13 Exploratory practice: a way of opening up access to research by classroom teachers and learners

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Abstract

Engaging in research is acknowledged as having a potentially transformative impact on the professional development of language teachers (Borg, 2010). Yet a cursory examination of the literature suggests that teachers rarely engage in research. The aim of this chapter is threefold: to introduce Exploratory Practice (EP), a form of inclusive Practitioner Research (PR) designed to empower teachers and their learners to better understand their practice, to illustrate, through a case study, how EP works in the classroom, and finally to report on the recent developments of opening up access and possibilities for language teachers to engage in and make their research public while, at the same time, creating opportunities for themselves to continue with their professional development.

Keywords: exploratory practice, inclusive practitioner research, collegiality, research sustainability, continuing professional development.

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1.   Context of the project

1.1.   Background of EP

The lack of engagement in research by language teachers has been noted by many scholars in English Language Teaching (ELT) (Borg, 2010) and in Modern Foreign Language (MFL) teaching (Marsden & Kasprowicz, 2017). The barriers preventing this engagement cover a large spectrum of obstacles, many of which are summarised in Borg (2010, p. 409). Suffice it to say, for the needs of this chapter, that a lack of time, research skills, support, and access to theory and research are most notable.

It remains, however, relevant for teachers to engage in research in order to contest their tacit understanding and ensure that their classroom practice is not based only on intuition and experience. In this respect, the eclecticism that characterises teachers' methodologies and the 'sense of plausibility' (Prahbu, 1992) that guides their decision-making processes acknowledges them as reflective practitioners capable of developing their practice. At the same time, it falls upon them to rise to the challenge of showing that they are not mere consumers of academic research and implementers of other people's ideas. They can engage in research to enable themselves to understand the specific and contextual environment in which they operate so they can explain to others what works in their practice, what does not work, and why.

1.2.   The principled framework of EP

It is essential to realise that teachers cannot undertake research in the same way academic researchers do because their training and working conditions differ drastically. EP has put forward a principled framework (Allwright, 2003) to empower teachers and their learners to understand better their practice by investigating teaching puzzles, such as *why do my students make disruptive use of mobile phones during my lessons?*, as Lecumberri's (2018) study illustrates below. EP believes that asking 'why' instead of 'what' questions leads to a deeper understanding of complex issues rather than finding solutions which

may work in some circumstances but not in others (for more teacher and learner puzzles see Allwright, 2003; Allwright & Hanks, 2009; Dikilitas & Hanks, 2018; Slimani-Rolls & Kiely, 2018). EP is part of the PR family which includes, amongst others, reflective practice (Farrell, 2008), action research (Burns, 2005), and exploratory action research (Smith, Connelly, & Rebolledo, 2014). As in any family, differences between siblings exist and EP differentiates itself by a number of distinctive principles which characterise its theoretical framework as listed and explained below.

1.3. Principles of EP

- Quality of life for language teachers and learners is the most appropriate central concern for EP.

- Working primarily to understand the quality of life, as it is experienced by language learners and teachers, is more important than, and logically prior to, seeking in any way to improve it.

- Everybody needs to be involved in the work for understanding.

- The work needs to serve to bring people together.

- The work needs to be conducted in a spirit of mutual development.

- Working for understanding is necessarily a continuous enterprise.

- Integrating the work for understanding fully into existing curricular practices is a way of minimising the burden and maximising sustainability (Allwright & Hanks, 2009, pp. 149-154)

Quality of life is prioritised in the classroom because it is believed that it is the search for quality of life that paves the way to quality of work. When teachers and learners feel respected, listened to, and enjoy rather than endure their classroom experiences, then they invest their efforts in developing the quality of their work.

Seeking to understand quality of life should come before attempting to bring any change because understanding is "a prerequisite to intelligent decision-making" (Allwright & Hanks, 2009, p. 151).

The principles of collegiality and inclusivity for mutual development are crucial to embed in the research enterprise. Indeed, it is imperative that all those involved in the research are given the opportunity to contribute with their ideas and, by the same token, derive a positive learning experience. In particular, inclusivity of learners as co-partners is essential as EP suggests that learners are an integral part of the classroom environment and that their involvement in the search for its understanding is paramount. In order to make sense of their practice without getting burnt out, EP recommends that teachers integrate the search for understanding into their teaching routine so that both, teaching and research, get done at the same time. For this purpose, EP proposes that teachers use normal classroom activities as research tools to investigate the teaching puzzles. These activities can include brainstorming sessions, class discussion, pair/group work, reading comprehension texts, surveys, video recording, and any other pedagogic activity that teachers find suitable. Developing expertise in using the tools of their trade as investigative instruments would make the teachers' search for understanding feasible and sustainable.

