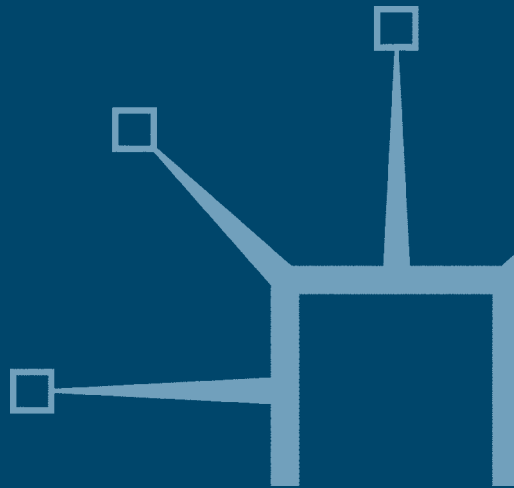


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The Developing Language Learner

An Introduction to Exploratory Practice

Dick Allwright and Judith Hanks



Research and Practice in Applied Linguistics

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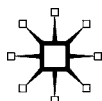
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To Joan, Kate, Isobel, Lucy and Sophie
To Helga, Peter and Stephen

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General Editors' Preface

Research and Practice in Applied Linguistics is an international book series from Palgrave Macmillan which brings together leading researchers and teachers in Applied Linguistics to provide readers with the knowledge and tools they need to undertake their own practice related research. Books in the series are designed for students and researchers in Applied Linguistics, TESOL, Language Education and related subject areas, and for language professionals keen to extend their research experience.

Every book in this innovative series is designed to be user-friendly, with clear illustrations and accessible style. The quotations and definitions of key concepts that punctuate the main text are intended to ensure that many, often competing, voices are heard. Each book presents a concise historical and conceptual overview of its chosen field, identifying many lines of enquiry and findings, but also gaps and disagreements. It provides readers with an overall framework for further examination of how research and practice inform each other, and how practitioners can develop their own problem-based research.

The focus throughout is on exploring the relationship between research and practice in Applied Linguistics. How far can research provide answers to the questions and issues that arise in practice? Can research questions that arise and are examined in very specific circumstances be informed by, and inform, the global body of research and practice? What different kinds of information can be obtained from different research methodologies? How should we make a selection between the options available, and how far are different methods compatible with each other? How can the results of research be turned into practical action?

The books in this series identify some of the key researchable areas in the field and provide workable examples of research projects, backed up by details of appropriate research tools and resources. Case studies and exemplars of research and practice are drawn on throughout the books. References to key institutions, individual research lists, journals and professional organizations provide starting points for gathering information and embarking on research. The books also include annotated lists of key works in the field for further study.

The overall objective of the series is to illustrate the message that in Applied Linguistics there can be no good professional practice that isn't based on good research, and there can be no good research that isn't informed by practice.

CHRISTOPHER N. CANDLIN and DAVID R. HALL
Macquarie University, Sydney

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1

General Introduction: Learners, and What We Think of Them

This chapter will:

- explain what we mean by calling learners *key developing practitioners*;
- introduce five propositions about this view of learners;
- explain why we believe these propositions are important;
- outline our plans for the whole book.

Introduction

‘Learners are interesting, at least as interesting as teachers.’

Many years ago, because everybody appeared eternally preoccupied with teachers, Dick Allwright (1980: 165) started an academic paper with this statement of the blazingly obvious. Teachers were the major focus of attention, always had been and always would be, it seemed. Now, more than 25 years later, we can see some progress, but not nearly enough to secure for learners the amount and quality of attention we believe their importance justifies. In this volume we want to put learners fully at centre-stage, alongside teachers, as *key developing practitioners* in their own right.

Quote 1.1 Tudor on learners

We can no longer assume that our students are ‘simply’ students, nor that they are bundles of discrete variables. They are complex human beings who bring with them to the classroom their own individual personality as it is at a given point in time, and this influences how they interact with what we do as teachers.

(2001: 14)

What we mean by 'key developing practitioners'

First, by insisting on the term *practitioner* we want to make it easier to see the learner's role as importantly parallel to the role of the people we already happily see as 'practitioners' – the teachers. Teachers are officially in charge of the practice of language teaching in the classroom, but they have to leave the actual practice of language learning to the learners. Only the learners can do their own learning. And it is their parallel practice as learners that either will or will not effectively complement the efforts of teachers and of other, more 'background' language professionals (like textbook writers and curriculum developers) to make language classrooms productive. So why not try to think of learners as *practitioners of learning*, and not just as 'targets of teaching'?

Second, we want to insist on the notion of *development*. Language professionals increasingly think of their work in terms of their own development, but do not use the term as happily in relation to learners. But why should we not consider learner development a viable and parallel concept? We want learners to develop as learners; to become better at it, better able to enjoy and profit from the courses we provide, and eventually both able and eager to carry on learning after our courses are over.

Learners can develop, do develop and will develop, whether or not language professionals recognise the fact. But if we make a direct parallel between teacher development and learner development, explore its implications in some depth and then look for ways of assisting learner development, we can expect it to be highly productive for all concerned.

Third, we insist on the term *key* because we want to convey the message that calling learners 'developing practitioners' is not just a descriptive matter; it is a profoundly important professional matter. Learners are key because they are the only people who can do their own learning. They also have what is virtually a 'right of veto' over the teaching, and perhaps over their own learning. As Cortis wrote many years ago: 'no teacher teaches except by consent' (1977: 66). Learners are crucially important to their own learning. That inescapable fact is key to the whole issue of how language professionals may or may not be able to help them.

Learners speaking for themselves

Such a positive view of learners could be dismissed as naively optimistic and impractical, a typical product of educational idealism. So let us hear from learners, to show that the approach we are advocating is



Photo 1.1 Learners at an EP conference in Rio.

already a reality for some. The Rio de Janeiro Exploratory Practice Group (the Rio EP Group) is a group of language teachers and learners in Brazil. They have been instrumental for more than 15 years in developing the principles and practices of Exploratory Practice, the type of inclusive practitioner research we shall advocate later in this volume and throughout Part III. One of the Group's founding members, Maria Isabel A. Cunha ('Bebel'), talked to three eighth graders from the *Colegio Dom Quixote* in Rio in 2006 about an investigation they had conducted into their learning lives. They had reported on by poster at a teacher and learner conference two years before, in 2004, when they were twelve years old (the interviews were translated from Portuguese by Bebel):

Interview with learners 1.1 Learners talking about teachers

Bebel: Do you feel that many people don't believe that students can think about such topics?

Lucas Souto: Some adults think that we complain about homework just because we want to complain about something, because we want to have fun... Because homework is good for us and we should do it. Because we don't think about the consequences of things, we only want to have fun.

Lucas Lombardi: Some teachers 'advance' things. Many teachers think we only want to play. Some teachers say that we learn things because we are

going to use them later, in three years' time or so. But we don't know about that, we are starting 8th grade now. Sometimes we ask a teacher: don't you think you're assigning too much homework? Ten pages! And he answers: in the entrance exam [to university] you won't have an easy time, things are very difficult! We still have three years to get used to this.

Lucas Souto: We are not thinking about entrance exams now. Now we want to play and pass at the end of this year.

Pedro Baulman: A teacher should learn with the students.

Lucas Lombardi: The teachers who know that they learn with their students are the ones we like most.

Lucas Souto: It's better for the learning process if the teacher has a good relationship with her students, and the learners with their teacher. If the teacher understands the students, we won't be ashamed to ask her, we can have open talks with the teacher.

Lucas Lombardi: The teachers who understand the students (the ones who assign less homework) did not forget they used to be our age. Because many grow up and forget, they say: I'll assign homework anyway, they have to do it, they have to learn the same way I learned. It was hard for me, so it has to be hard on them.

Lucas Souto: It was hard for me but I survived, so they will have to as well.

Lucas Lombardi: Some teachers think: man, I didn't like doing this, so I'll go slowly on them, so they can learn ...

Lucas Souto: It's not just assigning a little homework, but depends on how you assign it. For example, this poster is work, but it's not a book, it's nicer. And so we do it with pleasure, there's no problem.

Lucas Lombardi: If the environment is pleasant, not stressed, the students get home, call their friends, prepare a poster, then we go out, we play soccer.

Lucas Souto: Especially if it is a topic we like, a topic that interests us. Interesting to us, to us.

The work of teacher and learner members of the Rio EP Group will feature largely in Part III. Group members also wrote Chapter 14, which describes the 'web of life' of the Group. In Part III we will also present case studies and other evidence of practitioner research from England, Hong Kong, Israel, Japan and Turkey. The work in Rio is, however, the longest established (starting with Dick Allwright's visit in 1990), and the most advanced for learner development.

Five Propositions about learners

Our thinking, and the inspiration such learners provide, leads us to the Five Propositions we shall use throughout this volume as a shorthand of how we would like learners to be treated by us language professionals. First, they will provide a framework for reviewing the field as it has developed and as it is now. Then they will inform our proposals for a way forward for anyone who, like us, wishes not only to develop general understanding of

classroom language learning, but also, and crucially, to do so in a way that helps learners develop *their* understandings, and so develop as *key practitioners of learning*. We shall propose ‘inclusive practitioner research’ where, as in Rio, teachers and learners are co-practitioners, and where learners investigate their own puzzles about their own learning lives.

Proposition 1: Learners are unique individuals who learn and develop best in their own idiosyncratic ways

Treating learners as key practitioners means respecting their unique individuality. They will not be best served if we expect them to learn, and develop as practitioners of learning, in exactly the same way as everybody else, from the same classroom activities, and so on. We shall explore this further, but for now we can simply note that textbooks and lesson plans, and the way teachers are trained to use them, typically do still seem to assume that classroom learners are best treated, to put it crudely, as ‘an undifferentiated mass’. Learners in a classroom group may have much in common, but we now know enough about learning to understand just how idiosyncratic it can be, and usually is. Each lesson is a different lesson for every learner.

Proposition 2: Learners are social beings who learn and develop best in a mutually supportive environment

Second, learners may be unique individuals, but they are also social beings, and classroom learning is essentially social. (If learners are *anti-social* that is a different matter, but note they can only *be* anti-social in a social setting.) So learners are not entirely free agents. The presence of others constrains what they can do in the classroom. So, we can expect learners to be caught between wanting to be unique and individual, and knowing they need to be aware of, and careful about, their effect on others. But these ‘others’ are also their major resource for mutual support. Learning strictly alone may be possible, even attractive for some, but most people seem happy to acknowledge that being in a learning group is likely to be far more enjoyable and far more productive because of the mutual support such a group can provide.

Proposition 3: Learners are capable of taking learning seriously

If learners are key practitioners, then we must take them seriously, as serious people. As we shall see throughout Part I, this is a key underlying issue for many aspects of the work of language professionals. A good many experienced language professionals consider that the learners they

know are really not serious about learning. Around the world what seems to concern teachers most, for example, is their learners' apparent lack of motivation. There are distinguished exceptions, as we have seen and shall see again in Part III, but the general picture is largely negative. We can expect teachers who *perceive* their learners that way to *treat* them as people incapable of being serious about learning. But experience also tells us that people tend to conform to what others expect of them, and expectations can work positively as well as negatively.

Whether or not learners are serious about their learning is a matter of great social importance in the classroom. Some learners even hide their seriousness of purpose to avoid the social consequences of being thought too keen. The teacher then gets a false impression of their attitude to learning. So it may help to *treat* learners as being capable of taking learning seriously, even if their behaviour suggests otherwise.

Proposition 4: Learners are capable of independent decision-making

Key practitioners capable of taking learning seriously are not going to be always told precisely what to do, when to do it, how to do it and who to do it with. Unfortunately, though, many language classes around the world are like this. Language curricula, syllabuses, textbooks and lesson plans all tend to leave little space for learners to learn how to take their own, necessarily idiosyncratic, decisions about what to learn, when to learn it, how to learn it, and so on. So, if learners never learn how, it is hardly surprising that teachers typically consider them to be *incapable* of taking independent decisions.

Proposition 5: Learners are capable of developing as practitioners of learning

We cannot expect learners, especially young ones, to be fully developed as learners when they come together in language classes. Their ability and maturity as learners will leave room for development, perhaps towards taking their own learning seriously, and taking productive independent decisions about it. From Proposition 1 we can expect learners to develop best if they are treated as unique and idiosyncratic, not as an undifferentiated mass. Following Proposition 2, when we start trying to help learners develop as 'key practitioners of learning', we can expect to see that development itself is best seen as a mutual social process where we all gain most by sharing understandings, ideas and experiences.

Language professionals influence this process by the way they treat learners, for good or ill. Unfortunately, as we shall explore in Part I,

language learners around the world do not very often experience anything beyond a rudimentary notion of learner development.

We present our propositions not really as ‘news’, since our view of learners is hardly new – the work in Rio has been going on for more than 15 years now, for example. Rather, we present them as a guide to the ideas that will permeate this volume. They will structure our review in Parts I and II of work in applied linguistics to do with classroom language learning and teaching, and in Part III we shall see how they can be incorporated into inclusive practitioner research.

Concept 1.1 Our Five Propositions

Proposition 1: Learners are unique individuals who learn and develop best in their own idiosyncratic ways.

Proposition 2: Learners are social beings who learn and develop best in a mutually supportive environment.

Proposition 3: Learners are capable of taking learning seriously.

Proposition 4: Learners are capable of independent decision-making.

Proposition 5: Learners are capable of developing as practitioners of learning.

But if there’s nothing new, why read on?

Our five fundamental propositions would probably get ready agreement among language teaching professionals, and perhaps among education professionals in general, so are we not pushing at an open door? Perhaps, but first, the implications of these ideas are, we believe, potentially much more powerful and exciting than people generally realise. We shall not develop that thought here, because it should become apparent as the volume proceeds. For now, we focus on the perennial worry that classroom reality for most learners lags a long way behind the ‘best’ ideas.

Basically, views like ours, however widely endorsed they may be, have not made much difference to the lived experiences of learners in classrooms around the world. Instead, except for the work in Rio and some ‘maverick’ institutions like Neill’s Summerhill (Neill, 1968), education as a whole is currently in a state of tension between two apparently irreconcilable forces. The first is the desire among teachers to follow their own ‘sense of plausibility’, to use Prabhu’s (1987: 103–4) evocative term, about how best to help learners learn. The second is the often overwhelming pressure to conform to national institutional demands for standardisation: to ensure accountability by following the official curriculum, by teaching in the officially approved way and by preparing

learners for the examinations that the authorities impose. This pressure for standardisation de-professionalises teachers. It also brings with it, by implication, pressure to think that learners are not really key developing practitioners, and therefore not worth treating in accordance with our Five Propositions. That would be asking for trouble!

Quote 1.2 Breen on the dangers of standardisation

... governments have mobilized standards of achievement and competencies in education, the accountability of educators and the new rationalism of 'evidence-based' practices. Such measures have been put in place on the basis of two unproven assumptions: that whatever teachers achieved before is no longer adequate and that systems of bureaucratic surveillance of teachers' work will improve their students' performance.

(2006: 206–7)

Quote 1.3 Prabhu on the dangers of standardisation

A good system of education ... is not one in which all or most teachers carry out the same recommended classroom procedures but rather a system in which (1) all, or most, teachers operate with a sense of plausibility about whatever procedures they choose to adopt, and (2) each teacher's sense of plausibility is as 'alive' or active, and hence as open to further development or change as it can be.

(1987: 106)

Learners who are treated as serious people capable of independent decision-making and so on, are not going to accept that the institutional pressure towards standardisation is in their individual best interests. Standardisation means treating all learners in the same way in very important respects – with the same curriculum, the same examinations, and so on. It does not allow for meaningful differential treatment. Taking learners seriously means giving them the freedom to think and to express their views about their education. They will notice, and resent, the contradiction between being taken seriously as learners by their teachers and yet not being allowed, by those same teachers, acting as agents for the state, to operate in any real sense as key developing practitioners.

Quote 1.4 Tudor on the uniqueness of learners

Over three decades of research into learners' subjective interaction with language study has led us to acknowledge the uniqueness of each language

learner, and therefore of the need to accommodate this uniqueness, and, in this way, the learner's identity, in our pedagogical actions and choices.

(2001: 14)

Teachers whose 'sense of plausibility' encourages such a challenge face an additional problem. Their colleagues may think they are threatening the achievement of the school's official goals because standardisation is crucial to the official need to compare schools in terms of measurable achievement (the so-called league tables). Doing well in such comparisons is in turn crucial to the overall 'health', even survival, of each school. Anything that threatens standardisation threatens measurable school achievement and ultimately school income. Teachers who endanger measurable school achievement, let alone school income, or who even appear to be willing to risk doing so, can expect to be under pressure to conform to the requirements for standardisation.

Quote 1.5 Gilbert (author of *I'm a Teacher, Get Me Out of Here!*) on 'bullying' in the English educational system

The pressures on teachers today to attain good results are enormous.... Headteachers are bullied by numerous agencies and people – [government], governors, parents, the local education authority, the education department – if they fail to reach targets. As a result, management in many schools then bully staff if they don't meet these targets.... And, at the end of it all, schools do get better results. But does it do us any good in the long run?... I fear that our obsession with results is causing us to miss the point of education entirely.

(2004a: 5)

Arguing against standardisation is very different from being against standards, however. We want teachers to work to the highest standards they are capable of, but that is a very personal professional matter and one that is made much more difficult if institutions insist on standardisation, making everyone work in precisely the same way. As we write, in 2007/8, there are signs, in the UK at least, of some official recognition of the problem, but not enough for us to rejoice just yet.

Standardising teaching also implies a 'universalistic view' of learners, seeing them as an 'undifferentiated mass' (against our Proposition 1). This also implies in practice, and against our Proposition 2, a curiously *asocial* view of learners. The individuals in the mass are expected to act just like each other, as clones might, rather than as a group of unique indi-

viduals in an essentially social setting. This implies that it makes sense to look for '*the one best*' teaching method, as if any one method could be the best for everybody everywhere. We shall see throughout Part I how such notions of 'standardisation' and 'universalism' have long been a major underlying feature of much authoritative thinking in the language teaching professions. They have brought a corresponding lack of concern for the complexities that follow any serious recognition of the essential uniqueness of individuals and the fundamentally social nature of classroom language learning and teaching. They have, perhaps because of their link to government, been the most practically influential notions as well, in spite of any apparent agreement in principle among language professionals that learners should be treated as unique individuals operating in a common social context, etc. – in short, as 'key developing practitioners'.

And if I do read on, what will I find?

Part I explores the background in our field to this gap between what people may think and what they find themselves doing. We review language assessment, teaching method, language teacher training, learner variables and second language acquisition to trace how ideas about the classroom language learner have developed in recent decades. We consider how strongly they may have influenced classroom practice, especially in relation to our Five Propositions.

Part II explores the research background to these developments, concluding that inclusive practitioner research ('inclusive' because it fully includes the learners as co-practitioners) offers the most appropriate approach to helping learners become key developing practitioners.

Part III offers practical support and ideas for anyone considering adopting inclusive practitioner research in their own situation. To illustrate what the ideas can mean in practice, presents classroom case studies from various parts of the world, but especially from Rio. We suggest that you start with Part III if you are keen to learn quickly about these practical matters, leaving the more historical and theoretical material till later.

Part IV offers sources and links that list particularly relevant books, journals, websites, associations and conferences. It also offers resources such as classroom materials, with brief notes for using them in inclusive practitioner research, and some very brief position papers on key issues.

Plan of the book

Part I: traces how ideas about classroom language learners have developed over recent decades, taking an historical and conceptual view of assessment, method, teacher training, learner variables and second language acquisition.

Part II: explores the research background to these ideas, focusing on how research has typically adopted an unhelpful third-party approach, even in the context of teacher-based classroom research, and concluding that inclusive practitioner research, involving both teachers and learners as research practitioners, is the most appropriate approach if we are to gain deeper understandings of learners and learning, and if those understandings are to be helpful to those who need them most, the practitioners themselves.

Part III: goes from the conceptual to the practical. Practical suggestions and personal stories from around the world illustrate inclusive practitioner research in context to show readers how they might carry out their own research. The value of teachers working together is featured in a chapter specially written by members of the Rio Exploratory Practice Group.

Part IV: gives a range of possible starting points for practitioners wishing to research their own contexts, including lists of books, journals, websites, associations and conferences; some classroom materials; and four very brief position papers on major issues.

Further reading

- Breen, M. P. 2006 Collegial Development in ELT: The Interface between Global Processes and Local Understandings. In S. Gieve and I. K. Miller (eds), *Understanding the Language Classroom*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan: 200–25. Emphasises collegiality as the way to face challenges that may undermine language teachers' personal professional identities.
- Gilbert, F. 2004 *I'm a Teacher, Get me Out of Here!* London, Short Books. A very popular book and a heartfelt critique, by a teacher, of the current situation for teachers in the UK.
- Giroux, H. A. 1997 *Pedagogy and the Politics of Hope*. Boulder, CO, Westview Press. Broadens the scope of the debate, relating his notion of 'the politics of hope' to pedagogy in general.
- Tudor, I. 2001 *The Dynamics of the Language Classroom*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press. A view of the learner very much in tune with the ideas in this volume.

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Part I

The Developing View of the Learner

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2

Introduction to Part I

This chapter introduces Part I by:

- stressing how people in general get their view of learners from their own educational experiences;
- introducing briefly the succeeding chapters – assessment, language teaching method, teacher training, learner variables and second language acquisition – all potential sources of teachers' views of learners;
- showing how we shall develop our concern for how learners are viewed in relation to our Five Propositions.

The importance of our educational experiences

Where do our ideas about learners come from? How have they developed over the years? How do they relate to our Five Propositions about learners as 'key developing practitioners'?

People get their first, and probably most fundamental, perceptions of learners from their own educational experience as learners. So, what can we expect that to produce in relation to our Five Propositions?

Concept 2.1 Our Five Propositions in one sentence

Learners are both unique individuals and social beings
who are capable of taking learning seriously,
of taking independent decisions,
and of developing as practitioners of learning.

At the end of the General Introduction above we found little room for our Five Propositions in current state educational institutions. The world

seems to have bred and to be breeding generations of potential language education professionals who do not know what it means to be treated as *key developing practitioners*. They might welcome this book's glimpse of how things could be different, but not believe they can change anything themselves. We want this volume to show that productive changes in line with our Five Propositions are not only highly desirable, but also practically possible, even within current educational institutions.

The structure of Part I

In our General Introduction we introduced 'standards' and 'standardisation', emphasising the currently overwhelming importance of assessment. Chapter 3 therefore focuses on the negative influence that standardised assessment can have on a view of learners, while acknowledging the potentially positive contribution of other approaches.

Chapter 4 turns to language teaching method, which is often seen as the heart of the teaching/learning process. Teaching methods embody a view of how learners learn, and how teachers can best help them. Adopting a method, therefore, means endorsing a particular view of learners. We consider how the method notion has developed over recent decades and show how changing views on method relate to our Five Propositions. Is thinking about method bringing the field any closer to them or taking it further away?

Chapter 5 moves on to teacher training – the primary source for many teachers of their ideas about method, and so a major influence on teachers' developing view of learners. We use the term 'teacher training' very broadly, to cover all courses designed to help teachers get the practical competence and background knowledge they need to function as qualified teachers. We argue that course *content* is less influential than the key training *processes* in forming teachers' views of learners. Unfortunately, the incompatibility between the 'messages' of our Five Propositions and the 'messages' of the processes of teacher assessment creates a dilemma for trainers who agree with the Propositions.

Teaching methods and training courses are not the only sources of ideas about learners. Professional experience is also major, starting with classroom time spent discovering what to expect of learners. It also includes getting to know other, more experienced teachers. The workplace may also offer teacher development workshops run by colleagues. Even if they never explicitly discuss how learners are viewed, colleagues are going to convey messages about what can be expected of learners (to be capable, or incapable, of taking learning seriously, etc.). Beyond the

workplace there are language teacher associations, and their conferences and other events. All provide opportunities to get to know other language teaching professionals and to find out what ideas are 'in the air' about language teaching and learning, and about learners. But such ideas are not only 'in the air'; they are also in professional books and periodicals.

The influence of printed material is limited, however. First, most teachers around the world do not have access to good library facilities, so professional reading cannot feature significantly in their lives. Second, there is a communication problem among language teaching professionals. Many teachers perceive academics as producing largely irrelevant research, in a largely parasitic way, which is subsequently reported in impenetrable language. This problem may be eased for language teachers on MA courses. They can at least consult the written resources themselves in academic libraries, and they can address communication problems in discussion with tutors and fellow students. This may backfire, however, because getting to know at first hand literature you suspect to be irrelevant and impenetrable may leave you even more disaffected than before. Nevertheless, such courses will enable teachers to go deeper into content areas they have studied in their initial training, to meet new content areas. These may all influence their developing views on learners.

Chapter 6 discusses one of these areas – learner variables – including aptitude, learning styles and strategies, learner training, attitude and motivation. These topics should help develop our understanding of learners, and perhaps strengthen confidence in the Five Propositions. Unfortunately, learner variables research has been unhelpfully reductionist in nature, focusing on classifying and categorising individual learners, instead of being fully open to the complex and essentially social nature of classroom language learning. Recent developments, especially in the field of classroom motivation, are more promising, but overall the picture is not very encouraging.

Chapter 7 deals with another topic that 'ought' to be directly relevant and helpful to our position. But second language acquisition (SLA) studies have largely adopted a narrow, psycholinguistic perspective and treated the learner as a cognitive device rather than as a full social person. Thankfully, this is now controversial among SLA researchers. Recent thinking offers much more promise.

Classroom research is another subfield of applied linguistics that can influence views of learners. But 'classroom research' is an *approach* to research, not a content area in itself. We therefore leave it to Part II,

where we look for the appropriate model for research on the developing learner. The findings of classroom research have contributed significantly to the understanding of classroom language learning, in particular by establishing it as an essentially social process in which learners have a large part to play, as unique individuals acting collaboratively – as *key developing practitioners*. We explore these ideas and their influence further in Part II, Chapter 9.

First though, the role of assessment.

3

Assessment and the Learner

This chapter will:

- consider the nature of educational assessment in our field and assess its contribution to our view of learners;
- contrast ‘standards’ and ‘standardisation’ and assess the problematic role of standardisation in hindering the adoption and implementation of our Five Propositions;
- discuss alternative, potentially promising, approaches to language assessment.

Introduction

Assessment is a huge topic. Here we can only highlight the way that assessment in all its institutional forms imposes the overall framework of constraints within which most language education professionals work. Unfortunately, this framework implies a view of learners that is at odds both with our Propositions and with the view that language teachers and teacher trainers have developed for themselves.

Standards, standardisation and their implications for assessment and for views of the learner

We have already introduced these notions, but their central relationship to educational assessment makes it important to take them further here.

How language education professionals view learners is inevitably influenced in part by how they assess them. Language professionals decide whether learners succeed or fail in official terms (in examinations),

and so these terms themselves virtually constitute the profession's view, in practice, of what it means to be a language learner. Applying the same standardised criteria to everyone implies a universalistic view of learners: as identical in all important respects, and certainly not free to make their own decisions about what constitutes success or failure for them personally. If, as is usual, the criteria impose purely individual measures of achievement, essentially pitting learners competitively against each other, we can expect this to imply that learners are essentially 'on their own' – asocial, if not actively *anti*-social. All very bad news for our Five Propositions.

But in a responsible and accountable education system assessment *must* arguably be universalistic, *must* measure everyone by the same criteria, by the same 'standards', and *must* measure individuals individually, allowing no collusion. Otherwise it will be useless both globally, as a measure of the quality of an educational system, and individually, as a measure of someone's fitness for a qualification (and potential employment).

Quote 3.1 Weir on accountability

The increased expectation that providers of educational services should be made accountable to external bodies for the impact of their work has been a powerful driving force...It has encouraged a swing from viewing tests as instruments for assisting in the development and improvement of student language ability to treating them as indicators of performance for outside agencies.

(2005: 39)

And so those who apply the 'standards' must also apply 'standardisation' to ensure the standards are applied equally to all, with no possibility of collusion. Ironically, the key educational assessors in the system are the teachers themselves, who both run the examination system in schools and who, in their 'spare time', undertake the huge mass of marking that it generates annually.

Quote 3.2 Weir on standardisation of test administration

A constant testing environment where the test is conducted according to detailed rules and specifications so that testing conditions are the same for all test takers is essential. If the uniformity rule is broken, say by one centre giving extra time for planning, producing or monitoring a task, then the theory-based validity of the test is compromised...

(2005: 83)

Faced directly with implementing the global institutional demand (often directly from government) for the standardised application of universal standards, it is only natural if language education professionals embrace a view of the learner that is compatible with such demands, but wholly antithetical to our Propositions.

If this were the whole story, it would indeed be a very depressing one. We might even conclude that making room for our Propositions in language pedagogy would mean abandoning standards altogether. But ‘standardisation’ is the problem here, not ‘standards’.

Without the standardisation imperative we can rethink the notion of standards, remove its associations with universalism and competitive individualism, and reconcile it with our Propositions. So, learners who take learning seriously will want to reach as high a standard as they can manage, to make appropriate decisions about their learning for that purpose, and to develop their ability to work productively to reach the standard they, as unique individuals, set for themselves. And they will probably work together willingly in a mutually supportive manner towards their different individual target standards, rather than aggressively compete against each other. ‘Standards’ are not in principle antagonistic to our Propositions.

That does not make it easy to make room for them in language pedagogy, however. Wherever the standardisation imperative rules, there will be a practical and ultimately ideological conflict about the nature of ‘education’ itself, between the view of the learner that those who agree with our Propositions want to live by and the constraints of working within the framework of the standardisation imperative. That imperative *actively militates* to impose its view of learners, because when teachers are constrained to operate standardised assessment procedures, they will find it difficult to resist the associated view of the learner. Resentment of imposition itself may free people up to resist it mentally, but that can have very negative consequences for the individual professional. Teachers, even head teachers, are leaving their jobs in despair, as seen in England with Arrowsmith’s resignation in 2006, which made national news.

Quote 3.3 Arrowsmith on resigning

To me, the value a school adds to a child is difficult to measure and is found in exciting experiences, opportunities to take responsibility and residential visits. It is certainly nothing to do with the small statistical variations between dubious sets of data predictions.

The real issues affecting achievement are often things that cannot be measured. I am a person who is not motivated by targets, and a lot of children are not...

(*Education Guardian*, 8 August.2006: 2)

So language professionals do not necessarily accept the institutional framework of standardised educational assessment even if it costs them their career. Fortunately, there are important alternative sources and resources.

Even within the field of assessment there are two distinct strands of professional thought to consider. For standardised assessment work there are professional testers and testing agencies, and academics specialising in research on tests and test development. But such 'summative assessment' (designed to sum up achievement and provide a final measurement of it) is only one aspect of assessment. Many language education professionals, both classroom teachers and teacher trainers, for example, make use of 'formative' assessment to help them, and their learners, find out how well people are doing and how they might make further progress.

Quote 3.4 Weir on summative and formative assessment

...in recent years there has been an unfortunate tendency to link language testing to summative evaluation; as a result, the important formative capacity of testing in the classroom has often been overshadowed.

(2005: 39)

Even summative testing instruments *can* be used to assess and assist progress. Taking published versions of a secure final test is a well-established test preparation strategy. This is most useful in the run-up to a final test, when learners need to become familiar with the test format. But summative instruments are not designed for formative assessment and are not optimal for it. Later in this chapter we shall discuss the quite different procedures that are available for formative assessment, after some further consideration of testing research.

Language testing research and development: the elusive 'washback' phenomenon

Language testing researchers want to understand what it means to be a competent language user, and they want to translate this into language tests to provide a 'true' picture of someone's language competence. Developing experimental language tests is a necessary part of that

research. But the societal implications of test development are very wide and easily overlooked. Testing instruments are needed for the practical assessment of individuals. For example, English language examinations such as TOEFL (Test Of English as a Foreign Language) and IELTS (International English Language Testing System) are used worldwide to screen applicants to English-medium higher education. A test quantifies the student's language proficiency, and that may give, or deny, them the life chance that study in a foreign country promises. Such important tests must be fair to all, which means adopting a universalistic, standardised position about what constitutes adequate proficiency. It also means highly standardised administration procedures that treat all candidates identically, and are proof against collusion. So test developers need to focus on the practical validity and 'administrability' of their tests, rather than be greatly concerned about the view of learners their tests imply and its potential implications for classroom pedagogy. In fact, however, test developers are very interested in the potential impact of testing on the language classroom. But 'washback' – the notion that testing 'washes back' into the classroom, positively or negatively (Alderson and Wall, 1993; Wall and Alderson, 1993; Wall, 1997; Watanabe, 1997; Cheng and Watanabe, 2004) – has proved rather elusive. It has been impossible to establish conclusively that washback plays a major part in determining what happens in classrooms.

Quote 3.5 Alderson on washback

...there is no longer any doubt that washback does indeed exist. But we now know that the phenomenon is a hugely complex matter, and very far from being a simple case of tests having a negative impact on teaching.

(2004: ix)

Quote 3.6 Shohamy et al. on policy-makers and the complexity of washback

Policy-makers who are aware of the power of tests and who use them to manipulate the educational system and to control curricula and new teaching methods, also appear to be aware of the fact that that these washback effects may undergo change over time and may not last indefinitely within the system. The question is not only whether washback exists but also what kind of washback can be identified at different points in time. A test's impact is highly dependent on the nature, purpose and other characteristics of the test, and is therefore likely to be complex.

(1996: 316)

We are unaware of any washback research that has investigated the impact of a particular test on teachers' and learners' views of learners, and so can discuss here only research that asks: is teaching itself liable to be distorted if learners face assessment by a known test? Teachers teaching learners who will take TOEFL or IELTS are necessarily somewhat constrained by that prospect. They must work for the best possible results for their learners, even if they are not convinced about the validity of the test, perhaps because of the view it implies of the nature of language and what it means to know one. For example, moving to secondary school final examinations, many teachers who believe in communicative language teaching also believe (rightly or wrongly) that this means emphasising the development of their learners' speaking abilities. But their national examination system may simply be unable to afford more than a perfunctory testing of speaking skills, and instead focuses on reading, listening and writing. These are more easily testable, and potentially even machine-scorable. Teachers may feel under pressure – from learners as well as from 'authority' – to suppress their professional judgement, downgrade speaking and concentrate on whatever will help learners get good results.

