Exploratory practice and professional development in ELT: The roles of collaboration and reflection

Phil Benson

Department of Linguistics, Macquarie University

Mary Ann Chehade

Jose Lara

Gamze Aliriza Sayram

Lesley Speer

Macquarie University English Language Centre

Although professional development is a primary aim of teacher research, published studies tend to foreground research findings. This study focused on professional development outcomes of two collaborative exploratory practice projects. Using narrative inquiry as a tool for reflection, the participants identified turning points in the projects that led to professional development. In addition to learning about teaching, learners and research, developments related to working with others and the professional development process were identified as outcomes that have not previously been emphasised in the literature on teacher research. It is suggested that these professional development outcomes may be specific to exploratory practice and narrative inquiry, as flexible approaches to teacher research that are focused on understanding.

Introduction

Teacher research is often discussed as means towards professional development. However, published reports tend to emphasise research findings and what has been learned about the focus area of the project. In this paper, four teachers and one academic collaborator focus on their professional development during two collaborative exploratory practice projects. Adopting a narrative inquiry approach, they reflect individually on turning points in their professional development during the projects and conclude with a collective reflection on how exploratory practice worked as a means of professional development in the context of the collaboration.

Teacher professional development and practitioner research

For Richards and Farrell (2005), teacher professional development 'seeks to facilitate growth of teachers' understanding of teaching and themselves as teachers' (p. 4). From a teacher's perspective, professional development outcomes may also include improved practice, presentation and publication, and career enhancement. A study of Macedonian English teachers' cognitions of continuing professional development found that a minority emphasised growth and lifelong learning, while the majority emphasised 'keeping up-to-date' with methods and new technologies (Wyatt & Ager, 2017). Wyatt and Ager observed that this reflected the 'top-down' approaches to professional development that the teachers had experienced and that conceptions of professional development as growth might fit better with 'bottom-up' approaches.

In a guide for English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students (ELICOS) institutions, Brandon (2015) describes professional development as 'a coherent and multi-faceted approach to an individual's professional growth' that involves 'more than observations and workshops and conferences' (p. 5). Chappell and Benson (2013) stress the importance of teacher involvement in design of self-directed and collaborative professional development activities (see also, Mann, 2005; and Smith, Connolly & Rebolledo, 2014). Maintaining that teachers can only learn in sustained and meaningful ways when they are able to do so together, Johnston (2009) argues that the crucial features of collaborative teacher development are that teachers must have or share control over the process, and, where research or curriculum development are involved, the goal of teacher development for its own sake must be clearly stated. When collaboration involves university–school partnerships, the support that teachers receive from the academic partner needs to be balanced against the risk that they will lose ownership of the professional development process (Yuan & Lee, 2015). The importance of creating space for teachers to engage in individual thinking and reflection is also stressed (Wang & Zhang, 2014).

Research-based approaches to teacher development in the field of language teaching include reflective language teaching (Farrell, 2007), action research (Burns, 2014; Edwards & Burns, 2016) and exploratory practice (Allwright, 2003; Hanks, 2017a, 2017b). Farrell (2007) explains that reflective language teaching involves collecting data but can result in 'non-observable behaviour changes', such as increased levels of awareness of a teacher's assumptions, beliefs and practices (p. 95). In contrast, for Richards and Farrell (2005), the word 'action' in action research, 'refers to taking practical action to resolve classroom problems' and the primary goal is to improve teaching and learning (p. 117). Exploratory practice focuses on 'puzzles' rather than 'problems' (Allwright, 2003) and emphasises 'practitioners working to *understand* their language learning/teaching issues before attempting problem-solving' (Hanks,

2017b, p. 38). Exploratory practice may also be complemented by narrative inquiry into teachers' experiences of teaching and professional development (Johnson, 2002; Pinner, 2016).

