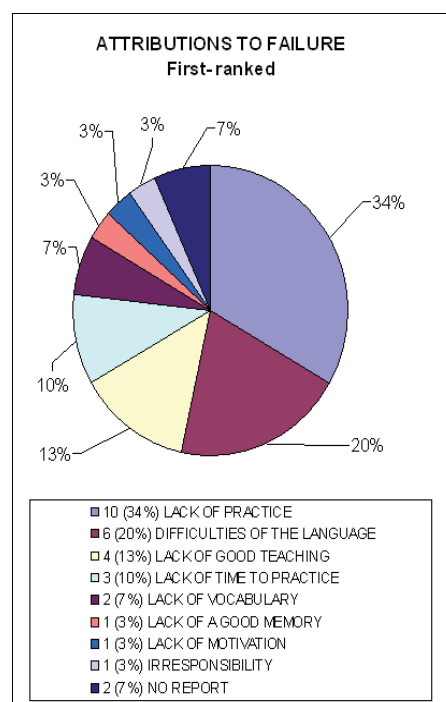
**Figure 2**  
Total attributions to success condensed into eight categories. A total of 96 statements were recorded and categorized into 8 attributions. The other reasons mentioned included need and accessibility (each x 2), evaluated reading, importance, travelling abroad and a good memory (each x 1).

'Use of resources' in Figure 2 includes:

Listening to music	9
Watching TV/movies	8
Internet	2
Video games	2
Reading (books/News)	3

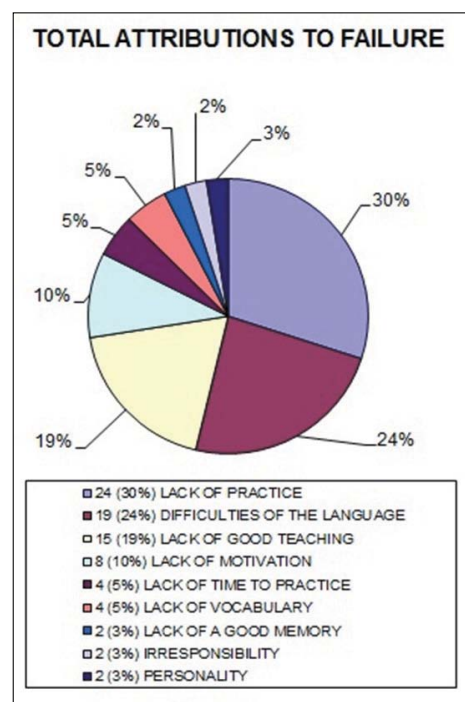


## What has prevented some students from learning English?



**Figure 3**

The reported N° 1 reasons for failure, ranking from the most to the least frequent. Two students did not report reasons for failure. These two students were successful sophomores.



**Figure 4**

The frequency of the total attributions to failure reported by the sample of 30 students, summarized into 9 categories.

## Reflections

Although 'Use of resources' ranks number 1 for success overall, it was interesting for me to see that only successful learners mentioned it as a first choice reason for success. I assume that these students learned English as a consequence of seeking entertainment and/or professional knowledge via available resources (music, books, Internet, etc.), this being their prime motivation but with English being helpful (instrumental) in achieving their goals (Classes 3 & 4).

I found that only successful students and, among them the sophomores, mention previous experience (good teaching and teachers at school) as having been a factor in their success (Classes 3 & 4), while successful seniors attribute their success to the fact that they practise and have made use of available resources, as well as the fact that they feel motivated to learn (Class 4).

Less successful students attribute success to personal effort and failure to the difficulties of the English language: grammar, pronunciation and spelling (Class 1).

I was surprised that when successful students (sophomores and seniors) were asked about failure, they never blamed the difficulties of the English language but lack of practice, lack of time to study or lack of importance given to English either at elementary school or high school, in addition to ineffective teaching (Classes 3 & 4).

Nine out of the thirty students surveyed were majoring in Education; however, only one considered teaching methodology as their first choice reason for success. When giving reasons for failure, students following the English Teacher Education major reported a lack of English language background, which they attributed to low quality teaching at school. However, if we review the second, third and fourth ranked options they tend to be more critical of themselves, mentioning irresponsibility and lack of effort in their study as causes of their failure, perhaps due to the knowledge of linguistics they acquired during their first semester in college (Class 2).

Since I taught these four groups of college students for sixteen weeks, I can say that successful English learners were motivated to learn because

they wanted to access entertainment and knowledge; they practised the language and had good teaching or teachers at school. On the other hand, less successful students attribute success to personal effort, and failure to the difficulties of the language and lack of previous knowledge.

I confirmed that motivation and need are instrumental to success when learning English. Therefore, as a college teacher, I became even more determined to use methodologies which expose my students to meaningful contents and topics, in the scope of their fields of study, so that students feel they are not only learning English but also learning *through* English. My previous and present research has confirmed for me that good teaching should create the need to learn by means of challenging and significant activities which, in turn, will activate motivation and thereby create an effective learning setting.

From this piece of research I have learnt that I must make an extra effort to tailor my teaching to what my students really want and need to learn. I have been gathering more information on my students' programs and their needs as learners to design new courses and plan my lessons. I hope to be able to say that my students have improved their level of English because I have motivated them to do so.