Ironically, many teachers around the world work in circumstances that are even worse for their professional freedom. They report being pressured both to teach 'communicatively', whatever their professional opinion about its appropriateness, and to prepare their learners for nationally standardised examinations that are not themselves 'communicative' at all.

We do not know just how strongly teaching may be affected by such a perception of external pressure, or its effect on teachers' views of learners. It remains a matter of professional concern. But we do have some idea of what may happen if testers introduce an innovative test in the hope that teachers will adopt innovative teaching procedures to help learners prepare for it. Alderson and Wall's (1993) curriculum development project, for example, introduced a new language testing format in Sri Lanka. Their findings cast doubt on the power of washback to influence teacher behaviour.

Quote 3.7 Alderson on the limited power of washback

We were...surprised to discover that the impact of the introduction of new tests was much more limited than we expected, and we were forced to re-examine our beliefs about washback.

(2004: x)

Typically, though, national testing and international testing lag behind methodological developments, and so leave many teachers in a dilemma. Is testing inevitably in conflict with important educational aims that teachers may want to pursue, beyond the materialistic one of securing maximal success for their learners in universalistic assessment terms? Test developers have to produce valid measures of achievement, and simultaneously meet the requirements of standardisation, to permit, as we have seen, comparisons among learners, and among educational institutions, etc. Teachers, by contrast, have the more personal aims of dealing with groups of individuals in the complex social context of the classroom and doing their best both for the group as a whole and for each individual learner's educational and personal development. Society appears to be making impossible demands on both testers and teachers (not to mention learners!). Here is Arrowsmith again:

Quote 3.8 Arrowsmith on the head teacher's dilemma

If this is to be the way forward, the [government's education department] does not need heads like me. They need a more compliant, less challenging group of heads who will only think within the parameters they are allowed.

(2006: 2)

But not all testing researchers are involved in producing such national or international tests, and many are in any case interested in the wider societal implications of testing work (see Duan, 2007). A recent comprehensive review of the language testing field concludes that the main challenges for the future will come in such relatively technical areas as validity and reliability, but it does include separate consideration of ethical and political issues, and recognises that McNamara's 'model of the social dimensions of language proficiency will be a fruitful area of research for some time to come' (Alderson and Banerjee, 2002: 81, see also McNamara, 1995).

Quote 3.9 Shohamy on unethical bias in test use

Bias related to tests' use implies that a language test is being used for unfair purposes, such as forcing students to learn, teachers to teach, create fear and narrow the learning domain or create *de facto* educational policies.

(1997: 341)

Approaches to language assessment in the classroom

We noted earlier that there were alternative sources for language education professionals in relation to the assessment of learners – sources potentially offering them views of the learner that are at odds with the view from standardised testing. We now discuss three such alternatives.

Alternative approaches 1: self-assessment

What happens if you take learners seriously enough to ask them to assess themselves? Oskarsson (1978) pioneered work in the area of self-assessment for the unit/credit system developed by the Council of Europe's Modern Languages Project in the 1970s. Both researchers and practitioners are interested to know if learners are, or can be, good judges of their own competence. Research suggests that learners are not very different in their judgements from their teachers, and are certainly not, as originally assumed, any less harsh on themselves.

Quote 3.10 Oskarsson on self-assessment

It is not uncommon to find that adult learners, especially middle-aged and older, underestimate their achievement.

(1978: 29)

In introducing his 'Concrete Suggestions' chapter, Oskarsson notes on behalf of the Modern Languages Project 'our concern for the learner's possibilities of assuming more responsibility for the structuring and evaluation of his [*sic*] own learning' (1978: 13). This matched the Council of Europe's major developing interest in learner autonomy, part of 'education for European citizenship' (Council of Europe Project 12: 'Learning and Teaching Languages for Communication'). But Oskarsson's comment was about adult education, with its acknowledged lack of institutional support structures for language learning. This particular support for self-assessment indicated a concern for practicality, rather than principled support for learner autonomy in general.

It is also of great general societal interest to know if learners are, or can become, capable of assessing their own strengths and weaknesses both in competence terms and in terms of their developing ability to learn. After all, we hope learners will want to continue learning after formal teaching has stopped, and such independent learning will

probably be more successful if they can evaluate their own learning and development instead of depending on professionals. We shall revisit this area in Chapter 4 in relation to ‘autonomous language learning’, which largely depends on positive answers to such questions.

Alternative approaches 2: assessment by Graded Objectives

The Graded Objectives Movement (Page and Hewett, 1987) was a grass-roots initiative involving several groups of British teachers. It pioneered some of the key ideas in our Five Propositions in respect of formative assessment and its role in learning, and especially in motivation. The Graded Objectives approach made learners responsible for deciding what, if anything, they felt ready to be tested on at any given time – an approach already familiar from the ‘grades’ system in music and ballet teaching in the UK.

Quote 3.11 Page and Hewett on the aims of assessment by Graded Objectives

...learners, in school or out, of any age, would be able to attempt any level of which they might think themselves capable.

(1987: 3)

Learners would select a card representing a communicative achievement they thought worthwhile and work to prepare themselves to cope with it.

Concept 3.1 A Graded Objectives Movement progress card

Level 1

I can:

1. ask for tickets for a bus or a train;
2. ask how much that costs;
3. understand how much that costs.

Task

I can buy tickets for use on public transport.

(Page and Hewett, 1987: 28)

As Page and Hewett report: ‘Pupils themselves were responsible first for ticking the activities on the card when they felt capable of performing them and presenting themselves for assessment by a teacher’ (1987: 21).

The approach proved particularly successful at recording progress in an enjoyable way, at motivating learners to work for ever more progress and at motivating them to continue studying a language even when it was no longer compulsory. It was a great success story, and especially interesting because it was a *grass-roots* movement, initiated and run by teachers. That it has largely disappeared as a distinct movement is partly because some of its ideas (though not necessarily its precise practices) were gradually 'mainstreamed', even within the national examination system – the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE). Page and Hewett were writing in 1987, and were already using the past tense: 'It is clear then that ideas derived from the graded objectives movement influenced both the national criteria and the syllabus details of the GCSE' (1987: 99). But standardisation seems to have led the movement to wither rather than become the very strong positive influence it promised to be. The Graded Objectives Movement, Hamilton wrote, 'was the last time language teachers in England really felt they were influencing events' (1995: 77). Thinking in particular of the Lothian project (in Scotland), she explained it in relation to the industrial unrest in education in the UK during the 1980s, and a drive for centralisation and conformity that inhibited teacher-driven curriculum renewal.

Quote 3.12 Hamilton on teacher-driven curriculum renewal and centralisation

There is a need, and there should be made a place for teacher-driven curriculum renewal movements such as that represented by the Lothian project. Many would argue that it is the only model of curriculum renewal that has a chance of working. All the new examinations and national curricula in the world cannot replace having teachers take a proactive role in their own development.

(1995: 112)

The initial success shows that some teachers were already able to trust learners to respond positively to these very novel assessment practices, to become serious learners even if they had not previously appeared serious, and so to take responsible decisions about their learning and its assessment, and gradually learn how to take such decisions more and more wisely – to develop as practitioners of learning. All within a framework that allowed for idiosyncrasy, instead of expecting all learners to take the same tests at the same time. The framework also acknowledged the essentially social nature of classroom language learning.

Quote 3.13 Page and Hewett on learners as whole individuals in the Buckinghamshire scheme

...the planners of the scheme show again that they see pupils not only as language learners but as whole individuals, and language learning as having an effect on their development as individuals.

(1987: 37)

And on the social nature of the classroom

The aim is to promote in pupils the ability and the willingness to interact with each other and to offer them the challenge of talking together in order to complete a task, solve a problem or find out some information for a specific purpose.

(1987: 40)

Alternative approaches 3: portfolio assessment

Portfolio assessment is a relatively recent development (see O'Malley and Valdez Pierce, 1996; Brown, 1998) which depends on learners to produce a summative compendium of evidence of their learning, like art students producing a portfolio of their work.

Concept 3.2 Early portfolio assessment – the pupil dossier

This can be a file, folder or even an empty cereal packet with a distinctive cover.... Into the folder go the learner's personal cassette, a collection of items of personal interest related to France (labels, stamps, letters, etc.), a diary or 'log book' in French for three separate weeks during the year and the Pupil's Record Sheet on which she [*sic*] records not only her progress through the tasks but also her own comments on them.

(Page and Hewett, 1987: 34)

Learners will most probably have to produce their portfolios to a fixed institutional timetable, and many may need considerable guidance about what is appropriate for a 'portfolio' used for summative assessment purposes. Whatever the learner eventually submits is judged and assigned a mark (or at least a pass or fail grade) by the teacher. But in producing portfolios the learners can demonstrate their seriousness of purpose, exercise their decision-making abilities in choosing precisely what to include, be idiosyncratic and indeed unique (within set limits), and then put it all together in their case for a good grade. They can even show the development of their learning (and their teachers can assess them on this too), if they are allowed to include items from different stages of

their course. Only our Proposition 2 (concerning learners as ‘social beings’) is not addressed here. If each portfolio is assessed as the exclusive work of one individual, the collaborative work encouraged for other aspects of their course may be here penalised as collusion. The potential benefits of a mutually supportive environment, while not eliminated altogether, may therefore be seriously compromised.

Quote 3.14 Lynch and Shaw on portfolios

For portfolios to be considered alternative assessment, the process of selecting and assembling components, the nature of the final product, and the reading, feedback, and evaluating procedures must demonstrate these features:

- The students actively participate in the selection of the portfolio components.
- The students reflect on this selection process, and their reflection is included in the portfolio.
- The process of creating and selecting the portfolio components is included in the evaluation.
- The evaluation contains elements of peer and self-assessment.
- The portfolios are examined by persons familiar with the individual students and their learning context.
- The students participate in deciding the criteria for evaluating the portfolios.
- The evaluation is reported qualitatively, as a profile or other detailed description of what the student has achieved.

(2005: 265)

Lynch and Shaw’s requirements are not easily met, but portfolio assessment has been adopted in connection with the Common European Framework (CEF 2001) for the European Language Portfolio, and trialled by 15 European countries, involving 3000 teachers and 30,000 students (Schärer, 2000). In Finland, Kohonen (2001) has made strong and productive connections with his own work on experiential learning and learner autonomy.

Portfolio assessment is widely adaptable well beyond language learning itself, to include the assessment of teachers in training, for example. It is a very welcome development in terms of our Propositions.

* * *

These three alternatives to traditional assessment are broadly supportive of our Five Propositions. They treat learners as unique but social beings

capable of taking learning seriously, of independent decision-making and, above all (at least for the Graded Objectives Movement and portfolio assessment), of developing as practitioners of learning.

Nonetheless, such positive developments do not typically realise their full potential in relation to our Propositions, especially in terms of learners' ability to develop their judgement about their learning, however enthusiastically teachers promote the idea in their teaching. This is because, typically, teachers themselves, acting as gatekeepers, eventually must evaluate each learner according to a standardised assessment system that cannot – virtually by definition – embody our Propositions (a problem we return to in Chapter 5 when we consider teacher training). The learners' own developing judgement is ignored and all the previous enthusiasm made to appear hypocritical. In all, then, assessment is moving towards an ever more closely regulated and policed evaluation system, one that goes against individual teacher thinking and positions learners as objects of assessment (see Shohamy, 2001), not as active participants in self-evaluation, or, therefore, in self-development.

Quote 3.15 Lynch and Shaw on power relations in assessment practices

... power relations are not inherently evil and need not be escaped. They are, rather, part of the human condition, and educators must work to develop practices – in this case, practices of assessment – that maximise the mobility, the reciprocity of those relations.

(2005: 292–3)

Teachers and learners are closely related here: both are effectively disempowered by a system that is more interested in the *products* (e.g. school league tables based on examination results) than in the *processes* of learning and learning how to learn (and, indeed, as we shall now see, learning how to teach).

Quote 3.16 Gilbert (again) on academic bullying

I received my GCSE results for my year 11 class a few days ago; I was pleased because they were very good. Nearly 70% of the class received As or A*s. And my goodness, did I feel that I had earned this! I had been quite unpleasant to some pupils for not working hard. The detentions, the letters home, the bloodcurdling demands for silence and homework paid off. Some pretty lazy children were shocked out of their apathy and actually did some work.

The truth is that if you are going to push your pupils to work extremely hard, even the nicest teacher in the world must be a bit of a bully. The pressures on teachers to attain good results are enormous.

(2004a: 5)

The assessment of teachers

Traditionally, teachers assess learners, but teachers in turn are also assessed. *How* they are assessed (as trainee teachers, through to in-service training courses) sets a very specific tone for how anyone who is learning is positioned.

Systems such as Accreditation UK (formerly the English in Britain Accreditation Scheme – EiBAS) involve independent assessors visiting a school, at the school's considerable expense, for a period of time, to check documentation (including lesson plans) and to observe lessons. Their report will specify 'points of excellence' and weaker areas to be worked on in terms of what they have seen. They may even recommend that accreditation be withheld. This is crucial for marketing purposes, because failure to get accreditation can adversely affect the recruitment of learners.

The criteria used in such systems tend to emphasise conformity to certain overarching themes. All include quality of classroom management and lesson planning in a form officially recognised by the assessing body (generally requiring aims, objectives, procedure, timings and groupings to be written out in advance and handed to the assessor). Teaching techniques are usually included, as is knowledge of the language. All too often, given their inevitable crudity, 'tick-box' criteria are used to ensure 'quality control' (with the emphasis here on 'control').

The *EiBAS Handbook* (2003) is a good example. It clearly aims to be extremely (helpfully?) detailed in its specifications of the criteria to be assessed for accreditation. Under the categories 'The planning and preparation of lessons' and 'Teachers' performance' we find:

Criteria: Planning and Preparation	Not met	Met	Point of excellence	See comments	N/a
8.3.36 Lesson objectives					
8.3.37 Planning					
8.3.38 Preparation					
8.3.39 Coherence					

Continued

Criteria: Planning and Preparation	Not met	Met	Point of excellence	See comments	N/a
<i>Criteria: Teacher's Performance</i>					
8.3.41 Teaching techniques: appropriacy					
8.3.42 Teacher and student talking time					
8.3.46 Variety					
8.3.47 Feedback					
8.3.48 Checking learning					

Source: *English in Britain Accreditation Scheme Handbook* (2003: 16–17)

Later editions of the *Handbook* (2005, 2006) do not use this perfunctory tick-box format, but retain the underlying approach. Teaching and learning are subdivided into discrete items to be checked off by the inspector/assessor. It permeates (perhaps originated in?) the assessment criteria on teacher training courses.

This is what is most destructive to the full implementation of our Five Propositions. Teacher trainers and trainees may well wish to incorporate our Five Propositions into their teaching, to see all learners as unique individuals who learn and develop best in their own idiosyncratic ways (Proposition 1), to think of them as social beings who learn and develop best in a mutually supportive environment (Proposition 2), capable of taking learning seriously, of independent decision-making, and of developing as practitioners of learning (Propositions 3–5). But these ideas are ‘inconvenient’, to say the least, when the same trainers and trainees have to conform to incompatible assessment criteria in the syllabus for teacher training courses.

The general rise in demand for initial teacher training courses such as the Certificate of English Language Teaching to Adults (CELTA) and the Trinity Certificate, as well as further training courses such as the Diploma in English Language Teaching to Adults (DELTA), and the Trinity Diploma, to name a few of the internationally recognised ones, suggests an ever-increasing influence for this emphasis on assessment criteria in teacher training. The more formalised, codified demands of such courses result in ever more narrowly expressed criteria, which of course trainees must meet to pass the course. The CELTA syllabus expresses this very clearly: ‘In their teaching and in their lesson plans, candidates should demonstrate an increasing ability in their achievement of the assessment

criteria...' (CELTA syllabus: 20, accessed 14.April.2005); criteria which are written out in minute detail (ibid.: 20–2).

Block One: Criteria compatible with our Five Propositions

CELTA Learning Outcomes	Trinity Certificate in TESOL Learning Objectives
1.1 demonstrate an understanding of the range of backgrounds and experiences that adults bring to their classes.	b. awareness of the learning needs of individuals or groups of learners, and the motivation of learners in a variety of cultures and environments
1.2a demonstrate an understanding of the different motivations and expectations that adults bring to learning English...	
1.2d develop and maintain motivation, identify and respond to expectations	
5.2 establish and maintain a good rapport with learners at all times and foster a constructive learning atmosphere	c. ability to establish rapport, create and maintain learners' interest

Block Two: Criteria creating difficulties for our Five Propositions

4.1a understand the purpose and principles of planning for effective teaching of adult learners	5.1d. ability to draw up a range of lesson plans with clear and achievable aims, using appropriate methods for learners with various needs
4.2b devise lesson plans which include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. a statement of aims ii. a class profile iii. anticipation of difficulties and suggested solutions iv. description of teacher and learner interactions v. details of resources to be used vi. staged description of procedures including anticipated timings 	
5.1b set up and manage whole class work, pair and group work and individual work as appropriate	

Source: Adapted from the CELTA syllabus (www.cambridgeesol.org, accessed 14 April 2005) and from the summary of course content and key information for course members for the Trinity Certificate in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (revised version April 2004).

At first sight all the above criteria may appear unexceptional, but on closer examination a number of contradictions emerge. The Block One items suggest learners are to be considered, understood and otherwise taken seriously. CELTA assignment 1 (2005: 22) actually requires trainees to focus on an individual learner or group of learners. And yet Block Two items suggest learners are to be planned for, in effect regimented, and closely organised by the teacher-manager throughout lessons: trainees are required to state aims, outcomes and objectives in advance, and write out a fairly comprehensive plan of what will happen when, and for how long. Trainees not achieving their stated aims may well be failed, whatever else they achieve. Once again, the culprit seems to be the push for standardisation.

The question of qualifications and ‘gate-keeping’

The standardisation of both detailed requirements and their implementation is arguably a completely understandable consequence of attempts by examining bodies, teacher trainers and teacher training courses to be globally acceptable. But such standardisation is a reasonable way of maintaining minimal standards, not the best way of ensuring the highest possible ones. Establishing minimally acceptable standards and imposing them on everybody, even on those who can exceed them, can create a powerful but stultifying myth about what constitutes ‘good’ teaching. Creativity in teaching is then stifled in favour of conformity to the set model. Trainee teachers who want their learners to set the learning agenda, and who want to respond to their learners instead of imposing a detailed, pre-planned lesson on them, are in danger of failing their course and having the gate to a teaching career firmly shut in front of them. Their trainers are equally powerless, faced with the dilemma of being required to fail trainees who do not conform to the teaching model specified by the course criteria, even if they have demonstrated the potential to be good creative teachers.

Quote 3.17 Hamilton on the drive for conformity

The drive for conformity in order to please those in authority is dangerous, and if it continues at its present rate, will ultimately damage the education service of any country, because it will kill off the spirit of adventure, the spirit which welcomes, indeed, seeks out challenge and applies to it innovation and entrepreneurship.

(1995: 78–9)

The dilemma becomes even more poignant for trainees with considerable teaching experience. Such trainees often have more trouble passing initial training courses than absolute novices. They may have acquired 'bad habits' that need eradicating, but may simply have devised their own unconventional way of teaching most productively. If an assessment system turns that into a problem, it is itself highly problematic.

Conclusion

The dominant conventional practices of learner and teacher assessment are seriously problematic for our Five Propositions because of the current emphasis on accountability via standardisation. We have found some promising alternatives to conventional assessment practices, but they do not produce a positive picture overall. We return to teacher training in its own right in Chapter 5 where we reassess the situation.

Further reading

- Brown, J. D. 2004 *Language Assessment: Principles and Classroom Practices*. White Plains, NY, Longman. Brown discusses standardised tests and standards, and covers alternative assessment practices.
- Hamilton, J. 1995 *Inspiring Innovations in Language Teaching*. Clevedon, Multilingual Matters. A powerful case against conformity and for the spirit of adventure in language teaching.
- Lynch, B. and P. Shaw 2005 Portfolios, Power, and Ethics. *TESOL Quarterly*, 39/2: 263–97.
- Lynch and Shaw discuss the issues of validity and ethics in relation to alternative assessment practices, focusing on portfolios.
- Shohamy, E. 2001 *The Power of Tests*. London, Pearson Education. A critical perspective on the ethical and political aspects of the uses made of tests.
- Weir, J. C. 2005 *Language Testing and Validation*. Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan. An authoritative discussion of test validity.

4

Method and the Learner

This chapter will:

- survey the last few decades of thinking and research on language teaching methods in relation to the developing view of the learner;
- show how the behaviourist approach, the cognitive approach and then the move towards a socio-psychological approach all had important implications for how learners were viewed;
- document the arrival of a potentially radical new view of learners, with autonomous language learning and the communicative approach;
- appraise the generally disappointing impact of new technologies;
- outline the latest thinking about method, challenging views of the learner once again.

Introduction: why should we care about language teaching methods?

What is the best method for teaching a language? For decades this question has dominated our field. There are certainly broad debates about the right general approach for other school subjects – history and geography, for example – but only for mathematics and initial literacy are there such directly competing methods, and even then nothing like the numerous alternatives facing language teachers, often with major commercial interests (i.e. publishers) behind them.

Quote 4.1 Richards on 'methods promoters'

If the methodology of language teaching is to move beyond speculation and dogma, its practitioners must become more seriously concerned with the issues of accountability and evaluation than recent history has evidenced. This may in turn mean shifting our attention to the relevant facts and procedures of curriculum development, rather than concerning ourselves with the unsubstantiated and often irrelevant claims of methods promoters.

(1985: 45)

Faced with this profusion of competing methods, what is a teacher to do?

Concept 4.1 Larsen-Freeman's list of approaches and methods for language teaching

The Grammar-Translation Method.

The Direct Method.

The Audio-Lingual Method.

The Silent Way.

Suggestopedia.

Community Language Learning.

Total Physical Response.

Communicative Language Teaching.

Content-based, Task-based, and Participatory Approaches.

Learner Strategy Training, Cooperative learning, and Multiple Intelligences.

(Larsen-Freeman, 2000: v)

Choices do have to be made. Why should that matter here, though? Different methods necessarily imply different views of how teachers can help learners, and so different views of learners themselves, what they bring to the classroom and to the learning process. Choosing a method means choosing a view of the learner. Teachers with the freedom to choose will want something that fits their own 'sense of plausibility' (Prabhu, 1987: 106) about teaching, and what to expect of learners. In extremely poor countries, where even textbooks – the usual conveyors of method – are unavailable, teachers may be entirely 'free'. But without access to information and resources, that 'freedom' is meaningless. Elsewhere, most language teachers worldwide probably get no real choice either. Educational institutions typically prescribe teaching methods, by prescribing textbooks, which necessarily embody methods. They may give teachers a choice of textbook, but probably from a limited

range of methodologically very similar ones. This looks fine for beginning teachers, since those doing the prescribing will be more senior, better informed (one hopes) and have more relevant experience. In any case, teachers at all career stages will probably at least have to try to implement the prescribed method, even if it goes against their 'sense of plausibility'. What happens when they implement it will influence their view of learners, and they will convey that view to the learners themselves. So a named method expresses a view of learners, and transmits that view, usually via a textbook, to teachers, and ultimately to learners. That is why method matters here.

In the 1950s and 1960s audio-lingualism, with its roots in behaviourist psychology, was the most influential of the named methods, so this is where we start.

The behaviourist approach to language teaching method

'Audio-lingualism' came into language teaching in schools in the US after success in training military and diplomatic personnel during and after the second world war (see Stern, 1983: 102; Richards and Rodgers, 1986). Originally called the 'Michigan Oral Approach', it offered a coherent package of materials and procedures apparently (but later controversially) derived directly from the leading learning theory of the time – behaviourism (see Skinner, 1957).

Quote 4.2 Howatt on the role of behaviourism

The Michigan Oral Approach is often credited with having applied behaviourist psychology to language teaching, but this is a rather doubtful claim.

(1984: 266)

This claimed theoretical coherence meant that teachers needed to follow closely the prescribed procedures. The teacher was in charge, but to do only whatever the textbook prescribed. The learners' role was to follow their teachers' instructions. In principle the best teaching was teaching that followed most strictly the procedures the method prescribed. The best learning would follow if learners followed exactly their teachers' instructions. Teachers and learners did not need to understand and accept the theory; they only needed to obey its prescriptions.

When audio-lingualism was well supported in the literature, and the only new method to think about anyway, this was probably not too much to ask. But in the 1960s competition arrived, eventually leading to today's plethora of methods.

In the mid- to late 1960s, just when new, competing methods were being formulated, the largest scale method comparisons experiment in the US was conducted (Smith, 1970). Ironically, it was later held to be largely invalidated by teachers not following methodological prescriptions closely enough (see also Part II). Following their own view of their learners' needs, some had – justifiably, we suggest – adapted their teaching accordingly (Allwright, 1988: 3–10).

Quote 4.3 Rivers on dedication to new methods

[Teachers] faced with the daily task of helping students to learn a new language cannot afford the luxury of complete dedication to each new method or approach that comes into vogue.

(1981: 54)

But what view of learners did audio-lingualism represent, whether or not teachers accepted it? In relation to our Propositions, audio-lingualism did *not* expect learners:

- to learn 'in their own idiosyncratic ways': all learners were to perform the same learning activities as everyone else;
- to learn as part of a mutually supportive social process: the theory did not address the social aspect of learning at all;
- to be serious agents in their learning: they had simply to follow instructions;
- to be involved in 'independent decision-making': the teacher was to be in total control of events;
- to develop as learners: the theory did not address development.

Audio-lingualism's restrictive ideas about learners were hardly new. What was new, and impressive (despite its resultant prescriptiveness), was that at last a method had the latest learning psychology behind it. But, with Chomsky's famous and savage attack on its weaknesses as early as 1959, the persuasive power of behaviourist theory eventually declined.

Quote 4.4 Chomsky on Skinner's behaviourist theory of language

The magnitude of the failure of this attempt to account for verbal behaviour serves as a kind of measure of the importance of the factors omitted from consideration, and an indication of how little is really known about this remarkably complex phenomenon.

(1959: 28)

However, thinking of a 'method' as a theoretically coherent package, and of learners simply as compliant recipients, remained strongly influential.

Such thinking was strongly reinforced in 1964 when Rivers published her hugely influential *The Psychologist and the Foreign Language Teacher*. Rivers set out authoritatively the four fundamental 'assumptions' she saw behind audio-lingualism. This set the scene for others.

Concept 4.2 The four psychological assumptions behind audio-lingualism

1. Foreign language learning is basically a mechanical process of habit formation.
2. Language skills are learnt more effectively if items of the foreign language are presented in spoken form before written form.
3. Analogy provides a better foundation for foreign language learning than analysis.
4. The meanings which the words of a language have for the native speaker can be learnt only in a matrix of allusions to the culture of the people who speak that language.

(Adapted from Rivers, 1964: 19–22)

The return to cognitivism for the next new psychology-based method

Two years later, Carroll (1966) responded by proposing a set of principles for classroom language teaching based on recent developments in cognitive psychology and in its new subfield of 'psycholinguistics'. These developments strongly challenged behaviourism by insisting that humans can go beyond automatic habit-formation and learn by conscious study. Carroll re-interpreted the old Grammar-Translation method (for the history, see Stern, 1983; or Howatt, 1984) for his 'Cognitive Code' approach. Learners were still on the receiving end of a

delivery system for a prescribed method, but now they were to be mentally active, thinking about the language they were learning, not just blindly following instructions.

Concept 4.3 Carroll's Cognitive Code conception of language learning.

...learning a language is a process of acquiring conscious control of the phonological, grammatical, and lexical patterns of the second language, largely through study and analysis of these patterns as a body of knowledge.

(Carroll, 1966: 102)

This at least acknowledged, in terms of Proposition 3, that learners could be expected to take learning seriously, via conscious study. But it still left learners *not* expected:

- to learn in their own unique ways,
- to learn socially as well as individually,
- to be 'capable of independent decision-making',
- to need to develop as practitioners of learning.

Most striking for us now is the neglect of the social nature of classroom language learning. Individual psychology was still dominant in psychology in general and the major source discipline for language teaching professionals. 'Individual' psychology, ironically, was essentially asocial and universalistic in its approach. Studying individuals individually would allow you to extrapolate to all humanity. Social psychology, studying individuals as essentially social beings, was not yet influential.

A first, almost socio-psychological approach: community language learning

What might a socio-psychological approach mean in practice? Our first example offers a radical, 'alternative' approach to education – Curran's (1971) 'counselling-learning'. Father Curran developed his 'whole-person model for education' from his background in counselling and therapy. This could have been as individualistic as previous approaches, but he recognised the crucial importance of others in a person's learning – hence the name 'Community Language Learning' (CLL) for his language teaching method (for details, see Stevick, 1976: 125–33). Learners, seen as

unique individuals (Proposition 1), were encouraged to form a learning community in which they would socially and sympathetically support each other's learning efforts (Proposition 2).

Quote 4.5 Curran on whole-person education

We need a new educational experience that allows each student to grow in self-worth and self-understanding and in appreciation of himself [*sic*] and others as he increases in knowledge.

(1971: 2)

Language learning itself was still an individual matter for the individual brain, however. Vygotsky's ideas on the essentially social nature of language learning had not yet had an impact on western thinking about language learning and teaching (but see Vygotsky, 1962, 1978; also especially Lantolf and Appel, 1994; and Pennycook, 1999, for pedagogic implications). In terms of our other three Propositions, CLL did expect learners to take language learning seriously and undertake independent decision-making (what language items to focus on, for example). Learners were also expected to develop, but along a universalistic progression of five natural stages, metaphorically from embryo to mature adult (see Curran, 1971: 130–7).

Another methodological development with a social view was the 'humanistic' approach associated primarily with Moskowitz in *Caring and Sharing in the Foreign Language Class* (1978).

Quote 4.6 Moskowitz on humanistic education

Humanistic education involves learning to be a better, more feeling human being. Educators have been notorious for assuming that socio-emotional growth somehow just happens on its own. But if we don't teach for such goals, they just don't happen. We need a place in school where teachers and students can be human, get empathy, and take time to share.

(1978: 20)

Moskowitz's concern for socio-emotional growth chimed well with the post-1960s spirit of the times. It is also echoed in Part III, where we report on people's experiences with Exploratory Practice. At the time, her ideas were first applauded, then attacked equally enthusiastically. Brumfit (1982) was especially concerned at what he interpreted as a call

for the explicit teaching of humanistic values. He wrote about 'romantic naivety' (1982: 18) and criticised the reliance on 'intuitive experience', even invoking Stalin and Hitler to indicate the totalitarian implications he saw in developing a methodology for transmitting values to learners. The underlying genuine and justified concern for socio-emotional growth had, it seemed, been overtaken by an unhealthy desire to turn pedagogy into compulsory psychotherapy. The humanistic approach lost favour as such arguments gained ground.

Comment 4.1 Humanism as psychotherapy

Dick Allwright once heard a 'humanistic' teacher explain to a conference audience that she expected all her children to tell the class about some feeling they had had before school, but that she rejected positive stories (of the type: 'I gave my mummy a hug because I love her') because they couldn't possibly be 'genuine'. Only negative emotions would be accepted for 'sharing'!

There is no space here to consider all the alternative methodological options (sometimes pejoratively labelled 'fringe' methods) that proliferated at this time (see Stevick, 1976, revised 1996). In general, however, unlike Moskowitz's humanistic approach, they perpetuated the notion of the method as a unique and quite highly specified package (see Gattegno's 'Silent Way', and Lozanov's 'Suggestopedia', in Stevick, 1976, for example). And, more than CLL, they saw learners as recipients of a package, rather than as pro-active participants.

Something else really different: autonomous language learning

Most 'fringe' methods, like CLL, were developed for relatively small classes, usually in private language schools, not for state school systems. During the early 1970s a much more radical methodological option appeared, pioneered (though not exclusively) in the state school systems of Europe and Scandinavia. It could be called an 'anti-method', because it took important decision-making away from teachers to give learners methodological 'autonomy'. Teachers no longer had to decide the precise content of lessons or how learners should go about their learning. For the early proponents of learner autonomy (e.g. Trim, 1976; Dam and Gabrielsen, 1988; Holec, 1988) learners were essentially proactive participants in their language

learning, ultimately in all aspects of it. They might need special training for the socially sensitive decisions facing them, but they would gradually develop their decision-making capacities under the guidance of a strong, supportive teacher.

This radical view matches perfectly Propositions 4 and 5 about learners being capable of independent decision-making and development as practitioners of learning. It also assumes that learners will learn by developing their own unique ways of learning, as individuals serious about learning (Propositions 1 and 3) in a mutually supportive environment (Proposition 2).

Concept 4.4 Language learner autonomy as a socio-political enterprise

The increasing interest in the autonomy of the student envisages various advantages at various different levels. Perhaps the most important of these is the socio-political level, as part of a much greater attempt to move from authoritarian towards democratic structures in society generally. How far it is also a consequence of a thoroughly capitalistic (ie individualist, consumer-oriented) view of society is another matter of course! ...

Moving from socio-political to economic considerations, the achievement of autonomy is looked upon as being an educational objective more appropriate to the kind of society in which we increasingly live. It is no longer economically efficient for the education process to take the form of the transmission of fixed quanta of knowledge and fixed skills determined in advance by some formal or informal education authority as being in the long-term interests of a learner, regardless of whether he [*sic*] knows why, what, or by what methods he is learning. It is perhaps increasingly useful to replace that kind of educational experience by one leading to an improved heuristics and an awareness in the individual of the processes by which he can himself organise his learning experience.

(Trim, 1976: 2–3)

Trim's words illustrate the major difference between autonomy and the humanistic approach. Learner autonomy is a whole philosophy of education about the development of the self, but as a learner and, quite explicitly, as a citizen, not just vaguely as a 'whole person'. As part of education for European citizenship, the Council of Europe has developed learner autonomy for language learning in its projects ever since the early 1970s (see Holec, 1980, 1988). As we saw in Chapter 3, Kohonen's work in Finland is especially interesting, combining experiential learning, collaborative learning and learner autonomy, all in connection with portfolio assessment (Kohonen, 2004).