Professional development outcomes have been discussed in a number of studies in which academic collaborators and teachers analyse data from published work or projects that they have been involved in (Burns, 2014; Crane, 2015; Edwards & Burns, 2016). Burns (2014) found that teachers who participated in action research projects in Australia experienced three types of learning: learning about teaching, learning about learners, and learning about engaging with and conducting research. Edwards and Burns (2016) found that, up to four years after participating in action research projects, teachers reported they were more confident, connected to students, research-engaged and recognised by colleagues and managers. Crane (2015) notes a number of benefits to teachers that have been cited in published studies, including awareness of learners' experiences, renewed enthusiasm for teaching and learning, gaining space to study personal and affective issues, opportunities to develop common understanding with colleagues about curricula, and greater understanding of reflective processes. Valuable as these studies are in advancing our understanding of processes of professional development in practitioner research, we believe that there is a need for more studies in which teachers reflect on their own professional development as they experience it in the course of collaborative projects.

In this paper, four practicing teachers from the Macquarie University English Language Centre (ELC) and an academic collaborator from the Applied Linguistics department at the same university, reflect on their experiences of professional development during two exploratory practice projects. Using a narrative inquiry approach that focused on 'turning points', they address the following questions: How did the participants develop professionally by participating in an exploratory practice project? What were the main turning points in their development?

Methods

This study began when the academic collaborator, Phil, was invited to lead a lunchtime professional development session on independent learning at the ELC, in which he presented 10 pedagogical strategies to encourage independent learning. Two collaborative projects on independent learning came out of the session: Book Club Café, a project designed to encourage students to read more outside the classroom, in which Lesley and Jose were experimenting with ways of making extensive reading materials available to students and with formats for a weekly class session (Speer & Lara, 2017); and 'Motivating Learner Independence', in which Gamze and Mary Ann developed pedagogical processes to involve students in the ideas and practice

of independent learning, based on the principle of moving from thoughts to words and then to actions.

Teaching schedules imposed a number of constraints on the projects. ELC classes are taught in five-week blocks. Teaching allocations are made at the end of each block and teachers frequently change classes or class levels. This meant that our projects had to be completed within five weeks and, if they were to be repeated, they had to be designed for a range of different class levels. Innovations had to fit with a relatively tight curriculum and regular assessments. Project team meetings were also constrained as teachers on morning and afternoon sessions could only meet during the 45-minute lunch break. End of block meetings were difficult to arrange when one block ended on Friday afternoon and the next began on Monday morning.

The two teams opted for an exploratory practice approach for three main reasons: (i) the idea of 'understanding a puzzle' appealed; (ii) the teachers were attracted by the idea of embedding the project in the existing curriculum; (iii) exploratory practice supported a cyclical approach to practice and evaluation that suited scheduling and time constraints. A pattern emerged, in which each project evolved from block to block over a year. Toward the end of the year, the two teams came together to prepare a presentation on sustainability and transferability of pedagogical innovations for a local TESOL conference. This led to a second phase of the project in which our attention shifted from the projects themselves to reflection on the impact of exploratory practice on our own professional development.

The approach that we adopted in this second phase was based both on reflective practice (Richards & Farrell, 2005) and narrative inquiry (Barkhuizen, Benson, & Chik, 2014). We each had a sense that we had developed professionally, but found it difficult to articulate or conceptualise exactly how we had developed. Therefore, we decided to engage in systematic retrospective reflection in an attempt to recover the processes of change that we had experienced. As an approach that is especially suited to capturing experiences of change, narrative inquiry provided the structure for this reflection as we drafted, shared and redrafted the narratives that make up the findings for this study. In order to give focus to this process of reflective narrative inquiry, we first interviewed each other on our experiences of the projects. We then met to discuss the interview transcripts in order to identify 'turning points' (Bruner, 2001) in the projects that were, in retrospect, pivotal to our professional development. The writing process itself was carried out in a series of meetings over a year and, as is often the case in teacher research projects, contributed much to our understanding (Pinner, 2016). In this phase, we drafted and redrafted the narratives to elaborate on the turning points we had identified and shared feedback online and in face-to-face meetings. These narratives represent our individual responses to the questions

that guided the study and also reflect our understandings of our own professional development as it evolved through the exploratory practice and narrative inquiry phases of the project. At a final project meeting, we reviewed these narratives and, through discussion, identified the shared areas of development that are summarised under the heading of 'shared experiences'.

