

The use of Exploratory Practice as a form of collaborative practitioner research

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we will briefly outline an approach to practitioner research known as Exploratory Practice (henceforth EP), and will then present an EP study undertaken by one of the authors (Yasmin Dar) as part of her work as a pre-sessional EAP teacher at the University of Leicester when she became puzzled by the question ‘Why don’t my students take responsibility for their learning outside class?’

Exploratory Practice

EP has been developed by Dick Allwright and a number of collaborators principally based in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, (see for example Allwright & Lenzuen, 1997) and exemplified in a series of research articles over the past ten years, mostly published in the journal *Language Teaching Research* (Allwright et al, 2003). The fundamental principles of EP were continually refined in a series of published articles by Allwright since the early 1990s. It was originally developed as a form of professional development for teachers who may have little spare time to dedicate to classroom research (or, indeed, any form of continuing professional development), limited access to library resources, and a lack of training in academic research methods. This is the kind of situation in which many practicing language teachers find themselves. It was also intended as an antidote to the short-termism and burn-out typical of many practitioner research and professional development projects.

Over the years, it was increasingly recognised by this group that collaborative learner involvement in EP is essential to its success, and indeed that in EP *teacher* development is inseparable from *learner* development. This distinctive feature of EP is reflected in the title of the most complete exposition so far, *The Developing Language Learner* by Allwright & Hanks (2009), and conceptualising learners as key participants in exploring the life of the classroom is one of the book’s most significant contributions. In this respect, it may be seen as contributing to wider movements to promote learner education (see for example Kohonen, 2001), learner agency (see for example Mercer, 2011), and learner self-regulation (see for example Zimmerman, 2002). Nevertheless, some people make use of EP simply as a form of practitioner research which is distinctive from the teacher/teaching focus and professional development goals of reflective practice, and the quasi-academic knowledge creation goals of action research.

We will proceed by examining the concepts and assumptions embedded in the following very brief characterisation of EP:

Exploratory Practice (EP) is an indefinitely sustainable way for classroom language teachers and learners, while getting on with their own learning and teaching, to develop their own understandings of life in the language classroom. Allwright (2005, p.361)

The first key word to pay attention to is ‘develop’. EP is a form of teacher development (see Head and Taylor, 1997, for a useful discussion of the distinction between teacher development and teacher training) and as such is comparable to other forms of practitioner development work, such as reflective practice (Farrell, 2007), action research (Wallace, 1997) or lesson study (*Lesson Study UK*, online). Yet, its goal is distinct it is to develop understanding of what goes on in the language classroom, as opposed to focusing teachers’ awareness on what they themselves do or think (as in Reflective Practice), or solving *problems* (as in Action Research), or developing maximally efficient or effective lessons (as in Lesson Study). In place of a focus on teacher self-awareness, problem solving or technical efficiency, EP concerns itself with ‘puzzles’ which may or may not be solvable and with shared understanding which may be concerned as much with a better classroom experience as with more efficient learning. This is not to say that enhanced understanding may not lead to implementing change in practice if a problem is indeed perceived that could be addressed. However, understanding comes first:- it may be that the puzzle was not in fact a problem at all – or not an urgent or important one, or one faced by most classroom participants. Or it could turn out to be a problem but not one that can be addressed at the classroom or even the institutional level, but a better understanding of it may allow work in the classroom to proceed less troubled by frustration, anxiety or doubt. This is why EP proceeds from the idea of a puzzle rather than a problem.

Notice that EP does not lay claim to finding generalisable truth, but to seeking localised (but shareable) *understandings*. In EP both teacher and learners must be involved together in seeking their own enhanced understandings; it is not something done by the teacher on, to or about either herself alone or learners alone. Whatever understanding is reached must be one shared amongst all participants for it to become useful. In this way, EP becomes a form of learner development as much as teacher development.

The next key word to focus on is classroom ‘life’, for this is what understanding is of. The quality of the life of the classroom depends on what individual participants bring with them from their own lives when coming together in a communally shared social experience (which includes but is not limited to the work of teaching and learning). Teaching and learning takes place in individuals’ lived experience of this shared public space which EP concerns itself with, in the knowledge that life inside the classroom is strongly affected by that part of participants’ lives that is outside it (Gieve & Miller, 2006). The ultimate purpose of classroom life is to provide an environment in which learning is fostered. It is also a common experience of EP practitioners that the act of mutual, collaborative, engagement in seeking shared understanding also has the effect of generating a more productive, less antagonistic, communal working environment as well as a better understood one.