Learner autonomy could not be packaged in textbook form. It still required the teacher to have considerable management skills, but not to deliver a method. Instead, it meant inventing a way (day by day) of helping learners be both individually proactive and mutually supportive participants in their own, and each other's, learning.

Through radicalism to a new mainstream method: communicative language teaching

Closely allied with language learner autonomy was another 1970s radical movement, developing the ultimately extremely influential notion of Communicative Language Teaching ('the Communicative Approach'). CLT in its most autonomy-related form was developed to an important extent by Michael Breen and Christopher Candlin at Lancaster University in the UK in cooperation with Scandinavian proponents of learner autonomy (especially Dam and Gabrielsen) (see Breen et al., 1989), and with the movement in Germany developing a language curriculum for the new comprehensive schools (see Candlin, 2003; Legutke and Schocker-v. Dittfurth, 2003).

What CLT added to learner autonomy was the psycholinguistic notion that language learning was essentially the natural result of using language communicatively. Language lessons should, therefore, offer learners, individually and/or collectively, activities representing situations of communicative need. By deploying their existing linguistic resources, at whatever level, to solve their immediate communication problems, learners would develop linguistically (see Prabhu, 1987, for a similar view for school teaching in India).

Concept 4.5 Some of the methodological principles of communicative language teaching as developed by Dick Allwright at Essex University

1. Use no materials, published or unpublished, actually conceived or designed as materials for language teaching.
2. Avoid linguistic correction from the teacher entirely.
3. Refuse to supply words, or in any other way simply to 'give' language items to the learners.
4. Never introduce linguistic content for its own sake or make any pre-selection of materials on a linguistic basis.
5. Be extremely supportive, but primarily of learners' struggles towards independence from the teacher and towards peer interdependence.

6. Allow time for learners to work at their own pace (except where, as with some small-scale communication activities, an artificial time constraint may be intrinsic to the task).
7. Keep the learners busy, constantly engaged in 'productive' tasks.

(Adapted from Allwright, 1976: 7)

This radical form of CLT, later known as the 'strong' form, was deeply methodological (or, more accurately, 'procedural'), and largely unconcerned about controlling syllabus content. Despite connections with learner autonomy, it left learners effectively controlled by specially designed language teaching materials, with teachers solidly in charge of general classroom management. More positively for us here, it left learners to learn in their own ways (Proposition 1), without needing expert correction, for example, or anyone to tell them what to learn. It consequently allowed for idiosyncrasy. It also made room for learning to be more than usually 'social' in nature (Proposition 2). Learners working together on communication problems would inevitably share some of their prior knowledge and learn collectively more than any one person would learn alone.

The arrival of a less radical, but more influential form of communicative language teaching

'Strong' CLT's radical view of language learning, with its relatively radical view of the learner, was not ultimately hugely influential. Although it did generate considerable professional interest (especially for Lancaster MA students in the 1970s and 1980s), its ideas were probably too challenging (but see Hall and Kenny, 1988, 1995). Not lending itself readily to the development of classroom textbooks, let alone highly marketable ones (but see Breen and Candlin, 1980), it was also inherently unpromising as a commercial commodity.

With his book *Communicative Language Teaching* (1981) Littlewood solved the commodity problem by offering much less challenging ideas and returning to carefully chosen syllabus content. 'Pre-communicative' activities would actually teach the language, followed by realistic communicative ones to facilitate the transition from classroom to 'real world'. This idea of 'communicative activities', enabling learners to practise 'real' communication, proved powerfully practicable, especially when separated from the bold claims of CLT's 'strong' form. Eminently publishable in textbook form and

teachable on teacher training courses, CLT quickly spread as a packaged method.

Concept 4.6 Howatt on 'weak' and 'strong' communicative language teaching

...according to the [weak] view, learners must not only learn English, they must also 'learn how to use it'. There is an unstated assumption here that the learners must already know English in some sense, and that it is the teacher's primary duty to ensure that this 'knowledge' is usefully employed for communicative purposes. In other words, the basic aim of a language teaching course is to promote (competent) communicative performance. The 'strong' view, on the other hand, maintains that knowledge of the second language is the outcome of communicative activity, not the prerequisite for it. Learners must use their communicative capacities in order to learn the new language or, to use the original term in its original sense, they must develop their communicative competence.

(1984: 287)

By 1984 this 'weak' form of CLT had 'become more or less standard practice' (Howatt, 1984: 279). But 'standard practice' often meant something even weaker than Littlewood envisaged.

Quote 4.8 Littlewood on the development of communicative skills

The development of communicative skills can only take place if learners have motivation and opportunity to express their own identity and to relate with the people around them. It therefore requires a learning atmosphere which gives them a sense of security and value as individuals. In turn, this atmosphere depends to a large extent on the existence of interpersonal relationships which do not create inhibitions, but are supportive and accepting.

(1981: 93–4)

So where did this leave our view of the learner? Littlewood well understood the complex social nature of classroom language learning, writing interestingly about how his proposals might lead to a rich learning environment for learners (1981: 85–95). In practice, however, the view of CLT that spread so successfully worldwide has done little to develop a rich and productive view of the learner as a developing practitioner. Giving learners more freedom to choose the language they use in class does not

necessarily give them substantial control over the management of their learning (for more on the 'management of learning', see Chapter 6 below and Allwright, 2005a). Learners still risk being treated as a largely undifferentiated mass (and therefore 'invisible', Benson, 1997), expected to respond more or less identically to a carefully prepared diet of teaching materials, and so not to be significantly proactive decision-makers about their learning, or see themselves as developing practitioners of learning.

But this relatively weak version of CLT became the mainstream method for teaching and teacher training in the 1980s. It perpetuated the prevailing pessimistic view of what to expect of learners, doing little to support our Propositions. Had the 'strong' form been commercially viable, and so more widely promoted, perhaps a radical rethink about learners would also have occurred more widely. Could technology offer a counterbalance to that disappointment?

Technology-based methods: computer-assisted language learning and the lexical approach

Underlying our story is a crucial but rarely mentioned issue: 'control'. Packaging methods, whether 'mainstream' or 'fringe', is not just a way of marketing textbooks. It offers control over how teachers teach, even if the underlying pedagogical ideas do not themselves suggest strong teacher control in the classroom. In practice, few methodological options involve any serious relinquishing of teacher control, and they are naturally the 'unpackagable' ones. Any packaged commodity must be specified sufficiently precisely to differentiate it from its market competitors. High specification will limit how teachers teach and consequently how learners go about learning. Such packaging is incompatible with our Propositions.

Computer-assisted language learning

What could technology offer? Computer-assisted language learning (CALL) proposed tracking learners' learning behaviour by computer, to offer computerised learning activities tailored to their individual and developing needs (see Jones and Fortescue, 1987; Hardisty and Windeatt, 1989). This promised to treat learners as unique individuals, capable of taking learning seriously (enough to sit at a computer without a teacher controlling and deciding everything). But a computer doing the pedagogic decision-making (e.g. sequencing the content and choosing exercise types) is not treating learners as capable of independent

decision-making. They will not develop as practitioners of learning, even if their language command develops well.

The whole enterprise also needed very sophisticated computer programming, and that was a lot to ask. In practice, learners often faced unexciting pre-communicative activities. A computer, not a teacher, issued the instructions, and learners had computers for company, not other learners. This perpetuated the view that learners are asocial people who should simply follow pedagogic instructions. So this approach supported only two of our Five Propositions.

Fortunately, the internet arrived. Dudeney (2000) and Windeatt et al. (2000) both offer numerous and varied suggestions for teachers with institutional internet access. Independent learner access around the world is now so common that many can practise their reading and writing (at least) by going online to contact other learners, and native speakers of the language they are learning (see Part IV for website links). The online diary is just one extremely promising possibility, where learners write about their lives and share their learning experiences – a good way of helping them develop as practitioners of learning. They will do so in their own unique ways, exercising and developing their capacity for independent decision-making and for taking learning seriously, all within a mutually supportive, if geographically remote, set of human relationships. Joanna Chuk's Case Study 15.4 (below) shows how all this can happen (in her case using xanga.com, a community of online diaries and journals for young people) without the teacher necessarily even knowing about it, still less being consulted. The learner is in control.

An alternative classroom use for computers: the lexical approach

Computer technology also brought the lexical approach (Willis, 1990). Learners trying to solve a communication problem (for their academic writing perhaps) could use a concordancing program (Tribble, 1990) to investigate how particular words are used by native speakers in similar situations. The learners became independent language investigators, controlling precisely what to investigate, how deeply, for their own purposes. As such, like basic CALL, it was still asocial, but otherwise it was very promising, if only in a limited area of language learning. Like CALL in general, however, it failed to have a major impact on classrooms in general, so its potential for establishing a new view of the learner as a proactive and independent language investigator has not been realised.

Another alternative approach promising a shift in control: task-based language learning

Task-based learning (TBL) involves using carefully designed language learning tasks that are usually extended activities involving learner group work. Tasks thus replace discrete language points as the core elements of lesson planning. What does this imply for control?

With learners engaged on substantial tasks, teachers are free to monitor rather than manage and control. In this way TBL resembles ‘strong’ CLT, and, like a CALL-based lexical approach, puts language learners in an unconventional and perhaps unusually proactive relationship to their classroom learning. They have more room to show seriousness of purpose, some capacity for decision-making and space to be unique, but social, learners.

Quote 4.9 Willis on learner freedom in task-based instruction

An important feature of TBL is that learners are free to choose whatever language forms they wish to convey what they mean, in order to fulfil, as well as they can, the task goals.

(1996: 24)

But the teachers still set the tasks, and the tasks they set rarely encourage learners to see themselves as developing practitioners of learning and think deeply about their learning experiences (see Edwards and Willis, 2005). This is hardly unique to TBL, but it represents a missed opportunity of considerable importance.

Some proponents of TBL do actually try to control learner behaviour so closely that they can predict what learners will learn from a given task. This is in principle just what audio-lingualism’s drills and exercises aimed to do: control learning precisely by controlling learning behaviour, and control learning behaviour by controlling teaching. Ellis (2000) calls this a ‘psycholinguistic perspective’ on TBL, to contrast with the perspective from ‘social cultural theory’. But he notes that this alternative perspective makes it ‘difficult to make reliable predictions regarding the kinds of language use and opportunities for learning that will arise’ from doing a task (Ellis, 2000: 193). With our Propositions in mind we would rejoice at such openness, but Ellis’s tone is rather regretful. His view perhaps reflects a researcher’s concern for prediction and control, but it reminds us of a major question underlying

this whole chapter: how appropriate is it for teachers to seek to control precisely the linguistic outcomes of learning?

Historically, the most widely adopted methods have been those that emphasise control rather than freedom, control of learning via control of teaching. This is hardly surprising. Educational institutions held directly accountable for measurable learner achievement will want to control what happens in classrooms. External control *is* arguably best for maximising scores on standardised examinations, but we want learners to develop a much more sophisticated notion of language than a standardised test can capture, and we want them to develop as practitioners of learning. For that we believe learners are best left to learn to control their own learning.

Control itself is not the problem, then. Control becomes problematic when it is externally imposed in a way that precludes the sharing of control, and so the development of control within and among learners. We want this book to make the case for sharing control with learners, but not for using control to try to make language learning narrow and predictable. We want it to be a broad and creatively productive educational and human experience that will help learners develop as practitioners of learning.

The story so far

We have suggested that a mixture of commercial and accountability pressures are largely responsible for ensuring that mainstream language teaching remains dependent on methods that emphasise control. But should we not just accept that, to the people who really influence such matters, from education ministers downwards, control via methods will always be more attractive than freedom? Perhaps, but first we should consider challenges to the notion of 'method' itself.

Rethinking the whole notion of 'method': critical language pedagogy and the 'postmethod condition'

In 1985 Ashworth challenged the primacy of method in her important but sadly neglected book *Beyond Methodology: Second Language Teaching and the Community*. Arguing that many aspects of language teaching are potentially far more important than 'method', Ashworth proposed community involvement as a new focus.

Quote 4.10 Ashworth on community involvement

...the fact is that the establishment of good second language programs and of good teaching/learning conditions cannot occur without the quiet, sustained efforts of caring and knowledgeable teachers working in and with communities that lie beyond the classroom – beyond methodology.

(1985: 1)

Ashworth's concerns are wide-ranging, from language planning to national educational policy.

Quote 4.11 Ashworth on change

When it is apparent that change is needed, teachers and administrators should, because of their knowledge and experience, be a part of the change-making process and not simply the passive recipients of other people's policies.

(1985: 1)

While Ashworth's global reach focused on mainstream education, Wallerstein was concerned with the very special crisis situation of teaching English as a second language in US refugee camps. Noting the cosy view of the world in course books, where problems were few and all could be solved, Wallerstein drew attention to the problem-dominated lives of refugees. Influenced directly by the socio-political thoughts and work of Freire in Brazil (Freire, 1972), she set out her 'problem-posing' approach in *Language and Culture in Conflict* (1983). Wallerstein also offered teaching plans that posed familiar life-problems as the prime content (booking a medical appointment, for example), with classroom activities designed to help learners deal with them. Methodologically, her approach was fairly traditional, with a teacher choosing topics and masterminding the classroom process using familiar classroom activities. What was excitingly different was prioritising topic over both method and language content, and deriving topics from learners' immediate lives, rather than from the fictitious lives of textbook characters. These shifts are both echoed very strongly in Auerbach's work on 'participatory practices' (1992, 2001) and in a different form in *Exploratory Practice* in Part III. Wallerstein's work was rightly seen as radical, and received much more attention than Ashworth's broader approach. It was an early move towards 'critical language pedagogy' (CLP), a notion stressing the fully social nature of applied linguistics in general and

calling upon language professionals in all aspects of language education to consider deeply the social implications of their work.

Quote 4.12 Ashworth on responsibility

Second language teachers are just one group among many groups who have a responsibility to think deeply and critically about current problems and practices in education.

(1985: 139)

Inspired partly by such examples, CLP questioned why the world of language teaching was so full of competing methods, and speculated about whose interests this served (see especially Pennycook, 1989). The conclusion was that the dominant interests were commercial and political (introducing the controversial notion of 'linguistic imperialism') rather than educational. A decade later a special issue of the *TESOL Quarterly*, edited by Pennycook, focused on CLP's practical implications. These centre on redefining the roles of teachers and learners to take into account the socio-political nature of institutionalised language teaching and learning. Generally positive in respect of our Five Propositions about learners, especially with regard to learner development, CLP's practical implications find an echo in Exploratory Practice, as we shall see in Chapter 10 and generally in Part III.

Quote 4.13 Norton and Toohey on 'critical pedagogies and language learning'

Advocates of critical approaches to second language teaching are interested in relationships between language learning and social change. From this perspective, language is not simply a means of expression or communication; rather, it is a practice that constructs, and is constructed by, the ways language learners understand themselves, their social surroundings, their histories, and their possibilities for the future.

(2004: 1)

Following on from Wallerstein and Ashworth, CLP offered a new perspective on language teaching. Its methodological implications in some ways recalled 'strong' CLT and learner autonomy. But, while 'strong' CLT was founded on a view of language learning, and learner autonomy on an educational philosophy, CLP was founded on a view of society. CLP represents another whole-person perspective on learners, but

without any hint here of the sentimentality that people feared with the earlier humanistic approach. The 'whole person' is now a social and political animal, much more than just a psychological one.

Quote 4.14 Auerbach on her goal

...the goal of participatory education, as I see it, is to promote critical reflection with a view toward acting for change.

(2001: 276)

CLP's leaving the teacher very much in control, instead of sharing decision-making more fundamentally with the learners (as in Exploratory Practice in Part III), could, however, carry a hint of another autocratic 'teacher knows best' stance.

Quote 4.15 Ross on Auerbach's participatory practices

Once the teacher has identified major themes in students' lives...she can use a variety of ready-to-hand 'tools' to draw students into the deliberate use of language to address the issues they see as important.

(1995: 2)

An alternative is offered by Murphey and Jacobs (2000) and Murphey (2001) with 'critical collaborative autonomy', which they link explicitly to 'exploratory teaching' (the early name for Exploratory Practice) and 'participatory action research'. It provides a link to our next topic: 'liberatory autonomy'.

The postmethod condition and 'liberatory autonomy'

Benson (1997, 2001) in particular has advocated bringing the Freirian ideas behind autonomy and CLP together in 'liberatory autonomy'.

Quote 4.16 Kumaravadivelu on 'liberatory autonomy'

While academic autonomy enables learners to be strategic practitioners in order to realize their learning potential, liberatory autonomy empowers them to be critical thinkers in order to realize their human potential. Liberatory autonomy goes much further than academic autonomy by actively seeking to help learners recognize sociopolitical impediments placed in their

paths to progress, and by providing them with the intellectual tools necessary to overcome them.

(2003: 141)

Kumaravadivelu, discussing the ‘postmethod condition’ (2003: 142–3), suggests how ‘meaningful liberatory autonomy can be promoted in the language classroom’.

Quote 4.17 Kumaravadivelu on ways of promoting ‘liberatory autonomy’

Helping them in the formation of learning communities where learners develop into unified, socially cohesive, mutually supportive groups seeking self-awareness and self-improvement.

...

Providing opportunities for them to explore the unfolding frontiers in cyberspace and the unlimited possibilities offered by online services on the World Wide Web, and bringing back to the class their own topics for discussion and their own perspectives on these topics.

(2003: 142, 143)

‘Liberatory autonomy’ fits in very well with our Five Propositions. It also looks forward to Part III, where we will see how Exploratory Practice can help learners develop by focusing on their own concerns as developing practitioners of learning. It therefore provides a good positive note on which to end this survey of methodological thinking in the field of language teaching and learning.

So what, though? What view of the learner actually prevails in the world’s classrooms?

Views of the learner have developed as ideas about teaching methods have developed. Some methodological options, especially non-commercial ones, represent fundamental reconsiderations of what view of the learner is most appropriate, given what we now know about classroom language learning. Some correspond to the view represented by our Five Propositions and to the learner as a ‘key developing practitioner’. To judge by the content of the leading journals in the field (e.g. *TESOL Quarterly*, *Applied Linguistics*, *Modern Language Journal*), such ideas inform much professional thinking and writing. But we cannot claim that they currently inform mainstream classroom practice. (For an alternative perspective suggesting

that practice influences theory rather than vice versa, see Allwright, 2004.) It may be too early to expect big practical changes, but the ideas have now been around for several decades. Yet the 'weak' notion of Communicative Language Teaching, with its largely conventional and asocial view of the learner, still dominates the world's classrooms – at least, that is, wherever there is, ironically enough, pressure for English language teaching to be 'up-to-date', and pressure on teachers to go abroad for advanced training. External control, then, is still a major issue.

Against that rather depressing background we turn to our next source of influence on views of the learner – teacher training – where control is again hugely important.

Further reading

- Allwright, D. 2005 From Teaching Points to Learning Opportunities and Beyond. *TESOL Quarterly*, 39/1: 9–31. Going beyond methods and teaching points to distinguish between 'managing' and 'doing' learning, and to prioritise learning opportunities as the central concern.
- Ashworth 1985 *Beyond Methodology: Second Language Teaching and the Community*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press. Ashworth goes beyond methods to prioritise involvement in the community as the major source for successful language teaching.
- Benson and Voller 1997 The Philosophy and Politics of Learner Autonomy. In P. Benson, and P. Voller (eds) *Autonomy and Independence in language Learning*. London, Longman: 18–34. A wide-ranging discussion of learning autonomy for language learning.
- Howatt, 1984 *A History of English Language Teaching*. Oxford, Oxford University Press. Chapters 15 and 18 offer two especially authoritative and informative essays on the history of English language teaching in the latter part of the twentieth century.
- Pennycook, A. 1989 The concept of method, interested knowledge, and the politics of language teaching. *TESOL Quarterly*, 23/4: 589–618. A seminal paper asking whose interests are served by the proliferation of methods.
- Stevick, E.W. 1976, 1996 *Memory Meaning and Method: Some Psychological Perspectives on Language Learning*. Rowley, MA, Newbury House. In both editions this is still the most thoughtful and insightful introduction to thinking about method.

5

Teacher Training and the Learner

This chapter will:

- examine how the processes of teacher training may establish, for good or ill, career-long beliefs about learners;
- identify two major barriers to the incorporation of our Five Propositions and analyse their implications;
- provide a perspective on developments within the processes of teacher training, showing how they reflect developments in the teaching profession as a whole and how they relate to our Five Propositions.

Introduction: personal professionalism and institutional standardisation

The impact of teacher training on teachers-to-be, on their understanding of what it is to be a learner and of how to treat learners is fundamentally important. Teachers in initial training in particular are likely already to be influenced by how they were treated as language learners when they were at school ('the apprenticeship of observation', Lortie, 1975) and a teacher training course is a major opportunity for trainers to build on – or attempt to counter – such influences. This chapter considers the potential influence of both pre- and in-service teacher training on teachers' views of learners. We shall focus on teacher *training*, using Ur's (1996: 3) definition: 'the process of preparation for professional teaching'. We shall leave teacher education and development aside for the moment. However, teacher development is an underlying concern throughout Part III.

Comment 5.1 A note about terminology in this chapter

The term ‘beginning teacher’ refers to anyone embarking on their first experiences of teaching, whether in a first job without any formal training at all, or in a first or early job following some form of formal teacher training. The terms ‘trainee teacher’ and ‘trainee’ refer to someone currently engaged on a course of formal teacher training in order – officially at least – to learn something about teaching.

The terms ‘teacher trainer’ and ‘trainer’ refer to someone currently engaged on a course of formal teacher training in order – officially at least – to teach others (trainees) something about teaching (and learning).

The fundamental attitudes underlying our Five Propositions are generally attractive to training professionals, we believe, even if they are not accepted universally, and such professionals are in principle very well placed to help establish them. Many would like to see them incorporated into everyday practice, but there are barriers to overcome.

Two barriers

Our ideas may be ‘in the air’, but they are not fully developed in training course practice (see Breen et al., 2001). In Chapter 3 we saw the potentially negative influence of the assessment criteria which leads, our experience suggests, to courses focusing very much on getting trainees to:

- shape a room full of individual and idiosyncratic learners into a homogeneous group with a single purpose, all doing the same things at the same time in the same period, whether this suits the needs of the individual or not;
- make sure that the learners are ‘on task’ (a task set by the trainee teacher, of course);
- use a variety of techniques to enforce such uniformity.

Senior (2006) writes sympathetically of the enormous stress and anxiety experienced by trainees. She identifies a common reaction – trainee introspection – while the core requirements of a course such as the CELTA (Certificate in English Language Teaching to Adults) go unchallenged.

Quote 5.1 Senior on trainee anxiety

Not surprisingly, trainees tend to be inward-looking – focusing on themselves and their own performance, rather than on how well their students are learning.

(2006: 46)

Senior also exemplifies a contradiction between the good intentions of many trainers to treat learners and trainees (and to teach trainees to treat learners) in ways that accord with our Five Propositions, and the reality of many teacher training courses, where trainees become so focused on superficial aspects of the criteria (for example, timing or pace) that they ignore the keys to teaching: the learners. But why does this contradiction exist and where does it come from? We believe there are essentially two major barriers to the implementation of our ideas on learners.

Barrier 1: Trainee inexperience

The first barrier is a 'personal professional' one: the very inexperience of trainee teachers appears to rule out the openness of lesson management that our Five Propositions imply.

Vignette 5.1

James has recently completed his initial training and starts work in a school. On his course, the longest time he ever had to teach was an hour. His first class in his new job is three hours long and there are 15 students on the class list. The three hours stretch out in front of him like an empty eternity – chaos could reign. Fear of chaos does reign. The structured lesson plan which allots activities and interactions for every minute of those three hours alleviates that fear and reduces the likelihood of the learners asking James a tricky question that he does not yet know the answer to. But when he goes into the classroom at 9.00, only one student is there; ten minutes later another arrives. After an hour there are seven students in the room.

James despairs: 'I spent all night worrying about my lesson, and planning how they would do group work and pair work, only for it to fall apart on the day!'

In order to cope with managing a roomful of people (the learners), beginning teachers may well fall back on the relative stability of a formal lesson plan, with learner behaviour carefully scripted.

Quote 5.2 Richards and Rodgers on training in method

Training in the techniques and procedures of a specific method is probably essential for novice teachers entering teaching, because it provides them with the confidence they will need to face learners and it provides techniques and strategies for presenting lessons.

(2001: 250)

This may sound reasonable, but it effectively precludes individual learner or group decision-making. This is especially important to us

because the way someone is trained to teach can have a career-long effect. If teachers are trained to believe that their survival depends on their being in total control of everything, how will they ever dare to risk sharing that control? How will they ever find out just how much learners can contribute to lessons? It is a very unfortunate way of getting started on a teaching career. It encourages, and could serve to legitimate, a career-long incapacity to see learners as 'key developing practitioners'.

If, however, training establishes learners as co-decision-makers in the construction of lessons, and provides practical guidance and training for doing this without producing chaos, then beginning teachers can begin to build the ideas into their earliest lessons. Breen et al. (1989) present a distinguished example from teacher training work in Denmark. Even more directly relevant here is Inés Miller's experience of training teachers in Rio de Janeiro (Chapter 15), which shows how trainers can challenge the need for control-centred lesson plans, by encouraging trainees to consider, and practise using, alternative ways of managing the classroom. So trainee inexperience need not be a barrier.

There is, however, a second barrier to overcome, one that trainers may be powerless to surmount.

Barrier 2: Institutional standardisation

We argued in Chapters 2 and 3 that the current emphasis on standardisation dominates teaching and learning, and generally distorts how teachers and learners operate. Teacher training also has to cope with this distortion. Governmental policies prioritising measurable achievement have augmented the tensions for teachers, trainees and trainers whenever they attempt to implement pedagogy they believe in.

'Authoritarianism is world-wide and militates against effective teaching and learning – and also training', says Hayes (2004: 72). The authoritarianism in question is that of test results, pass/fail lessons, tick-box assessments and the evaluation of teachers (and learners) against their conformity to a particular model.

Quote 5.3 Roberts on a prescriptive approach to assessment

A prescriptive approach to assessment assumes that a limited and precise set of criteria can be safely applied to assess the performance of teachers. This view assumes that certain methods of language teaching are best; and that criteria applied to a student-teacher's classroom performance will be appropriate to all possible future teaching contexts. Neither is a safe assumption.

The effective assessment of teaching depends on the development of a model of effective teaching. However, such models derive from values and ideology, not from certainty...

(1998: 162)

As we saw in Chapter 1, Breen also objects to standardised evaluations, arguing that 'much in-service training...positions teachers as deficient before it commences' (2006: 211). Teachers, trainees and indeed trainers (otherwise potentially powerful figures) are disempowered by institutional demands for standardisation.

When the institutional pressure is for standardisation, then individuality, flexibility, creativity and sharing decision-making with learners are severely curtailed, if not eliminated altogether. The message for trainees, whether in pre- or in-service training, is that learners and teachers (as learners of teaching) cannot be trusted to be capable of:

- taking learning seriously,
- making their own decisions, or
- developing as practitioners of their own learning.

A very different message is available, however. Chapter 14 shows how collegial development, advocated by Breen (2006), opens up a much more positive range of possibilities. Nevertheless, in most teacher training, standardisation, especially standardisation of assessment, effectively discourages trainers from exploring ways of fully including trainees, and by extension learners, in the processes of learning about teaching and learning.

Reflections on the two barriers

To summarise, even trainers who thoroughly endorse our view of learners may be cautious about what they can expect of inexperienced trainees (see Senior, 2006: 60–1). Such caution may be unnecessary, but even if they overcome it, they are likely to face the institutional necessity of training according to standardised criteria.

Teacher training is multifaceted, however, with many elements. The ones most likely to influence the incorporation of our ideas about learners are, we suggest:

- training in teaching methods,
- teaching practice (with its foregrounding of lesson planning),
- teacher assessment.

The processes of teacher training: (1) training in teaching methods

Four questions facing trainers with regard to methods

Which methodological option(s) do teachers need to know about?

Chapter 4 noted that language teaching is distinguished by its plethora of named and more or less commercially packaged teaching methods. To be professionally well informed, trainees need to know about them and their underlying ideas. But time is always limited, so choices must be made, and every choice will convey an official endorsement not only of the chosen method(s), but also of the corresponding view of learners. The choice is easier for private institutions training teachers to work in their own schools (e.g. International House, the British Council), where the house style is seen as a commercial asset, but that only strengthens the influence on the trainees' view of learners.

Which method(s), if any, do teachers need to learn to use?

Trainees also need to be trained to teach. In principle this need not mean adopting any particular named method, given the range of options available, but training institutions do typically teach their trainees to use a particular method or methods. This choice may be a commercial decision, as we have seen, or a policy matter from an educational authority. Any such choice, we know, will necessarily imply a view of learners and what can be expected of them. Furthermore, knowing how to use a method, and not just knowing *about* it, strengthens its influence on the user's view of learners. The method used is very important.

A potential counterbalance is that trainees may already have a fixed view of what is possible in their future classrooms.

Vignette 5.2 A British teacher trainer goes abroad

A teacher trainer goes to Africa and works intensively with teachers there to raise awareness of communicative teaching. One of the 'trainee teachers' (a woman with several years of teaching experience) gives an excellent presentation which clearly shows how she has understood the principles of the Communicative Approach.

At the end, the trainer congratulates her and asks what she thinks will be an easy question to field: 'So will you be doing this in your classrooms?' 'Oh no', comes the reply, 'we couldn't possibly do it in our classrooms with our pupils! It just wouldn't work!'

A further possible counterbalance is the prospect of resistance from future employing institutions, and from learners. This may give trainees

an excuse to reject their training, but it could be a legitimate reason for not allowing trainers to unduly influence their views. Teachers around the world are now routinely trained to teach 'communicative' lessons, using 'communicative' course books (claiming to use 'real' language). Until recently at least, there was a lucrative market for training institutions based in 'BANA' (Britain, Australasia and North America) countries (see Holliday, 1994) offering courses training teachers to use the 'Communicative Approach'. However, some (Holliday, 1994; Pennycook, 1999) have argued strongly that this is typically done with scant regard for the situation in the participants' home countries. It fails to take into account trainees' prior professional knowledge, their institutional context (class size, classroom layout, school regulations, Ministry regulations and state examinations), and such matters as student and parent expectations, or jealousy and suspicion from teachers left behind – the broader societal context.

Vignette 5.3 A Chinese teacher comes to Britain

Carefully selected by examination and interview panel, a group of 40 or so teachers comes to a teacher training centre in Britain to learn about the 'Communicative Approach'. The aim of the course is to teach them the theories about this 'new' form of teaching where learners are expected to interact, rather than simply awaiting a fount of knowledge from their teacher, which they will then reproduce without thought or question later. The local government has issued a decree that all classes must now be communicative, so these teachers are to learn how to do it, and teach their colleagues how to do it when they return. However, one teacher complains: 'It's all very well, but my students will not do this because the national examination is all about rote learning and grammar!'

These two counterbalances may both be powerful, then, but neither promises support for our view of learners.

Which method to use in training?

Any training method, whether it reflects a named one or not, implies a view of learners, but now the learners are *trainee teachers*. This only heightens the importance of matching how trainees are trained to treat learners with how they are treated as learners themselves.

Comment 5.2 The introduction of group work

A concrete example of this kind of 'official endorsement', which was quite worrying at the time (the late 1960s), is the way group work was introduced

by teacher trainers. Group work was emphasised as a new classroom activity associated with the latest methodological thinking. If trainers did not use it in the training itself, the trainees could see this as a lack of faith in the innovation. After all, if the trainers did not use group work, why should the trainees believe it was worth doing?

How should trainees be assessed?

Where private language schools with a 'house style' train their own teachers, they may understandably only pass the people who have successfully learned to teach their way, no matter how competent they may be otherwise. In more general training institutions, preparing teachers for national education systems, government directives may specify the method(s) schools should use. This choice may not be what trainers themselves would consider most professionally justified, and may also imply a different view of learners from what trainers would wish to convey. But if they follow their own professional judgement, they face a dilemma. Their assessment procedures need to be valid for the course provided, but must also meet government requirements, which may be at odds with the course. In such circumstances, we might expect a backwash effect. Trainers may feel their choice of methods (both for the content of training and for its own processes) must reflect government requirements rather than their own professional judgements, wherever these create conflicts of opinion. The resultant 'bad faith' is bad for the profession and highly significant for trainees' developing view of learners.

Underlying everything is still the broad notion of control. Attractive to most people (as we saw for 'method'), control can certainly make life easier for the controllers, but it can create problems for the controlled, and for the health of the system as a whole. We stay with control to consider next the narrower notion of classroom control and its relation to methodological options and to training issues.

Teacher control

Teacher training programmes often reflect the dominant methods of the day. In Chapter 4 we saw that this generally means methods that put the teacher in unilateral control of the classroom, leaving the learners to follow instructions. Methods that share control between teacher and learners (e.g. learner autonomy) attract only a minority. But why should teacher control be so attractive? Commercial pressure to sell textbooks and teacher training handbooks that promote control are unlikely to be the whole answer. Hubbard et al. (1983) offer a clue. They reflect a widespread focus in teacher training at the time on

sequencing lessons in terms of three processes: Presentation, Practice, Production (PPP). PPP offered trainees a clear and predictable structure of control over lessons and what learners should do. This made it relatively easy for trainers to demonstrate and for trainees to implement, and so was attractive to trainers and trainees alike, without the need of a 'hard sell'. Above all, perhaps, trainees who teach in such a controlled fashion are relatively easy to grade. Trainers know what to look for; while trainees know what to do to get good grades. PPP as such is no longer so widely recommended in the training literature, but it remains a feature of many traditional training courses, perhaps precisely because of the relative ease of use that control brings to all aspects of teacher training.

Hubbard et al. do not encourage the unthinking acceptance of any methodological prescriptions, and certainly not just because they may be easy to use. They write: 'teachers should think for themselves and never accept any idea on trust' (1983: 323).

Quote 5.4 Hubbard et al. on the complexity of the teacher's responsibility

No sophisticated techniques, nor libraries of books on methodology, will help the teacher who fails to understand that students *do* have problems learning languages and that it is his [*sic*] responsibility to try to solve these problems.

