

Finding exploratory practice in unusual places

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Exploratory Practice as a research-based teaching approach is gaining traction with foreign language teachers internationally, as it offers a framework and a set of principles which opens up opportunities for teachers to engage in investigating what puzzles them about their teaching, or similarly, what puzzles them about learning. The EP approach encourages teachers to pursue their own personal maze of puzzles, which eventually leads to a refined research question - posed not as what or how but *why*. Asking 'why', is the starting point for many teachers' journeys of exploration into revealing a deeper, humanistic understanding of their teaching experiences in language education.

Rhian Webb and Dinesha Senaratne are EFL teachers at the British Council Teaching Centre in Colombo, Sri Lanka. They discuss their individual stories about how they came across Exploratory Practice in their desire to carry out their own research in their classes and what it means for them personally to enact Exploratory Practice with their learners.

How did I come across Exploratory Practice?

Rhian: I was very fortunate to come across Exploratory Practice (EP) when two of the leading experts in Exploratory Practice (Dr. Judith Hanks and Dr. Kenan Dikilitaş) came to the university where I was working in Northern Cyprus to conduct several introductory workshops. I was taken with the notion of Exploratory Practice because it brought out my inquisitive nature and it encouraged me to think more deeply about the things that puzzled me in my role as an EFL teacher. Initially, it felt unfamiliar framing my puzzle around 'why' but eventually I came to realise that it was a natural place to start, and I grew more comfortable with asking myself, 'why is this puzzle so important to me that I want to explore it further?' Answering this question helped me to identify the kernel of my research idea, and I became more confident with my new identity as a teacher-researcher. I found that Exploratory Practice empowered me to question why we assess learners' language proficiency and progress in certain ways. Fortunately, I found out that a colleague and I shared the same puzzle, so we decided to conduct an EP research project together (Öncül & Webb, 2018). It was an illuminating journey, at the end of which, we discovered that the learners shared different perspectives from us about how their language progress should be assessed.

Dinesha: As a student studying Educational Research, I look at every situation as an opportunity to learn about new research methods. Sitting in a classroom during a Career Professional Development session on how to incorporate Democratic Competencies for Democratic Cultures (CDC) in the EFL classrooms, I was completely intrigued. Following the session, I spoke to Rhian who delivered the training and I expressed my interest in studying it further and the possibility of conducting research on it. She suggested I explore the subject using Exploratory Practice, to which I responded with a blank face because I had not come across it before.

Why do I want to incorporate Exploratory Practice into my teaching practice?

Rhian: There are many facets, layers and nuances to teaching a foreign language, which means it a rich and diverse area for teachers to conduct their own classroom research. Exploratory Practice provides me with a mechanism to delve into areas of education which intrigue me. One such area I explored concerned 'Education for Democratic Citizenship' (Council of Europe, 2016) which proposes an approach for educators, irrespective of the subjects taught, to devise ways in which their learners can develop their democratic competences. My Exploratory Practice project (Webb & Sarina, 2018) involved using in-class debating activities with my language learners to see if the process of arguing for and against in a group debate encouraged them to develop aspects of democratic competency – in this case, their interpersonal skills as well as their communicative linguistic skills. I consider the Exploratory Practice principles (Allwright & Hanks, 2009) of 'involve everybody' and 'work for mutual development' definitely shaped my research journey and also established a co-

investigatory ethos whereby I designed the research project to include my learners as co-researchers in the research project. Using Potentially Exploitable Pedagogical Activities (PEPA) during the usual class time meant that my learners and I could collect data together without interrupting their learning and my teaching. Later, we discovered shared understandings concerning the linguistic and interpersonal skills required to participate in a group debate, and it also shed light on the many challenges and successes they experienced while debating a controversial issue in a foreign language.

Dinesha: The flexibility of the EP approach is the greatest advantage for EFL teachers. In reality, every lesson we plan includes a PEPA. In my opinion, by creating more awareness about EP in Sri Lanka, we could encourage EFL teachers to carry out more research in the classroom. This paves the way for us to be reflective teachers who continue to discover new ways to have bigger impacts on our learners.

What obstacles did I face when attempting to implement it?