## Acknowledgment

I thank Dirección de Investigación, Universidad de La Frontera, for funding the DIUFRO13-0028 Project and allowing me to present the findings from my classes.

## About the author

**Oriana Onate** ([orianaonate@gmail.com](mailto:orianaonate@gmail.com)) works at the Universidad de La Frontera, Temuco, Chile. She has taught English as a foreign language at primary, secondary and tertiary levels. She has been involved in English for Specific Purposes for 30 years, mainly in business and dentistry. Her research has focused on finding reasons for the low levels of English in her region, with motivation being her main concern until now.

See Oriana's Teachers Research! poster presentation here: <http://resig.weebly.com/oriana-onate.html>

# 5 *Preparing students for an academic presentation: Maximising class time*

*Akile Nazim*

## Introduction

At UNSW Institute of Languages, being able to successfully deliver a presentation is a fundamental component of tertiary studies. Moreover, in order to progress to undergraduate or post-graduate courses, students are assessed on such skills and need to succeed. This action research project aimed to address how teachers can better assist students to prepare for the oral academic presentation assessment within a restricted time frame.

## Background

The study included 57 mixed-nationality English for Academic Purpose (EAP) students who were at the CEFR B1/B2 borderline level. These students were not quite at the English proficiency standard for a direct entry university pathway course, and were therefore placed in an intermediate EAP course for five (Module A) to ten weeks (Modules A & B), to raise their proficiency in all macro skill areas to a B2 level. All assessment tasks took place in Module B. The oral presentation assessment task is com-



pleted in week four, so students have six hours of classroom input before they are assessed.

## Changes in practice

The action research was divided into four stages:

1. conducting focus groups and surveys with current and former teachers and students
2. rewriting the course material
3. trialling new course material
4. evaluating the new course material.

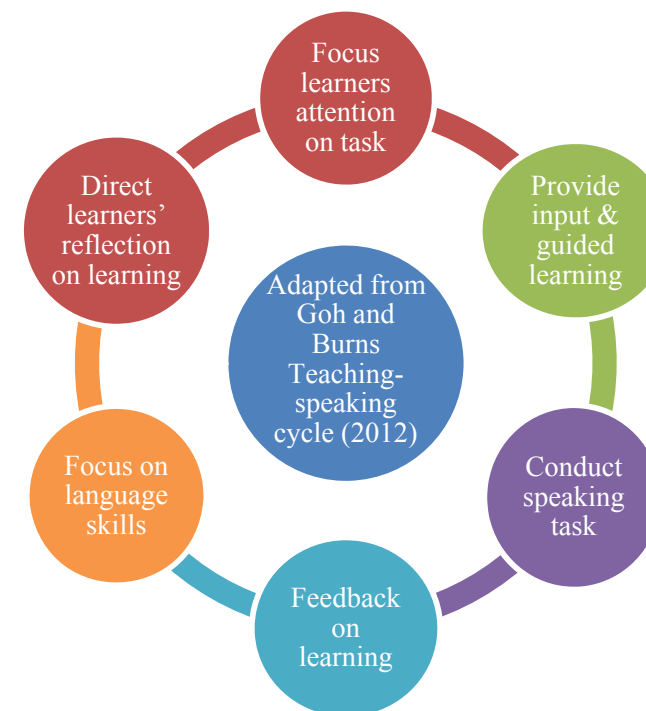
The results from the focus groups and surveys highlighted a lack of a) formative feedback and b) in-class practice.

For feedback to function as feed forward and for the feedback itself to be beneficial to learners, three main areas need to be addressed:

- Where am I going?
- How am I going?
- Where to next? (Sadler 2010; Hattie and Timperley 2007).

Through the incorporation of these three questions, we hoped that learners would have a clear concept of what their goal was, and an understanding of their level of performance and of what actions were required in order to achieve the intended goal.

To provide students with opportunities to practise presenting and receiving feedback which would ultimately function as feed forward, the following six-stage cycle was adapted from the teaching speaking cycle as advocated by Goh and Burns (2012: 151–168).



*Figure 1: Six-stage cycle*

Figure 1 shows how the six-stage cycle was implemented into the course material. Over the three weeks, each two hour block was divided into practice and input. During this period, students had the opportunity to present in front of the class and receive feedback each week. Students presented different stages of what would be their final assessed presentation. Finally, students were asked to reflect on the feedback they received and an aspect of the input covered in class by answering three to four questions each week.

	Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4
Practice	2 min presentation – <i>Any topic</i>  Feedback – general (written / verbal)	2 min presentation – <i>Introduction</i>  Feedback on – clear topic/content, timing and body language (written / verbal)	2 min presentation – <i>Body</i>  Feedback on – voice, pronunciation & language (written / verbal)	Final Assessment
Input	Explore assessment task, criteria, sample genre and introduction.  Self-reflection	Explore stages of a presentation, focusing on body; Signposting / useful language.  Self-reflection	How to facilitate a discussion; Using voice.  Self-reflection	

**Table 1:** Implementation of six-stage cycle

## Responses

The students' responses, both qualitative and quantitative, were positive and provided us with good insight into how students felt about the new course material and their individual progress. When asked whether the six hours were used efficiently to prepare them for their final presentation, 44% of the students strongly agreed while 54% agreed and only 2% disagreed.