(1983: 324)

However, the overall effect of the book was probably to reinforce the attractiveness of control and the ease of use it promised to all.

Some of the methodological options described in Chapter 4 offered a different approach to control, especially the 'humanist approach', with its wish to treat learners as 'whole beings' (Moskowitz, 1978). But by a sad irony, the commercially packaged 'alternatives' (e.g. Silent Way, Suggestopedia, Community Language Learning) tended to be even more precisely packaged and marketed than anything in the mainstream, and so more prescriptive about how teachers should control the classroom. Their influence on teacher training, especially in the private sector, was direct and strong. As an extreme example, it was perfectly possible to read about Community Language Learning, but if your training was not conducted by the originators of CLL themselves, they would not accept that you could possibly be teaching that way. So control was again a major issue, both internally to the various methods and

in terms of commercial control, all of which militated against the sort of flexibility our Five Propositions imply.

The Communicative Approach, as we saw, promised to reopen the question of teacher control, but in practice, especially in its weak form, it did not. Instead, teachers were, and are, trained to 'manage' – even micro-manage – classrooms in much the same way as before. 'Communicative activities' are typically selected, designed and implemented by teachers without significant space for learners' input.

Overall, then, as methodological options arrive and are 'mainstreamed' into schools (unless they are too demanding and get left to a cult minority) they are gradually woven into the fabric of teacher training courses. In the process they are adapted (adulterated?) to accommodate the wish for control and the general ease of use that control promises.

Quote 5.5 Harmer on a balanced activities approach

...while students need a lot of input which is roughly-tuned, and while there must be an emphasis on communicative activities which improve the students' abilities to communicate, there is also a place for controlled presentation of finely-tuned input and semi-controlled practice.

(1991: 43)

Views such as Harmer's, which were not uncommon in language teacher training in the 1990s, hint at this underlying desire for control. The trainee teacher might be called a 'facilitator' rather than an 'instructor', but in practice 'facilitating' still meant closely managing and directing learning: initiating pair work or group work, setting tasks for listening practice, keeping learners 'on task'. Consequently, any wish trainees might have to treat learners as capable of making their own decisions about language learning or as capable of developing as practitioners of learning would be buried beneath the weight of having to teach a teacher-directed, teacher-planned, teacher-executed lesson.

Some have seriously attempted to open up the issue of control, however, and to promote the sort of flexibility in trainees' minds that Hubbard et al. (1983) called for and that might make room for our view of learners.

Eclecticism and variety

Some of the trainers involved in the later methodological developments described in Chapter 4 (and developments described in the

following chapters) exercised an influence beyond their own institutions by publishing their methodological ideas and principles in teacher training handbooks that incorporated the new thinking. Key teacher training texts such as Harmer (1991), Wallace (1991), Woodward (1991), Scrivener (1994) and Ur (1996) all included sections requiring trainees to consider varieties of learning styles, the complexities of motivation, ways of giving feedback effectively while respecting individual human needs, and the value of getting learners seriously involved in their learning.

Scrivener (1994) and Ur (1996) provide some alternative views to Harmer's in Quote 5.5 above. Like Harmer they both generally endorse the weak version of the Communicative Approach in teacher training, but the messages that consistently come through in all three key texts are balance, eclecticism and variety.

Quote 5.6 Scrivener on teaching techniques

Although this book concentrates mainly on teaching techniques, it is important to bear in mind that knowledge of subject matter and methodology are, on their own, insufficient. A great deal of teaching can be done with those two, but I would suspect that the total learning would not be as great as it could be. However, an aware and sensitive teacher, who respects and listens to her [*sic*] students, and who concentrates on finding ways of enabling learning rather than performing as a teacher, goes a long way to creating conditions in which a great deal of learning is likely to take place.

(1994: 4–5)

Ur continues the theme, which looks most encouraging for our Five Propositions.

Quote 5.7 Ur on what courses should offer trainee teachers

Courses should lead trainees to rely on their own judgement and to be confident enough to discuss and criticize ideas put forward by others, whether local colleagues, trainers, lecturers, or university researchers. They should also promote individual research and innovation, in both practical and theoretical topics, and encourage the writing up and publication of original ideas for sharing with other professionals.

(1996: 9)

Harmer, in the third edition of *The Practice of English Language Teaching* (2001), sums up the current state of affairs:

Quote 5.8 Harmer on pragmatic eclecticism

All this amounts to a pragmatic eclecticism where decisions about what and how to teach are based, essentially, on what seems to work. ... What really matters, for teachers who wish to grow and develop as they teach (and for the students whom they work with), is that practices should be constantly scrutinised to see if they are working and why or why not. ... students have a right to expect that they are being asked to do things for a reason, and that their teacher has some aim in mind which he or she can, if asked, articulate clearly.

(2001: 97)

Leaving aside the vexed question of the logic of eclecticism (see Prabhu, 1990), how could trainers respond? They could promote eclecticism by introducing trainees to the ever-growing range of methodological options, but then prescribe those that fit the assessment profile (as discussed in Chapter 3). That would facilitate the assessment process, but invite accusations of hypocrisy. Alternatively, they could adopt an approach where trainers and trainees collaborate in selecting methods that suit them. But the trainees' choices might not fit the standardised assessment profile, and they might have to be failed. At best the official assessment profile might be adapted (subverted?) to give more freedom of interpretation. But given the current trend in professional communication in general, and not just in education (see Sarangi and Candlin, 2001), for ever more detailed descriptors and speedy 'tick-box' criteria (see Breen, 2006: 207), that sounds unduly optimistic.

Martin Parrott (1993) neatly underlines the dilemma by noting that the tasks in his book are designed for teacher training programmes *not* leading to formal qualifications. The reflective and inquiring attitudes his tasks presuppose require too much time for discussion and development on a formally assessed programme. Removing the pressure to conform to limited criteria for assessment allows trainees to fulfil their potential as key developing practitioners themselves.

Quote 5.9 Parrott on teacher training

It is assumed that there is no 'right' way to teach. Teachers need to take account of the ways in which their students are predisposed to learn and to

<p>recognise the range of different predispositions which may be found in most groups of learners.</p>
--

<p>(1993: 1)</p>

The story of training in method is very problematic for trainers, then, and so for our view of learners. Even if trainers endorse our propositions, it seems difficult (even impossible) in the current climate, to run a qualificatory training course based comprehensively on them, and to have trainees collaborating with trainers in making decisions about timetabling, what to study, how to study it, how long to study it for, and so on.

The processes of teacher training:

(2) teaching practice

Three elements of teaching practice

Courses to *train* teachers, not just inform them, usually include a major element of teaching practice (TP). During TP, trainees develop and demonstrate, over a series of classroom encounters with real learners, their mastery of one or more teaching methods. How TP is conducted inevitably influences the view of learners that training process transmits. TP itself typically involves three phases:

1. *Lesson planning*: trainees going into a classroom and facing learners need to know how to plan for such encounters; specifically, how to plan lessons that they, as novices, will be able to teach.
2. *Classroom observation*: trainees need to learn how to observe what happens in classrooms and to be ready for trainers to observe their own TP lessons. Observation visits help trainers decide if they are competent to practise.
3. *Feedback discussion*: trainees need to reflect, with their trainers, on lessons just taught, set them in context with other lessons seen or delivered, and make connections with their other pedagogic discussions.

As before, the problematic influences of standardisation and assessment dominate our discussion.

Lesson planning

In the 1970s it seemed reasonable to train teachers to plan for a specific level of learning of predetermined language points.

Quote 5.10 Celce-Murcia and Gorman on lesson planning

...the teacher can decide in advance that the lesson will be successfully completed if X per cent of the students can perform the objectives X per cent of the time. (This level should normally be fairly high, e.g. 80–100%).

(1979: 296)

A high degree of control was apparently expected, leaving learners more as passive performers than active practitioners of learning. The methodological developments we have seen implied less of a ringmaster role for teachers (and teacher trainers) and popularised the alternative notion of the ‘facilitator’. Even at the height of the enthusiasm for ‘facilitation’, however, detailed lesson plans were still required on most teacher training courses, even if trainees no longer had to nominate a specific level of achievement. Much more recently the requirement for lesson plans to predict precise learning outcomes has returned – if it ever really went away.

By requiring trainees to conform to standardised lesson plan formats, trainers may feel they are meeting several needs at once. Once again, control is central. Thinking about a lesson sufficiently to plan it in detail should help trainees stay in control of classroom events and so avert chaos. This control should also help ensure that learners get worthwhile lessons from their novice teachers. Furthermore, if everyone plans and executes lessons in the same standardised way, then, as we saw earlier, it should be easier to compare trainees and assess their relative progress and competence. But this convenience comes at a cost.

Comment 5.3 When learners don’t learn what was planned

Just as only some of the things learners learn will have been in the lesson plan as learning objectives (see Allwright, 1984a: ‘Why don’t learners learn what teachers teach?’), some of the learning objectives will remain unlearned. When learners do *not* learn these targeted items, trainee teachers may well be deeply frustrated and the trainer disappointed in the trainee’s performance. The learners, too, may feel guilty or inadequate if they notice the teacher’s frustration, or simply realise that they did not learn what they were expected to. The fact that they may have learned many things *not* on the teacher’s plan will go unnoticed and be of no comfort to anyone.

The central point of the classic lesson plan, with its aims and precise learning objectives, is for the learners to learn whatever their teacher

teaches, and for the teacher to be judged on how much of it they learn. But reality is much messier, and potentially much more productive, than that.

Vignette 5.4 When learners offer divergence from the lesson plan

Charlotte, a trainee teacher, writes a lesson plan in which she is required, by her institution's lesson planning specifications, to state her lesson aims and objectives, learning outcomes for the students in her class, their interactions and groupings when the students will work individually, in pairs or in larger groups, or in plenary mode, and the approximate timings for what will happen when (and for how long) during the lesson. She is not required, let alone encouraged, to ask the learners what they would like to do, when and for how long. She has been discouraged from allowing herself to be diverted from her plan. If she has planned to work on modal verb usage, for example, she must not let general discussion develop if a learner interrupts to ask, out of genuine interest, what 'baby light my fire' means. If she does, she can expect to be penalised by her trainer for failing to achieve her planned aims, even if the class actually has a linguistically very productive time discussing, in the target language, the use of metaphor in pop lyrics.

A further problem is that the detailed lesson planning advocated in training handbooks (see again Harmer, 2001; Scrivener, 1994, 2005; Ur, 1996) virtually precludes significant learner input into decisions either at the planning stage or during lessons.

Quote 5.11 Senior on lesson planning

The importance of lesson planning is regularly stressed by teacher trainers, who may use the aphorism 'failing to plan is planning to fail' to impress upon trainees the importance of careful and detailed lesson planning, with a specific number of minutes allocated to each lesson segment. Learning how to develop and articulate lesson objectives, and then select and sequence tasks and activities that are likely to lead to the achievement of those objectives, is a fundamental part of learning how to teach.

(2006: 43)

For trainees to produce lesson plans in a way that seriously reflects our Five Propositions, no matter how much their trainers would (secretly?) like them to, is therefore extremely problematic. Any independent input from learners, however well intentioned, could derail a lesson so badly that the trainer might have to give a bad assessment.

Scrivener (1994) in particular exemplifies this conflict between good intentions and the need to conform to assessment criteria. He identifies

four kinds of lesson plan – logical line, topic umbrella, rag-bag and jungle path – but then draws back from advocating a seriously radical approach.

Quote 5.12 Scrivener on lesson planning

The 'jungle path' lesson can look artless to an observer, yet to do it successfully requires experience.... A teacher doing this needs to be aware both of the people in the room and of the wide variety of options open to her [*sic*]. She needs to be able to make decisions, moment by moment, about which route is the best one to follow. She needs to be familiar with all the resources of material and information available to her.

The need for teaching experience and awareness of resources available suggests that lessons of this type are more appropriate for teachers who are already fairly competent in planning and executing lessons of the 'logical line' or 'topic umbrella' variety. For this reason it is the lesson you don't normally learn to do on teacher training courses!

(1994: 36)

Despite the apparent flexibility in Scrivener's (1994) rag-bag or jungle path lessons, or Harmer's (2001) recommendation of eclecticism, an underlying assumption remains that trainee teachers should decide in advance all the essential aspects of lessons. So, however strongly they may believe in the individuality, seriousness and development potential of learners and trainees, teacher trainers still find themselves constraining their trainees to plan and conduct TP lessons in a way that cannot realistically reflect our Propositions.

On a more positive note, 'maverick' trainers such as Roger Hunt (1996) report using a 'cyclic approach' whereby the trainer engages trainees in discussion about the content of TP input sessions both before and after them, to promote reflection on the ways TP will be carried out. This does require careful monitoring and account-keeping, perhaps via a 'retrospective syllabus', if everyone is to feel comfortable that they know where they have been, even if they cannot know exactly where they are going. It is not managerially simple, therefore. Perhaps that is at least partly why such openness is rare.

Classroom observation

To see how trainees execute their lesson plans trainers must observe TP lessons and make a final judgement of trainees' practical competence. Before that happens, however, trainees will themselves usually have learned to use classroom observation on their own and others' teaching as a tool for their own development.

Traditionally, however, observation was an informal, impressionistic process for trainers and examiners, not trainees. Then Flanders' pioneering work (1960a, 1960b) in the US introduced Interaction Analysis as an educational research tool. Trainers quickly realised that observation systems could be simple enough for teachers to use on their own teaching. Such a quantified analysis could help them think 'objectively' about their own teaching. By the end of the 1960s systematic observation schemes were widely used in language teacher training in North America and Europe (see Allwright, 1988). Classroom observation had become an important feedback tool.

Comment 5.4 Systematic observation as a feedback tool

Having quantified one attempt at teaching in a particular way, trainee teachers could then decide in what precise ways they wanted their teaching to produce a different quantifiable outcome in future. For example, if a trainee teacher thought, or was told by a supervisor, that he or she was missing too many opportunities to correct learners' language errors, then that trainee could on the next occasion make a deliberate attempt to reduce the number. Having numbers for both occasions enabled trainees, and their trainers, to make direct comparisons between teaching practice lessons, to see if actual teacher behaviour changed as intended.

It was now possible to use systematic analysis both to measure trainee progress towards teaching appropriately and also finally to evaluate it objectively and reliably.

Concept 5.1 Reactions to being trained in Interaction Analysis

After learning the Flanders system, I felt completely different as I started my teaching in September. Everything I learned during the course, I applied to my teaching, and I strongly believe it has worked just beautifully. I have spread the system among my colleagues and explained to them how categories 1, 2 and 3 work in the foreign language class. They think it is a great thing to be your own observer. My textbook has gone from one teacher to another. I strongly believe every foreign language teacher should take this course.

(Unattributed, from Moskowitz, 1968: 232)

With reliability assured, everything depended on the *validity* of whatever was observed and quantified. Being able to demonstrate objectively that trainees had reduced the number of language errors they had failed

to correct was impressive, but what if correcting as many errors as possible was not necessarily a good thing?

The highly problematic issue of validity is still with us, despite decades of research and development. But a more tractable problem soon emerged. Observation systems used in teacher training naturally focused on teacher behaviour, as if learner behaviour was unimportant. Flanders' (1960a) highly influential system had only ten categories. Seven were of teacher behaviour, leaving two only for learners ('student talk – response' and 'student talk – initiation') and one for 'silence or confusion'. From the perspective of our Five Propositions this is ludicrous. Two such minimal categories do no justice to the potential richness of learners' contributions to lessons, or to their ability to make decisions influencing the lesson. And they totally fail to reflect the social nature of classroom language learning.

Teacher trainers adjusted their systems accordingly, adding many more categories for learner behaviour (see Allwright, 1988; Wallace, 1991). But overall the systematic observation movement still conveyed the view that it was primarily *teacher* behaviour that mattered, and, reflecting mainstream views on teaching method, that the learners' role was primarily a reactive one. The teacher was in control. Lessons were not yet seen as a co-production. This insight came with ethnographic work such as Mehan's (1974) in San Diego, who wrote about lessons as a social accomplishment. But it could not be captured in simple observation systems and so had more influence on classroom research than on teacher training. Systematic observation did help trainers and trainees to have interesting pedagogic discussions, but it missed the opportunity to open up for discussion less easily quantifiable issues like the learners' contributions to the accomplishment of lessons and so to the 'management of learning' (see Chapter 6). Trainees were therefore not likely to be encouraged to consider learners capable of taking learning seriously.

The systematic observation movement developed increasingly complex systems (see, for example, the Communicative Orientation of Language Teaching; Allen, Fröhlich and Spada, 1984), with increasing influence from the 'competency-based teacher education movement' (see Fanselow, 1977c; 1987; Fanselow and Barnard, 2006).

This movement assumes:

- that good teaching can be adequately defined by a set of agreed 'teacher competencies';
- that these can be defined well enough to be reliably observable;
- and so used to objectively evaluate a teacher's performance.

Inevitably, this keeps the focus firmly on the teacher and reinforces standardisation as a laudable teacher training aim. The learner (and the trainee teacher) remains a passive recipient of a potentially bewildering array of new methods and instruments for observation. Our Five Propositions about learners (including trainees as learners) are not given significant space by systematic classroom observation, but instead are crowded out by teacher-centred concerns.

Feedback discussions

So observation itself, especially when influenced by the teacher competency movement, can carry an inherent bias against our Five Propositions. But if observation doesn't help, what might?

Observation, to be fully productive, must lead to feedback. A feedback session after an observed lesson, typically held away from the learners, can discuss the planning and conduct of the practice lesson and also more general ideas about pedagogy, potentially including the ideas in our Five Propositions. Feedback sessions are not necessarily straightforward, however.

Vignette 5.5 A missed opportunity for the five propositions?

Anna (a trainee teacher) delivers a lesson in which she aims to provide an opportunity for learners to practise their listening skills. She sets the scene, telling students they will listen to a tape of three people talking about their favourite sport or leisure activity. She plays the tape, and then hands out a worksheet in which she asks the students to make notes in answer to a number of questions. The students do their best, but struggle with the task, and only manage to answer one or two out of the seven questions. Even those that they answer are incomplete. The students become sullen and uncommunicative.

Anna becomes impatient and is frustrated, she does not understand why they have spent only two minutes on a task she had anticipated would take about ten minutes.

After the students have left, the trainer, Elaine, works through the feedback session in which she guides Anna through to the realisation that the students were unable to complete the task because they were missing something. Elaine asks for suggestions from the other trainees, who have also observed the lesson, and from Anna herself. After some discussion they agree that the students needed to know more about the topic of the tape (for example, they needed to revise sports vocabulary) before listening. Elaine guides them through carefully phrased questions to collate a number of possible ways of activating the vocabulary before playing the tape. She asks the trainees if they can suggest other improvements. When the conversation runs dry, she suggests that giving the students the task to consider before they listen to the tape would make it less of a memory test and more of a chance to practise their listening techniques.

All very familiar no doubt, but there is no mention (perhaps to avoid diverting the trainees from the official criteria) of anything directly connected to our Five Propositions. There is nothing, for example, about the possibility of developing a class discussion about what the learners feel they have problems with when listening and how they would like to practise improving this skill – taking them seriously as developing practitioners of learning.

It is precisely during feedback discussions, however, that we might expect beliefs about learners to emerge, powerfully, from trainees and trainers alike, given the immediacy of the preceding classroom experience. It is a key opportunity in trainees' professional lives for their developing ideas to be tried out, analysed and accepted, adapted or rejected, and for trainers to suggest their own pedagogic ideas, and their own view of learners, with all the authority of their position as trainers. But all too often, as Ramani comments, the focus remains on the *mechanics* of teaching: 'A major source of tension is that observation is seen as a *tool* for trainee evaluation rather than for understanding the teaching-learning process in a lesson' (1987: 9).

Observation systems, then, especially when influenced by 'teacher competency' thinking, tend to reinforce any focus on mechanics to the exclusion of less concrete matters. And trainers may well feel they should focus on the concrete aspects of lessons, because these are the ones inexperienced teachers can most readily bring under conscious control, and because, realistically, they will only be able to pass (or fail) their trainees on the mechanics of their practice lessons, not on more subtle considerations. And so this overall concern for control, and for the ease of use it brings to all, militates against finding time to discuss more general ideas, including the trainees' developing view of learners.

Quote 5.13 Ramani on the possibilities of observation feedback

I am sure that classroom data can be used in many exciting ways to get teachers to reflect on their experience. ... teachers' theoretical abilities *can* be engaged and strengthened if their intuitions are accorded value, and if the entry point into theory is close to their experience as practising teachers.

(1987: 9)

As Ramani (1987) suggests, good things are possible, but institutional pressures make them less likely to happen.

Teacher training and the learner: some final comments

This review has focused on showing how language teacher trainers can find themselves in a complex dilemma, caught between their professional inclinations and external pressures, especially in relation to incorporating our Five Propositions into their work.

For trainers caught up in thoroughly standardised training processes, including all stages of assessment, the dilemma is profound, and it is difficult to know what to suggest. Perhaps we should not expect very much of formal teacher training, at least not until the current challenge to standardisation bears fruit. While we wait, we can take comfort in informal approaches to teacher development. They can help teachers who have already had the standardised initial training we have described and who wish to overcome that background. Exploratory Practice, as illustrated throughout Part III, offers such an approach to both teacher and learner development.

Further reading

- Hayes, D. (ed.) 2004 *Trainer Development: Principles and Practice for Language Teacher Training*. Language Australia Ltd. This influential volume contains a wide range of contributions from teacher trainers mainly about what it means to be a teacher trainer in different contexts around the world, both pre-service and in-service, and how trainers understand their own situations.
- Roberts, J. 1998 *Language Teacher Education*. London, Arnold. A very helpful analysis of the major pre- and in-service teacher training courses available to teachers which aims to help teacher trainers develop their approaches to trainee teachers, and to their own practices.
- Senior, R. 2006 *The Experience of Language Teaching*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press. A telling collection of teachers' experiences, quoting extensively from teachers in different contexts, but mainly in English-speaking countries. It aims to link theory and practice, but with the emphasis very much on how teachers work in practice.

Teacher training handbooks

- Harmer J. 2001 *The Practice of English Language Teaching* (third edition). Malaysia, Pearson. The 'bible' of many teacher training courses since publication in 1983. Now in its third edition, it provides the core of many initial training courses.

- Parrott, M. 1993 *Tasks for Language Teachers*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press. A set of tasks for discussion which encourage reflection and examination of beliefs about language teaching and learning.
- Scrivener, J. 2005 *Learning Teaching* (second edition). Oxford, Macmillan. This much expanded edition of the 1994 text is a popular and particularly thoughtful alternative to Harmer, mainly aimed at initial teacher training. It also considers concepts relevant to in-service training.

6

Learner Variables and the Learner

This chapter will:

- survey ‘aptitude’, ‘the good language learner’, ‘learning styles and strategies’, ‘learner training’ and ‘attitude and motivation’ to see how the traditions and concerns in these areas of learner variables research imply particular views of the learner;
- discuss how such views relate to our Five Propositions;
- show that there are some encouraging signs of a greater acceptance of the highly complex and essentially social nature of classroom language learning;
- conclude, however, that the field has disappointed us, because of its focus on categorising and classifying people.

Introduction

Quote 6.1 Gardner on the variability of learner achievement.

Despite the fact that sometimes circumstances appear very similar, there are often wide variations in the level of proficiency attained in a second language, even by students in the same class.

(1997: 33)

Classroom language learning is not equally successful for all. That much is obvious. Some learners have a ‘gift’ for language learning, it seems, while others are quite hopeless at it. Destiny is what matters, not application or intelligence. This is curious, because first language learning seems so uniformly successful. In response, many researchers

have tried to identify what differentiates successful classroom language learners from unsuccessful ones.

In this chapter we review some of the major topics studied to explain such variability, focusing on whatever might help us understand the view of the learner involved and how it relates to our Propositions.

Aptitude

The universalistic audio-lingualism years also saw, ironically, important work on learner differences. Language educators had faced a very practical problem during the second world war (1939–46): how to test people's innate language learning aptitude to avoid wasting precious teaching resources on 'hopeless' cases. That need persisted into the so-called Cold War, prompting a major research effort to analyse aptitude and develop practical tests to measure it. Carroll and Sapon developed the Modern Language Aptitude Test (MLAT, 1959), and Pimsleur, keen to produce an even more practical in-class test, developed the Pimsleur Language Aptitude Battery (PLAB, 1966).

This concern for practicality necessarily limited the tests themselves and what could be done with them. Innate aptitude could not in practice be tested. You could not test babies, only school age or adult learners, and so any measured aptitude might be influenced by their previous learning experiences, especially by teaching methods. Taught by a different method in future, their learning performance could be unpredictable. Instead of *innate* aptitude for language learning, there might be *learned* aptitude for particular methods. Chastain (1969) argued that differential success is indeed largely the result of differential language experiences, of 'nurture', therefore, rather than 'nature'. People taught audio-lingually will be used to listening (learning through their ears), whereas people taught via the 'grammar-translation' method will be used to printed text (learning through their eyes). People are likely to learn better, in practice (almost regardless of any 'innate' aptitude), if new material is presented in a familiar way. Politzer (1970) suggested an instructive complication to this relative simplicity. Following Chastain, a cognitive method like 'grammar-translation' would suit people who are good at analysis because the teaching would provide them with analytical explanations. But Politzer showed that the opposite might be the case: people who are good at analysis may need to do the analysis themselves, rather than have it done for them.

Quote 6.2 Politzer on matching teaching to learners' learning preferences

Receiving the explanation *before* the treatment evidently antagonized precisely those students who like to arrive at rules by themselves and who are capable of doing so.

(1970: 340)

And Carroll objected to the assumption that a method could have such a powerful effect on learners anyway.

Quote 6.3 Carroll on learners' relationship to teaching method

It is almost impossible to control the techniques that the student himself [*sic*] will adopt to acquire a given skill, particularly over a long course of study.

(1966: 103)

Aptitude testing was still saddled in practice with the assumption of essential universality, however. Aptitude tests intended for universal application had to assume that aptitude can be validly tested independently of past (and projected) educational experiences.

Chastain's and Politzer's work highlighted the over-simplistic nature of any such universalist assumption, but Pimsleur had already implicitly acknowledged the problem by including a measure of motivation in his Language Aptitude Battery to give it reasonable predictive validity. Aptitude measures were not good enough to be of practical value by themselves. Motivation was indeed the next learner variable to get serious research (and measurement) attention and has remained central, with a still continuing resurgence of interest at the beginning of the 1990s. We therefore leave motivation till last as it has most contemporary relevance. The 1970s saw a different approach to identifying what makes some learners more successful than others: observing and talking to individual learners to unearth what they *did*.

The good language learner

Publications started appearing in North America that listed the characteristics of the 'good language learner' (Rubin, 1975; Stern, 1975; Tucker et al., 1976; Naiman et al., 1978). Rubin identified eight; Stern

found ten. Tucker et al. added to the complexity by writing about 'cognitive, affective, and social factors'. A little later Naiman et al. (1978) reported a whole new body of research, adding 'personal biography' to the mix. In isolating just five general characteristics of 'good language learners', however, they clearly signalled that their project, while not universalist, was essentially a reductionist one, aimed at classifying learners into the fewest possible types.

Concept 6.1 Naiman et al.'s five characteristics of good language learners

1. An Active Task Approach. Good language learners actively involve themselves in the language learning task.
2. Realisation of Language as a System. Good language learners develop or exploit an awareness of language as a system.
3. Realisation of Language as a Means of Communication. Good language learners develop and exploit an awareness of language as a means of communication (i.e. conveying and receiving messages) and interaction (i.e. behaving in a culturally appropriate manner).
4. Management of Affective Demands. Good language learners realise initially or with time that they must cope with affective demands made upon them by language learning and succeed in doing so.
5. Monitoring of L2 Performance. Good language learners constantly revise their L2 systems. They monitor the language they are acquiring by testing their inferences (guesses): by looking for needed adjustments as they learn new material or by asking native informants when they think corrections are needed.

(Naiman et al., 1978, adapted from Skehan, 1989: 76–7)

Identifying the characteristics of the 'good' language learner was essentially aimed at teachers, who could if they wished, adapt their teaching accordingly. Of special interest to us here, though, is Rubin and Thompson's (1982) book-length guide addressed directly to classroom language learners (though it could only get published as a classroom text for use under the direction of a teacher). Of the 14 strategies they propose learners should use to become more successful, the first five are especially interesting. They imply endorsement of learners as idiosyncratic, serious and independent decision-makers.

Concept 6.2 Rubin and Thompson's first five strategies for being 'a more successful language learner'

1. Find Your Own Way.
2. Organise.

3. Be Creative.
4. Make Your Own Opportunities.
5. Learn to Live with Uncertainty.

(1982: v)

Simplification soon returned, however, with publications identifying just a handful of learning styles. These introduced more ways of categorising people, more reductionism, more opposition to our proposition that there is something irreducibly idiosyncratic about classroom language learners.

Learning styles and strategies

Research on cognitive styles could already be found in general psychology, along with associated work on learning styles. Influential work on *language* learning was done in Australia by Willing (1985, 1989), and in the US by Reid (1987). Both identified four main learning style preferences.

Concept 6.3 Willing's and Reid's learning style preferences compared

Willing (1985)
Communicative
Authority-oriented
Concrete
Analytical

Reid (1987)
Visual
Auditory
Kinaesthetic
Tactile

The two lists are so fundamentally different that it is difficult to believe they claim to characterise the same phenomenon. This reflects a major unresolved problem for the field – what *is* a 'style'? Such a conceptual problem could have prompted increased acknowledgement of the great complexity of classroom language learning. It offered a further argument against pigeonholing learners: dividing them up so that you can teach each category differently. Willing (1989) nevertheless envisaged such 'positive pigeonholing' (see also Reid, 1995), and developed training materials for teachers by relating different learning styles to different learning strategies.

Learning *strategy* research was not dependent on learning style categories, however, and proceeded to produce its own exhaustive inventories of strategies. Unlike style research, there was no push to

produce the shortest possible list, since the aim was to find all the things learners could do to learn languages. For simplicity, long lists were organised into groups, but the underlying (implicit) principle was ‘the more the merrier’, suggesting that the more strategies a learner used the better. Oxford’s (1990) highly influential inventory has no fewer than 80 separate strategies, in six major groupings. Her work invites learners to measure their command of learning strategies by how many they use and by how frequently they use them.

Concept 6.4 Oxford’s ‘Strategy Inventory for Language Learning’

The six groups of strategies:

1. Remembering More Effectively (15 items).
2. Using Your Mental Processes (25 items).
3. Compensating for Missing Knowledge (8 items).
4. Organising and Evaluating Your Learning (16 items).
5. Managing Your Emotions (7 items).
6. Learning with Others (9 items).

(1990: 290)

Examples of strategies from Group 2. Using your mental processes, the one with the most items:

16. I say or write new expressions repeatedly to practise them.
21. I use idioms or other routines in the new language.
26. I attend and participate in out-of-class events where the new language is spoken.
31. I use reference materials such as glossaries or dictionaries to help me use the new language.
36. I look for similarities and contrasts between the new language and my own.
40. I develop my own understanding of how the language works, even if I have to revise my understanding based on new information.

(1990: 285–6)

Oxford’s response categories:

1. Never or almost never true of me.
2. Generally not true of me.
3. Somewhat true of me.
4. Generally true of me.
5. Always or almost always true of me.

(1990: 284)

‘How many’ and ‘how often’ are much less important than how *well* learners use strategies, one suspects, but much easier to inventory. This

elusive but potentially crucial issue of quality in strategy use was picked up, but not developed, a decade later by Dörnyei in his work on classroom motivation (2001: 135, see also 'motivation' below).

For all its reductionist and quantitative tendencies, however, learning style and strategy work does support in principle at least four of our Five Propositions. It suggests that learners can reasonably be treated as if they were capable of being serious, of making independent decisions (about their strategy use), of learning in their own unique ways (if only in terms of the unique constellations of strategies they employ) and of developing as practitioners of learning (by refining their strategy use, for example). It also soon led to interesting work on learner training.

Learner training

The 'good language learner' work prompted the question: if 'bad' learners do not use the strategies 'good' learners do, could you train them to? And if they *do* use 'good' strategies, but 'badly', could they be trained to improve the *quality* of their strategy use? Rubin and Thompson (1982) had already answered 'yes' with their guide for learners, and so introduced the possibility of *learner training*. Proposing that learners can be helped to get better at learning is important for our notion of the *developing* practitioner. In 1989 Ellis and Sinclair published an entire course of learner training ('Learning to Learn English'), to be run either before or in parallel with a language course (for a partial application of it, see Case Study 13.2 in Chapter 13). In 1990 the Council of Europe published its report on Workshop 2A, 'Learning to Learn: Investigating Learner Strategies and Learner Autonomy', as part of its major project on language learning for European citizenship (Biddle and Malmberg, 1990). All this work raised the questions familiar from Chapter 4: who should control learning and does it make sense to aim for maximum precision in the relationship between acts of learning and learning itself? Learner training sometimes seemed to be trying to get learners to be more precise for themselves about their learning than their teachers could possibly be. In Chapter 5 we saw that teacher training can appear to imply that teachers should aim for a one-to-one relationship between teaching and learning, but that teaching and learning are both much messier and potentially much more productive than that. This alternative view emerged at that time, based on Allwright's (1984a) earlier research on classroom language learning.

Quote 6.4 Allwright on language lessons as sets of learning opportunities

I believe it helps if we look at language lessons as co-produced events in which all the participants are simultaneously involved in the management of interaction and, ipso facto, in the management of their learning. Following this line of thought, we can look upon language lessons as sets of learning opportunities, some deliberate but many incidental, all created through the necessary processes of classroom interaction. It should now be easier to see why the relationship between teaching and learning is problematic. What the learners do learn is presumably limited by the learning opportunities that are made available to them. But the provision of learning opportunities is not just determined by the teaching. The teaching is just one factor (though sometimes a powerful one) in the overall process by which lessons happen and learning opportunities are created.

(1984a: 5)

This view suggests that the relationship between deliberate acts of learning (termed 'learning management' in Allwright, 1993b: 40; 2005a) and learning itself is infinitely complex and inherently unpredictable.