Narratives of exploratory practice

Lesley

Like all language teachers, I am constantly looking for ways to improve my students' language skills and to that end, I attend conferences and as many professional development courses as possible. However, I had always seen professional development as something theoretical, which occurred outside the classroom and was delivered by experts in the field to the teachers, who were passive recipients. It never occurred to me that what I was doing in the classroom could also be regarded as a form of professional development. It was only when Book Club Café evolved into an exploratory practice study that I came to the realisation that professional development is continuous, and that it can happen among colleagues in a horizontal manner as well as in a vertical or top-down direction. I had already been working at the ELC for seven years when we started the project and I had been teaching for several decades. However, I had never undertaken 'research' as such and I had certainly never seen a connection between research conducted by the teacher in the classroom and professional development.

'Accidental' professional development

The first step in the research process was taken when my colleague, Jose, and I decided to combine our classes for Book Club Café sessions to try to motivate our students to engage in more reading in their free time. This informal collaboration led to conversations in the staff room, which were overheard by other teachers, although we weren't aware of it at the time. The project went well and the students began to read more, but after a few weeks, a major turning point came when I overheard a conversation in my shared office. Two teachers were discussing the Book Club Café, and I realised that one was training the other in how to run a Book Club Café, session during class, using the model we had implemented. I realised that other teachers had been listening to our informal discussions in the staffroom and they had decided to try out the project with their own students. Undoubtedly the strong sense of teamwork and collegiality in the ELC had contributed to this sharing of ideas and there followed a number of discussions about the benefits and challenges of implementing extensive reading. The positive reaction towards the project from our colleagues gave me the confidence to continue the project and to explore ways to extend it.

Exploration of our teaching leads to more opportunities for professional growth through collaboration with other teachers

After a few months of the project and as more teachers were beginning to implement our program, we began working with Phil, who introduced us to the concept of exploratory practice and mentored us in its application. With Phil and the two teachers who were involved in 'Motivating Learner Independence', we presented a paper at the TESOL Research Network Colloquium' in Sydney in 2015. The process of preparing this presentation forced me to look more closely at Book Club Café in terms of its sustainability over time and transferability to other teaching contexts. The model of exploratory practice gave me another perspective on professional development. I realised that by examining what was happening in our classroom and sharing it with other teachers, we were all expanding our database of knowledge, and developing our skills. At the same time, I have developed better collaborative strategies and have learnt how to conduct classroom research as part of a team. Taking part in the exploratory practice study has also provided me with a structured approach to analysing my teaching, which in turn has made it easier to reflect upon, and make changes to my classroom teaching.

So what have I learnt from the exploratory practice study? Apart from attaining a greater understanding of how students learn, and being inspired to continue to develop our reading project, I have learnt that professional development can take many forms. To use Allwright's (2003) terminology, by looking for 'puzzles' in our teaching contexts rather than seeing 'problems', teachers are empowered to use their own resources to increase their understanding of what is happening in the classroom. The critical factor lies in the sharing of this understanding as we establish our own personal learning networks. Certainly, the whole process has given me more confidence as a teacher and I have learnt to place even more value on the benefits of encouraging teachers to work together to make things better for our students.

Jose

As a full time teacher, the concept of research seemed quite distant and somewhat 'reserved' only for academics with PhDs. As I waited for an opportunity to do some kind of research, I started to consider different avenues of professional development as a way to maintain and update my teaching skills. It was not until I attended the professional development session conducted by Phil, that the opportunity to conduct some sort of research finally arose. This opportunity, which presented itself in the form of an exploratory practice study, would become one of the most valuable professional development experiences that I have had in my 20 years of teaching. By following the guidelines of an exploratory practice study, not only were my colleague Lesley and I able to motivate our students to do more reading for pleasure outside

class time with our extensive reading project, but I also learnt about two aspects of teaching that I had not previously explored.