Three main areas were commented on. Firstly, receiving regular formative feedback was integral to the students' perception of progress, as they were able to observe the changes in their weekly performance. Secondly, a majority of the students felt that their confidence had improved, with many students expressing that they were no longer nervous while presenting in English in front of a class. Thirdly, students stated that they

had a good understanding of the assessment task requirements and this was mainly due to the fact that each lesson focused on a particular stage of their presentation.

## Conclusion

To conclude, in order to best prepare students for an academic oral presentation assessment within a restricted timeframe, we found it beneficial for the material to include: scaffolded course material which raises metacognitive awareness of the assessment task and language features; implementation of feedback as feed forward through short in class presentations; and an emphasis on self-reflection and evaluation.

This action research journey has been and still continues to be a rewarding one, conducive to my personal professional development. While we presume that we, as teachers, have a good understanding of what our students want and need, formally collating information from them showed that we should at times drill down further and find out where they see themselves – how far they are from the personal goals they have set and what their struggles are – as this then enables us to have a better understanding of how we can combine what we believe is best for them with their subjective goals. The findings from this project have allowed us to make changes in our current courses.

This journey has also allowed me to travel to different conferences around the world and be part of a larger ELT domain. Meeting like-minded colleagues, sharing ideas and paving the way towards other projects are only some of the highlights. This has by far been the most reflective and insightful professional development experience I have taken part in.

Finally, I would like to thank Cambridge English and English Australia for this amazing opportunity. I would also like to extend my appreciation to UNSW Institute of Languages management, Anne Burns and Katherine Brandon for their ongoing support.

## References

Goh, C. and Burns, A. 2012. *Teaching Speaking: A Holistic Approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.



Hattie, J. and Timperley, H. 2007. 'The power of feedback'. *Review of Educational Research* 77/1: 81–112.

Sadler, R. 2010. 'Beyond feedback: Developing student capability in complex appraisal'. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education* 35/5: 535–550.

## About the author

**Akile Nazim** ([angien@languages.unsw.edu.au](mailto:angien@languages.unsw.edu.au)) is currently a Language Teacher and Teacher Trainer at UNSW Institute of Languages. She holds a Bachelor in TEFL and a MEd in TESOL and has over 16 years' experience teaching English in Australia and overseas. She has special interests in curriculum design towards assessment tasks and attending to Multiple Intelligences in the classroom.

See Akile's Teachers Research! poster presentation here: <http://resig.weebly.com/angie-akile-nazim--emily-mason.html>

# 6 *Exploratory Practice: Investigating my own classroom pedagogy*

**Yasmin Dar**

## 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 Exploratory Practice (EP) 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 to hopefully inspire other language teachers to either try it out for themselves or find out more about Exploratory Practice.

## 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 I or my students are experiencing a problem that needs to be solved. EP also appeals to me because, interestingly, it 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* 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-session EAP courses in a university context in 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-session course. They were aged between 18 and 30 (9 females and

3 males) from Saudi Arabia, China and Kurdistan, who needed to pass a total of four blocks of pre-session 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 (Principles 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 practise 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 to a website to practise 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: 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 MA 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).

## References

- Allwright, D. 2003. 'Exploratory Practice: Rethinking practitioner research in language teaching'. *Language Teaching Research* 7: 113–41.
- Allwright, D. 2006. 'Six promising directions in Applied Linguistics'. In S. Gieve, S. & Miller, I. (Eds.), pp. 11–17.
- Allwright, D., & Hanks, J. 2009. *The Developing Language Learner: An Introduction to Exploratory Practice*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Allwright, D. 2011. Talk at IATEFL Learner Autonomy SIG Pre-Conference Event, Brighton, Friday 15 April 2011.
- Gieve, S., & Miller, I. (Eds.) 2006. *Understanding the Language Classroom*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Kemmis, S. & McTaggart, R. 1981/1988. *The Action Research Planner*. Victoria, Australia: Deakin University.

## About the author

**Yasmin Dar** ([yd19@le.ac.uk](mailto:yd19@le.ac.uk)) teaches EAP to international students on the preessional courses at the English Language Teaching Unit (ELTU), University of Leicester. She is a member of the events organising team for the IATEFL Research SIG. Yasmin is currently interested in investigating the relationship between Exploratory Practice classroom research and EAP teaching/learning.

You can see Yasmin's Teachers Research! poster presentation (about a *later* Exploratory Practice experience based on students' own puzzle) here: <http://resig.weebly.com/yasmin-dar.html>

## 7 *Exploratory/action research to improve oral presentations with French engineering students<sup>1</sup>*

*Katie Moran*

This article summarises an ongoing project, conducted by a newcomer to exploratory/action research, which aims to help French engineering students improve their mandatory in-class oral presentations. Here I describe the first, exploratory phase of the project.

### Background

From 2000 to 2010, I believed that my students benefited greatly from preparing and giving talks. Their motivation and effort were reflected in the high quality of their presentations and how attentively they listened to their peers' talks.