Faced with such complexity, who would assume that training in learning strategies could make precision in learning possible? The complexity of the relationship between learning management and actual learning also suggested a possible cause for learners in learner autonomy projects not being convinced of their own progress. They had been led to expect to be in full control of their learning and so to see it happen 'before their eyes'. But they were only in control of the *management* of their learning, not of the *learning* itself, and had not perhaps realised that learning itself works in mysterious and unpredictable ways.

Another worry about learner training is the implied assumption that learners are fundamentally ignorant of what strategies might be available and useful. We prefer a more optimistic (and arguably more accurate) view of the situation: that most learners are probably well aware of the strategies that might make their language learning more effective. If in practice they do not use them, it is probably because they are inhibited by the social nature of the classroom (Allwright, 1997b). For example, people readily agree that asking questions about things you don't understand is a familiar and inherently sensible learning strategy, but many learners, perhaps fearful of public humiliation, hardly ever ask any questions during lessons.

Quote 6.7 One of Cherchalli's learners on social inhibition

Sometimes I feel like asking the teacher a question, but just realising that perhaps the rest of the class understand I hesitate.

(Cherchalli, 1988: 185)

Such indications from learners that social factors inhibit good learning behaviour have been extremely important in prompting us to propose that classroom language learning is (Proposition 2) *essentially* social, not just incidentally so. This is crucial to our view of research itself (see Chapters 9 and 10 below).

Attitude and motivation

Motivation, like aptitude, has long been considered an important factor in classroom language learning. Initially seen as something that people simply have more or less of, motivation research complicated matters by making connections with other, external variables. For aptitude, 'method' was the major complicating factor. For motivation, it was the wider social situation, outside the language classroom. Gardner and Lambert's (1972) highly influential work brought motivation and attitude together and proposed that there were differences of quality in relation to motivational attitude, not just of quantity. They concluded that most, if not all, learners could be characterised as either 'instrumental' or 'integrative'. We could expect learners to be more or less successful depending on the nature of their broader societal learning. 'Instrumental' people might be most successful if success promised a material reward, such as a good job, whereas 'integrative' people might be most successful if success promised social benefits, such as acceptance in the target language community.

Gardner and Lambert were explicitly dealing only with people who were clear cases of one 'motivational orientation' or the other, thereby excluding perhaps a third of the population. It was the simple bipolarity of their central distinction that appealed, however. Its influence was therefore tainted by the over-simplification brought in by others. The result was only a minor weakening of the general expectation that learners could be treated as essentially similar to each other in important respects. In any case, even if you did decide, as a teacher, that your learners could be divided into two motivational categories, it was not clear that the two groups' learning behaviour would necessarily be different. If motivational orientations seemed to work directly on the

central mental processes of the learner, why should a teacher treat them differently?

Several years passed before research appeared that related the different motivational orientations to actual classroom behaviour. In 1976 Gardner and colleagues published work showing that motivation as a causal variable might work by directly influencing overt classroom behaviour (the 'management of learning', rather than the learning itself). 'Integratively' motivated learners, for example, having more sociable aspirations, might be more sociable in class too, more willing to participate in classroom activities. And that might itself be good for learning (Gardner et al., 1976).

Nevertheless, research carried on paying more attention to wider societal influences, at least until the 1990s, when Dörnyei wrote: 'The main focus shifted from social attitudes to looking at classroom reality, and identifying classroom-specific motives' (1998: 124). Dörnyei's own model includes the 'direct socialisation of motivation' by the teacher, involving such practical matters as modelling, task presentation and feedback (1994: 280). He takes this classroom interest further in work with Ehrman on interpersonal dynamics in the language classroom (Ehrman and Dörnyei, 1998), and explicitly recognises the social nature of classroom learning (Proposition 2) in his later work on 'improving the quality of the learning experience'. For him this involves (among other things) 'enhancing the learners' social image' (Dörnyei, 2001: 129). We shall return to the essentially social nature of the language classroom in Chapter 9.

Individual differences in general: where are we now?

The breadth of interest in learner variables was well captured in Skehan's (1989) authoritative volume on the entire spectrum of 'individual differences' in classroom language learning. For him the term 'individual differences' covered 'motivation', 'aptitude', 'language learning strategies' and 'additional cognitive and affective influences on language learning'. Gardner's later review (1997) covers 'language aptitude', 'attitudes and motivation', 'language anxiety' and 'language learning strategies'. The mere existence of such lists challenges the notion that learners should be treated as essentially identical. Ellis pointed out long ago, however, that where individual differences can be shown to be practically relevant to language learning success, it is typically only that they affect the *rate* of learning rather than the fundamental central cognitive processes that

may govern the *route* of development (1985: 123–4). This is a theoretical challenge to learner variables research from a second language acquisition (SLA) specialist, and from that perspective it is important. However, even if the *route* of linguistic development is in some sense universal (and even that is problematic), it is the *rate* of learning, not the route, that matters to teachers (and learners), as we shall see in Chapter 7.

Logically, any interest in learner variables is welcome if it promises to help develop a more comprehensive view of the learner. For us, however, the problem remains that most work on learner variables has exhibited an underlying desire to classify and pigeonhole. This conflicts with our Proposition 1 concerning the essential idiosyncrasy of classroom language learning. Conversely, work on the social nature of classroom motivation fits our Proposition 2, and learner training, for all our reservations, fits our Proposition 5, that learners are capable of developing as practitioners of learning. Overall, however, the wide tradition of looking at learner variables has not contributed as positively as we might have expected and would have hoped. For that it needed to be less interested in classifying classroom learners and more interested in understanding them, in all their richness and complexity.

Further reading

On individual differences in general

Gardner, R. C. 1997 Individual Differences and Second Language Learning. In G.R. Tucker and D. Corson (eds), *Encyclopedia of Language and Education: Volume 4, Second Language Education*. Dordrecht, Kluwer: 33–42. A comprehensive survey of the field of individual differences, from a major contributor to research on the topic.

Skehan, P. 1989 *Individual Differences in Second-language Learning*. London, Edward Arnold. Nearly twenty years on this is still a valuable book-length survey of the whole field of individual differences, with a very useful introduction.

On aptitude

Skehan, P. 1998 *A Cognitive Approach to Language Learning*. Oxford, Oxford University Press. Skehan revisits aptitude in the context of proposing a generally cognitive approach to language learning.

On the good language learner

Rubin, J. and I. Thompson 1982 *How to be a More Successful Language Learner*. Boston, MA, Heinle and Heinle. Very useful for its sensible advice and for its direct address to learners.

On learning styles and strategies, and learner training.

Oxford, R. L. 1990 *Language Learning Strategies*. New York, Newbury House. An influential and instructive introduction to the fields of learning strategies and learner training.

On attitude and motivation

Dörnyei, Z. 2001 *Teaching and Researching Motivation*. Harlow, Longman. On motivation in the classroom, and on how to research it and encourage it there.

7

Second Language Acquisition Studies and the Learner

This chapter will:

- argue that studying *uninstructed* second language acquisition (SLA) involved an essentially universalistic and asocial view of the learner;
- describe how this prompted people more concerned with how learners learn from instruction to challenge SLA with irrelevance;
- discuss how some researchers have responded by using SLA research to derive universalist psycholinguistic principles for language teaching;
- assess the controversy over the role of social context in language *acquisition* as opposed to language *use*;
- show how second language studies in general have adopted a more social view of the learning process, in line with our classroom concerns;
- relate these developments to our Five Propositions.

Introduction: the importance of understanding second language acquisition

At the heart of any thinking about language learners must be the question: how do people actually learn languages? What happens in their brains? Is language special, or is language acquisition a normal part of general cognitive development? And why, as we saw in Chapter 6, does first language acquisition seem so remarkably successful, whereas precisely the opposite might be said about language learning in school? Could the mental processes of primary language acquisition somehow be unavailable for learning other languages later? Or could that apply

only to the mental processes entirely specific to primary language acquisition (if there are any)? Could the *general* mental processes that we use for primary language acquisition, among many other things, become even more useful with time, in tune with developmental progress in general?

These issues and challenges are highly relevant to our view of learners and of how language professionals might best help them. Central to them all is whether language teaching should seek to recreate the circumstances of primary language acquisition in some way, in the hope of bringing back into play the particular mental processes originally involved in infancy. But equally important to us is the question of whether or not language acquisition is an essentially social process. A psycholinguistic view sees language acquisition as a fundamentally personal process which only requires the target language to be available to the learner. A more social view, like ours, sees interaction with other language users as essential to acquisition, and considers the quality of that social experience crucial to successful classroom language learning.

The starting point: describing and explaining 'natural' second language acquisition

SLA researchers chose the term 'acquisition' to distinguish 'natural' processes from the deliberate and externally assisted ones captured by the term 'learning', which was used for instructed language development. They wanted to understand the 'natural' second language acquisition process in order to compare it with the 'natural' processes of primary acquisition, 'uncluttered' by whatever influences formal instruction might bring (see Corder, 1967). This initial focus on *natural acquisition* differentiates SLA sharply from the areas of applied linguistics discussed in previous chapters, with their focus on *instructed learning*.

SLA's ambition to study entirely 'natural' processes was largely frustrated. Any attempt to conduct experimental research would make the process artificial, 'unnatural' and so invalid. That meant conducting case studies of individual 'acquirers' instead. However, it proved difficult to find totally uninstructed people to study (see Allwright, 1984b: 209–10). This looks absurd, because most people in the world are probably at least bilingual and have probably become so without any specific language instruction. But the researchers themselves were mostly in North America or Europe, and looking for their 'subjects' among immigrant populations. It was never going to be easy to find immigrants who had had no language instruction of any sort, and yet

who were willing and available to enter into the fairly intensive and extended research relationship that a case study implied (but see Bremer et al., 1996, for important later work in Europe).

If, however, you made the universalistic assumption that all humans learn languages in essentially the same way in terms of their central mental processes, then studying any one person was like studying everyone. So finding lots of subjects mattered less, and less still if you were only interested in the central *cognitive* processes and not apparently relatively 'peripheral' affective ones, such as attitude and motivation, discussed in Chapter 6. So, although studying individual cases might have led to a focus on personal idiosyncrasies and emphasised the essential uniqueness of each individual's language learning experiences, SLA tended in practice to ignore individual variability, perpetuating the universalistic notion of learners as an undifferentiated mass, essentially the same in all relevant respects.

In addition, SLA researchers followed the assumption of primary acquisition theory that language acquisition was unique as a mental event, with its own 'language acquisition device' (LAD) in the brain guiding the process automatically. This notion helped us understand (or at least think we understood) the mystery of primary language acquisition: how could infants learn anything as complicated as human language without apparently having to work at it consciously? If the brain was already programmed at birth for language acquisition, an infant in contact with people would eventually learn a language without the need to 'study' it at all. If this LAD remained available, learners would not need to 'take learning seriously' (Proposition 3), since learning a second language would happen automatically. Nor would there be any need for 'independent decision-making' or for deliberate learning development (Propositions 4 and 5). There would be no room for 'learners to learn in their own unique ways, as individuals' (Proposition 1), except in essentially unimportant respects, and no need for concern over the social dimension (our Proposition 2). The LAD would take care of all the important issues.

Quote 7.1 Corder on the inevitability of second language acquisition

Let us say therefore that, given motivation, it is inevitable that a human being will learn a second language if he [*sic*] is exposed to the language data.

(1967: 164)

That was a remarkably promising and enticing prospect for language teaching professionals. The relative failure of school language teaching compared to the near-universal success of natural primary language acquisition could be blamed on teaching methods inhibiting the LAD. Removing that inhibition could in principle release unlimited language learning (or 'acquisition') potential. Krashen and Terrell's 'Natural Approach' (1983) was one response, seeking to recreate in the classroom the conditions for natural acquisition to take place, most obviously by not imposing a linguistic syllabus.

Quote 7.2 Krashen on learning materials for acquisition

It is ironic that it should be far easier to create these materials than it is to create grammatically-oriented materials – there is no need to ensure that particular grammatical rules or vocabulary are practised, and initial field testing need determine only whether the materials are interesting and comprehensible for the intended student audience.

(1985: 56)

SLA and pedagogy: the 'route' and 'rate' issue

But Krashen's willingness to derive specific teaching recommendations from SLA research was very unusual. Hatch (1979) was more typical, emphasising the dangers of drawing pedagogic implications from what was 'pure' (not 'applied') research. One reason for caution was the relatively narrow focus of early SLA, trying to establish whether there was a 'natural order' for second language acquisition, as there seemed to be for primary language acquisition. This search ended up studying the development of relatively few language phenomena. Studying morphemes that occurred in 'obligatory contexts', where there was no choice (see Concept 7.1 below) made it relatively easy to locate them in speech or writing and decide if they were being used correctly. But the only language phenomena that could be studied in this way were syntactic ones. Areas such as semantics and pragmatics were virtually untouched.

Concept 7.1 A typical set of morphemes for a 'natural order' study

Progressive *-ing*
Pronoun case
Short plural
Article

Copula
 Auxiliary
 Third person
 Long plural

(Based on Dulay et al. 1982: 230)

Although Dulay et al. did establish a relatively robust natural order (for a contemporary discussion, see Allwright, 1984), that finding appeared largely irrelevant to language education professionals. Reducing language to a few isolated syntactic phenomena, however justified for research purposes, meant having little to say about everything else. Having to deal with the whole of language in their work, language education professionals were generally not very impressed.

Looking for a natural order emphasised the *route* of acquisition, the sequence of events. Once this was described, the route itself would become precisely what theory needed to explain, as the core of SLA. 'Purist' SLA researchers were not as interested in what matters most for language professionals – the *rate* of acquisition. That was an 'applied' matter, subject to all sorts of influences that need not concern 'pure' theorists.

The search for a natural order was considered largely successful in its own terms, however. That represented a small triumph for universalism, a counterexample to our claim for the essentially unique nature of each individual's language learning. In the spirit of Larsen-Freeman's call for SLA 'to do what the SLA field has always done on such occasions: to adopt a perspective that is large enough to accommodate the two competing points of view' (2002: 33), we argue that the two positions are by no means incompatible.

If the route of language *development* is in some respects universal, it might appear attractive to make language *teaching* follow that order, but in practice it is logistically impossible for teaching simply to follow a 'natural order', however narrow or wide in scope it might be (see Candlin, 1984). The essential idiosyncrasy of learning means that the *rate* of learning is highly variable. Every learner in a group is always at a different stage of learning from the others. Learners may universally have to learn item X before they can learn Y, but in practice they are never all going to have mastered X and be ready to learn Y at the same time. If there is never a moment when all are ready for Y, when should the teacher teach it? Lesson planning in traditional language item terms becomes impossible. (This is not a problem in autonomous language

learning, and sometimes with Exploratory Practice, when learners determine their own learning sequences.)

In any case, even if classroom teaching could follow the natural order exactly, educational systems, and the people in them, are typically not greatly concerned about the route of learning. Rate is the key educational issue, especially where maximising measurable achievement is the official goal. Except in performance areas like music, and the Graded Objectives Movement described in Chapter 4, achievement tests do not wait until the learners are ready. Both learners and teachers are evaluated according to learner achievement on the same, officially designated test day, so the more learners achieve by then the better.

The triumph of universalism in establishing a universal route for SLA was hollow then, in pedagogic terms, because it failed to address the key issue for the classroom.

Another problematic issue in the relationship between SLA and pedagogy: how important is social context?

In its purist search for a universalist theoretical base (following cognitive psychology) early SLA studies also represented the SLA process as essentially asocial, an entirely personal phenomenon, happening within the acquirer and guided according to universal principles. The process was seen as dependent upon exposure to the target language, and that meant contact with other people. But the interactive (i.e. social) nature of such encounters was not considered theoretically interesting.

Quote 7.3 Long on the relative unimportance of social factors

Social and affective factors, the L2 *acquisition* literature suggests, are important, but relatively minor in their impact, in both naturalistic and classroom settings, and most current theories of and in SLA reflect that fact.

(1997: 319)

Krashen believed in developing 'pure' theory, but also in drawing pedagogical implications from it (as we saw with the 'Natural Approach'). He included social interaction as a condition for acquisition (1982: 76–8), but somewhat as an afterthought, valuable only for increasing the opportunities for an acquirer to encounter language input. The internal characteristics of the input were much more important.

Long (1983; Long and Porter, 1985) also introduced the social dimension, in a way, with work on negotiated interaction as a trigger for acquisition. But negotiation for him was not the diplomatic or trade union sort. He saw it as an essential, inescapable aspect of any live communication – the negotiation of meaning itself, at the smallest linguistic level. For example, if someone says ‘I go football’, it would be reasonable to ask ‘To watch or to play?’, negotiating for a clarification of precisely what was meant. Doughty and Pica (1986) used this basic idea to explore the pedagogic potential of ‘information gap’ tasks, where one learner has information which the other needs to complete a classroom task. The information gap is filled through the natural process of negotiated interaction, which the researchers hypothesised would facilitate acquisition. It proved quite easy to show that such ‘troubleshooting’ negotiation happens more frequently if an information gap is created, but much more difficult to establish unequivocally that it facilitates acquisition. And it raised a social problem.

Quote 7.4 Aston on the downside of negotiated interaction

The social difficulty reflected by their use would imply that where these [troubleshooting] procedures are very frequent, interactions may be frustrating and hence pedagogically undesirable to learners.

(1986: 128)

Constantly querying what is being said is not socially attractive, to say the least, and potentially quite unpleasant for all parties. By ignoring work in the field of discourse and conversational analysis (but see Larsen-Freeman, 1980) such SLA researchers failed to take properly into account the socially sensitive nature of classroom language learning, and this will be a major background issue for the remainder of this volume.

Such SLA work also assumed that second language acquisition, like primary language acquisition, was a non-conscious process, not helped (and potentially even hindered) by bringing it to consciousness. Language study was therefore seen as largely pointless. Some less ‘pure’ researchers, however, suggested that consciousness-raising – ‘a deliberate attempt to draw the learner’s attention specifically to the formal properties of the target language’ (Rutherford and Sharwood Smith, 1985: 274) – could even enhance the rate of acquisition (see also Rutherford, 1987). Schmidt (1990) proposed ‘noticing’ as a significant

mechanism for the acquisition of language material only casually encountered, perhaps in conversation.

These pedagogically motivated developments brought the idea of the learner somewhat closer to our Proposition 3, that learners are capable of taking learning seriously. It also reassured language education professionals to see some researchers at least acknowledge that learners who take their learning seriously might benefit from it. But there was still no room in 'pure' SLA research for seeing language learners as unique but essentially social individuals. This was in spite of Breen's (1985) complaint, in SLA's own scholarly journal, that the social context of language learning was a critically 'neglected situation'. Nor was there much room for seeing learners as potential decision-makers, or as capable of developing as practitioners of learning. But at least it was no longer easy to maintain that classroom language development was necessarily an automatic process best left 'unaided' by deliberate instructional intervention.

A return to positive thinking about SLA's implications for pedagogy

During the 1990s Ellis's (1994) 'theory of instructed second language acquisition', and Skehan's (1998) 'cognitive approach to language learning' developed this return to a strong interest in what instruction might offer. People were now more willing to consider the learner as an active participant in the learning process. But it was still the learner as an individual brain rather than a fully social being. Even Swain's (1995) return to her 'output hypothesis' (1985) – a notion involving language performance in social contexts – still held on to her essentially asocial perspective on the learner.

Quote 7.5 Swain on the functions of output

It 'enhances fluency'.

It 'promotes noticing'.

It 'enables learners 'to control and internalise linguistic knowledge'.

(Based on Swain, 1995: 125–6)

All of these *could* involve social interaction, but the interest is still in the individual experience, not the collective one.

Three years later the relationship between SLA and pedagogy was being viewed very differently. Thomas (1998) called into question what she saw as the commonly held perception that SLA had come

from nowhere, and so had no scientific antecedents. Arguing that SLA needed to (re)discover its roots, she proposed that these could be found in centuries of thinking and research into language pedagogy. Gass et al. (1998) rejected Thomas's analysis, insisting that SLA had become a distinct field in its own right precisely because it excluded pedagogical concerns. There was simply no such historical precedent to return to. The ensuing intellectual debate was inconclusive, despite calls for reconciliation (Larsen-Freeman, 1997), but it did show that the field was widening for most researchers. They now explicitly wished to contribute to pedagogy, if only in terms of general advice to teachers.

As far back as 1985, Lightbown, a major contributor to SLA-related research herself, had been willing to summarise the relationship between SLA research and language teaching in ten pedagogic propositions. She revisited them in 2000 to incorporate more recent SLA research findings, but they did not move away from an essentially *asocial* conception of classroom language learning towards a social one.

More recently Ellis (2005), after long involvement in the field as both a researcher and interpreter of SLA for pedagogy, has published his own ten 'principles of instructed language learning' derived entirely from studies in SLA.

Concept 7.2 Ellis's ten 'principles of instructed language learning'

Principle 1: Instruction needs to ensure that learners develop both a rich repertoire of formulaic expressions and a rule-based competence.

Principle 2: Instruction needs to ensure that learners focus predominantly on meaning.

Principle 3: Instruction needs to ensure that learners also focus on form.

Principle 4: Instruction needs to be predominantly directed at developing implicit knowledge of the L2 while not neglecting explicit knowledge.

Principle 5: Instruction needs to take into account the learner's 'built-in syllabus'.

Principle 6: Successful instructed language learning requires extensive L2 input.

Principle 7: Successful instructed language learning also requires opportunities for output.

Principle 8: The opportunity to interact in the L2 is central to developing L2 proficiency.

Principle 9: Instruction needs to take account of individual differences in learners.

Principle 10: In assessing learners' L2 proficiency it is important to examine free as well as controlled production.

(From Ellis, 2005: 210–21)

Ellis (2005: 222) himself makes clear that his conception of learning is purely psycholinguistic, not social. This perpetuates Lightbown's asocial perspective, but he does explicitly acknowledge the development of 'the social turn' in SLA (Block, 2003), echoing Breen's (1985) much earlier insistence on the importance of the social context for language learning.

Back to social context and controversy over the proper scope of SLA

Breen's (1985) support for including the social dimension, though published in SLA's academic journal, *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, was slow to gain wide acceptance. It was echoed in 1994, however, in van Lier's work.

Quote 7.6 van Lier on SLA theory

Every scientific pursuit must be anchored in practical activity. For SLA, *en bloc*, to fly off on a quest of theory as the ultimate goal of research, abstracted from the social context, and disdainful of practical affairs would seem, in the light of these considerations, unwise.

(1994: 342)

Norton Peirce (1995) (later Norton) also emphasised the importance of the external social context for language learning, especially with regard to immigrant language learners, with her notion of 'investment'.

Quote 7.7 Norton Peirce on SLA theory

SLA needs to develop a conception of the language learner as having a complex social identity that must be understood with reference to larger, and frequently inequitable social structures which are reproduced in day-to-day social interaction.

(1995: 13)

Breen himself returned to the theme in 1996, with a paper on 'constructions of the learner in SLA research', in which he argued

again for the importance of social context in understanding language learning.

Quote 7.8 Breen on social context and variation in language learning outcomes

...variation will...have to be explained with reference to the context in which the learning has occurred so that input, process, and outcomes are seen as extensions of how the learners variously defined that context and acted in it.

(1996: 86)

The general intellectual climate in applied linguistics in general was now more favourable, and a number of publications emphasised the social dimension. Rampton (1997) advocated what he called 'a socially constituted' linguistics, with implications for the whole of applied linguistics broadly conceived as the 'theoretical and empirical investigation of real-world problems in which language is the central issue' (Brumfit, 1991: 46). Also in 1997 Crookes published 'SLA and Language Pedagogy: A Socioeducational Perspective', like Breen, in SLA's *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*. In the same year Firth and Wagner wrote: 'Language is not only a cognitive phenomenon, the product of the individual's brain; it is also fundamentally a social phenomenon, acquired and used interactively, in a variety of contexts for myriad practical purposes' (1997: 296). They were deliberately taking issue with 'pure' SLA for its narrowly cognitive emphasis.

Quote 7.9 Firth and Wagner on SLA

This article examines critically the predominant view of discourse and communication within second language acquisition (SLA) research. We argue that this view is individualistic and mechanistic, and that it fails to account in a satisfactory way for interactional and sociolinguistics dimensions of language.

(1997: 285)

This critique was highly controversial. Opponents accepted that social factors might well be interesting and relevant to language *use*, but insisted that SLA, to be a distinct area of enquiry, still needed to focus centrally on the necessarily cognitive process of *acquisition*. As Kasper put it: 'If the "A" is dropped, we are looking at a much wider field of second language studies' (1997: 310). The 'A' was not dropped, but the

field of second language studies (if not SLA itself) has certainly looked even broader since, covering acquisition, learning and use.

Nevertheless, in 2000 Toohey was still complaining about the narrowness of 'much SLA research'.

Quote 7.10 Toohey on SLA and the importance of social context:

...the traditional SLA notion of language learning as individual internal processing of second language input and production of second language output has not sufficiently examined the practices, activities and social contexts in which learners engage....attention to these matters is important, not only because they are commonly overlooked in much SLA research, but also because the development of socially and pedagogically useful understandings of SLA must take into account the realities of learners' circumstances.

(2000: 134)

van Lier (2000) widened the social domain still further.

Quote 7.11 van Lier's ecological perspective:

...an ecological approach to language learning avoids a narrow interpretation of language as words that are transmitted through the air, on paper, or along wires from a sender to a receiver. It also avoids seeing learning as something that happens exclusively inside a person's head. Ecological educators see language and learning as relationships among learners and between learners and the environment.

(2000: 258)

SLA and the learner: concluding comments

The broad field of second language studies in general, with its emphasis on the social dimension and its interest in the individual learner experience, looks very promising for our view of the learner.

SLA as narrowly conceived, however, implies an asocial view of the learner which is very much at odds with our Five Propositions. In intellectual terms it separates research from pedagogy, and in human terms it separates SLA researchers from classroom teachers (see Block, 2000: 130, 140–1). These divisions have been highly counterproductive for our field.

Throughout Part I we have found some support for our view of learners, but by no means enough to dispel our original concern that it is time for

a new look at how research might contribute to our understanding of the learners' role in classroom language learning *and* make a significant contribution to learner development. In Part II we will look for the most appropriate research model for our purposes. It will need to be one that addresses the very regrettable separations in our field.

Further reading

- Breen, M.P. (ed.) 2001 *Learner Contributions to Language Learning*. Harlow, Longman. Starting from an SLA perspective, this book presents a wide-ranging and highly valuable collection of papers focusing on learners 'as thinking, feeling, and acting persons in a context of language use grounded in social relationships with other people'.
- Larsen-Freeman, D. and L. Cameron in press *Complex Systems and Applied Linguistics*. Oxford, Oxford University Press. Another wide-ranging volume, but with a special interest in supporting a broad view of SLA and a strong relationship with pedagogy.
- Toohey, K. 2000 *Learning English at School: Identity, Social Relations and Classroom Practice*. Clevedon, Multilingual Matters. Another fully social and human perspective on SLA research.

Part II

Research Models: What We Have and What We Need

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8

Introduction to Part II: What the Past Has Provided

This chapter shows how Part II will:

- establish our twin purposes for research: (a) to further our general understanding of the learners' role in classroom language learning, and (b) to develop understandings in a way that actually helps learners develop as learners;
- survey research in the field, making a broad comparison between third-party and practitioner approaches, to determine the most suitable general approach for our purposes;
- consider the special case of classroom research as a form of third-party research, and show how it has established the essentially social nature of classroom language learning;
- consider the even more special case of Action Research as a form of practitioner research, and show how it has not adequately met the second of our aims;
- propose principled and fully inclusive practitioner research as our response.

Our purposes and their implications for Part II

Research is not an end in itself. However much researchers may enjoy doing it – and it certainly can be fascinating – research needs purposes beyond itself. The most general purpose is to develop our understanding of our world. This is already ambitious. So some researchers see no need to look beyond understanding as their goal. Researchers in the social sciences, however, typically want to use their understanding to address directly the problems we face with the quality of our lives. For

this volume that concern gives us two particular aims for research. The first is standard. The second is decidedly radical, because it means, we believe, engaging the learners themselves as researchers into their own learning lives.

Concept 8.1 Our twin aims for research

1. To further our general understanding of the learners' role in classroom language learning, especially with regard to our Five Propositions.
2. To develop understandings in a way that actually assists learners to develop as learners.

To further both most productively we need an approach that goes beyond the current research handbooks in our field (see, for example, Holliday, 2002; Richards, 2003) in one hugely important respect: agency. Recent decades have witnessed extensive and still continuing debates (see Guba and Lincoln, 1994; Lincoln and Guba, 2000) about appropriate research models for the social sciences in general and for our field in particular. These debates have sometimes focused unhelpfully on a false dichotomy between quantitative and qualitative approaches (disposed of, for some, by Cook and Reichardt as early as 1979). But they have also dealt with the important ethical and epistemological issues raised by different research paradigms. This has led to a welcome call for a shift in agency towards 'participatory' research in the social sciences in general (Heron and Reason, 1997) and in education (Kemmis and McTaggart, 2000). In education we had already seen the rapid development of practitioner research in various forms, with teachers now as research agents instead of just consumers, investigating their own teaching practices via Action Research (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1981).

The agency of *learners* as potential researchers has been sadly neglected, however. In this respect the field has remained close (with honourable exceptions, as always) to what is still a third-party (or at best a second-party) approach. Teacher-researchers have acted as outsiders with respect to their learners, and to some extent even as outsiders to their own practices. Part II will end with our response – a proposal for a fully inclusive research model that engages learners, with their teachers, as practitioner-researchers.

In this chapter we review the subtopics of Part I in such research model terms. 'Third-party' thinking is so pervasive, however, that we shall first consider it and its implications at some length. So what exactly do we mean by 'third-party' research?

Third-party research: what it is and the promises it implies

'Third-party' research is conducted by someone acting as an outsider (a 'third party') to the situation under investigation. The term itself highlights the fact that the outsider researcher is typically dealing with at least two other parties – for us, teachers and learners. 'First-person' research ('practitioner' research) is research by people investigating their own practices, as insiders, where the researchers are also the 'researched'. But 'third-party' thinking is so pervasive that teacher-researchers may try to act as outsiders to their own teaching. In any case they, like workplace professionals with clients (see Candlin and Sarangi, 2003), cannot research only their own personal practices, as if they worked in total isolation. Their learners are inevitably involved as part of the 'researched', and are, therefore, still only 'second parties' at best.

Third-party research appeals because, like the broadly positivist approach it stems from (see again Guba and Lincoln, 1994), it appears to offer three important guarantees of research quality:

- *Promise 1:* objectivity – 'outsider' researchers, having no personal stake in the situation, unlike 'insider' participants, will have no bias towards any particular outcome.
- *Promise 2:* technical competence – people specially trained to conduct research will ensure studies are expertly designed and conducted.
- *Promise 3:* peer review – the quality of publications, the primary means of communicating research outcomes, will be guaranteed by a process of rigorous and expert review by other researchers.

Third-party research also brings some other important promises – though more by history than definition:

- *Promise 4:* generalisable understandings. Beyond contributing generally to our understanding of the world, the dominant tradition has promised technically generalisable understandings, understandings that are valid beyond the setting actually investigated, for all similar situations. So, although the Pennsylvania Project we described briefly in Chapter 4 was conducted in just one US state, it was designed to determine, once and for all, which method was most appropriate for language teaching in *all* US high schools, not just those in the project.
- *Promise 5:* conclusiveness of outcomes. Research aiming to be generalisable in this way has typically had to accept the positivist promise

(see Guba and Lincoln, 1994: 109–13) that research can be conclusive, producing definitive, irrefutable answers. An inconclusive outcome (as happened in Pennsylvania) cannot easily be used to produce *useful* generalisations about the world, because any generalisations will have to be correspondingly cautious and highly provisional.

- *Promise 6*: experiments are the way to get conclusive outcomes. By no means a necessary feature of the ‘third-party’ approach in itself, this positivist belief is no longer strongly advocated in applied linguistics research handbooks. Larsen-Freeman and Long even go as far as to note, for example, that ‘experiments are sometimes totally inappropriate for studying human behaviour’ (1991: 22). The experimental approach continues to be highly influential in pedagogy, however, thanks partly to the pressure on teachers to continuously innovate – to experiment with new teaching techniques in order to (measurably) improve teaching efficiency and learner performance.
- *Promise 7*: outcomes can be turned into precise and compelling prescriptions for changing the world. Research outcomes advance our general understanding of the way the world *is*, but they should also offer practical prescriptions about the way the world *should be*, and how to change it. Had the Pennsylvania Project shown that method X was best, then that method *should* have been prescribed to teachers. Again, at least in intellectual debates about what research can deliver, confidence in this promise has steadily withered. In practice, however, the underlying position remains strong – research can and should tell us what to do to make things better.

The third-party approach, with its implied promises, has proved increasingly problematic in our search for a model that will adequately meet both our research aims. In Chapter 10 we present the technical, ethical and epistemological rethinking behind our response.

Concept 8.2 The seven promises associated with third-party research

1. Objectivity will be achieved.
2. Technical competence will provide quality.
3. Peer review will guarantee quality.
4. Generalisability will result.
5. Outcomes will be conclusive.
6. Experiments will provide this conclusiveness.
7. Conclusive results will generate useful prescriptions.

For now, to structure our brief history of applied linguistic research, we ask: how does the third-party approach, and its seven promises, look in relation to the topics discussed in Part I? We start with method. Method research was dominant in the 1960s because increasing the measurable efficiency of language teaching became especially important then. It has been very closely associated with controversy over research approaches ever since.

Research on language teaching method

Quote 8.1 Smith on the Pennsylvania Project

These results were personally traumatic to Project staff.
(1970: 271)

What a sensation! Smith was Director of the project, a major experiment (briefly discussed in Chapter 4) that compared language teaching methods to find the ‘best’ one. It involved thousands of learners in a large number of Pennsylvania schools in the mid-1960s. How *could* he dare/bear to admit that his staff were so committed to one particular outcome that the results were ‘personally traumatic’? The ‘Project staff’ had expected ‘audio-lingualism’, the most recent language teaching method when the project started, to prove to be conclusively the ‘best’, but it had not done so. The inconclusiveness of the four-year experiment (a failure for Promise 6) was itself bad enough. Smith’s admission, however, revealed that the Project team had completely lacked the objectivity crucial to such research designs (Promise 1), thus invalidating the whole Project.