More student engagement through freedom of choice

It had always been evident that most of my students did not understand the importance and value of voluntary reading. For this reason, at the beginning of Book Club Café, we decided to conduct questionnaires with our students, which indicated that the topics presented in most graded readers were limited and of little or no interest to students. Because of this, they found reading a boring and disengaging learning activity. Additionally, I learned that the lack of freedom in selecting texts contributed to the low levels of motivation towards reading. Lesley and I managed to overcome this problem by introducing a number of websites which provided a large range of texts containing a wide variety of text types and topics. With the introduction of these websites, the students had access to reading resources that they were genuinely interested in, and this resulted in higher levels of motivation and attitude towards reading. After having experienced first-hand the importance of freedom of choice, I could see how I seldom used to incorporate this factor into my lessons. As a result, I try as much as possible to let my students choose the topics not only for reading-related activities, but also for listening and speaking tasks, and in this way, I am seeing better results both in their performance and motivation.

Away from comprehension questions

Using a standard approach to teaching reading, I used to prepare follow-up activities that were primarily based on comprehension questions that I prepared beforehand. This meant that I had to invest a great amount of time reading the texts before I could write such questions. This, in addition to being time-consuming, also meant that my students felt that the focus of the reading was to be tested, thus adding to their already low motivation. After observing this, my colleague Lesley and I substituted the comprehension-based approach by completely student-centred follow-up activities, which allowed students to use the information they gathered through voluntary reading in a more entertaining and valuable manner. The first was peer teaching of vocabulary. Later, other activities, such as role-plays, creation of class glossaries, summarising stories, drawing of pictures and critical evaluation of texts, were introduced. I soon realised that the use of these kinds of follow-up activities had substantially and positively contributed to the participation and motivation of the students in regard to reading.

Beyond having assisted me in developing Book Club Café and the lessons learnt along the way, being part of this exploratory practice study gave me the chance to reduce the gap between research and pedagogy. But most importantly, given that

I was able to do so with a project that I felt passionate about and with my own students, exploratory practice provided me with a hands-on opportunity to make my professional development more meaningful, personalised and contextualised.

Gamze

At the beginning of my university studies, I developed an interest in learning about the new advances in the fields of languages and education. Having a background in TESOL as well as training and development allowed me to integrate these two fields throughout my career, focusing on knowledge networks, learning organisations, professional development and continuous education. This one-year longitudinal project contributed to my professional development in multiple dimensions: personal, motivational and intellectual.

My story evolved around three major themes. The first theme is the compass. After attending Phil's professional development session on independent learning, I was inspired to orchestrate an exploratory practice approach and navigate my teaching focusing on specific pedagogical concepts. The second theme is the creation of a new framework, 'Motivating Learner Independence', which aims at promoting learner independence by stimulating students' thoughts, words and actions. The third theme of my story is the circle of empowerment – the ripple effect of participants' positive influences on each other.

The compass

Phil's workshop provided us with practical tools and knowledge base to promote independent learning. Specifically, the 10 pedagogical strategies that were introduced during the session provided a clear road map, with a new scope and parameters. I was especially interested in focusing on independent inquiry, reflective practice and peer teaching. With this new direction, I started to think about how I can incorporate these three pedagogical strategies into my teaching methodology and curriculum.

A new framework

The inspiration for our project started with a motive. How can we encourage our students to become more active learners inside and outside the classroom and motivate them to take more responsibility for their learning? I wanted to understand our students' thought processes and how I can guide them in their journey to become independent, self-reliant learners.

The second defining moment of this project came along when my colleague, Mary Ann, and I developed a new framework after our brainstorming sessions. 'Motivating Learner Independence' is a unique composition that involves incremental stages of developing new thoughts, word associations, reinforcing new actions and reflections,

and spiralling into deeper understandings to stimulate learner independence. This new approach allowed us to be more observant, reflective and creative in our teaching as we tailored it according to students' needs, monitored the outcomes and added a wide range of extracurricular activities inside and outside the classroom to enrich the curriculum.

Circle of empowerment

Another significant outcome of this study was the interconnectedness, support, collegiality and encouragement among teachers, colleagues, lecturers, administrators and students as a whole. As we shared our experiences, reflected upon the outcomes, challenges and improvements, we developed a thorough understanding of the dynamics, needs and motives of our students and ourselves. This integrated network of collaborative learning became a community which empowered me personally and professionally.