In recent years, however, I felt that the quality of the presentations had dropped. Many students seemed to be preparing their talks quickly and at the last minute, without seeing the linguistic or professional value of the exercise. It appeared that they were sourcing the contents online and simply reading their findings without engaging in in-depth reflection or analysis. Few students seemed to be listening actively to their peers' talks and I felt that students were not taking my feedback into account.

In February 2013, I had the opportunity to attend an inspiring workshop entitled Action Research for Professional Development organised in Paris by UPLEGESS (*Union des Professeurs de Langues des Grandes Ecoles*) and facilitated by Divya Brochier and Dr Richard Smith.

---

<sup>1</sup> This report is adapted from a longer version which first appeared in *ELT Research* 30: 17–20 (January 2015). There, a second cycle of the project is also described [Eds].



Subsequent dialogue with Richard helped me to realize that I had some doubts about my own perceptions (as indicated in my second paragraph above: “students seemed”, “It appeared...”, “I felt...”, etc.) and he helped me to see that I might be able to gain a better understanding of the situation through exploratory/action research.

I was interested in the students’ perspectives concerning:

- the reality of their experience
- when/how they prepared their presentations
- the quality of their talks
- their peers’ presentations
- the feedback they received
- the value of the activity

## Procedure

In order to log my experience and facilitate reflection, I made brief notes throughout the project.

I started by explaining to my class that I was always trying to improve myself as a teacher and that I wanted to see if the quality of the oral presentations could be improved. I asked them if they wanted to collaborate by participating in a small research project – they immediately replied positively.

After sharing my generally negative perceptions of their previous talks, I explained that in order to improve the activity effectively, I needed to know their opinions. I wrote words on the board to remind the students of the elements involved in oral presentations (subject, instructions, preparation, sources, etc.) and the question “In my opinion, how valuable is the oral presentation activity?” I gave the students forty-five minutes of class time to write freely about presentations, explaining that they could use the question as a starting point if they wished and underlining the fact that they really were free to write anything they liked regarding the presentations – positive or negative. I explained that the freewrite was anonymous and could be done in French. There was a relaxed, studious

atmosphere in the classroom and the students really took the opportunity to collect their thoughts and express their opinions.



After class, I analysed the freewrites systematically by looking for themes that reoccurred and then translated the findings into English. Using an overhead projector, I disseminated the analysis orally during the following class. The students were a captivated audience and seemed very interested in their peers’ viewpoints and how their own comments had been portrayed in English.

Given the richness of the data and the enthusiasm generated, I asked the class if they wanted to come up with a plan of action to ensure top quality talks that semester. The students were genuinely enthusiastic about the idea. I put the students in groups of three to brainstorm, telling them that they could draw inspiration from the freewrite analysis or any experiences of talks they had given or seen. The discussions were collaborative, dynamic and productive.

Next, I led a class discussion during which I asked each group to express what they thought needed to be done differently. As a group, we then came up with numerous improvement strategies. Although I led the discussion and made notes on the board, I made a conscious effort not to interrupt the students when they put forward ideas or when they were engaging in spontaneous debating. As much as possible, I tried to let the strategies emerge from the students themselves.

We then scheduled our class plan of action, allowing time for the oral presentations and a final freewrite.

Date	Topic	Activity
15/05	Presentation Intro	
22/05	TP2	Presentation preparation using the internet
29/05		presentation on Ppt
05/06	Amph	
07/06	Amph	
12/06	Amph	Plan Ppt + snacks!

## Improvement strategies

In total, the class had democratically decided upon eight improvement strategies, each with a clear objective and a pedagogical justification. Three examples included:

### Free-er subject

The class considered that the more autonomy a student has in choosing a presentation topic, the more captivating and enriching the oral presentation experience is. As the course was on cross-cultural awareness, the class decided that they would be able to research and present *any* angle of 'culture' – they wanted the freedom to use their creativity.

### Evaluation criteria

The students said it would be useful for them to have a clearer idea of the evaluation criteria. I explained that I used an evaluation grid and suggested that – as a class – we could develop one together. I set up a group poster-creating activity by sticking up four large sheets of paper around the classroom; each poster had a different heading: contents, structure, delivery and language. In small groups, students brainstormed and wrote notes on the poster about the criteria that *they* would want to take into account if *they* were the teacher evaluating the talks. After this, the groups

switched posters, read and discussed the criteria that their peers had come up with and added other ideas.



After switching posters a final time, I centralised the ideas on the board. After much discussion, we collegially decided how many points would be attributed to each section.

Language	Contents	Structure	Delivery/Creativity
pronunciation	originality of subject	introduction	professional ppt
grammar	relevant information	main body	fluency / pace / diction
tenses	evidence of	conclusion	dress
articles	critical and accurate analysis	source page	body language
prepositions	when? why? how? what? where? (opposites? opposition? Absences?)	transitions (referring backward and forwards)	eye contact
vocabulary	arguments, facts, opinions	integration and use of sources	posture
richness			Extra - vocabulary
false friends			2 assistance
explanations			
linking words			

### *Audience interest*

The students found it disconcerting when their peers did not listen to their presentations. We agreed that the students should participate in the evaluation process by using a simplified version of our class evaluation grid, which would include space for a question to be written.