Surprisingly, Smith’s published remark did not provoke comment at the time, but in it we can already hear the death knell of this sort of experimental research. From other perspectives, however, the project was still highly controversial.

Quote 8.2 Grittner on the Pennsylvania Project

...perhaps we should ask for a cease-fire while we search for a more productive means of investigation.

(1968: 7, cited in Otto, 1969: 420)

The Project had failed to systematically collect adequate evidence of what actually happened in Project classes. It was therefore not possible to say precisely and exclusively what teaching activities, or teaching behaviours, had produced whatever results. Even conclusive results, therefore, could not have been turned (Promise 7) into a practical prescription for teachers to be trained to teach the proven 'best' method. This was a failure of technical competence (Promise 2) and unexpected, given the collective research expertise of Project staff and consultants. Better classroom observation procedures were seen as the obvious answer to the technical problems, but this part of the research design depended crucially on the assumption that it is observable behaviour, of the teacher in particular, that causes success or failure in the classroom. As we saw in Chapter 5, that was a very large and dubious assumption. It bedevils any attempt to answer conclusively the apparently straightforward question of what is the 'best' method for language teaching. As Prabhu (1990) argued cogently many years later, however, this universalist question is not really a sensible one to ask in the first place.

Quote 8.3 Prabhu on method

The search for an inherently best method should perhaps give way to a search for ways in which teachers' and specialists' pedagogic perceptions can most widely interact with one another, so that teaching can become most widely and maximally real.

(1990: 176)

But it is precisely the sort of question to expect in a research tradition (see Promises 4, 5 and 6) that believes the experimental method can uncover causal relationships by controlling the experimental treatments (the methods being compared) and measuring achievement outcomes (the test results).

The first alternative was to 'downsize'. The technical problems of research design and procedure might become entirely manageable if only one teaching technique was experimented with at a time, and with a few classes over a few weeks, instead of the thousands of students and the four years involved in the Pennsylvania Project. The Swedish GUME project of the late 1960s (Lindblad, 1969) adopted this approach to compare the efficiency of two ways of presenting classroom language drills. One included an explanation based on the latest linguistic theory – (transformational generative grammar (Chomsky, 1957, 1965) – the other offered no linguistic explanation at all. Using

explanations *was* eventually found potentially helpful for Swedish adults, after results proved generally inconclusive at school level. Objectivity was probably not a problem for this project and technical competence was not in question, but there was a crucial design flaw.

The Pennsylvania Project had been criticised largely for not ensuring that teachers kept strictly to the designated methods. To avoid this, the GUME team eliminated the teacher almost entirely, by using a tape recorder to communicate the teaching material to the class. A teacher conducted the class (e.g. indicating when to respond to the tape recorder), but did not otherwise intervene. A design strength at first sight, this proved to be a fatal weakness. From an experiment conducted fundamentally *without* interactive teachers, it was impossible to infer what learning the same teaching procedures would produce if the teachers interacted normally.

Method comparison projects also suffered from an unrecognised *ethical* problem. The Pennsylvania Project design relied on teachers keeping strictly to their assigned method, *regardless of how well or badly their learners were performing*, for up to four years (much of their entire high school career for the children). By choosing not to do so they invalidated the experiment, but that is surely to their credit. Such insensitivity to the needs of learners and teachers is almost bound to erode trust between teachers and researchers, and lead to teachers seeing research as a parasitic enterprise conducted by people interested only in their own agenda. The GUME project's small scale meant that its potential for damage was less. Deliberately minimising the teacher's role, however, was intended to avoid the potentially 'polluting' impact of the teacher. That may not have been unethical, but it was hardly calculated to establish mutual trust.

This was a time when new methodological ideas were plentiful, but how could they be evaluated if conducting 'definitive' experiments was no longer credible? Formal experimentation did largely disappear, replaced by a mixture of empirical and intellectually speculative approaches, and a very informal approach to trying out new ideas. A major example of people primarily associated with 'speculation' is Widdowson, as seen in his first book, *Communicative Language Teaching* (1978). Breen and Candlin (1980) perhaps best exemplify a strong mixture of the speculative and the empirical. In this way 'developmental' research took over, with people trying out their own methodological ideas and reporting descriptively on their experiences, as Allwright did in 1976 for his strong version of CLT (see Chapter 4). Such reports could not make claims about 'proven' measurable effectiveness, and so there

were no more controversial experimental results to fight over in academic publications. Instead, there was space for academic researchers with strong professional connections to publish descriptive surveys of the available methodological options. Writing directly for teachers rather than for fellow researchers, they did not even claim to know which one was 'best' (see Brown, 1980; Larsen-Freeman, 1986; Richards and Rodgers, 1986).

None of this suggested a new approach to conducting comparative methodology research. Rather, it expressed disillusionment with what research based on experimental psychology could offer people interested in teaching methods. The focus shifted away from Promises 5, 6 and 7, from trying to *prescribe* what *should* happen in the language classroom to trying to *describe and understand* what was happening anyway (a shift noted in Chapter 5 with classroom observation in teacher training). This was also a shift from essentially quantitative to more qualitative research, where rich descriptions and interpretive insights sought to supplant the now unconvincing hard numerical findings of previous research. Initially, description was still largely a quantitative matter, however, with classroom observations being counted before being discussed. It was some time before a more fundamentally qualitative approach appeared acceptable.

But when you were dealing with whole interactive episodes of classroom behaviour instead of describing lessons by just counting occurrences by category you could no longer ignore the social nature of the classroom. This prompted another substantial shift: from the essentially individualistic sphere of experimental psychology to *social* psychology as the source discipline for understandings.

This took research even further from its earlier focus on the teaching-centred notion of 'method'. Instead, there was more concern for understanding *learning*, and classroom life in general, on both sides of the teacher's desk, regardless of 'method'. This is what underlay Dick Allwright's 'learners are interesting, at least as interesting as teachers' (1980: 165; and see this volume, Chapter 1 above). But his was still very much a third-party position on research at that time. Now we would add: 'learners are interesting to themselves, not just to outsiders'.

In Chapters 9 and 10 we shall see how these multiple shifts eventually led to work that convinced us that a further profound shift was warranted, from third-party to fully inclusive practitioner research.

The history of research on language teaching method is a curious one, then, because it eventually succeeded in discrediting the notion of method itself. It is particularly instructive with regard to our twin

purposes here: (a) to further our general understanding of the learners' role in classroom language learning; and (b) to develop understandings in a way that actually assists learners to develop as learners. We can only be grateful that the experimental/quantitative approach failed even in its own terms, because that failure prompted a fundamental and very promising reorientation of the field. The experimental/quantitative approach has not disappeared altogether, though. It has resurfaced in teacher development work, especially in relation to the requirement on teachers to innovate in the constant search for increased teaching efficiency. But as we shall see in Chapter 10, it has proved problematic in that sphere as well.

Teaching method has been the major battleground for debate about research approaches, but the other topics in Part I also have stories to tell.

Research on the other topics from Part I

Research on assessment (Chapter 3)

Research on developing psycholinguistically valid language tests, like work on method, has been both thoroughly third-party in nature, and generally experimental in mode, as seen in the intensive trialling of test items and formats (see Weir, 2005). A very different dimension of assessment research has been observational work on washback – the notion (discussed in Chapter 3) that tests may 'wash back' into the classroom and influence teaching. Studying washback involves establishing what happens when a teacher teaches towards a test. That is a descriptive matter, directed towards establishing a causal relationship, if possible, between the test and the teaching (see Alderson and Wall, 1993). As we saw in Chapter 3, that research has proved far from conclusive (a difficulty for Promises 5, 6 and 7) in simple cause and effect terms. But, by revealing the unexpected complexity of washback, it has established the need for more, and perhaps different, work for understanding it. This extra complexity has turned up also in work on the ethical aspects of testing (Shohamy, 2001), necessitating a different, less psycholinguistic and more social approach to the research processes involved.

Some researchers are also interested in what learners actually do and think when they take tests. This area yields good news for the experimental approach – it can still contribute interesting insights, even if it cannot produce conclusive results. Akira Tajino (1993) was not actually looking for results to justify precise pedagogic prescriptions (Promises 5, 6 and 7) when he interviewed some young Japanese learners. He

wanted to know what they could tell him about their thinking while, in a series of small experiments, they were taking a number of language tests. The experiments manipulated their perceptions in terms of how well they could expect to perform on each test. He found that they thought socially rather than purely individually, and adapted their test-taking behaviour accordingly.

Quote 8.4 Tajino on social aspects of test performance

Our study has demonstrated how important the social aspects of classroom life are in determining learner behaviour. We have found that LPE [learner perception of ease] can decrease 'task/test anxiety', but at the same time increase another type of anxiety, termed 'social anxiety'. Our interview data have shown that this anxiety was caused by social pressure in the classroom situation.

(1993: 315)

The learners said failing would bring no loss of face if everybody was virtually bound to fail, but considerable social disgrace if everybody was expected to do well. The fact that individual results would remain confidential, so that disgrace or otherwise could remain a purely private matter, was not enough to counter the perceived social pressure. This ingenious use of small experiments to provide material for follow-up interviews shows how experiments can still be useful in classroom studies, but the insights came from the interview data, not the experimental results themselves.

Tajino's explicitly third-party work reinforced the growing view that classroom learning is *essentially* social, not just incidentally so, and that social factors may be as important in what learners think as in what they do.

Research on assessment is a broad field, then, involving a variety of research models. Its generally third-party approach is, however, problematic in that it risks missing what a first-party approach might add, with learners as practitioner researchers bringing extra insights from their important perspective.

Research on teacher training (Chapter 5)

Research *on* teacher training is inextricably linked to research as part *of* training. Research *on* training has developed classroom observation tools for teacher evaluation, which have then been used *in* training teachers to evaluate their own teaching. Grounded in earlier research

on teachers' classroom styles aimed at isolating aspects of teaching behaviour reliably associated with learning achievement, it started with a basically third-party prescriptive intent in fundamental educational research, quite independently of research on named 'methods'.

Quote 8.5 Flanders on his intentions

This book is written for those who believe that interaction between a teacher and his [*sic*] pupils can be improved.

(1970: v)

As with method, prescription gradually gave way to description. Observational research was unable to produce convincing and practically useful generalisations about teacher behaviour (problematic for Promises 4–7). But some of the observational tools could provide non-judgemental descriptions of teacher behaviour. These could give feedback to teachers about their own classroom behaviour, for discussion with tutors and potentially for introducing monitorable change. Using the procedures of classroom research (the topic of Chapter 9) in this way was teacher-centred; it was not aimed at furthering our understanding of learners. In the context of teacher training this was hardly surprising. Getting teachers on teaching practice to investigate what happened in their own classes did, however, sometimes lead to their observing carefully particular learners, as a way of developing their understanding of the effects of their teaching.

This was third-party research in respect of the learners, and still influenced by third-party thinking when teachers, having recorded and numerically analysed their own lessons, tried to look at them afterwards objectively (Promise 1) as 'outsiders'. But from our point of view involving teachers as investigators was a very positive move towards *practitioner* research, that is, research by practitioners on their own practice. It offered the means for teachers to be the agents of their own development in later years, perhaps via Action Research. Unfortunately, as we shall see in Chapter 10, this risked perpetuating the third-party approach in some respects, and could lead to learners still being treated as subjects (of informal methodological experiments) rather than as potential practitioner researchers themselves.

Interestingly for our search for appropriate research models, it was precisely in the general area of teacher development that the approach shifted most strongly towards practitioner research (and away from Promises 4–7). Reflective Practice (Schön, 1983, 1987, 1991) stressed the

potential of encouraging teachers to think systematically about their own practices, reflecting *on* practice and *in* practice, using tools 'such as narratives and journal writing, stimulated recall, action research and ethnographies' (Calderhead, 1993: 16). Again, however, by missing the opportunity for learners to use research as a tool for their own development, this work misses the insights that learners seen as full co-practitioners might bring. Reflective Practice has an important place in teacher development, nevertheless, and in the development of practitioner research. It has helped establish insights, rather than conclusive findings, as the aim of research, and has generally proved a valuable source of ideas for our fully inclusive research model.

Research on learner variables (Chapter 6)

Learner variables research is entirely dedicated to understanding learners, so how could it not devise research procedures to explore learners' own understandings of their learning? But the third-party approach has also dominated this area, with learners treated largely as data sources. Such research surveys learners, typically by questionnaire, sometimes supplemented by interview, and then looks for statistically significant correlations between what learners say about their learning behaviour and their relative achievement (for an early overview, see Skehan, 1989). This does recognise that learners can take their learning seriously and are capable of making independent decisions about it, but it is not designed to help researchers (let alone learners) understand learners as unique individuals operating in an essentially social environment. It is still looking for commonalities rather than differences. It does not offer us much, therefore, in our search for an approach that will both further our understanding of the learners and help learners develop their own understandings.

Sometimes, however, learners are given a more individual voice. Cohen and Hosenfeld's (1981) imaginative work used learners' verbal self-reports to uncover what learning strategies they employed. Bailey's insightful work (1983) with learner diaries explored the roles of competitiveness and anxiety in classroom language learning.

Quote 8.6 Bailey on learner diaries

The diaries often include early impressions of the people and culture of the target language environment, the teacher and fellow students in a language class, comments about the learner's fears and frustrations, and the difficulties or successes experienced by the learner.

(1983: 71)

Such work respects Promises 2 and 3 (technical competence and quality by peer review), but ignores Promises 4–7 – not aiming at conclusive findings or directly applicable prescriptions for change. Instead, it seeks insights to enrich our view of learners and is therefore very welcome. Diary-keeping itself turns Promise 1 (objectivity) on its head and makes a virtue of subjectivity. By so doing it offers insights for the learners themselves into their own learning, even if each diary is part of a research project designed to illuminate second language acquisition in general (but see our discussion of Schumann's 1980 diary study in Chapter 9). Work like Cohen and Hosenfeld's, or Bailey's, is originally 'third-party' in conception (about *other* people). But, like reflective practice, it does offer a variety of practical investigative techniques (see also Allwright and Bailey, 1991; and especially Breen, 2001) that may be adaptable for the fully inclusive practitioner research we advocate in Chapter 10 and throughout Part III.

Research on SLA (Chapter 7)

Beyond the diary studies, what can the way research on SLA has been conducted tell us? Can it help us shed more light on our Propositions about learners? Can it help us develop understandings in a way that actually assists learners to develop as learners? Initially, the signs are not good, given SLA's fundamentally universalistic stance, its focus on 'route' rather than 'rate', and the time it took for SLA researchers to be seriously interested in trying to understand classroom-based learning. But the focus has shifted, with increasing attention directed to (a) the role of input and output in interaction (including classroom interaction), to (b) consciousness-raising (an almost defining attribute of instruction, presumably) as a potentially key factor, and (c) to deriving pedagogic principles from SLA research. This last development in particular illustrates again the general shift away from the last three promises. Finally, SLA's 'social turn' at last acknowledges, if controversially, the essentially social nature of classroom language learning.

These changes have brought a wide range of empirical research procedures to add to the error analysis of the earliest years. Work on the input and output hypotheses, for example, necessitated close classroom observation, if only of the precise features relevant to those hypotheses. And work on consciousness-raising sometimes involved an experimental approach to see, for example, if a classroom consciousness-raising activity on a particular language structure would actually facilitate its learning (Fotos, 1993). Finally, the 'social turn' also involved close observation, to explore the essentially social nature of interaction. No

wholly new research procedures needed to be devised however, given the parallel development of classroom research, the topic of Chapter 9.

Overall, the picture is again one of thoroughgoing adherence to a third-party approach, where even individual learners' accounts (as for the diary studies) are seen primarily as sources for other people's interpretations of the acquisition process. The 'social turn', as we saw for assessment research, has brought a wider range of research strategies into play, but not departed from the view that SLA research is essentially about *other* people. It aims at furthering our general understanding of the learners' role, but not at developing understandings in a way that actually assists learners to develop as practitioners of learning.

So where are we now and where are we going next?

This review has shown how persistent the third-party approach is, with research still mostly by and about *other* people. We have nevertheless also seen a shift away from many of the associated Promises set out at the beginning of this chapter, towards looking for illuminating and productive insights, and towards practitioner research, if only in the area of teacher development.

Our survey has hardly mentioned Promise 3, quality via peer review, however. Worthwhile research needs to reach people who can use it. In our field the people to reach are not just fellow researchers but practitioners, and 'practitioners', for us, means learners as well as teachers. Professional researchers, however, especially in academia, are under increasing pressure to publish in the most intellectually respected places (e.g. prestigious journals with rigorous peer review processes), for their researcher colleagues, and without co-authors. They are not rewarded for trying to reach other readers, for publishing in cooperation with practitioners or in outlets that actually reach practitioners. Expecting practitioners to read the prestigious academic journals is no answer. Too few practitioners (teachers let alone learners) have access to them, and since they are intended primarily for the research community anyway they are very unlikely to offer 'accessible' texts for people without specialist training. This is why we have included in Part IV a list of short texts and other resources directly written for practitioners.

Career structures within academia are fundamentally unhelpful then, but that intractable structural problem is well beyond our scope here. The communication problem, however, is worth considering further (see also Chapter 10). If professional researchers *were* rewarded for

writing with and for practitioners, could they communicate their understandings adequately to them? History suggests, cruelly, that only relatively crude understandings are likely to get through. As we saw in Chapter 6 with Gardner and Lambert's work on motivational orientations, the scope for distortion and misinterpretation is huge. But all this comes from adopting the third-party approach in the first place.

If the people who most need the understandings (teachers and learners, but especially learners) are themselves the prime agents of developing them, then the structural and communication problems of getting ('intellectual') researchers to write for ('practical') practitioners are effectively eliminated. Furthermore, understandings that are too subtle for even the people who develop them to communicate successfully may nevertheless perhaps be successfully 'lived' by those people. By 'living example' they may even eventually be successfully communicated. We explore these ideas more fully in Chapter 10, where we advocate a principled and fully inclusive form of practitioner research we call Exploratory Practice. Its potential practical implications will fill Part III.

Further reading

- Brown, H.D. 1988 *Understanding Research in Second Language Learning*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press. A 'teacher's guide to statistics and research design', exemplifying the academic third-party research perspective, and aiming at making the reader 'research literate'.
- Breen, M.P. (ed.) 2001 *Learner Contributions to Language Learning*. Harlow, Pearson Education. This important collection of papers focuses on what learners contribute to language learning, and how that can be researched.
- Holliday, A. 2002 *Designing and Writing Qualitative Research*. London, Sage. A comprehensive and up to date introduction to third party qualitative research.
- Lincoln, Y.S. and E.G. Guba 2000 *Paradigmatic Controversies, Contradictions, and Emerging Confluences*. In N. K. Denzin and Y. S. Lincoln (eds) *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, second edition, Thousand Oaks, CA, Sage: 163–88. A complex and comprehensive revisiting of the debates about research models for the social sciences.
- Richards, K. 2003 *Qualitative Inquiry in TESOL*. Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan. Another thoughtful, book-length introduction to qualitative research in our field, though again from what is ultimately a third-party perspective.

9

Going Beyond Experiments: Descriptive and Qualitative Classroom Research

This chapter will:

- consider the contribution of descriptive and qualitative classroom research to our understanding of classroom language learning;
- conclude that its main contribution has been to establish the essentially social nature of classroom language learning;
- show, via an analysis of one research project, how the social nature of the research enterprise, as well as of pedagogy itself, makes third-party classroom research so problematic for our purposes.

The origins of descriptive classroom research: three important developments

Descriptive academic classroom research was a response to three important general developments:

1. creating classroom observation systems;
2. using classroom observation systems to provide feedback;
3. using classroom observation systems to describe and then adapt teacher behaviour.

The first two initially echoed the prescriptivism of methods research that we saw in Chapters 4 and 8 – the desire to be able to tell teachers how to teach. Flanders (1960a) intended his simple ten-category observation system to establish which was the more effective for education in general: a democratic or an authoritarian teaching style. Such

essentially quantitative observation systems were soon used (as we saw in Chapter 5) to provide numerical behavioural feedback about teachers in training (Flanders, 1960b). The third development echoed Flanders' concern with democracy, but went well beyond education. It was the general rise in the 1960s, especially in Europe and North America, of anti-authoritarianism (expressively labelled 'flower power'). For language teacher training this meant teacher trainees using observation systems to describe *their own* teaching performance and then decide *for themselves* (with a tutor's help) if they wished to change their classroom behaviour, and if so, how.

The shift from teacher training to a greater interest in learners

Two routes for the development of academic classroom research

As the demand for foreign language education developed rapidly in the 1970s so did the demand for teachers and for teacher trainers. Teacher training was offered mostly in academic institutions, giving trainers an academic responsibility for research. So academic research into classroom language teaching (and learning) was often conducted by people with a professional background who could immediately use their research in teacher training (see especially Moskowitz, 1971; Fanselow, 1977a, 1977b). As anti-authoritarianism developed in training, it fed back into academic research, leading to a more descriptive approach there too (see Allwright, 1972).

Quantitative and descriptive classroom research also developed quite independently of teacher training throughout the 1970s and 1980s, oriented instead towards developments in SLA (see Allwright, 1975; and especially Seliger and Long, 1983), and increasingly influenced by the rise of ethnography in general educational research (see Cicourel et al., 1974; Mehan, 1979). In the process classroom research gradually developed away from relying centrally on quantitative observational systems, towards treating classroom lesson transcripts more like texts for discourse, conversational or even literary analysis (for an early example, see Allwright, 1980). Observation itself was still central, however.

The development of observational classroom research

Technical developments

The original observational systems required instant analysis in 'real time': an observer sitting at the back assigning categories to events. In the 1970s,

portable equipment made it easy to make electronic recordings of lessons and categorise them later. But recordings did need to be transcribed first. Transcription (see van Lier, 1988: 238–44) became a key skill, but was very time-consuming: just one hour of classroom recording could take up to 20 hours to transcribe adequately for research purposes.

Data analysis

Even an acceptable transcription was 'raw' data. It still needed to be analysed. Initially, that meant 'coded', using observation systems developed for teacher training. But the links with SLA and educational ethnography meant that teaching *quality* was no longer central. Instead, descriptive questions could be asked about what was actually happening in the classroom. Given SLA's interest in errors, for example, some classroom researchers studied what happened when teachers corrected errors. For that limited purpose something more specialised than a comprehensive coding system was required.

The extreme complexity of error treatment soon became apparent (see Allwright, 1975; Chaudron, 1977; Fanselow, 1977a; Long, 1977). Trying to reduce the data to a finite set of error and treatment types was not productive. Expecting research to identify the 'right' treatment for each error type proved hopelessly optimistic. There could be no research-validated suggestions for classroom practice other than the radical one of abandoning traditional error correction practices altogether (as in Allwright, 1976, mentioned in Chapter 4).

In 1975 Allwright had suggested using close textual analysis of classroom transcriptions instead of only coding the data. This involved a more intuitive approach to interpretation: trying to understand what the teacher might have meant by a particular reaction, or non-reaction, to a learner error, and then trying to imagine what the learner might have thought the teacher had meant. For example, if learners are corrected for something other learners have 'got away with', will they think the teacher is being mean to them personally, *or* just adjusting treatments to suit individuals, *or* simply being lazy with the others? This sort of social consideration introduced a complication that would only grow in importance over the years, leading to our view of classroom language learning and teaching as not just peripherally social, but essentially so, echoing developments in second language studies.

Discourse analysis

Most classroom researchers, however, took the less intuitive and more theory-oriented route of adopting discourse analysis or conversational analysis as a framework for their data analysis (Larsen-Freeman, 1980).

Hatch and Long (in Larsen-Freeman, 1980) proposed the analysis of interaction in general (not just in the classroom) into discourse units to reveal its structure, and this led eventually to a theory of interaction. Sinclair and Coulthard's *Towards an Analysis of Discourse* (1975) was seminal in this regard, as was the work of Schegloff and Sacks (1973) in conversational analysis. So, just as Allwright's work was becoming increasingly 'local' (see Allwright, 1980), the theoretical ambitions of discourse analysis and conversational analysis were becoming much more 'global' and 'universalist'. Instead of just taking a professionally relevant issue like the treatment of error, researchers took a structural view. They looked at turn-taking as an aspect of error treatment, for example (see van Lier, 1988), not just because it was professionally important to pedagogy, but also, and perhaps primarily, because turn-taking was a central structural feature of discourse itself, in or out of the classroom. The classroom, for Sinclair and Coulthard, as well as for Hymes (1972), was primarily of interest as an example and site of discourse, not just as an example and site of pedagogy. The work became influential in education (see especially Jupp and Hodlin, 1975; Gumperz, 1981), but their initial priority was to develop a theory of discourse.

Quote 9.1 Sinclair and Coulthard on focusing on the classroom

...we decided it would be more productive to begin again with a more simple type of spoken discourse [than conversation], one which has much more overt structure, where one participant has acknowledged responsibility for the direction of the discourse, for deciding who shall speak when, and for introducing and ending topics. We also wanted a situation where all participants were genuinely trying to communicate, and where potentially ambiguous utterances were likely to have one accepted meaning. We found the kind of situation we wanted in the classroom.

(1975: 6)

Quote 9.2 Hymes on language in the classroom

Studying language in the classroom is not really 'applied' linguistics; *it is really basic research*. Progress in understanding language in the classroom is progress in linguistic theory.

(1972: xviii, original emphasis)

We shall return to this issue of the relationship between local/practical and global/theoretical understandings in Chapter 10, as it is part of our

argument for a fully developed, and importantly local, research model – inclusive practitioner research.

Focusing on learners

No fewer than three book-length treatments of classroom research were published in 1988 (Allwright; Chaudron; and van Lier), all showing how independent academic classroom research now was from teacher training. Allwright's volume is exclusively about observation itself: how it arrived in teacher training and how the focus shifted to classroom research. It ends very cautious about what we can learn from the directly observable. Van Lier's book is broader, dealing with the aims, methods and subject matter of language classroom research in general. Some of its main headings illustrate its discourse analytic approach to pedagogy:

- In and out of turn: interaction in the second-language classroom.
- Topic and activity: the structure of participation.
- The organisation of repair in second-language classrooms.

Chaudron's comprehensive review of findings in the field is particularly interesting in marking the shift, not even including teacher training as a category in the index.

Three years later Dick Allwright and Kathi Bailey published a book subtitled: *Introduction to Classroom Research for Language Teachers* (1991). 'The treatment of oral errors', 'input and interaction', and 'receptivity in language classrooms' were the focuses suggested for teachers to research – a mix of discourse analytic and pedagogic categories. The inclusion of 'receptivity' is interesting for its emphasis on learners rather than teachers. Learners were now people to be understood, not just as recipients of teaching, but as practitioners of learning. The focus was still very much on the development of understanding *by* researchers (including the teacher as researcher), however, not by learners themselves. Only in the Epilogue was anything more radical suggested: a new approach to classroom research labelled 'exploratory teaching', later developed and renamed Exploratory Practice – the focus of Part III below. At that stage it was still very teacher-centred, however.

The development of techniques for understanding learners

Identifying the learners as the targets for work for understanding was an advance, but we needed new tools. Receptivity, as defined by the

following list of subtopics, can be neither straightforwardly counted, nor directly observed.

Concept 9.1 Aspects of receptivity in language classroom

Receptivity of learners to:

- the teacher as a person;
- fellow learners;
- the teacher's way of teaching;
- course content;
- teaching materials;
- being a successful language learner;
- the idea of communicating with others.

(Allwright and Bailey, 1991, Chapter 9)

Understanding learner receptivity meant moving away from an emphasis on quantification and visual observation as the central means of enquiry. Instead, it required a 'qualitative' rather than a purely 'quantitative' approach to observation. Ethnographic enquiry had already mixed quantitative and qualitative approaches to data (see Watson-Gegeo, 1988). We now needed research techniques that gave learners the opportunity to speak for themselves, not just be observed by others.

Learners reflecting on their own learning

One central technique (Cohen and Hosenfeld, 1981) was 'protocol analysis'. For example, learners might audio-record their comments on their mental processes while they were reading a foreign language text. The recording constituted a 'protocol', which would be analysed for potential insights.

This was still third-party research though. The focus was on the understandings derivable from a *researcher's* analysis of the 'protocols'. Producing a protocol might incidentally contribute to a learner's understanding, but that was not its purpose. The same was true of the popular and productive 'diary studies'. Learners kept learning diaries for researcher analysis. Initially, however, researchers were often their own diary-keepers, and so could expect to gain insights into their own learning. John and Francine Schumann, for example, wrote independent diaries about learning Farsi in Iran and Arabic in Tunisia (Schumann and Schumann, 1977). Their experiences were instrumental in John's development of acculturation theory (1982). Of greater interest here though is Bailey's macro-analysis of a set of diary studies (1983,

mentioned in Chapter 8). This is again third-party work aiming upwards towards global theory, in this case a possible close dynamic relationship between competitiveness and anxiety in classroom language learning. Francine Schumann called for such a macro study in her further analysis of her own diary (Schumann, F., 1980).

Quote 9.3 Francine Schumann on what she learned from her diary study

In conclusion, when I initially undertook this study, I did so with the hope that by examining my own learning I could arrive at some answers about what is involved in SLL in general. However, now I realize that what I have learned is how *I* learn second languages. This is certainly significant in and of itself; a tool that learners can use to discover the facts about their own language learning is certainly valuable. But to generalize beyond the individual it will be necessary to find techniques for aggregating the data from several studies. ... the time is now appropriate to attempt to develop methods for the aggregation of journal study data. Future efforts should be directed towards this end.

(1980: 56)

In her conclusion Francine seems to be expressing dissatisfaction that she has learned more about herself as a learner than about second language learning in general. We would now rather rejoice in her contribution as a practitioner of learning (and teaching, incidentally), to her own understanding of her learning, and her perception that she has pioneered a 'valuable' tool for learners to develop their own understandings.

Cohen (see Cohen and Hosenfeld, 1981), in a further 'mentalistic' technique, asked learners to stop to note down, during lessons, what had just been on their mind. This proved illuminating. For example, relatively few learners reported that they had the lesson content itself on their mind, throwing interesting light on the issue of attention during lessons. This was third-party research, intended to provide generalisations. But such a procedure might well be illuminating for learners themselves, as practitioners of learning, and cause them to reflect helpfully on their own attention processes.

This was all still 'descriptive' research, however, with no underlying 'prescriptive' desire to tell teachers – let alone learners – precisely what to do. It was also fundamentally 'pure' research, not intended to be directly useful to practitioners. At best there was Francine Schumann's almost apologetic note that all she had done was discover a potentially valuable tool for learners, having been unable to serve her theoretical purpose.

So, by the late 1980s classroom research had largely broken away from the teacher-centredness of teacher training, oriented itself towards second language learning without tying itself to SLA's relatively narrow agenda, and broadened its approach well beyond quantifiable classroom observation as the core research procedure. The focus was clearly on understanding as a prerequisite to theory-making, which might eventually lead to well-informed pedagogic decision-making. There was certainly an increasing interest in understanding learners, but not much concern for the development of understanding *by* learners or for the social nature of classroom learning.

Understanding the essentially social nature of classroom language learning and teaching

Classroom interaction and the interaction hypothesis

Moving well beyond classroom observation alone and beginning to listen to learners talking about their classroom learning made it virtually inevitable that researchers would soon fully recognise that classroom behaviour was strongly influenced by social pressures. The research question of the day was: 'Why do learners not apparently benefit very directly either from explicit classroom instruction or from the language input they get during lessons?' (see Lightbown et al., 1980). Seliger (1977) had made the quantitative proposal that classroom interaction was key: the more learners interacted the more they would learn, because interaction would get them more input. But that proved inadequate as an explanation (see Day, 1984). A more qualitative approach looked promising. Long (1981) had already developed his 'interaction hypothesis', proposing that language learning would be facilitated if learners undertook conversational repair activities. Aston (1986), as we saw in Chapter 7, challenged this, invoking the 'law of diminishing returns'. But the interaction hypothesis retained its interest both for SLA and classroom researchers.

An alternative interaction hypothesis

Allwright (1984a) meanwhile was developing an alternative 'interaction hypothesis'. His analysis suggested that it might be more productive to analyse classroom interaction in terms of the quality of the learning opportunities it occasioned. He wanted to understand not only why learners learned less than they were taught, but also why they might learn more language material than had been in the teacher's lesson plan. His data analyses showed classroom interaction creating learning

opportunities for language material not among the teacher's teaching points (see also Allwright, 2005a). Slimani (1987) investigated this for her doctorate at Lancaster University, and concluded that the language items made the focus of attention by learners during lessons actually appeared more powerful in facilitating learning than language items chosen for focus by the teacher – the teaching points. This new evidence confirmed both the essentially social nature of classroom language learning and the importance of the learners' role in 'managing' their own learning opportunities (individually and collectively), even in such standard teacher-controlled lessons.

Further clues as to why teaching points might be relatively unproductive came in Safya Cherchalli's (1988) doctoral work, also for Lancaster. Her revealing data (see further Part IV below) came from interviewing Algerian secondary school students. One learner, for example, noted:

To be honest, sometimes I don't pay attention to the lessons because they are not so good for learning. But I always manage by using other books I have. I find them more efficient. (Anonymous student quoted in Cherchalli, 1988: 327; all statements translated by Cherchalli from the original French or Arabic)

More directly appropriate to us here, many made comments like this one:

When the teacher is giving explanations my heart beats strongly and I keep saying to myself: 'It's going to be my turn now'. (ibid.: 156)

But fellow learners were also capable of creating anxiety about potential embarrassment:

I'll never forget today and the shame I felt. Everything started when the English teacher asked me to read a few sentences on the blackboard. In one of them there was the word 'knives' and when reading it I pronounced the 'k'. I knew I shouldn't have pronounced it but I did it inadvertently. At that moment I saw all my classmates laughing surreptitiously. They thought I hadn't seen them but I had and I shall never forget it. (ibid.: 318)

A social dilemma for learners

What such data uncover is what we saw in Chapter 6, in the context of learning strategy use: learners, entirely understandably, allow the social

situation to undermine their ability to behave as pedagogically intelligently as they could in principle. Classroom life presents learners (and teachers) with this continuous dilemma: how to reconcile competing social and pedagogic pressures (see Allwright, 1989). Cherchalli's data show us that social pressures seem generally stronger than pedagogic ones – the pressure to 'get along' socially seems stronger than the pressure to 'get on' academically.