The outcomes of this study can be encapsulated in three areas: pedagogical, instructional and professional. I developed a better understanding of the pedagogical outcomes, and the motivational and affective factors that facilitate or inhibit learning. Parallel to that, I started to focus more on developing needs-based strategies, tailor-made tools and techniques to maximise student learning and developing learner independence. As an overarching reflection, this project contributed to my professional development in numerous areas: observing, deeper understanding of the nature and dynamics of the learning environment and participants, analysing, reflecting, researching, finding ways to improve the curriculum, mentoring and sharing. My professional development throughout this project also contributed to my personal growth and increased my knowledge and awareness.

Above all, the most rewarding outcome of this project for me was to develop a deeper sense of mindfulness and insight in expanding the ability of the mind to focus more on the 'moment of learning' and comprehending.

Mary Ann

Exploratory practice, in the context of 'Motivating Learner Independence', has proved to be a catalyst in my professional journey as a teacher. Prior to identifying suitable methodologies for the implementation of this project, Gamze and I raised ideas by brainstorming and discussing observations from our own experiences as teachers in the classroom. In particular, we were interested in the lack of initiative and motivation demonstrated by our English language students in their learning environments. In early meetings, we discussed possible reasons for the lack of learner engagement and the students' passive responses to learning. I suggested that perhaps learners were less active in their environments due to their previous learning experiences in

their home countries. With the majority of learners being from Asian backgrounds and only exposed to such cultural styles of education, I made the assumption that this explained their reluctance to be actively involved in their own language development. However, exploratory practice encouraged me to challenge these assumptions, so that I could more definitely identify the reasons for the lack of learner engagement.

Puzzles rather than problems

The first turning point in this project for me as a teacher was being inspired to look at challenging situations as 'puzzles' rather than 'problems'. By simply becoming aware of the literature around the principles of exploratory practice, I was offered a new perspective or way of thinking. This was a more constructive approach that liberated me from the barriers imposed by seeing the challenge of learner motivation as a 'problem'. This principle of exploratory practice meant that there was a need for me to delve more deeply in understanding learners' needs. In doing so, it acted as a starting point for me to be more consciously attentive and responsive to students' needs, while challenging my personal approaches to teaching in practice. It also led to the next stage of acquiring data from students, which would either challenge or affirm personal presumptions.

Away with the assumptions

Making the assumption that students were passive learners due to their previous learning experiences is one example of many assumptions that I brought to the classroom on a daily basis. The critical thinking skills fostered by methods of exploratory practice forced me to question and challenge the ideas and assumptions that I held. Such skills were necessary to the development of this project and the acquisition of authentic data from students. The first lesson in the implementation process was designed to elicit information from students about prior learning experiences. However, the results and information gathered seemed to be almost scripted and generic in nature. Students gave few examples of personal experiences, but rather produced responses that tended to be very similar to each other and lacked personal expression of ideas.

This led to the second turning point. When reflecting on data gathered, I could see that perhaps learners were giving answers to my questions, based on what they thought I wanted to hear. This turning point caused me to make changes to how I would pose questions and elicit information from students. I became more aware of the need to ensure questions were not structured in a way that led to a specific answer or implied assumptions, and began to ask more open questions and fewer closed questions. When I made changes to my questioning and discussion tactics, it seemed that it produced results, which included more personal reflections and a broader and more

diverse range of data. It also encouraged a richer, deeper response from learners, which dispelled some of my preconceptions and assumptions. It demonstrated that although there were some students whose prior educational experiences were similar to those I had envisaged, there were also individual differences in many of their previous experiences and individual interpretations of their roles as learners.

Apart from supporting the development of 'Motivating Learner Independence', exploratory practice has enabled me to take part in self-directed professional development. It was flexible enough to be personalised to meet my individual professional needs to gain a different perspective and understanding how my personal assumptions influenced my teaching practice. It helped me to move forward with current literature, in developing research skills to aid my investigation and led to strategies that helped to motivate and encourage learner independence.