We then put the new plan of action into practice. After all the presentations had been conducted, students were again asked to engage in a freewrite.

### **Freewrite analysis**

Four main points emerged from my analysis of the rich data represented by the final rewrite: the perception of higher quality presentations as a result of the project; overwhelming endorsement of the exploratory, participatory and democratic nature of the class project; the positive impact on the teacher/learner relationships; and, finally, the belief that the project – because of its limitations but also because of its potential – should be continued.



### **Reflections**

Throughout my teaching career, I like to think that I have constantly tried to improve my teaching skills and to broaden my mind through reading, attending conferences and exchanging ideas and experiences with colleagues.

This was the first time, however, that I had *really* taken the time to try and understand a teaching/learning situation from the students' standpoint. This project enabled me to genuinely explore and understand students' expectations. Teaching *with* rather than *at* my students rekindled my belief that my students are interested in and capable of improving.

The students appreciated this truly learner-centred approach and seemed to flourish from being treated as active partners. It was heart-warming to witness their change in attitude and motivation for their talks, as they took ownership of the project and experienced learner awareness.

I was reminded that my students come to the classroom as highly creative individuals with different experiences and expectations. The goal-oriented cooperation experienced in this project proved highly stimulating, empowering and productive for us all. I also believe the project increased mutual respect and resulted in higher quality presentations, particularly in terms of structure and delivery.

### **About the author**

**Katie Moran** ([katherine.moran@efrei.fr](mailto:katherine.moran@efrei.fr)) has been teaching in higher education institutions for fifteen years, notably at Efrei, an engineering school specializing in information and digital technologies, Paris, France, where she is the head of language programs. Katie has also taught in England and Indonesia and holds a *Maîtrise de langues, littératures et civilisations étrangères* (with distinction) from the Université Paris-Est Marne-la-Vallée.

See Katie's Teachers Research! poster presentation here: <http://resig.weebly.com/katie-moran.html>



## 8 *Exploratory practice in initial teacher education: Working collaboratively for understandings*

*Inés Kayon de Miller, Thelma Christina Ribeiro Côrtes,  
Ana Flora Alves de Oliveira and Walewska Gomes Braga*

### Introduction

This text is co-authored by a teacher educator (Inés), two student-teachers (Thelma and Ana) and the municipal sector teacher (Walewska) in whose class this specific Exploratory Practice work was carried out. Our aim is to briefly explain the basic rationale for the Exploratory Practice work that has been developed in university initial teacher education courses taught by Inés. These courses form part of the undergraduate bilingual Portuguese-English teacher education curriculum at the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro (PUC-Rio), Brazil. We also wish to share a story that illustrates how this innovative work has been carried out in a public school environment, within the government-sponsored Teaching Initiation Scholarship Program (PIBID).

### ‘Working for understandings’ at the university

Approximately 15 years ago, Inés and her teacher educator colleagues, who are in charge of the Teaching Practice courses at PUC-Rio, moved beyond a conventional reflective approach to language teacher education. They decided to incorporate Exploratory Practice, an inclusive form of practitioner research into their work with student-teachers.

Within this principled way of conceiving the language teacher education classroom (Allwright & Miller, 2012), teacher educators and student-teachers prioritize quality of life as they work primarily to understand life in their own university classrooms and in the various schools in which they are involved as student-teachers.



Novel concepts such as ‘planning to understand’, ‘learning opportunities’, ‘potentially exploitable pedagogic activities’ and ‘quality of classroom life’ became the focus (Allwright, 2003, 2005; Gieve & Miller, 2006; Allwright & Hanks, 2009). ‘Work for understanding’ is integrated with regular pedagogic activities. Within the Exploratory Practice approach to initial teacher education, reports, portfolios, micro-teaching and lesson planning, among other traditional professional tasks, are conceived of as potentially exploitable pedagogic activities that engage participants in joint work for deeper understandings of the initial process of learning to be a teacher.

### ‘Working for understandings’ at the school

The Exploratory Practice conception of initial teacher education briefly introduced above was also chosen as the ‘guiding philosophy’ for the Portuguese-English component of the Teaching Initiation Scholarship Program. This initiative aims at integrating future teachers into public schools from the beginning of their academic lives. Student-teachers are encouraged to plan and develop pedagogical activities in public schools under the guidance of the school teacher and a university teacher educator. The ultimate goal is to improve Brazilian public school education.

To illustrate this work, we present here the development of an Exploratory Practice investigation which was carried out in 2012 by a group of 7<sup>th</sup> grade students and ourselves.

### The emerging puzzle

Working with the students in groups, Thelma, Ana, and Walewska noticed that some students were addressing each other with offensive nicknames. In one of the groups, two long-term friends started to fight. Reflectively, the student-teachers initially raised the following questions: *Is this attitude a sort of bullying? Should we report the fact to the school principal, who might deal with it as a discipline issue? How long has this name-calling been going on? What should we do?*

However, being an experienced Exploratory Practice teacher, Walewska proposed not to try to ‘solve the problem’ but to attempt to ‘understand the puzzle’: *‘Why do some 7<sup>th</sup> grade students ‘disrespect’ long-term friends?’*

So, inspired by this exploratory attitude, Thelma, Ana and Walewska set out to understand the puzzle by integrating their work for understandings with the language content to be focused on.