We turn our attention now to the phrase ‘while getting on with their own learning and teaching.’ EP is integrated into the on-going activity of the classroom, which does not stop

while a researcher (albeit a practitioner researcher) makes an intervention and evaluates its outcome, whilst wrestling with the ethical problems of experimental intrusions into naturalistic settings. Neither does it stop while a teacher tries out a questionnaire that she has designed or found, for example, in her learners' class time. The aim of EP in the search for understanding is to use classroom activities that would have taken place anyway, so that they form part of the on-going learning programme.

Finally, let us consider the term 'indefinitely sustainable.' While most teachers and learners are only with each other for relatively short periods, their own experiences of teaching and learning have a continuing history. They will continue to teach and learn after the class has disbanded, sometimes for many years, and while each class is a new experience, understanding can be carried forward and built on. While teacher burn-out is unfortunately not an uncommon experience, and neither is learner drop-out as well as failure, all work to better understand classroom life must support us, not place an additional burden and in this way, it becomes sustainable.

In summary, the seven core principles of EP are as follows (Allwright & Hanks, 2009, pp149-154):

1. Focus on quality of *life* as the main issue.
2. Work to *understand* it before thinking about improving it.
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*.
6. Make it a *sustainable* enterprise.
7. *Integrate* the work for understanding into existing curricular practice to minimise the burden.

We now turn to a description of an EP project carried out in an EAP class at the University of Leicester by the teacher in collaboration with the students in that class. The process of deriving the puzzle itself is not described here for reasons of space, but see Allwright & Hanks (2009, p.176) for a discussion of how puzzles can be derived from on-going classroom experiences.

The study

The classroom puzzle that developed out of the experience of teaching a number of similar university pre-session EAP courses at the same institute was 'why don't my students take responsibility for their learning outside class?' The institution expects students to be set homework activities and homework also tends to be requested by the students themselves. The assumption that they were not taking responsibility was based on evidence that the assigned homework and preparation for the subsequent classes were frequently not being done.

The particular class with whom the puzzle was investigated consisted of 12 international students aged 18-30, 9 female and 3 male, from Kurdistan, Thailand, Saudi Arabia, and China, who held BA degrees from their home countries and their current language level was the equivalent of IELTS 4.5/5.0 (intermediate/upper intermediate). The author taught 7.5 hours of the weekly 21 hours of the 10 week pre-session course, and the remainder was

shared by two other teachers. Students needed to pass 4 blocks of 10 week pre-session courses before they could be considered for enrolment onto their chosen MA programmes in various fields at the University of Leicester.

Why and how the principles of EP were used

The principles of EP were applied to first understand the reasons for students' reluctance take responsibility for their learning outside class, and ultimately this led to the development of strategies to enhance the students' teaching and learning experience. The learners' personal commitment to autonomous learning was investigated so that learners and teacher together could share their understandings and identify any mismatch in expectations (Dar, 2008) before attempting to close any gap that became apparent. The collaborative exploration took the form of the pre-existing pedagogical activities of classroom discussions and homework tasks via email.

At the start of each class students took part in an informal pairwork 'warm up' activity where they were asked to share their opinions on topics that the teacher would suggest, and these were usually intended to make explicit links to learning that took place in previous sessions. At the beginning of the course, the students and the teacher had agreed that during these regular pair-work activities the teacher would be listening and making notes on both form and content for subsequent whole-class feedback. The intention was that they could practise their language skills while the teacher monitored and noted common language errors for subsequent whole-class feedback.

In line with Principle 7, students were asked in the warm-up discussion to '*ask your partner if they have completed their homework. If the answer is no, ask why?*' The same question was then discussed as a pairwork activity at the start of every session on a daily basis for about 10-15 minutes. The reasons that emerged in the discussions were surprising. For instance, it had been assumed that students had sufficient IT skills to complete some of the homework which involved logging onto the university's student virtual learning environment (Blackboard) to access materials, and knowledge of how to carry out online research for classroom topics that had been set for homework. Another surprise was the following student comment:

I don't have enough time for homework.. I reach home at 5pm.. my cooking take 3 hours...