It would be wrong to suggest that such research was the only work establishing the essentially social nature of classroom language learning. Gardner's (1985) work in social psychology has been highly influential, attracting attention more recently in relation to classroom motivation (see Ehrman and Dörnyei, 1998; Williams and Burden, 1997; Williams, 1999). It has also led to revealing studies of the social dilemma underlying deliberate learner underperformance, the basis for the case study below (see also Lefkowitz and Hedgcock, 1999).

Trying to understand learners does not necessarily help learners understand themselves, but it could show the way forward

Going beyond classroom observation

Key to all this research is the willingness to let learners tell us about their classroom experiences. The research techniques may, as for Cherchalli, include classroom observation, but the core data, though still obtained on the researchers' terms (by researcher-designed questionnaires, interviews and diary studies) comes direct from the practitioners of learning themselves. When observation reigned, asking learners about their learning was considered pointless because learners would not be able to report their own mental behaviour in a reliable and valid way (see Nisbett and Wilson, 1977; Seliger, 1983). Such distrust of what practitioners could contribute stemmed from the traditional research concern for objectivity (third-party research's Promise 1; see Chapter 8). Asking people about their behaviour directly invites subjectivity. The notions of validity and reliability in our field needed therefore to be rethought. Learners cannot perhaps tell us everything (who could?), and they may be inclined to self-flattery (who isn't?), but they do have a lot to say, and what they say is interesting, for all its imperfections as research data in the quantitative tradition. It is important because it can give us their *perceptions*. And it is perceptions that guide behaviour, more than objective facts. What Cherchalli's learners tell us, for example, is that they felt likely be laughed at and that they

perceived such laughter as unkind, whatever their fellow learners might *intend* by it.

The research techniques employed in such research, however (questionnaires, interviews and diary studies, for example), are consciousness-raising activities that might help learners think about their learning processes.

Quote 9.4 Woods on research as consciousness-raising

One of the learners ... a graduate student from Iran, had very well-articulated views about his language learning, not just in terms of autonomous strategies and their relationship to his 'life plans', but also in terms of his classroom planning process and his contribution to the learning of others in the class.

(2006: 104)

Allwright found this when collaborating with Woods (see Woods, 2006) on an interview study with some university learners in Canada in 1991. At the end of the data collection period, one of the interviewees, the mature Iranian student cited above, told us that he intended to continue asking himself the questions we had been putting to him every week, because he found them helpful to his development as a learner. They had not started out as *his* questions, but he had made them his. He could just have been trying to please us, but our regular meetings had helped us get to know him and generally to trust his sincerity. We had encouraged him to think of himself as a *developing practitioner* and given him a few questions to ask. We had not really thought about how he might develop his own understandings, but we had seen how a learner might want to. And then we had disappeared.

In retrospect that was not just a missed opportunity. Arguably, it was unethical of us, as researchers, to miss that opportunity. The case study that follows (see Flyvbjerg, 2001, for a discussion of the importance of case studies and *phronesis* – Aristotle's notion of 'practical wisdom', learning from real-life examples) illustrates how this lack of follow-up is just one aspect of the ethical problems such third-party research can involve. The story also serves to illustrate our claim that research itself is also essentially social.

Case study 9.1 'I knew and I didn't say nothing!'

How can a classroom researcher operate ethically when the research process itself risks opening up questions, doubts and difficulties within and between the research

participants? (For an extended discussion of 'the Seven Moments of Qualitative Research', see Denzin and Lincoln, 2003: 19–29.) Furthermore, if the classroom researcher gains understanding(s) and helps other researchers to understand (by writing papers, giving presentations, and the like), but has had to leave his or her informants behind, how useful can the research be to the participants themselves? Unless they join the ranks of academia, attend presentations, read specialist journals or books, how will they ever benefit from the researcher's insights?

In this case, the researcher (Judith Hanks – 'J below'; see Hanks, 1998) knew what she had to do to achieve high marks on an assignment at Masters level. She selected a topic and a site, arranged access, collected her data, analysed it and wrote up the findings. She observed classes as a relative 'insider' because her friendship with the teacher allowed her relatively easy access to the classroom, and her knowledge of the institution afforded her insights into the ways in which the class was conducted. She interviewed individual students (as a friend of the teacher she felt in a position to gain the students' trust quickly), then transcribed and analysed the interviews. However, during the course of writing her paper, she found that one student in particular was struggling with a difficult social situation. In a 'critical incident' one of the students ('R') explained the reasons for her behaviour in class, which might easily have been misunderstood (or even unnoticed) by an outside observer:

- R: *There is tension in the atmosphere. Maybe because of the exam, or because you...do...*
- J: *Yeah...*
- R: *But it was different...it doesn't matter...I don't mind*
- J: *You don't mind? That's good...and er, so you say you talk. I mean, I noticed you talk quite a lot, which is great...so how do you feel about that? Do you feel...?*
- R: *I'm happy.*
- J: *Yeah?*
- R: *Yeah, but I don't feel very good, um...with the other students because maybe they can...they think: 'Ah she wants to show off' or 'She wants to...take the class as if it was her class' and that's not the idea, you know?*
- J: *Sure, yeah.*
- R: *For example, today, we have to...you have to have a word, write down in a paper and you have to say the meaning and we have to guess what is the word. And I knew every word, and all of they [them] were in silence...*
- J: *Oh really?*
- R: *And I said the word. And the second...I said the word, because I...my expectation was everyone will say the word, and I didn't say any more...I knew and I didn't say nothing because anyone [no one] was talking... Uncomfortable.*

'R' was describing a whole-class activity in which students had to guess vocabulary items from definitions (a typical 'communicative activity' in a language class). She then added her own analysis of the reasons for her behaviour (lapsing into silence) – behaviour which might easily have been misinterpreted. According to her, she stopped participating because the silence of the other students when she had spoken made her feel uncomfortable. So, rather than risk their disapproval, she 'underperformed'. And 'J' had to keep this strictly to herself.

'J' followed a typical formula for 'good classroom research', and her analysis of the interview transcripts led to a greater understanding on her part (of the factors affecting student motivation and behaviour, for example). In the end, however, she felt dissatisfied with the research process itself for forcing her into a situation where her need to understand was prioritised over that of the learners. As an outside researcher sitting in on classes, observing, interviewing, triangulating, she was attempting to follow the recommended pattern of classroom language learning research in line with current best practice. But everything she did was compromised. The objectivity requirement of third-party research meant she could not intervene or comment, not even when she became aware of a social problem in the group (see also below). This is not to criticise – anyone attempting to behave as a third-party researcher will be entangled by similar factors (and more). As *de facto* outsiders (however closely connected with the participants), researchers are faced with the problem of having one day to quit the scene of the research, leaving at best a situation unchanged by the project. At worst, through the research process (of interviews, observations, and questioning), they may have raised awkward issues in the participants' minds, but been totally unable to deal with them because to do so would be to intervene in a way that is intellectually 'unacceptable'.

This kind of research does not, indeed cannot, meet our twin purposes of helping researchers develop their understandings in a way that also helps learners (and teachers) develop *theirs*.

Further complications

In the interview quoted above, 'R' indicates that there is a degree of hindrance to her learning and suggests that this is due to social pressures. At first she says that it '*doesn't matter*', which is supported by the researcher ('*that's good*'), but her next utterances show that she cannot repress the feelings generated by the social situation in the group. This return to a deeper theme suggests that she was not simply 'saying what

the interviewer wanted to hear' (Bailey, 1983: 70). Indeed, her feelings are so strong that she returns to her theme several times:

...one thing I don't like in this course is the group. I don't like the group very much...I think...it's um...I don't know...I feel...I don't know now, it's a little bit premature? You say...something...but the people is not like friendly with each other you know, it's very...How can I say, very...people is like competing for something too.'

And:

...I can feel the atmosphere. It's like a little bit tension. Maybe for the exam, because of the exam, I don't know why, it's different to my previous course...very different...I don't like the feeling. But er, I'm not a girl, like most of the people here is 18, 19, they don't know what to do, and for example if you have an activity, maybe you could tell them, I was, I'm the more...er talkative?...And [teacher's name] ask[s] something and everyone is sat quiet, you know? And when you begin to...you know, and you want to speak and then they begin too, or they don't like if you're speaking.

'R's problem seems to relate directly to the comments cited earlier from secondary school students in Algeria (see Cherchalli, 1988, for a fuller analysis). In both cases, learners are silenced by social inhibitions, and thus do not behave in ways that they know would make them 'good language learners' (see again Chapter 6).

Quote 9.5 Cherchalli on social forces in the classroom

...learners are persons and much of their behaviour is in response to social forces.

(1988: 38)

When 'R' says: 'Yeah, but I don't feel very good, um...with the other students because maybe they can...they think: "Ah she wants to show off" or "She wants to...take the class as if it was her class" and that's not the idea, you know?' she is identifying a key factor which she sees as blocking her progress: the constraints imposed by membership of a social group (see Allwright, 1996). In their desire to integrate with the group (i.e. the other members of the class) learners may often be inhibited and unable to use to good effect the strategies they know (see Gardner, 1985: 106,

for a fuller analysis of the emotional aspects of a language course, and possible consequences of frustration or success). The lack of receptivity between fellow learners in the group is foregrounded by 'R' and it becomes clear that invisible social forces (nothing was ever said in the class that could be challenged by 'R' or by the teacher) stopped her from participating as actively in the lessons as she would have liked and from getting the most from the learning opportunities offered.

In sum, it became apparent to the researcher that there was a clear conflict between what 'R' *wanted* to do and believed she *should* do in order to improve her language proficiency, and what she was *constrained* to do in order to adhere to the group's norms (see Stevick, 1976: 48–9 for further discussion).

The complexity of her responses suggests that like any other human being, 'R' has a matrix of different orientations and motivations, some of which she can identify for herself, but cannot do very much about. For example, her suggestion that there is a sense of competition among her classmates has a parallel in Bailey's (1983) work on competitiveness and anxiety. Skehan calls for more ethnographic research which would help to 'gain a clear understanding of such issues as the role of "face" in the development of anxiety' (1989: 118) and Gardner has suggested that this kind of situational anxiety may 'have an inhibiting effect on the individual's performance, thus interfering with acquisition' (1985: 147). Yet 'R' and her classmates remain unaware of such work and are unable to make use of it to develop their own understandings as long as 'J' remains a strict third-party researcher.

Quote 9.7 Aston on social aspects of language use

...because the learner needs to develop strategies not just for obtaining comprehensible input but for establishing and maintaining social rapport, we need to develop classroom techniques which focus on the social aspects of language use. One implication for pedagogical method would be to balance situations where face is completely unthreatened, ... with others where learners can practise dealing with everyday face-threat.

(1986: 141)

'R's insistence on her unease with the other students in the class (she returned to the subject on several occasions, unprompted, at times perhaps even undermined, by her interviewer) indicates the strength of her feelings. Yet 'J' as the researcher was, as discussed above, in an

impossible dilemma. On the one hand, she was interested in her informant's perceptions and wanted to know more about her reasons for them. 'R' clearly wanted to tell her interviewer (or someone) about her feelings. On the other hand, 'J' had been given access to the fragile structure of a new class just working out its group dynamics by a fellow teacher and friend. It would have been extremely unkind to have encouraged 'R' to give further voice to her dissatisfaction, perhaps even increasing her negativity by affirming her perceptions (even if inadvertently, simply by giving them space in the interview), only to walk away from the situation leaving the students and teacher to sort out the emotions brought to the surface by the research. Not only on a purely human level (to co-create an emotional storm, only to walk away from it), but also on a professional level: such behaviour can only lead to a worsening of relations between academics and teachers, researchers and the researched.

When the *learners and teachers* are themselves the researchers, however, they will not only have direct access to the insights they gain by looking into their learning situations, they will also attain their rightful places as powerful, and empowered, people at the centre of the research process. In this way they can both extend knowledge of their own best practices and language learning success (and failures?) and deepen their understandings of the complex issues that surround the learning of a language in a group situation, specifically: *their* group situation. This will not guarantee the research is ethically unproblematic, but it will mean that problems can be resolved internally, without anyone just 'walking away'.

The case against third-party classroom research: the ethical and epistemological issues

Third-party classroom research has helped us understand not only the essentially social nature of classroom language learning, but also, and crucially, the essentially social nature of the research process. Especially when it is descriptive and qualitative it takes learners seriously and can help them think about their own learning processes. But it is not designed for that or best suited to it. As a result it raises ethical issues, particularly in the relationships between researchers and teachers, and between researchers and learners.

To be convincing to the field (in general dominated by other third-party researchers), third-party research, as we have seen, has traditionally to be impartial, objective, unaffected by the internal

dynamics of the classroom situation. Most importantly, the participants in the situation need to be unaffected by the presence of the researcher. They should not even know what the researcher is interested in, because that might bias their behaviour. This is an especially acute problem with direct classroom observation, but even responding to interview or questionnaire questions can be affected if you know, or try to guess, what the researcher is really interested in, however well this is disguised by clever question design. But it is an ethically doubtful form of marginalisation to expect people to cooperate without knowing precisely what aspects of their behaviour will be under such intense scrutiny.

More acutely ethical are the problems arising from the fact that data analysis and interpretation are likely to reveal problems in the classroom situation, as we saw for 'R', but that these, to preserve objectivity, have to be left unresolved and unmentioned until they appear in a research report. Confidentiality and anonymity can be technically preserved in publications, but the participants will be able to recognise themselves, and regret, if not actively resent, how their teaching and learning lives are represented. It is sometimes possible to consult the participants before publication, to invite them to comment on how they are represented (as we have done for this volume), but most commonly this is seen as impractical and accepted as such. This constitutes a further marginalisation of practitioners, who may not have fully realised the sorts of risks they took (to their self-esteem and to their reputation, if not directly to their employability) when they originally agreed to cooperate with the researcher.

Worse, even if it involves learners directly during the data collection phase, it risks marginalising them seriously thereafter. Most importantly it risks leaving their own understandings undeveloped. Even if the analyst does produce some insightful analyses, as Cherchalli undoubtedly did, these understandings are not directly available to the learners. It is the researchers' understandings that are developed, and perhaps those of their eventual readers. Such research makes no direct contribution to the development of understandings by the learners themselves. In this way the ethical issue of marginalisation also becomes a major epistemological one of agency, of *whose* understandings develop.

Third-party research is therefore far from fully compatible with our Five Propositions about how to treat learners, and quite unable to meet the second of our twin purposes for research. In Chapter 10 we shall propose fully inclusive practitioner research as a more appropriate research model.

Further reading

- Allwright, D. 1984 Why Don't Learners Learn What Teachers Teach? – The interaction hypothesis. In D. M. Singleton and D. G. Little (eds) *Language Learning in Formal and Informal Contexts*. Dublin, IRAAL: 3–18. This article argues that the social nature of classroom language learning creates learning opportunities potentially far richer than anything a teacher could plan for.
- Allwright, D. 1988 *Observation in the Language Classroom*. London, Longman. A book-length treatment of the history of language classroom observation, with major reservations about its future.
- Bailey, K. M. 1983 Competitiveness and Anxiety in Adult Second Language Learning: Looking at and through the Diary Studies. In H. W. Seliger and M. H. Long (eds), *Classroom Oriented Research in Second Language Acquisition* Rowley, MA, Newbury House: 67–84. Bailey's analysis of a batch of diary studies is an excellent example of a macro-analysis, but it raises tricky issues concerning the third-party interpretation of diary data.
- Cohen, A. D. and C. Hosenfeld 1981 Some Uses of Mentalistic Data in Second Language Research. *Language Learning*, 31/2: 285–313. The classic introduction to innovative third-party techniques to help researchers find out what learners think when learning.

10

The Research We Now Need: Principled and Inclusive Practitioner Research

This chapter will:

- argue that Action Research does not go quite far enough for our purposes;
- propose that we need an inclusive form of practitioner research to bring teachers and learners together to develop their understandings of their lives as ‘key practitioners’;
- compare looking upwards towards high-level generalisations for our understandings, with looking downwards, towards deep ‘human’ understandings;
- distinguish between *articulating* understandings and *living* them;
- offer the seven principles for inclusive practitioner research that have emerged from the development of Exploratory Practice;
- show how Exploratory Practice can serve our research purposes.

A first way forward: Action Research

Classroom research has met our first purpose for research – enhancing our general understanding of the learners’ role in classroom language learning – and established the crucial importance of the social dimension to both learning and research. But we identified some epistemological and ethical problems with this research model in Chapter 9, where we focused on the potential difficulties in researcher–learner and teacher–researcher relationships. The teacher–researcher relationship issue lay behind the introduction into our field some two decades ago

of Action Research (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1981; Carr and Kemmis, 1986; van Lier, 1988; Nunan, 1989).

Quote 10.1 Carr and Kemmis on ‘emancipatory action research’

...emancipatory action research provides a method for testing and improving educational practices, and basing the practices and procedures on theoretical knowledge and research organised by professional teachers. ...It provides a means by which teachers can organise themselves as communities of enquirers, organising their own enlightenment.

(1986: 221)

The spirit of Action Research (AR) is well captured in Giroux’s (1988) concept of teachers as ‘intellectuals, people who do not simply ‘deliver’ standard curriculum packages, but who think for themselves and reach their own conclusions about their professional practice.

AR promised to deal conclusively with any teacher–researcher relationship problems by proposing that teachers themselves should be the researchers in their own classrooms, combining the two roles in one person (see also Part IV, Resource 6 below). This was radical, and radically positive. For the first time teachers were knowledge generators, no longer just consumers, subjects of others’ research and potential victims of exploitation by researchers. They were now seen as key agents of change in education, conducting research for themselves, and then making whatever changes their findings suggested.

Illustrative example 10.1 A brief Action Research story

A teacher had problems with an unruly Year 9 group. She recorded the incidence of control statements in her usual teaching and discovered that she was creating *discipline problems* through keeping on at students about discipline. She negotiated classroom rules with the students and the ‘problem’ simply disappeared. She went on to explore the possibilities of negotiating the curriculum more generally with the students, and made further discoveries about the value of teaching strategies which actively used students’ knowledge as the basis for further learning.

(From Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988: 109)

We can see here the potential of AR in relation to our Five Propositions. This teacher trusted the learners to take their learning seriously and to

be capable of independent decision-making. She also trusted them to be able to develop as learners, and her trust was apparently amply rewarded. By negotiating with the whole class, she recognised the social nature of learning and the importance of mutual support.

But is AR going to meet *both* our requirements – to develop our general understandings of learners and also to enable learners to develop *their* understandings, and so develop as practitioners of learning? In spite of its obvious potential, we find three aspects of AR problematic in practice:

1. the continuing influence of the third-party model;
2. the consequent focus on the teacher, risking the potential marginalisation of the learner;
3. the focus on change and improvement, rather than understanding.

The continuing influence of the third-party model

How could AR, a pioneer of practitioner, first-party research, be unduly influenced by the third-party model? It is a paradox, but that is what seems to have happened. Looking through collections of reports of AR projects (see Thwaites, 1991; Beaumont and O'Brien, 2000) there is an experimental attitude in many that seems to come directly from the third-party tradition. As Di Palma writes (in Thwaites, 1991, 4/2: 11): 'The aim was to experiment with different teaching strategies, and document their effects on the students' motivation, ability to learn independently, and skill levels'. We also find a willingness to keep the 'experimental subjects' ignorant about the experiment: 'When I began this project, I did not tell my mixed-ability class of 30 children about it, thinking that if I did not inform them of what we were to do their responses would be more natural' (Watson, in Thwaites, 1991, 4/5: 37). In Beaumont and O'Brien (2000, who were influenced, we should acknowledge, by an early form of 'exploratory teaching' as set out in Allwright, 1993a) we also find a general willingness to couch research questions in direct cause-and-effect terms: 'what effects, if any, does the classroom analysis of some of the discoursal features of fairy tales (narrative discourse) have on pupils' production of fairy tales?' (Turrell and Beaumont, 2000: 44).

While not necessarily problematic in themselves, such features do suggest a surprising, and for us worrying, influence from the traditional research model. The initial appeal of AR was precisely that it promised first-party rather than third-party research, and an entirely new approach. For one thing, having practitioners researching their own

practice promised to eliminate the notion of the research 'subject' altogether.

Quote 10.2 Kemmis and McTaggart on what (among other things) Action Research is *not*

It is *not* research done on other people. Action Research is research by particular people on their own work, to help them improve what they do, including how they work with and for others.

(1988: 22)

But the learners seem to be left solidly in the traditional role of research subjects, providers of data and not practitioners in their own right at all, perhaps not even to be allowed to know the nature of the experiments being conducted on them. The opportunity to thoroughly rethink the nature of research itself seems to have been missed.

The focus on the teacher to the potential marginalisation of the learner

AR was for teachers, so that they could play a more decisive and informed role in education. We should therefore expect it to be largely teacher-centred. But it was also designed to be collaborative.

Quote 10.3 Kemmis and McTaggart on what (among other things) Action Research *is*

Action Research is *collaborative*: it involves those responsible for action in improving it, widening the collaborating group from those most directly involved to as many as possible of those affected by the practices concerned.

(1988: 23)

This is very promising in principle, but in writings about collaborative AR (see Burns, 1999; Beaumont and O'Brien, 2000) the 'collaborating group' may go beyond schoolteachers to include their university-based mentors, but it never seems to include the learners fully as decision-makers and agenda-setters, even in explicit calls for a 'participatory action research' (Auerbach, 1994; Kemmis and McTaggart, 2000: 340). Learner input is often highly valued, but it is not the input of 'co-practitioners'. This may be entirely understandable, but it represents another missed major opportunity in terms of our Five Propositions, and our research aims, if the

consequence is that it marginalises learners. (For a parallel concern in workplace communication research in general, see Roberts, 2003.)

The focus on change and improvement, rather than understanding

AR was also designed from the beginning to be about improvement and change.

Quote 10.4 Kemmis and McTaggart again on what Action Research is

Action research is an approach to *improving education* by *changing* it and learning from the consequences of changes.

(1988: 22)

Again this is entirely understandable, and hardly a problem in itself. However, it becomes a problem when it is exploited by people responding to the trend in recent years for governments to set targets for measurable improvement in children's school performance, and to focus on pedagogic change as the mechanism for reaching those targets. This puts pressure on teachers to continually innovate in the search for greater efficiency. We believe this has led to an undermining of the crucial role of *understanding* in research, which is surely to act as a prerequisite for intelligent decision-making about change. Occasionally, this underplaying can even lead to eliminating the stage of understanding altogether, as in the 'action plan' suggested in McNiff's website introduction to AR (2002: 9).

Concept 10.1 McNiff's action plan for Action Research

Identify an area of practice to be investigated;
imagine a solution;
implement the solution;
evaluate the solution;
change practice in light of the evaluation.

(2002: 9)

A 'solution' follows directly from identifying an area for investigation, and that 'solution' is to be 'imagined' rather than derived from evidence. Burns (1999), we should acknowledge, does offer a loose 'framework' starting with 'exploring', which involves 'clarifying your understandings'; followed by 'identifying', which 'involves a "fact-finding" process which

enables the researchers to refine their ideas about the general focus area and to prepare for more systematic investigation' (1999: 36–7). But the next phase, 'planning', is not intended to use this 'more systematic investigation' to determine what sorts of change, if any, it might be appropriate to try out. Instead, it 'is aimed at trialling a particular course of action and collecting data on the outcomes of this action' (1999: 37). Trialling a change is arguably one way of understanding it better. But the underlying assumption here is that change is always *necessary*. That leaves the main investigative effort as simply to discover what happens when a change is applied. This is investigation *by* change, *for* change, and not investigation to understand a situation better so that intelligent, well-informed decisions can be made (for more on change, see Allwright, 2001; see also Part IV, Resource 9 below).

The major proposal for practitioner research in our field, then, for all its highly positive characteristics, risks both marginalising learners and undermining the importance of understanding in research. Furthermore, it seems to be conservative in research methodology terms, offering no radical new research procedures. We need to look more deeply at the notion of practitioner research itself.

Rethinking practitioner research: the issue of agency, and a major shift in priorities

Third-party research in general cannot meet our purposes, and practitioner research, in the form of AR, has not yet taken us far enough away from the third-party model to overcome these limitations. We clearly need to look for 'a more productive means of investigation', as Grittner (1968) noted, in reaction to the Pennsylvania Project (see Chapter 8 above). If we are right to conclude that 'third-party-ness' is the source of the inherent problems of current research models, then that is an issue of agency.

Quote 10.5 Lantolf and Pavlenko on agency

We believe that learners have to be seen as more than processing devices that convert linguistic input into well-formed (or not so well-formed) outputs. They need to be understood as people, which in turn means we need to appreciate their human agency.

(2001: 145)

Within the 'third-party' conception, the first two 'parties' for research on education are the teachers and the learners. Since focusing on

teachers as research agents has been very productive, but has not necessarily saved learners from marginalisation, why not focus on learners as research agents instead? This is obviously attractive, especially given our call for learners to be treated as key practitioners. But classroom language learning and teaching, and research itself, are essentially social in nature. Focusing on learners to the *exclusion* of teachers would be counterproductive. Rather, as in professional communication studies more generally (see Sarangi and Candlin, 2003) we need to see teachers and learners as 'practitioner colleagues', with the teachers playing a collegial role in helping learners develop as researchers of their own practices and as practitioners of learning.

What, in our conception of learners and teachers as practitioner research colleagues, is practitioner research for, and *who* is it for? First, understanding is emphatically *what* research is for. But asking *who* it is for suggests prioritising the learners even more, perhaps, than their researcher colleagues, their teachers; and certainly more than language education professionals in general. This makes furthering 'our general understanding of the learners' role in classroom language learning' less important than our other purpose: developing understandings 'in a way that actually assists learners to develop as learners'. This is a major shift in priorities. It requires a fundamental change of attitude, perhaps especially for any teachers persuaded that their research role is only to try out potential (and perhaps externally imposed) 'solutions' to their pedagogic problems, not to develop their own understandings, let alone help learners to develop theirs.

Such a shift also requires us to think a lot more about what we mean by 'understanding'.

High-level generalisations and deep understandings

'Understanding' is a highly complex concept. If understanding is the ultimate aim, then it will follow, for many, that the understandings reached need to be combined into 'high-level generalisations', and ultimately into general theories that can be used to guide practical matters (policy decisions in education, for example). Only then will the understandings be of any real use to humanity, the argument goes, and the investment in developing them justified.

But teachers, and especially learners, need understandings *now*, and they need particular understandings that are directly appropriate to their unique situations, not high-level generalisations. That requires the local development of locally useful understandings (see van Lier, 1988; Holliday, 1994; Tudor, 2001). Such local understandings are likely

to relate to issues that are not even on the agendas of researchers looking for high-level generalisations. Practitioners need deep 'human' understandings of their immediate situation, understandings that may even be 'too deep for words'.

From this perspective, research could be said to point in either of two apparently opposed directions. 'Normal' research points 'upwards', towards 'high-level' generalisations that reduce accumulated findings to the simplest possible statement, expressed unambiguously to carry one meaning for all. This may seem the only logical way of looking at what research is ultimately for, but in the social sciences, represented here by classroom language learning and teaching, it is increasingly doubtful whether such a reductionist position can ever really be productive and helpful, given the essential idiosyncrasy of human experience and the 'irreducible complexity' of human life.

Quote 10.6 van Lier on reductionism from an ecological perspective

First, [an ecological approach] shifts the emphasis from scientific reductionism to the notion of emergence. Instead of assuming that every phenomenon can be explained in terms of simpler phenomena or components, it says that at every level of development properties emerge that cannot be reduced to those of prior levels. Second, ecology says that not all of cognition and learning can be explained in terms of processes that go on inside the head. Finally, an ecological approach asserts that the perceptual and social activity of the learner, and particularly the verbal and nonverbal interaction in which the learner engages, are central to an understanding of learning. In other words, they do not just facilitate learning, they *are* learning in a fundamental way.

(2000: 246, original emphasis)

Trying to ignore complexity is a predictable feature of authority's desire to control. But this is unproductive for practitioners, because that complexity is their daily classroom reality (Tudor, 2003).

Quote 10.7 Tudor on complexity

Few practising language educators would seriously question that language teaching is a complex activity. All too frequently, however, this complexity is ignored or brushed under the carpet, and more often than not by participants who are not practising teachers and who have little or no experience of the realities of teaching as lived out in the classroom. The perceptions of these participants (planning authorities, aid agencies, institutional managers, client faculties, etc.) can, however, have a significant influence on the parameters

within which teachers have to work, the goals they are expected to achieve, or the methodology and materials with which they have to work.

(2001: 209)

So, as Larsen-Freeman has argued in relating complexity theory to applied linguistics, we need to find non-reductionist ways of exploring the world (Larsen-Freeman, 1997, 2006; Larsen-Freeman and Cameron, in press: 16; see also Lantolf, 2006).

Can research look in the other direction, away from high-level generalisations altogether? This is exactly what we believe practitioner research must do, look downwards not upwards, and work towards reaching 'deep' understandings rather than high-level generalisations. Such understandings are non-reductionist because they reflect our acceptance of all the complexity we live with and through every day, and 'deep' to the extent that we are able to make some sort of sense of that complexity. But such understandings are going to be extremely difficult, at times impossible, to express in words.

The problem of communicability

So what is the point of *trying* to develop such deep understandings, if in essence they are likely to be incommunicable? Communicability is crucially important for professional researchers. It is part of their social responsibility as researchers to communicate their findings at least to the wider research community, if not directly to those in a position to apply them to practical decision-making.

But, as ordinary practitioners in the world, rather than as professional researchers, we do not need to communicate many of the understandings that we develop. They are understandings that we *live*, and that we can *live* reasonably successfully, whether or not we can communicate them to others. It may even be better to keep such understandings to ourselves. This may appear completely selfish, but if we do talk about our deep understandings, we may well find ourselves simplifying them so much that they obscure rather than illuminate. So, if we can succeed in deepening our understandings until they are 'too deep for words', perhaps we should just try to live them, and communicate them, if at all, by interacting with others, rather than by talking about them.

But, in spite of the potential impossibility of our ever fully expressing our deepest understandings, *attempting* to articulate them can, ironically, be extremely valuable in practice as part of the process of trying to deepen

them. Discussions where people push each other to think ever more deeply about their developing understandings, without expecting them to be able to articulate them fully and finally, can be a very satisfying and productive collegial process. We need therefore a form of research that encourages people to try to articulate their developing understandings, even if they are ultimately 'too deep for words'.

Our proposal for a form of research that will meet all our requirements is Exploratory Practice (EP), an inclusive form of practitioner research which has been developed over the last 15–20 years. EP will take us beyond the third-party model methodologically, will not marginalise learners, will prioritise learner understandings and will even have room for attempts to articulate understandings that are ultimately 'too deep for words'. By treating learners as practitioner researchers in their own right, EP brings to life our Five Propositions about learners, and so directly addresses our purpose of actually assisting learners to develop as practitioners of learning.

The research model we propose: seven principles for inclusive practitioner research

The following principles have emerged from discussions over many years about EP and how it can help practitioner-researchers avoid the ethical and epistemological problems we have identified with other research models. Such matters have attracted considerable attention recently, with a groundbreaking special issue of the *Modern Language Journal* devoted to the 'methodological, epistemological, and ethical perspectives on instructed SLA research' (Ortega, 2005). In that volume Allwright argued that focusing on the technical aspects of research method is not going to meet our needs, because the most urgent problems we face are basically not technical but ethical and epistemological. What we need, therefore, is not a new set of technical proposals but a properly principled basis for the overall *conduct* of research as an ethical and epistemological matter.

Our first two principles set out what we regard as the most appropriate central concerns for inclusive practitioner research in our field.

Principle 1: 'Quality of life' for language teachers and learners is the most appropriate central concern for practitioner research in our field.

Principle 2: 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.

Zhang's work on the teaching of extensive reading in China illustrates the potential value of moving from a technical, problem-solving, approach to a 'quality of life' perspective.

Illustrative example 10.2 Zhang on prioritising 'quality of life' in her classroom

Frequent modification to my teaching methods did not produce any positive results. For some time I did not come up with any solution to my class. Then after reading about Exploratory Practice I came to see that I did not understand what was happening in my classroom. I had been so worried about the teaching outcomes...about the examination results, that I never cared whether my students enjoyed the class or not. It suddenly occurred to me that the only way out was to emphasise 'the quality of life in the classroom'. According to EP principles 1 and 2 I decided to put the 'quality of life' first and work primarily to understand language classroom life instead of trying to directly solve problems as I had done up till then. I stepped back from the problems in my teaching and saw them in the larger context of the life and lives they affected.

(2004: 334)

Concern for 'quality of life' is also a major feature of work of the EP Group in Rio de Janeiro, where development has been most active and productive. The Rio Group has contributed Chapter 14 to this volume, where they tell their own story. Here we will use more of their words, from messages to us, to help explicate the principles they have been so instrumental in developing.

Quote 10.8 The Rio EP Group on quality of life

The first principle of EP is to put **quality of life** first, to allow the demands of the life of the group to be considered as a leading force, as the most important issue for those involved in the life in the classroom. The 'Rio teachers engaged in the EP programme prioritize issues related to their *lives* – *inside* as well as *outside* classrooms – over such work-oriented issues as content, proficiency, technical efficiency or productivity' (Gieve and Miller, 2006b: 19).

(Personal communication, 3 May 2006)

From an intellectual perspective (see Gieve and Miller, 2006b: 18–46 for recent extended discussions) 'Quality of life' is a dauntingly complex and elusive notion, but it is also a very practical one, at any level of intellectual sophistication (for further discussion see Part IV, Resource 8).

‘Understanding’ (Principle 2) is also a highly complex and elusive notion in academic terms and equally a very practical one, at all levels. The major point here is that, as noted before, understanding is a prerequisite to intelligent decision-making:

Quote 10.9 The Rio EP Group on understanding

Understanding is considered by the many teachers as something new and innovative introduced by EP. It would be preposterous/unreasonable of EP to believe that only with EP the notion of understanding was introduced in the pedagogy of foreign language teaching. What happened is that EP highlights this phase of investigative process, lifting the burden of finding results, solutions and answers to a problem.