### The potentially exploitable pedagogic activity

The theme and grammatical aspects of the English syllabus to be addressed that week were ‘Family Members’, possessive pronouns ‘his’ and ‘her’, the genitive case and the verb ‘to have’. The potentially exploitable pedagogic activity proposed was ‘Draw a family tree and find out about the families’ nicknames’.

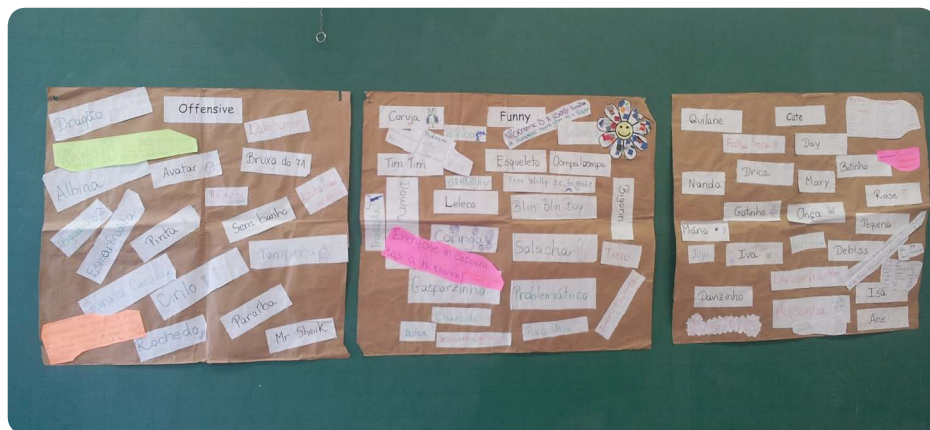
Most of the students found it interesting and enjoyable to get to know more about the lives of their families, and this motivated them to go out and do more research in their school. So, they asked about the nicknames of their peers and of the school staff: current and former teachers, school secretaries and even the school principal.

Students also accessed Wikipedia and found out that different cultures deal with nicknames in surprising ways. Interestingly, they are usually familiar

or humorous names given to people, but not chosen by the people themselves. A nickname may be acceptable, but some nicknames can be cruel, offensive or derogatory. Nicknames may refer to a person's occupation or title. They may also refer to a person's characteristics.

## Quality of life in the classroom

After a lot of classroom discussion and reflection, the time came to prepare a poster. Three sheets of construction paper were spread around the classroom and immediately completed with three categories of nicknames that had emerged from the process: 'cute', 'funny' and 'offensive'. Some students asked if they were allowed to create a fourth category: 'useful'. They had understood that nicknames could be useful too and were eager to include this. They said that, in their experience, nicknames can be 'useful' when they forget somebody's name, especially if the nickname is funny or unusual. After this explanation, they asked for Thelma's, Ana's and Walewska's nicknames and included them in the poster. Students from other classes also came into the classroom and gave their contributions.



Sharing and reflecting created space for refining previous understandings of the issue. For example, a nickname considered 'offensive' by some could be considered 'cute' by others. A nickname intended to be funny could, actually, be interpreted as offensive. The class was noisy but productive.

They got involved in showing, discussing, sharing and learning the topics of the language curriculum in a meaningful way. The group's excitement was contagious. Quality of classroom life was high, beyond expectations!

## Some more exploratory understandings

Concerning the English language curriculum, students showed that they could use the possessive pronouns, the verb 'to have' and vocabulary for family members, besides reading and discussing texts from Wikipedia. Language learning mission accomplished!

There were no incidents during the potentially exploitable pedagogic activity. Everybody worked together intensively. The atmosphere was inspiring and very pleasant. So, based on this joint lived experience, everybody – students, teacher and student-teachers – understood that it was possible to be happy at school!

It was worthwhile and meaningful to engage in Exploratory Practice rather than trying to solve what was, at first, considered to be a big problem. The two boys' attitudes could now be understood in terms of their long-term friendship! The student-teachers and the teacher realized this during the class in which the poster was produced, during and after the activity. When they talked about the habit of nicknaming, and indirectly, about the boys' behavior, they realized that the boys began to change their attitude. They were not arguing so much and started to act in a slightly friendlier manner with each other. It appears that the students realized what nicknames can mean: that they can be nice and funny, but also extremely offensive, and that, when they are offensive, they can hurt someone's feelings. The students seem to have arrived at this conclusion after the class reflections and, based on these, decided to change their attitude. It is important to mention that, at no point during the process, was the issue explicitly addressed with either them or the class. Thelma, Ana, and Walewska had attempted to understand what was going on without exposing their conflict explicitly to the whole class.

The investigative process made Thelma, Ana and Walewska feel closer to the students. All learned a little more about one another's lives. Accepting the challenge of discussing behavior, reflecting on human relationships, working to understand the good and not-so-good moments of life are ways of welcoming 'real life' into 'classroom life'.

Listening to the students and accepting them as partners enhanced trust, a move towards a more democratic class which, hopefully, may have a positive impact on society.