Phil

In my contribution, I reflect on my professional development as an academic collaborator, rather than as a language teacher, and, especially, on how this development was informed by the exploratory practice framework that evolved during the project. My turning points reflect changed understandings of my role as a non-teaching collaborator in teacher research, in the context of persistent concerns over what I could contribute to teachers' professional development without indulging in offering 'expert', but inappropriate, theoretically motivated advice.

Offering a different perspective

In the early stages, I observed several of Jose and Lesley's Book Club Café sessions. They would divide their classes into groups of three or four students, introduce the task (students summarising what they had read and sharing new words they had learned) and monitor as the groups worked. I would join a group and observe, usually without intervening. A repeated concern in my observation notes was that there was little interaction in some groups, because the students were struggling with the language they needed to explain new words. I felt this was something that I could see and hear as an observer sitting in on groups, that Jose and Lesley might miss from their vantage point as roving monitors. I passed this insight on in a team meeting and Jose and Lesley made adjustments to the classroom materials and procedures. This moment stays with me a turning point, however, because it represents a point when I understood that I could advise not as an 'expert', but simply as a participant with a different perspective on what was happening in the classroom.

Missing the point

In the 'Motivating Learner Independence' classes, Mary Ann tended to work with the whole class seated in a circle, while I observed silently from the side. To

prepare for one class, she asked students to bring in pictures that represented their understanding of independence and then share their pictures and thoughts with the class. In my observation notes, I wrote, 'This is a great lesson, can we "bottle" it?' Noticing that some of the students' pictures were too small for the whole class to see, I also noted the idea of building up a bank of larger laminated pictures that teachers could use for this activity. In a reflection meeting, I suggested this to Mary Ann. She responded, 'Yes . . . but isn't the point for the *students* to find the pictures?' I still squirm a little as I remember this incident, because I instantly realised how 'teacher trainer-y' my comment had been. To collaborate constructively, I understood, I would have to get inside the class teacher's perspective before opening my mouth.

Challenging questions

My third turning point came towards the end of the project in a conversation with the ELC Director of Academic Programmes, who had set up the professional development collaboration and regularly asked the participating teachers how it was going. The feedback, she told me, was that things were going well. What the teachers most appreciated, she said, was how I had asked challenging questions at each stage of the project. This surprised me, because I had not intentionally used questioning as a professional development strategy. Throughout the project, I had focused on the advice I should be giving, and not on the questions I should ask. But I recalled one conversation with Gamze in which I had repeatedly asked her how she thought a particular class involved independent learning. If my questions had been challenging, I realised, it was because they were genuine and emerged in the heat of trying to understand how her classroom practice matched her intentions. Now, I understood that the questions were more valuable than the advice that eventually followed.

Although my own professional development was not originally a goal of this collaborative project, I realise now that I have, in fact, developed a great deal. Looking back on my turning points, I see that the process of development has been very much about resolving puzzles about my role as academic collaborator. It is standard practice that the academic in this kind of collaboration should observe, listen and question, rather than advise; in this sense, I had learned something I already knew. The exploratory practice approach, however, had helped me internalise that knowledge and become more comfortable with that role. For me, exploratory practice is essentially about maintaining a sustained focus on day-to-day life in the classroom, trying things out, asking questions, and trying to answer them from different perspectives. What emerged from this, in my case, was a depth of learning that is less a matter of knowledge than of learning to inhabit a certain way of being an academic collaborator in teacher professional development.

Shared experience

Reviewing the five narratives collectively, we found that our professional development involved Burns's (2014) three general areas of learning about teaching, learners and research and several of the specific areas identified by Edwards and Burns (2016) and Crane (2015). At the same time, our narratives highlighted two additional areas of development that have received less emphasis in previous studies: learning to work with others and learning about professional development itself.

The projects involved learning to work with others in several ways. Lesley and Jose were already working together on Book Club Café, but not as teacher–research partners. Gamze and Mary Ann had not worked together before. None of the ELC teachers had worked with an academic collaborator before, and this was also Phil's first experience of such a collaboration. The collaboration between the two groups in the second phase of the project was uncharted territory for all of us. In 'Motivating Learner Independence', the themes of transferability and sustainability were mainly explored in the context of Gamze and Mary Ann's collaboration with each other; in Book Club Café the spread of the project to other ELC teachers introduced a new dimension of collaboration that Lesley was keen to explore. This may explain why working with others is most strongly thematised in her narrative. The teachers in this study shared the experience of teachers in Wang and Zhang's (2014) study, who discussed their action research projects and shared success studies and progress with colleagues. We are reminded, here, of Johnston's (2009) observation that teachers can only learn in sustained and meaningful ways when they are able to do so together. We also identify a broader willingness and capacity to engage with colleagues other than those they collaborate with in a specific project as a major outcome of participating in exploratory practice.