2.   Intended outcomes

The investigation of *why do my students make disruptive use of mobile phones during my lessons?* was carried out by Lecumberri (2018) within a larger project (Slimani-Rolls & Kiely, 2018) whose aim was to encourage language teachers, in my own institution, to use EP in their normal classroom environment, as advocated by its proponents. For this purpose, I invited practitioners teaching languages for business purposes to undergraduate students to join our two year long project. Three English and three MFL teachers (French, Italian, and Spanish) volunteered. They were four females and two males, each of whom had ten to over 15 years of teaching experience. Five had an MA in applied linguistics and one a diploma in teaching.

Prior to the start of the project, I introduced EP to the participating teachers to enable them to come up with their respective puzzle. Subsequently, we discussed together the research programme which would help them to scaffold their investigative efforts. Three strategies emerged: First, I recommended that the teachers use the existing institutional peer observation of teaching scheme to engage with each other. The resulting conversations about their teaching would allow them to refine their thinking about the puzzle area by reflecting upon it and further discussing it with colleagues. EP stresses that teachers focus on putting the puzzle area into a question starting with 'why', seeking for deep understanding rather than using 'what', which might bring up an ephemeral solution. However, it soon became apparent that identifying a puzzle was not problematic to the participating teachers. Second, some of them requested access to support in case they encountered issues with their investigations, as for most of them, their research experience was limited to the MA dissertation that they undertook many years ago. Hence, I made myself available as a mentor and offered individual consultations to support their research initiatives. The mentoring process provided guidance on EP principles and technical aspects of research design and practice. It also instilled encouragement and confidence building so they could take their puzzle investigation forward. However, the teachers clearly remained at the heart of this process-oriented project as they were working on their own agenda rather than following a pre-established schedule. Third, we agreed to meet together, once every six weeks, to share and discuss the questions, apprehensions, understandings, and misunderstandings about the teaching puzzles within the supportive professional community that we had built up.

3.   Nuts and bolts

3.1.   The activity

Esther Lecumberri is a teacher of Spanish and one of the six participating teachers (Lecumberri, 2018). She explained that one of her teaching groups was particularly challenging as the students seemed demotivated and tended to make

excessive use of their mobile phones, thus, marring the quality of life in the classroom. On the one hand, Lecumberri (2018) was aware of the institutional ban on the use of these devices, but she was also aware that they can be employed usefully as dictionaries, cameras, recorders, and information providers. Hence, for the benefit of the students, she refused to ban them indiscriminately. On the other hand, she was frustrated by the disruptive use that the students made of their mobiles. So, she decided to raise this puzzling issue with the students in a class discussion. As their language level was intermediate, Lecumberri (2018) seized this opportunity for them to practise their Spanish. Although she was surprised by their vehement rejection that mobile phones could impact negatively in the class, she was pleased with the level of involvement that the students showed during the discussion. They said that they felt respected and treated like adults, defending the view that they were using mobiles sensibly.

Subsequently, Lecumberri (2018) video recorded, with the students' permission, one of their classroom events hoping to demonstrate the disruption that not all the students had, so far, acknowledged in order to make them understand her frustration and negotiate a change of attitude. Once she felt that they were ready for another discussion, she asked them to view the video in groups with the task of assessing the level of disruption that they could see and hear. The groups reported, in Spanish, that particular instances were clearly disruptive, and some assured that it was ultimately the teacher's responsibility to monitor the level of mobile use intrusion.

Furthermore, Lecumberri (2018) followed the students' comments by developing a short survey with questions related to the impact that mobile phones could have on (1) their concentration and participation, (2) the use of the university policy, and (3) the classroom participants' responsibility in restricting the use of these devices. She distributed the survey for the students to fill out, discuss their responses in groups, and then report the content of their discussion to the whole class. It emerged that the students recognised that the assumption that they could attend to the classroom interaction and, at the same time, respond to their acquaintances was not necessarily tenable. They also understood the frustration that this behaviour could cause to the teacher and their peers and

admitted that protecting the classroom quality of life was not only the teacher's but everybody's responsibility.

3.2. Reflection and interpretation

Lecumberri (2018) explained that adopting an inclusive approach of listening and negotiating rather than imposing her authority to restrict mobile phone use enabled her to enhance, rather than damage, her relationship with the students which, she believes, is essential for the quality of classroom life. Opening up communication channels for meaningful exchanges between herself and the students and between the students themselves allowed the classroom participants to understand what it is that they are trying to achieve together. Lecumberri (2018) noted that

> "the benefit [derived from using EP] is initially improved communication processes which, in turn, enhances the relationship between the teacher and the learners and facilitates effective teaching and learning activities and participation" (p. 117).

3.3. Implications

As the use of mobile phones was endemic in her other classes and those of her colleagues, Lecumberri (2018) opted to tackle this puzzle with the rest of her classes and share her EP knowledge with colleagues across the institution in order to construct more academically oriented use of mobiles. Ester felt that she had not only regained confidence in her own classroom management skills, but she has also gained respect for the learners who collaborated with her to build a more conducive environment for learning.

While the above step-by-step methodological account of Lecumberri's (2018) investigation puzzle may be helpful to get neophyte EP practitioners started, it is worth noting that the steps are not intended as a rigid prescription. Rather, what is central to EP enquiries are the EP principles because they serve to create the context which facilitates the search for understanding by teachers. Once

they get to be more conversant with EP, teachers become more creative about developing, together with their learners, EP strategies for investigating their classroom environment.