## An ongoing reflection

The story above illustrates how Exploratory Practice can encourage practitioners to work with each other in order to understand puzzles which are specific to their educational contexts. The integration of an investigative attitude, pedagogy and life has created opportunities for developing pedagogic investigative creativity and inclusivity from the very start of initial teacher education. It has proved to be a complex and challenging task, but a promising one that intensifies the reflective, human and non-technicist attitude that we the co-authors of this text value in professional development.

## References

- Allwright, D. 2003. 'Exploratory Practice: Rethinking practitioner research in language teaching'. *Language Teaching Research* 7/2: 113–141.
- Allwright, D. 2005. 'From teaching points to learning opportunities and beyond'. *TESOL Quarterly*, 39/1: 9–31.
- Allwright, D. and Hanks, J. 2009. *The Developing Language Learner: An Introduction to Exploratory Practice*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Allwright, D. and Miller, I. K. 2012. 'Burnout and the beginning teacher'. In Soneson, D. and Tarone, E., with Uhl Chamot, A., Mahajan, A. and Malone, M. (Eds.), *Expanding our Horizons: Language Teacher Education in the 21st century*. Minneapolis: Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition (CARLA), pp. 101–115.
- Gieve, S. and Miller, I. K. 2006. 'What do we mean by quality of classroom life?' In Gieve, S. and Miller, I. K. (Eds.), *Understanding the Language Classroom*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 18–46.

## About the authors

**Inés Kayon de Miller** ([inesmiller@hotmail.com](mailto:inesmiller@hotmail.com)), Associate Professor at PUC-Rio, Brazil, holds a Masters' Degree in TESL from the University

of California, at Los Angeles (UCLA) and a PhD in Applied Linguistics from Lancaster University, UK. Her involvement in initial and continuing language teacher education includes being mentor of the Rio Exploratory Practice Group and coordinator of the PIBID-PUC-Rio/Capes 2012 English Projects.

At the time of writing, **Thelma Christina Ribeiro Côrtes** ([thelmachris@hotmail.com](mailto:thelmachris@hotmail.com)) and **Ana Flora Alves de Oliveira** ([anaflores.alves17@gmail.com](mailto:anaflores.alves17@gmail.com)) were undergraduate student-teachers at PUC-Rio and 'junior' members of the Rio Exploratory Practice Group.

**Walewska Gomes Braga** ([walewskabraga@globlo.com](mailto:walewskabraga@globlo.com)) is an English teacher at Escola Municipal Santo Tomás de Aquino in Rio de Janeiro and is a PIBID-PUC-Rio/Capes 2012 supervisor as well as being a member of the Rio Exploratory Practice Group, with a special interest in sustainability.

See their Teachers Research! poster presentation here: <http://resig.weebly.com/ineacutes-miller.html>



## 9 *Some issues in practitioner-research*

*Ana Inés Salvi*

My recent classroom practitioner-research experiences in the field of English for Academic Purposes in Higher Education in the UK, have raised several issues in my mind regarding: what makes good teaching practice different from research; who is involved in setting the criteria for what constitutes good research; what genres to use to disseminate research; and ethical considerations. Before I come to these issues, I would like to provide some background information about the teaching and research experiences from which they emerged.

As part of my MA ELT programme I became very interested in both *a pedagogy for autonomy* (Dam, 1995; Holec, 1981; Freire, 1996/2011) and Exploratory Practice (Allwright and Hanks, 2009) due to the emphasis they put on democratic/ participatory teaching, learning and research and the centrality of the learner as a capable person who can be serious about and in charge of their own learning. With these interests in mind, I decided to explore (1) how to combine these two practices in a 5-week EAP Pre-session course, and (2) my students' views on this innovation, by keeping oral and written records of their work in class, and by conducting interviews at the end of the course. Subsequently all this data was analysed and discussed as part of my MA dissertation.

After this, I decided to continue examining my practice. I wanted to inquire into what happens when students are provided with the space and the tools they need to be in charge of their own learning, and when the Exploratory Practice principles of trust, collegiality, quality of life, understanding, built-in flexibility, curiosity and courage (Allwright and Hanks 2009: 219–226) underlie the classroom experience. This exploration took place in the several short EAP courses and modules I taught over the following two years and the data collected consisted of students' weekly written reflections on their learning via email.





It is the differences between these two experiences which have made me re-think the key issues connected to practitioner-research that I listed at the beginning of this story and which I will reflect on in what follows.

In response to the question of what constitutes research, I am not sure whether the second group of experiences can be regarded as ‘research’. This is because the data that was collected has only been used during the course/module by the students and the teacher to understand their life in the classroom better, and has not been disseminated further. For this reason consent forms were not used either in most cases. Using the data collected in the class certainly helped us to establish a good rapport, to understand and try to meet each other’s needs and expectations, and to ascertain that learning is, above all, about life. Both the students and I reflected on the learning and teaching experience through weekly communication via email in an attempt to make sense of what was happening and to learn from it. By planning for this to happen, at the time I considered it research; in other words, I felt this practice was research-informed and research-oriented. However, since there was no output that my students, others or I could refer to after the experience, it may be that what we undertook was good practice but perhaps not research.