The teacher realised that students needed time to settle into their new environment, so perhaps unrealistic targets had been set because it had been assumed that everyone had had sufficient time and support to adjust to their new surroundings in the UK. For example, some students stated that they were trying to find a balance between their homework and domestic duties, while others were anxious about their children settling into school or leaving them at home to be cared for by their partner without the support of their extended family or housekeeper, and one student said that he didn't like using computers.

What emerged, then, was not that these students were *unwilling* to engage in study and preparation between classes, or that they held the expectation that it was the teachers' job to teach them during the lesson and this would be sufficient. Rather, it became apparent that they felt that practical reasons which had little to do with such expectations *prevented* them from studying between classes. The reasons were connected to constraints in their personal

lives rather than expectations of how the job of language learning should be carried out. With the mutual expectation that the teacher would refer to their pair-work discussion comments in the teacher feedback stage, the main reasons given for not completing the homework were summarised for the benefit of the whole class group. Subsequently, the next question for their pair-work discussions became ‘*Can you think of any ideas of how to solve these problems?*’ This question was discussed twice: first during pair-work followed by whole class feedback and discussion. In line with Principles 3 and 4, apart from increasing student talking time, an agenda was thus formed that these constraints needed to be addressed not only from the teacher’s point of view (as she had not dismissed them irrelevant) but were also something that could be shared within the class as a mutual responsibility. This resulted in the desired outcome of peer support in terms of offering suggestions, which were similar to the ones that the teacher herself might have given, for example, to cook large quantities of food to last a few days to ease the pressure. If such suggestions had come from the teacher, this could have resulted in the opposite of what was intended – the teacher assuming responsibility for the learners’ lives outside class, rather than the students becoming aware not only that these personal life events were constraints getting in the way of achieving their goals, but that they were soluble. Perhaps more importantly, the students’ everyday lives became legitimate topics for discussion amongst the class as part of the formal lesson time, instead of potentially becoming part of a resistant stance *against* a class that interrupted their lives.

The first step towards enabling a sense of mutual responsibility within a classroom community of learners that included each individual learner along with their peers and the teacher could be realised. From the teacher’s side, she took action to make some practical changes such as tackling the IT problem by demonstrating how to access and make use of the university’s Blackboard and email system for the homework tasks, which was then reinforced by peer teaching. She also changed the amount of homework to better suit the needs of this particular group. In addition, she reached an understanding that some students will resist taking extra language learning responsibility until they are ready to do so. As a result, as well as reducing homework expectations, she was also prepared to adjust and adapt to their changing needs during the course.

The work for understanding, and if necessary, searching for solutions to problems, enabled the class to move closer to bridging the gap between teacher and student expectations by listening to the students’ concerns and supporting them to take greater responsibility outside the classroom. Simply finding ways of doing assigned homework was the first step in this process, which laid a foundation on which future work might follow. Thus, for example, in week 6 of the course, one student emailed the teacher to say, ‘*I really want extra practice in reading. As you know my exam was the worst one, so could you please help me to find extra reading practice.*’ This was an indication that the student had become ready to take on extra responsibility outside the classroom (even if the trigger was the poor mid-course reading exam result). It can become the learner’s own puzzle (‘*why do I have difficulty finding appropriate reading material for myself?*’), and this puzzle can in its turn become one of the daily class warm-up discussion topics, shareable with other learners.

Conclusion

The outcome of this EP activity brought to light some key issues that had initially hindered international students in the language class from having a positive experience in the new learning environment. The principles of Exploratory Practice enabled the teacher to take

appropriate action to improve her students' international language learning experience, and laid the foundation for learners to regard class time, and each other, as legitimate resources for *working on* their learning, as well as *doing* the learning. Some teachers will certainly already use this common sense approach to understanding their classroom, while others may want to try out EP as a form of doing research in their classroom. The key is to ask oneself a 'why' question to reduce the emphasis on looking for 'solutions' to what has been assumed to be the problem. If *change* is needed, it would be based on *understanding* the underlying issues that have been explored.

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