Dinesha: Rhian was kind enough to lend me a book by Dikilitaş and Hanks (2018) to which she herself had contributed two chapters (Öncül & Webb, 2018; Webb & Sarina, 2018). I read up on EP and found that even my search engines mixed it up with Explanatory and Exploratory case study methods. What I learnt about EP was mostly thanks to informal chats with Rhian and from the book she lent me. Discussing the methods of EP with her opened up a world of possibilities to conduct research in my EFL classroom. Having grasped an understanding of the ease of conducting EP, I planned to use it as my method for my dissertation. Alas, this proved to be quite a feat. EP is a fluid methodology without a strict design, which perhaps is its greatest benefit as well as weakness. From reading the chapters in Dikilitaş and Hanks (2018), I realised that each person's research design was unique. From my perspective the fluidity of the research approach does not enable fellow researchers to replicate studies. A guideline of how to design an EP study would be ideal, especially to encourage educators in research-based universities to follow suit. Despite being established as a research method by Allwright (2003) my university was not keen on accepting EP as my research method as there were not enough studies completed in the area I wanted to focus on. This inspired me to create awareness so that future EFL teachers will not meet the same fate.

Rhian: Exploratory Practice is not widely known among academics in the fields of Teaching English as a Foreign Language, which is why it is timely that Hanks (2019) has provided a comprehensive literature review of ninety-four empirical studies in which EP was enacted in teachers' educational settings. Hanks discusses the benefits and challenges that teachers-as-researchers experience when pursuing EP as part of their pedagogic practice. An aspect of Hank's article that really struck a chord is the notion that by enacting EP, language teachers and their learners can feel empowered to knit together their research and pedagogy in search of a deep and mutually beneficial understanding.

Why is EP more suitable than other research methods for classroom research?

Dinesha: As EFL teachers, we are constantly striving to 'lift activities off the book'. This in fact is what EP encourages as a method. To identify, design and use a PEPA is a major way for teachers to explore pedagogy and teaching practice. I have conducted three classroom-based research projects at the British Council in Colombo as part of my Master's degree program. Each time, my biggest challenges were my instruments and methods of data collection because it had to fit into the conventions of traditional research tools. By using a PEPA as a research tool, it allows one to be empowered as a researcher rather than caged by it. The flexibility of the EP methodology is the greatest advantage for EFL teachers. One could say that every lesson a teacher plans includes a PEPA although they may not know how to use it as part of their research practice. In my opinion, creating more awareness about EP would encourage EFL teachers to carry out more research in the EFL classrooms. This paves the way for cohorts of teachers to become reflective teachers who continue to discover new ways to make changes in our teaching practices, and, to better understand our learners.

Rhian: After having completed the research on assessment practices of English language learners on an English preparatory course, my co-author and I reflected on our research design and we found that the use of PEPAs really helped our learners to express their views naturally

and confidently. However, when we ran the focus groups to discuss the pros and cons of the assessment practices, we observed that a handful of participants were very opinionated and dominated the group and many participants in the focus groups did not have the chance to speak for themselves (Öncül and Webb, 2018). It was our conclusion that the PEPA provided us with the most fine-grained and illuminating data. This, we felt, was largely because the participants felt more comfortable carrying out group discussions in their classroom environment.

Future plans for EP

The impetus to carry out an EP project can either be teacher-motivated or learner-motivated or a combination of both. It is an effective and exciting way for teachers to create and design their own research project, which they can mold to suit their individual teaching and learning styles, settings and professional development interests.

Dinesha: I look forward to using PEPAs to implement CDC in primary classrooms. Using EP to document and explore this component in the EFL classroom will enable me to empower my students with the tools of communication while also inculcating global citizenship competencies. Due to the reflective nature of EP, this research has potential to expand my horizons as an educator. I look forward to sharing my experience using EP with my fellow colleagues, paving the way for more EFL teachers to become research-practitioners.

Rhian: In my role as Senior Teacher, I would like to run training sessions with Sri Lankan teachers, so that I may introduce them to the Exploratory Practice concept of puzzles and why they are important to pursue – not solely to satisfy teachers' curiosity or deepen their own understanding but more importantly to share their puzzle with their learners, and by doing so, open up the possibility that essentially learners have meaningful contributions to make.

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ADVANCE PUBLICATION – ELT RESEARCH 35, 2020, ReSIG

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