Learning about the professional development process was closely linked to collaboration as it involved understanding how professional development could be a self-directed, collaborative process. It was also a matter of allowing our assumptions about learning and teaching to be challenged and to evolve inquiry-based approaches to teaching. This theme was present to some degree in all the narratives, but emerges most strongly in Mary Ann's narrative. We are reminded, in this case, of the importance that has been attached to teachers' involvement in the design and management of professional development activities (Chappell & Benson, 2013). As the opening of Lesley's narrative suggests, teachers are used to cultures of top-down professional development. If conceptions of professional development can be placed along a continuum from improving teaching practice to personal and professional growth (Wyatt and Ager, 2017), we might say that the main outcomes of this project were at the growth end of the continuum. At the same time, the participants did also

improve their teaching practice, so that it would be more accurate to say that they experienced an evolution along the continuum, and that awareness of the process of professional development emerged toward the end of the project.

Arguably, these professional development outcomes emerged from teacher research, rather than exploratory practice specifically. However, there may well be a link between exploratory practice and the specific outcomes of learning to work with others and professional development. Our initial preference for exploratory practice was chiefly based on a perception that it represented a sustainable approach to teacher research. It involved identification of puzzles and a collaborative search for understanding, but also a commitment to sustained experimentation and reflection that progressively deepened understandings of these puzzles. As one of us put it in a project meeting, exploratory practice was a flexible approach that provided just enough structure for sustained and meaningful reflection on practice. Narrative inquiry, which contributed much to our understanding of the professional development process, was also a natural development of the exploratory practice approach, in which attention shifted from one puzzle to another as the project developed.

Conclusion

Focusing on the professional development outcomes in exploratory practice, this paper has highlighted two areas of development – working with others and awareness of professional development processes – that have not been emphasised in previous studies. Because evidence-based studies on teacher research and professional development are still relatively few in number, we hope this will be pursued in further studies in which participants explore their experiences of professional development in teacher research. We have also come to attach particular value to formal reflection on our experience of teacher research, through collaborative narrative enquiry. It was during this reflective phase that we began to move beyond conclusions that were specific to and embedded within the two projects toward more complex understandings of the processes of professional development. One limitation of this approach is that a protracted period of collaboration might not be possible in other circumstances. Nevertheless, we would argue that the study shows evidence of the value of extending teacher research projects, albeit for shorter periods, to include a follow-up phase of explicit reflection on professional development outcomes.

Phil Benson is Professor of Applied Linguistics at Macquarie University. He has taught English as a foreign or second language in Algeria, Kuwait, Seychelles, Malaysia, Japan and Hong Kong, and now supervises higher degree students and lectures on the Master of Applied Linguistics program at Macquarie.

philip.benson@mq.edu.au

MaryAnn Chehade is currently teaching at Macquarie University, English Language Centre. She is specifically interested in learner autonomy, sociolinguistics and teacher professional development.

maryann.chehade@mq.edu.au

Jose Lara is a teacher and coordinator at the Macquarie University English Language Centre in Sydney. He is particularly interested in extensive reading and the use of technology in the classroom.

jose.lara@mq.edu.au

Gamze A. Sayram has a background in TESOL and applied linguistics. Her research interests include SLA, bilingualism, cognitive linguistics, learner autonomy, feedback, and assessment. She teaches English language courses at the Macquarie University English Language Centre, and has coordinated programs and mentored practicum teachers.

gamze.sayram@mq.edu.au

Lesley Speer is a teacher and coordinator at the Macquarie University English Language Centre in Sydney. She is particularly interested in extensive reading and motivation.

lesley.speer@mq.edu.au

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