Who sets the criteria, though, for what constitutes (good) research or not is another issue to be (re)considered. Robust views on this have been expressed by scholars and researchers, which nonetheless can be contested with the arrival of new researchers, PhD candidates and practitioners

in general. Even presentations in the *Teachers Research!* pre-conference event served to generate debate by questioning established parameters of what is research. Practitioner-research has traditionally been considered less prestigious than third-party research. Thus, further discussion of this type of research is important if there is interest in giving it a more equal status alongside more traditional research. This issue is also connected to the question of genre and dissemination space hierarchies. To me it seems necessary that recognised educational organisations, journals and publishing houses should support diverse research genres such as short reports, photographed artefacts, audio or video-recorded expositions and so on. This would accommodate a larger and more heterogeneous group of researchers.

Finally, with any research undertaking there are ethical dilemmas to deal with. For my MA research project, ethical considerations ran smoothly. I asked for permission from the institution and I designed consent forms for my students, which I handed out during the course. For the post-MA teaching practice, as I mentioned above, in most cases I neither administered consent forms nor did I fully inform participants in writing about the exploratory practice I was conducting. This was because I felt that complying with these ethical regulations could have discouraged students from continuing with the module or could have been interpreted as an added burden to the already busy study agenda. However, not doing this prevented me somehow from fully involving my students in the research experience *and* from sharing it with the wider community. After thinking through this issue I would accept that when conducting research it is very important to inform participants of the project from the outset, perhaps verbally at first, as well as the institution where the research will be carried out, not only to comply with ethical requirements but also as a way of validating and sharing the research being carried out within and outside one’s educational institution.

All in all, I have tried to present some of the issues connected to practitioner-research that I have encountered over a teaching period of three years (2010–2013) in the area of English for Academic Purposes in Higher Education in the UK. My presentation and this short account have been aimed at facilitating an honest discussion of important and often taken for granted questions regarding practitioner-research.

## References

- Allwright, D & Hanks, J. 2009. *The Developing Language Learner: An Introduction to Exploratory Practice*. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Dam, L. 1995. *Learner Autonomy: From Theory to Classroom Practice*. Dublin: Authentik.
- Freire, P. 2011. *Pedagogía de la Autonomía: saberes necesarios para la práctica educativa* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Buenos Aires: Siglo Veintiuno Editores. (First published 1996).
- Holec, H. 1981. *Autonomy and Foreign Language Learning*. Oxford: Pergamon. (First published 1979, Strasbourg: Council of Europe)

## About the author

**Ana Inés Salvi** ([Ana.Salvi@warwick.ac.uk](mailto:Ana.Salvi@warwick.ac.uk)) did her undergraduate studies in ELT in Argentina, where she taught English at primary and secondary school levels, in language schools and in pre-sessional university courses, for six years. She then completed her MA in ELT and is currently doing a PhD in Applied Linguistics, both at the University of Warwick, at the same time as teaching academic English at university level in the UK (for the last five years) and in China (for the last three years).

See Ana's Teachers Research! poster presentation here: <http://resig.weebly.com/ana-ineacutes-salvi.html>

## Coda: General Discussion at Teachers Research!

*Deborah Bullock*

After careful consideration we decided not to include here the transcript we had made of the interesting 'general discussion of teacher-research' which took place just after lunch at the Harrogate TR! event. There were valuable contributions from Dick Allwright, Anne Burns, Donald Freeman and other participants, but in the end we felt we did not want to distract from this book's main focus, which is the stories themselves. Nevertheless, to end I would like to draw out and summarise what for me were some of the key issues, since they are highly relevant to the origins and guiding principles of this publication, and to ongoing debates about the positioning and validity of teacher-research.

Central to the discussion was the nature of teacher-research itself. What is it, and what conventions should it conform to? There was concern that it is not widely enough known about, which raises the question – why not?

Possibly, because teachers don't publish. Should more effort, then, be made to make teacher-research public, to demystify and deconstruct the issues which surround it? And if so, what form or forms should publication take?

Traditional academic genres don't work for teachers. Why do we need a literature review, for example? In the context of teacher-research, it may be an academic stumbling block, a social expectation – it belongs elsewhere. Why should teachers have to change their 'day jobs' to share what they know? Unlike Chemistry or History, Teaching is not a discipline and has therefore lacked the genres it needs, but there are many ways of 'making public' – posters, for example, as used at the TR! event, and websites. New ways of sharing are needed – we tweet, we post in social networks, we blog, and these can be exploited, too.

We also need to start viewing genres as a continuum or spectrum, not a hierarchy. After all, who should get to say what counts as research? Because we are teachers, are we somehow not as good as academics? Is what we say of less value? Is what we do just 'good practice'? Why do we call it research?

Maybe we feel the need to formalize what we do and learn; maybe ‘making public’ is how we show our commitment to teaching; maybe we need a louder voice, a dialogue, a sense of community, to be taken more seriously. Maybe the process of researching and ‘making public’ raises our awareness and our noticing skills and leads to sustainable good practice.

Whatever our motivation, we need to take more control. Governments and other agencies worldwide seem to be co-opting teacher-research, portraying it as a cure-all for poor quality teaching. Teacher-research is in danger of becoming institutionalized and sanitized. We need to resist and take back control. *Teachers research!*

Click here to view a recording of the full discussion: <http://resig.weebly.com/discussion-of-teacher-research.html>