It is important to realise that a chronological sequence is not intended by the order in which Lecumberri's (2018) investigative processes have been presented. The first set of EP processes taken up by Lecumberri (2018) above are:

- **taking action for understanding by focussing on the processes themselves** such as making herself aware of puzzling issues of classroom life; thinking harder with other practitioners (learners, peers, and mentors) inside (and/or outside) the classroom; looking/listening and attending more intensively to what is going on, as it is going on in the classroom; and planning for understanding by adopting familiar pedagogic procedures (class/group discussion and video recording/ survey) to help her develop participant understanding. These are indeed interrelated processes and often concurrent with the next set of processes;

- **working with emerging understanding by focussing on the content of the processes** such as reflexively expressing and appraising personal/ collective insights; refining notions of potential 'change' if necessary as planned by the teacher; discussing potential personal or collective moves; sharing personal understandings of processes as a way of supporting others and of inviting others to join the EP community of practice as Lecumberri (2018) has done with her various teaching groups and subsequently with her own colleagues to professionalise her practice.

At this point, it is important to highlight the various and thriving means of opening up access to EP and PR in general. They encourage, as illustrated below, teachers' ownership to develop their own community of practice to use, revise, redistribute and remix creative works that are shared by teachers across the world (Wiley, 2014).

4.   Conclusion

Bridging the gap between research and practice is essential and so efforts are made to motivate teachers to work towards understanding their practice. A number of resources are available to open up access to engagement in research. These include Instruments for Research into Second Languages (IRIS)[2], a digital repository of data collection materials developed to facilitate access to PR (Thompson, Marsden, & Plonsky, 2018). Amongst the many uses of IRIS, teachers are directed towards methodologies to allow them to investigate issues directly relevant to their classroom environment, for instance: "why are my students sometimes unwilling to communicate in class? How do my learners feel about learning English? Why are my learners studying English? What motivates them? Are the materials I use communicative enough?" (Thompson et al., 2018, p. 79). IRIS materials link to Open Accessible Summaries In Language Studies (OASIS)[3], which supplies summaries of journal articles to facilitate teachers' search for information which can then be downloaded. IRIS can be followed on Facebook[4] for updates on new materials and for news on open science.

Carrying out and publishing their own research is something that teachers are simply not familiar with. In this respect, Bullock and Smith (2015) ask "why should teachers have to change their 'day jobs' to share what they know?" (p. 77). They draw attention to blogging, tweeting, and posting in social networks as possible alternatives for opening up more appealing and user-friendly genres for teachers to disseminate their work. As Kahle (2008) explains, "[o]penness is measured by the degree to which it empowers users to take action making technology [and content] their own, rather than imposing its own foreign and inflexible requirements and constraints" (p. 35). Along these lines of thinking, the teacher research Special Interest Group (SIG) of the International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language

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2. www.iris-database.org

3. www.oasis-database.org

4. https://www.facebook.com/irisdatabase/

(henceforth IATEFL Research SIG) is currently playing a leading role in demystifying research by enabling teachers to initiate and carry out research that is relevant to them and share their outcomes in ways that suit them.

The IATEFL Research SIG organises a one day Pre-Conference Event (PCE) devoted to PR by and for teachers. Rather than using formal papers presented by teachers standing on a podium, the PCE invites teachers to talk in front of their poster for up to five minutes before and after a morning coffee break. This gallery style format frees up ample time for delegates and presenters to join in the participatory nature of the event and discuss the content of the posters. The afternoon is generally taken up with the participants sharing their views about and experiences with PR including spontaneous commentaries rather than prepared speeches by experts such as Allwright, Burns, and Freeman so that the focus remains on the participants' own experiences. The presentations are subsequently published in a free e-book entitled *Teachers Research!*, with an exclamation mark stressing that teachers do indeed carry out research when appropriate development models, such as EP, are made accessible. Like the present volume, this book offers a less intimidating way of reporting on research activities in creative and varied writing styles and use of visuals with a practical orientation. It also includes the hyperlinks to website-based video-recordings and posters. The book *Teachers Research!* was nominated for a British Council ELTons award (innovation in teacher resources) in 2016 and was said to be "[a]n interesting, varied collection of research stories, which should inspire and give confidence to teachers to pursue their own research" (IATEFL, n.d., n.p.).

The emerging dissemination genres of research for and by teachers seen above are not limited to the PCE event in the UK. They have become a regular format in the efforts of IATEFL Research SIG and the British Council to open up PR in Europe, India, and Latin America. The *Teachers Research!* Chile 2016 conference attracted 120 participants with presenters from Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, and Uruguay; the Buenos Aires *Teachers Research!* 2017 conference and Istanbul *Teachers Research!* 2017 conference highlight the popularity of these events and testify to the growing interest that is shown by academics,

professional bodies, and teachers themselves to develop PR that is central to their professional development.

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