So, understanding is not an innovation in itself. What’s innovative here is placing understanding as the main focus of an investigative work. In a similar fashion, changing actions (finding new ways for solving old problems) is not an EP objective because a lot of change is already operated on a person who spends some time trying to understand what’s going on with her group of students, with herself as a teacher or student, with ...

(Personal communication, 3 May 2006)

The recognition that shifting the focus to understanding can bring a major change in itself is important to us, as we have noted earlier. Having regretted the use of AR as an agent of change rather than of understanding we should perhaps reaffirm here that EP is not against change, only against *unintelligent* change, and against *bureaucratic pressure* for change in the absence of an effort to understand (see Allwright, 2003).

The next three principles return us to the notions of agency and collegiality:

Principle 3: Everybody needs to be involved in the work for understanding.

Principle 4: The work needs to serve to bring people together.

Principle 5: The work needs to be conducted in a spirit of mutual development.

If anyone needs to understand, then everyone needs to understand (especially if we see situational understanding as the collective property of the group, rather than of each individual separately). Everyone should have the opportunity of reaching whatever level of understanding they are capable of, however ‘deep’ or ‘shallow’ that may be. All learners are

in principle capable of taking learning seriously, of taking independent decisions and of developing as practitioners of learning. Our Propositions about learners also encourage us to make room, as these three principles do, for learners to behave individualistically and idiosyncratically, while also working to bring everyone together in a collegial spirit of mutual development. These three principles encourage collective attempts to articulate developing understandings, and these may in turn prove productive for individuals and help them get beyond whatever levels of understanding they can actually articulate – and all within the spirit of our purpose of developing understandings ‘in a way that actually assists learners to develop as learners’.

Quote 10.10 The Rio EP Group on collegiality

There's still the feeling that a teacher is a know-all, someone who cannot ask for help because if he [*sic*] does so he will be considered a lesser professional. And this feeling is also present among students and towards the students (from the part of the teacher). For some teachers, this is THE understanding: to realize that you and the participants of the classroom scene are colleagues and can share their feelings and weaknesses openly (because teachers and students already knew each other's weaknesses but did not have a moment or a place to share this perception).

(Personal communication, 3 May 2006)

A further dimension is added to such thoughts when we reflect that ‘bringing people together’ is not often a strong feature of relationships in our profession (with distinguished exceptions of course, as in the work of the Rio EP Group, and others such as the *Lingua e Nuova Didattica* group in Italy (Part IV, see www.lend.it), and the Federal Working Group on Languages in Comprehensive Schools in Germany (see Candlin, 2003)). It is commonplace to talk of teachers and learners apparently inhabiting different worlds, with nothing to bring them together in what might reasonably be seen as a common enterprise of teaching and learning. When we move to relationships outside the classroom, between teachers and researchers, say, then we frequently find a relationship of mistrust, if not of downright hostility (see again Block, 2000: 130, 140–1).

From the teachers' point of view such mistrust and hostility arise from researchers turning research into a largely parasitic enterprise, leaving the teachers feeling exploited, and perhaps also sensing that their learners are both exploited and marginalised. As we saw in Chapter 9, even with goodwill on all sides and every care taken during

a research project, the third-party researcher eventually has to go away, leaving the practitioners to make whatever they can of the experiences they have been through together. So our wish to bring ‘everybody together in a spirit of mutual development’ is our move to build on the progress already made by Action Research to resolve the teacher/researcher issue, and to bring collegiality into the teacher/learner relationship as well.

Principle 6: Working for understanding is necessarily a continuous enterprise

Life is continuous and dynamic. Our understandings are therefore always going to be provisional, at best, and valid only briefly, if at all. Our work for understanding, therefore, needs to be a continuous enterprise. But professional research is typically ‘projectised’, if only because it is typically externally funded and funding agencies put a strict time limit on their support. External funding also places a heavy emphasis on ‘outcomes’. Such a research model cannot meet our requirements here. It may be a viable way of getting professional research done, but what we want is to get *teaching* done so that it embodies a research perspective and helps everyone develop their understandings as practitioners. As the Rio Group put it, we want to conceptualise our entire practice as ‘work for understanding’.

Quote 10.11 Continuity, in the words of the Rio EP Group

As EP practitioners (teachers, learners, colleagues, consultants, EP ‘disseminators’/ facilitators, mentors, etc.) we find ourselves constantly in the position of working for understanding, which we have found to be the ‘privileged’ learning position, irrespective of our social or institutional status or role.

In the process of conceptualizing our practice as ‘work for understanding’, we find ourselves to be enriching the quality of our lives and enlarging the network of practitioners (teachers *and* learners) who have discovered possibilities of engaging in praxis, rather than in practice.

(Personal communication, 3 May 2006)

But making working for understanding a continuous enterprise, however crucial it may be logically, is difficult in practice. So why should anyone think it a practical proposition? It appears to guarantee severe overload for teachers and learners, and they are busy enough already. Any hint of overload may discourage people from even trying. If they

do try, any actual overload could lead rapidly to burnout and abandonment, as happens with so many potentially helpful innovations. We therefore need one more principle to help make the research process practical and ultimately indefinitely sustainable (for further discussion of these issues, see again Allwright 2005b: 359–60).

Principle 7: Integrating the work for understanding fully into existing curricular practices is a way of minimising the burden and maximising sustainability.

Quote 10.12 Stewart on burnout and Exploratory Practice

Because there is a danger of teacher-research burnout, Allwright (2005) offers the concept of *Exploratory Practice* as an alternative to Action Research. The main aim of Exploratory Practice is to use ‘class time to deepen understanding of what language learning involves’ (2005: 26). Allwright seeks to make inquiry less cumbersome by encouraging teachers to use regular classroom activities as research tools.

(2006: 428)

The use of familiar classroom activities as investigative tools was a feature of early AR, as we saw in Concept 10.1 above, but history seems not to have been kind to it. Done well, however, good research itself can be good pedagogy. The point of EP is not to get research done, but to get teaching done well, in a way that fosters the development of understanding in and among all the participants.

Quote 10.13 Allwright on integration

Learners are likely to have some very interesting puzzles about what happens in language lessons, ones that are at least as interesting as our own. We might therefore do well to bring them in at the very beginning. If we do that, they are also likely to have ideas about how their own issues could best be investigated, and we can then involve them as co-researchers (rather than merely as ‘subjects’) collecting their own data and making their own interpretations of it, with us....learners acting as co-researchers can use the research process as a way of developing their language and communication skills. Research will not be the parasitic enterprise it has often been seen to be in the past if it can be incorporated as an integral part of the pedagogy.

(1990: 73)

Such integration covers two major aspects of the curriculum: the pedagogic activities themselves and the skills practice such activities

provide. If discussions, for example, are already a familiar activity for communication practice, then why not divert their language content to address concerns about language learning, rather than expect learners to be interested yet again in ‘pollution’ or ‘malaria’? In this way, little or no extra preparation is needed, and no language learning time is lost.

It may not even be necessary to divert the third major aspect of the curriculum, the language content, at all. As we shall see throughout Part III, existing syllabus content can often be exploited for its exploratory potential. For example, Aline Santiago (2006, see also this volume, Case Study 12.4) integrated her investigation fully into both the processes and the content of her lessons.

Illustrative example 10.3 Santiago on exploring why her group was so difficult to manage

The starting point was a brainstorming considering ‘Quality of Life’...The following moment was to write sentences using ‘should’ or ‘must’ [the current language topic from the course plan] regarding the role of students and the teacher in class. I collected the sentences made in groups and, in the following class, the sentences were shared with the whole group. On that day, they had chances to write their comments about our work and future life in class, taking into consideration the sentences made by them.

(2006: 17)

Such thoroughgoing integration fully preserves the language curriculum and learning time, without necessarily increasing the preparation time – two important factors facilitating sustainability.

A much more fundamental form of integration is also possible when the explorations are the starting point for all classroom work and so actually *form* the curriculum. This may remind readers of our reference in Chapter 4 to the problem-posing work of Wallerstein (1983) and Auerbach (1992, 1994). Both are based on Freire’s (1972) pioneering work on literacy in Brazil. In Part III we shall see this full integration in the Rio work of Inés Miller and Walewska Gomes Braga. It is no accident that EP has found such a good home in that country!

A further reason for optimism about managing the burden: working with ‘puzzles’ and Potentially Exploitable Pedagogic Activities

Sometimes simply working for understanding, without doing data analysis and reaching firm conclusions, can itself help change the

situation. Early AR was also conscious of this. Concept 10.1 above notes that the teacher ‘negotiated classroom rules with the students and the “problem” simply disappeared’ (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988: 109). This is attractive in itself, minimises the workload and makes further nonsense of any approach that seeks to improve a situation by ‘imagining’ a solution to the problem and trying it out *before* working seriously for understanding.

For EP we find it helpful to think in terms of ‘puzzles’ rather than ‘problems’, if only to try to capture the difference between something that simply calls for a ‘solution’ and something that is just interesting and warrants work for understanding. A ‘problem’ such as ‘How can I get my students to stop eating in class?’, for example, suggests the teacher simply wants to know what to do. If we reformulate it as a puzzle in ‘why’ question form – ‘Why do my students eat in class?’ or ‘Why does it annoy me that my students eat in class?’ – then we have something that cries out to be understood. Work for understanding can now begin. This deliberate shift of formulation from ‘problem to solve’ to ‘puzzle to understand’ is a central and highly productive characteristic of EP.

Illustrative example 10.4 A formative anecdote from the early days of EP

When Dick Allwright first visited Brazil he found many teachers complaining about the ‘problem’ that students kept slipping out of English into Portuguese in any group work. They were looking for pedagogic solutions in the form of better ways to run group work, but one Rio teacher thought of it as a puzzle to try to understand rather than as a problem to expect to solve, and simply gave her puzzle as a topic for group discussion. She was very pleased to find that her students took it seriously, and in the process of monitoring their discussions she felt she had begun to understand much better why staying in English was such a problem for them, and she also felt that they were themselves developing their own understandings of this aspect of their classroom behaviour. As ‘icing’ on the already very sweet ‘cake’, she later reported that in subsequent lessons, without her having to use her developing understanding to invent clever new ways of running such group discussions that would keep the students speaking English, the students stayed in English longer anyway.

This anecdote was formative because it was crucial in prompting the original thinking that led to the ‘discovery’ of EP. EP was already there in the work of such imaginative teachers (see also Case Study 13.1 below). It did not have to be invented, only acknowledged and appreciated for its potential.

Judith Hanks also has a story to tell about the same pedagogic issue of the use of L1 or L2:

Illustrative example 10.5 Hanks on change without 'problem-solving'

When I tried debating this question with one of my own classes recently, a student announced that she simply did not like speaking English! Others tried to analyse their own feelings towards using English and using Italian in class. Shortly after that, I noticed a marked increase in the students' efforts to use English. It was as if, having had the opportunity to discuss and analyse their feelings towards the language, they had convinced themselves of what they wished to do.

(1999: 15)

We have come to use the term PEPA (Potentially Exploitable Pedagogic Activity) for such classroom practices that also constitute work for understanding. In Rio the notion of the PEPA has developed in scope.

Quote 10.14 A wider notion of PEPAs in the words of the Rio EP Group

Our events are collegially organized and, due to the richness of learning opportunities generated, we have come to understand them, just as our other presentation modes, as huge potentially exploitable pedagogic activities (PEPAs).

(Personal communication, 3 May 2006)

Working with puzzles and PEPAs, we find, makes a significant contribution to sustainability within the overall framework of the other principles.

Principles and propositions

But have we lost sight of our Propositions? Do our Principles not take for granted that learners are already the way we would like them to be? The answer must be 'yes' because the problem is more a matter of how learners are perceived than of how they actually are. In Turkey, Deniz Renda Korum worked with colleagues in a state university, private language schools and a public science high school on their puzzle: *Why do learners*

think they have difficulties in writing? They found a striking mismatch of perspectives between teachers and learners:

Illustrative example 10.6a Teachers' and learners' different viewpoints

Teacher A

We revised the connectors, transition signals so many times in class. I cannot understand why they insist on not using them although I tell them that connectors and transition signals are necessary not only for accuracy but also for fluency in academic essays. I guess they do not mind or they are just being lazy.

Learner A

I know the meaning of those connectors and transition signals and I know how to use them in a sentence, but I just cannot use them in my essay. I am struggling so hard to produce a correct sentence and it takes so much time. But she does not see it. She thinks I am lazy.

Teacher B

One of the reasons why they cannot write is that they do not have anything to say about the writing topics. They do not read and write in Turkish as well, that is why; they do not have ideas of their own.

Learner B

I have many things to write about the writing topics. I just cannot organise my ideas. And my English is not enough to express what I want to express. She says try to use simple sentences, but then I write like a primary school child.

Illustrative example 10.6b Deniz on learners

The findings of our study ... provided us with some valuable tips about how to enable learners to practice writing in class, how to approach teaching writing as a skill and how to correct learners' essays. *However, the most important thing for me and I believe for my colleagues was that we had the chance to see that when learners were given the chance to talk about how they learn or how they themselves perceive second and/or foreign language learning they may provide us with very valuable information about what goes on in their minds.* Also, they reminded us what it was to be a language learner and how difficult it was to struggle with too many variables and control the content when trying to write about something.

(emphasis added)

If learners are seen differently, they are likely to behave differently. The principles of EP provide a way of bringing our Propositions to life.

From principles to practices: why we specify principles rather than research procedures

Other approaches to research go to great lengths to specify what research procedures are acceptable and how they should be applied. Whole books address the technical rather than the ethical and the epistemological considerations involved. The six successive editions (1980–2007) of Cohen and Manion's comprehensive survey of research procedures for education are a major example of this mainstream tradition. In the area of qualitative research (for example, Clough and Nutbrown, 2002; Holliday, 2002; Richards, 2003) the approach has been, by contrast, more to ask exploratory questions about why one should undertake research and to problematise it as a challenging activity, rather than see it simply as a methodological matter. Even in the development of EP, responding to demand, we for a time followed convention by specifying 'eight steps', inviting direct comparison with the eight steps of Action Research (see Nunan, 1989: 12, but also Burns, 1999, for more flexibility), until we realised that the people most actively involved in developing EP (the Rio Group again) simply did not find the steps helpful. Elsewhere others in the US (e.g. Johnson 2002) and in China (e.g. Zhang in Illustrative Example 10.2 above), had shown how teachers could work directly from the principles, creating their own ways of working as they went along (for this history, see Allwright, 2005b).

So we recast EP in relation to its emerging principles, in ethical and epistemological terms, rather than in technical ones. Zangjie Wu (2006) responded with a philosophical, 'Eastern', interpretation of EP as a 'form of life', as we see in the words of the Japanese students below.

Illustrative example 10.6 A group of learners at Kyoto University of Foreign Studies about their ways of understanding and learning

Exploratory Practice is a new concept to us but we think we have experienced Exploratory Practice in some of our best classes. In some classes we create an environment with our teachers which helps us learn in the ways we learn when we read a book that makes us think new thoughts, thoughts not in the book exactly but thoughts which the ideas or stories in the books stimulate in our minds. In some classes we learn in the ways we learn when we take part in our club activities, hike in the mountains, or have friendships. We think that is Exploratory Practice.

(Personal communication, 24 June 2003)

None of which excuses us from trying to say helpful things about the technical and practical aspects of conducting classroom investigations, of course. These will be a major focus in Part III, especially Chapters 12 and 13. In this chapter we have simply tried to show how our principles could inform and encourage a form of inclusive practitioner research that meets our twin purposes for research: to help develop general understandings in a way that also helps learners develop theirs, and so to develop as practitioners of learning.

Part III is therefore entirely devoted to what practitioner researchers can do within the framework of our seven principles to conduct their own investigations, their own 'work for understanding'. It does not offer blueprints for readers to copy, but it will discuss, describe and illustrate with their own stories what practitioner researchers, teachers and learners, have done in their own local settings, to get research started, to carry it through and to let others know about it.

Practitioners around the world, like Zhang, who have adopted the EP framework, are mostly working collegially with their students but in relative isolation from other professional colleagues with a similar interest in practitioner research. Thanks to the Rio EP Group, however, we are particularly alive to the potential of groups of practitioners (teachers and learners) working together collegially. We have therefore reserved the whole of Chapter 14 for the Rio Group to report on their work and life together.

We hope Part III will successfully communicate the enthusiasm of EP practitioners around the world for their collegial engagement as teachers and learners in inclusive practitioner research. We find it inspirational. We hope you will too.

Further reading

- Allwright, D. 2005 Developing Principles for Practitioner Research: The Case of Exploratory Practice. *The Modern Language Journal*, 89/3: 353–66. This paper gives the history of EP to show how it moved from 'steps' to 'principles', from technicist preoccupations to ethical and epistemological concerns.
- Breen, M. P. 2006 Collegial Development in ELT: The Interface between global processes and local understandings. In S. N. Gieve, and I. K. Miller (eds), *Understanding the Language Classroom*. Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan: 200–25. Breen surveys the pressures on language teachers that tend to undermine their professionalism and advocates collegiality as the way forward.
- Gieve, S. and I. K. Miller (eds) 2006 *Understanding the Language Classroom*. Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan: 18–46. This volume offers a wide variety of perspectives on relevant conceptual issues in applied linguistics.

- Holliday, 2002 *Doing and Writing Qualitative Research*. London, Sage.
A wide-ranging guide for qualitative researchers, fundamentally third-party in conception, in our terms, but very informative and thoughtful.
- Richards, K. 2003 *Qualitative Inquiry in TESOL*. Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan.
Richards, like Holliday, aims to help researchers develop skills relevant to qualitative inquiries. He also exemplifies the third-party approach to practitioner research.

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Part III

Inclusive Practitioner Research in Practice

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11

Introduction to Part III

This chapter shows how Part III will:

- use learner and teacher stories to bring to life our ideas about what can happen when learners get involved as *key developing practitioners*, with their teachers, in exploring their learning lives;
- show how such inclusive practitioner research can be both immediately practical and indefinitely sustainable;
- use the stories as case studies to show, as a source of practical ideas for others, *what* particular people have done in particular settings, and *how* they have done it;
- emphasise the value of collective collegial action, exemplified in the work of the Rio EP Group;
- discuss the dissemination of research outcomes, and the importance of ‘sharing’ as integral to the research process;
- evaluate EP in relation to the developing learner.

Case study 11.1 Mariana’s story

Hi, my name is Mariana Pompilho de Souza, I’m 15 years old and I was Solange’s [Solange Fish Costa Braga’s] student in 2005 at Albert Einstein School. I was from the 804 class. Once, the teacher asked us to do a ‘task’ in which we had to discuss and put into practice some questions about the classes and the school that we would like to investigate like: Why did we have to wear an orange uniform? Why didn’t we like to learn English? Why was it difficult to pay attention to the school classes? Why do teenagers get pregnant despite all the information about contraceptive methods?, etc.

Everything was normal: we did the tasks, doing research, filling questionnaires, interviewing students and teachers, preparing posters and presenting

them to the class. But it didn't finish this way, I mean with evaluation and grades. The teacher started to talk about Exploratory Practice and asked us if we wanted to participate in the EP event. A few people got interested in that and I was part of this group, thank God. The first time I went to the EP sessions we debated our questions. It was very interesting because I liked to show my opinions. The sensation of being among several teachers is great! We could say what we think about our questions and they heard us without criticising us; they could understand us and explore our opinions, respecting them above all. And the snacks during break time were also great!

I think I like everything and I intend to keep on practising EP questions for a long time.

Mariana's story illustrates our propositions from Part I: that learners are uniquely individual, yet social, beings who are capable of taking learning seriously, of taking independent decisions and of developing as practitioners of learning. Her description of what she and her classmates did, with their teacher to understand some aspects of their learning lives gives a good sense of the enthusiasm and energy that were generated. Mariana also demonstrates the ability to report reflectively on the experience, both in class and for her poster presentation at the 'EP event'. This 'event' (see Chapters 14 and 15 below) is the annual conference in Rio for teachers and learners to share their experiences and develop their understandings in a forum that is intellectually serious *and* great fun. Mariana comes across as someone with a great contribution to make to classroom language learning, and not only her own. A *key developing practitioner*, no less.

Mariana's example is not just encouraging; to us it is positively inspiring. Throughout Part III we shall use such learner and teacher stories to exemplify the practicalities of working for understanding within the framework of EP, and to convey this atmosphere of collegial enthusiasm for language learning and language learning research. It is a major outcome of our principled inclusive and collegial practitioner research model.

Concept 11.1 EP in one sentence

Exploratory practice involves:

A. PRACTITIONERS WORKING COLLEGIALLY TO UNDERSTAND:

- a) what *they* want to understand, following their *own* agendas;
- b) not necessarily *in order to* bring about change;
- c) not primarily *by* changing;

- d) but *by using* normal pedagogic practices as investigative tools, so that working for understanding is *part of* the teaching and learning, not extra to it;
 - e) in a way that does not lead to 'burn-out', but that is *indefinitely sustainable*;
- B. IN ORDER TO CONTRIBUTE TO:
- f) *teaching and learning* themselves;
 - g) *development*, both individual and collective.

Mariana tells us she will 'keep on practising EP questions for a long time' – a very encouraging sign that she believes EP is sustainable. Sustainability, however, is not simple. It is a major theme for Part III.

Sustainability

Classroom research, however engaging, demands time and energy and eats into valuable lesson time. The standard way of addressing these problems, following the model of research exercises on training or MA courses, is to confine research to intensive but time-limited 'projects'. The extra workload may be more bearable if the teacher and class can look forward to 'going back to normal' soon. Intensive projects threaten sustainability, though, because they can lead to research burnout – a reluctance to repeat the process. They also make research a 'discontinuous' process, against our call (in Principle 6) for it to be a properly continuous process, because the situations to be understood are themselves continually changing. The intensiveness problem can be reduced, and continuity improved, by more open-ended 'rolling projects'. These still demand time and energy, however, and leave research as a separate, extracurricular and decidedly 'abnormal' activity which eats into lesson time. Our Principle 7 suggests 'normalising' research by integrating it fully into the curriculum. This preserves continuity and effectively minimises the extra workload, without reducing teaching and learning time. It therefore maximises our chances of achieving indefinite sustainability.

Support is also important to sustainability. Funding agencies, which cannot make open-ended commitments, prefer only fixed-term projects. But continuous curricular integration does not need such *funding* support, or even want it if it reintroduces projectisation. Continuous *collegial* support within and across educational institutions is another matter. Unfortunately, teachers work in relative isolation, even when they are in the same building, and most cannot expect much collegial support for practitioner research. EP, however, through

its emphasis on classroom collegiality (Principles 3, 4 and 5), positively encourages teachers and learners to give each other mutual support. Outside the classroom such support is more elusive, but the collegial work of the Rio EP Group (see Chapter 14 below) offers a powerful positive example (see also Part IV for links to potentially useful websites and teacher associations).

Sustainability, in short, depends on research becoming part of the normal working lives of teachers and learners. Part III is about how this can happen.

The structure of Part III

The chapters that follow suggest how practitioners might undertake their own exploratory inclusive research investigations, in line with both our Principles and our Five Propositions about learners. From the wealth of EP material contributed by teachers and learners from around the world, we have been particularly keen to focus on learners investigating their puzzles, rather than on teachers investigating theirs. Within the EP framework such work is relatively recent, however, and concentrated in Rio de Janeiro, so that is where most of our practitioner contributions come from. Some are stories, some interview transcripts (as we saw as early as Chapter 1). We present the stories here as 'EP case studies' (see Table 11.1). Where we can we illustrate them with photographs of the posters themselves, sometimes in English sometimes in Portuguese.

Because her experience is so rich, no fewer than five of our 19 case studies, come from one teacher, Walewska Braga. Two of them are her own stories, three help learners present their experiences. Such personal accounts are crucial to developing an understanding of how EP can function, in state schools, private schools and universities, and with adults as well as children.

Our case studies are not projects to be faithfully copied but practical and personal accounts whose prime purpose is to feed the imagination and foster 'learning from real-life examples', not invite direct replication. Different practitioners are puzzled by different thoughts and experiences, and devise different investigative classroom activities to suit their immediate local circumstances. Their investigations and findings are uniquely personal and local, however interesting they may in fact be more generally. What unites them is the principled framework of EP and the curricular integration we have argued for above.

Integration reduces the overall workload, but addresses only half the problem. People adopting familiar classroom activities as their

Table 11.1 The EP case studies

Case Study	Country	Institution	Learners' age
11.1 Mariana	Brazil	State school	15
12.1 Walewska	Brazil	State school	Young learners 14–16
12.2 Ana Paula	Brazil	State school	Young learners 14–16
12.3 Judith	UK	University	Adults
12.4 Aline	Brazil	State school	Young learners 14–16
13.1 Hadara (1)	Brazil	University	Adults
13.2 Joanne	Hong Kong	HK Institute of Education HK Academy for Performing Arts	Young adults – 16+
13.3 Clarisse	Brazil	Private language school	Adults
13.4 Hadara (2)	Israel	University	Adults
13.5 Ana Rosaria	Brazil	Night school	Adults
13.6 Walewska and Carlos Magno	Brazil	State school	17
13.7 Walewska and Daniela	Brazil	State school	17
14.1 The Rio EP Group	Brazil	All sectors	All ages
15.1 Ana Raquel	Brazil	State school	15
15.2 Inés	Brazil	University	Adults
15.3 Walewska	Brazil	State school	Young learners 14–16
15.4 Joanne	Hong Kong	HK Institute of Education HK Academy for Performing Arts	Young adults
15.5 Rute	Brazil	Private language school	Teenagers and young adults
15.6 Tihago (told by Walewska and Solange)	Brazil	State school	Young learners 14–16

investigative tools will already know how to manage them *pedagogically*, but not necessarily how to *adapt* them to serve effectively as *research tools* for the processes of working for understanding.

But why 'processes', and what 'processes'? We argued against reducing EP to 'steps', and even 'stages' suggests something too finite, with a beginning and an end. We want to emphasise fluidity and continuity.

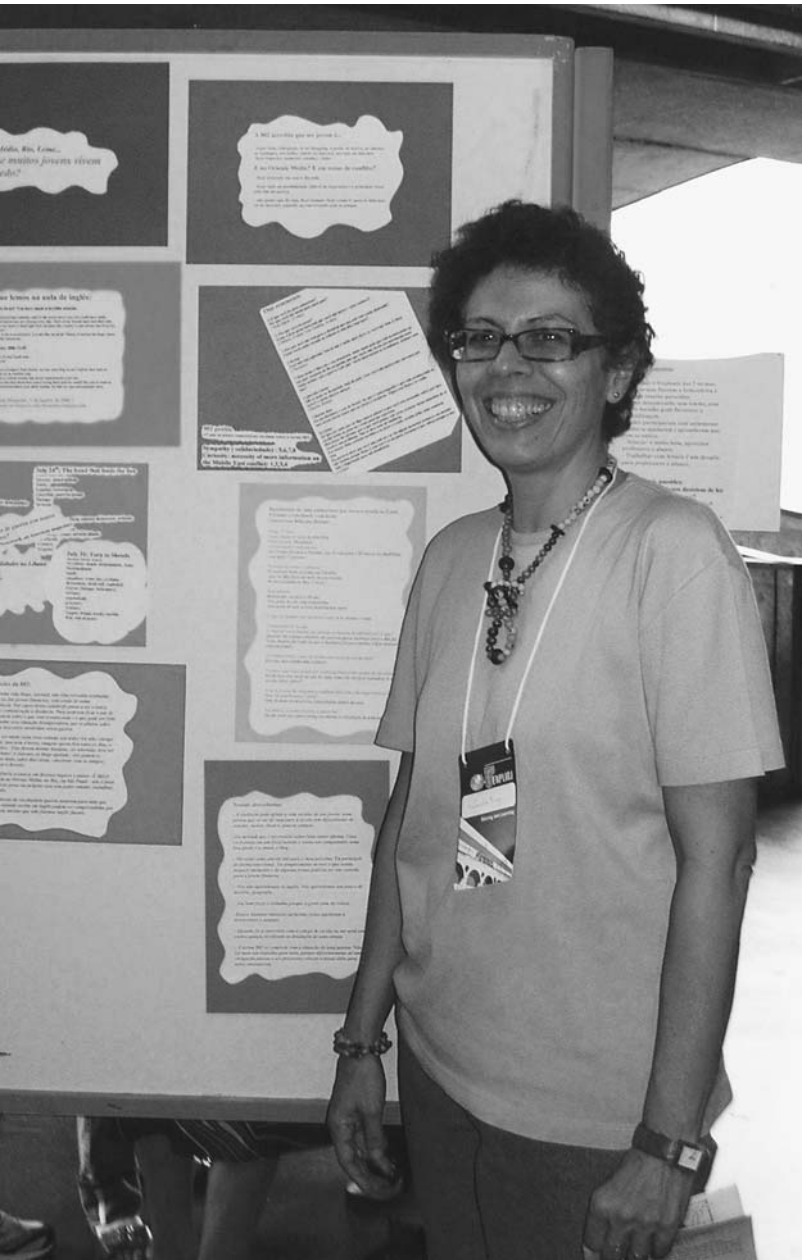


Photo 11.1 Walewska Braga

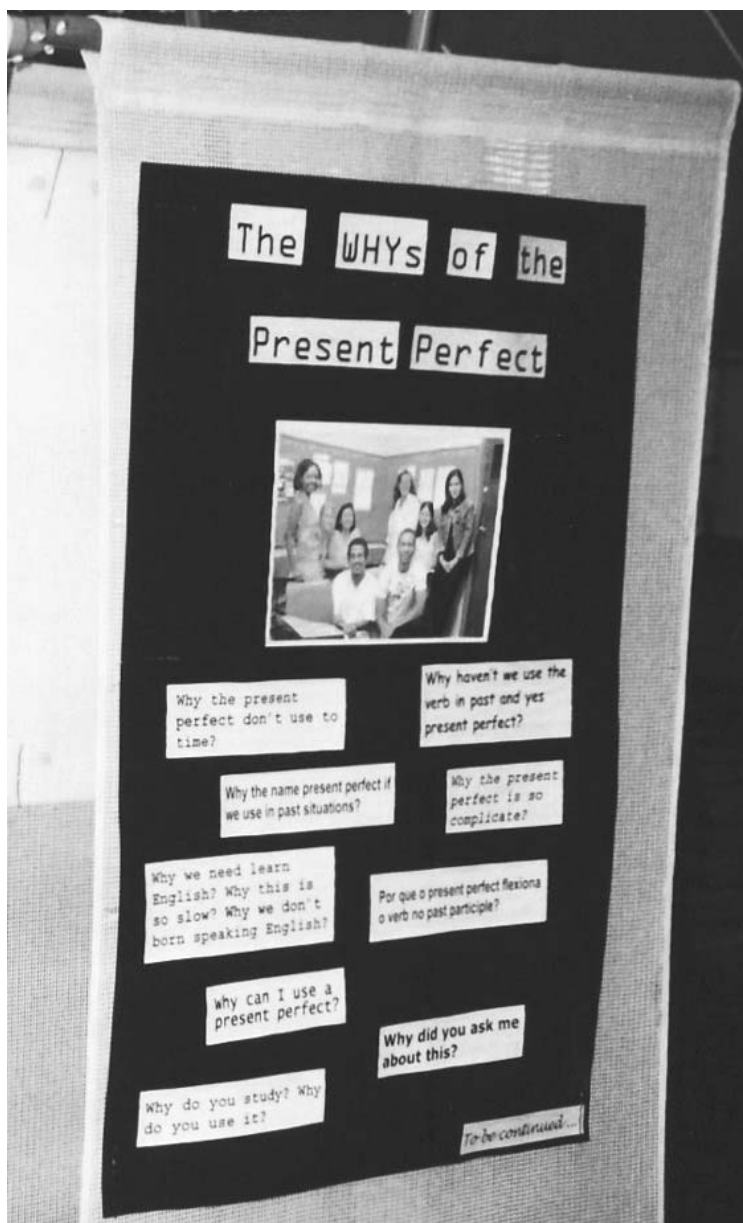


Photo 11.2 A learner poster. Note the 'to be continued'

investigative tools will already know how to manage them *pedagogically*, but not necessarily how to *adapt* them to serve effectively as *research tools* for the processes of working for understanding.

But why ‘processes’, and what ‘processes’? We argued against reducing EP to ‘steps’, and even ‘stages’ suggests something too finite, with a beginning and an end. We want to emphasise fluidity and continuity. We did choose to start this chapter with Mariana’s story, however, and that does have a beginning and an end, so are we trying to have it both ways? In part, ‘yes’. Our case studies follow the story-telling genre and we like them that way, as stories. But they may not convey the essential continuity of the practitioner research that they represent. So, before we present our case studies, we need to redress the balance. Here the term ‘process’ can help.

The basic processes of practitioner research: action for understanding and action for change – the importance of intentions

Practitioner research involves two conceptually distinct processes: taking action for understanding, and taking action for change. Taking action for *change*, as we argued in Chapter 10, is more the realm of Action Research. EP’s is action for *understanding*. That may suggest that if an EP investigation suggests a need for change, then some AR will be necessary. In practice, however, the understandings generated through EP are themselves capable of both producing change and handling the change process, as our case studies show (see also Part IV, Resource 9). But, if EP also involves change, why insist on two distinct processes, taking action for understanding and taking action for change? The answer lies in the ‘for’. It is a matter of intentions. AR starts out with an *intention to change* in order to solve a problem, or at least to introduce an innovation.

Quote 11.1 Cohen and Manion on Action Research

The *first stage* will involve the identification, evaluation and formulation of the problem perceived as critical in an everyday teaching situation. ‘Problem’ should be interpreted loosely here so that it could refer to the need to introduce innovation into some aspect of a school’s established programme.

(1989: 232)

EP starts out with an *intention to try to understand*, rather than change. It recognises that any understanding may suggest change is needed, but it also acknowledges that sometimes understanding, or even just the process of working together to understand, will bring sufficient change in itself. Case Study 12.4 below offers a striking example of this.

Action for understanding

Taking action for understanding involves two types of ‘activity’ – ‘thinking’ and ‘doing’. Since all human activity (except perhaps sleep) could be summed up under these two, it is worth analysing them further for our purposes here – to describe what each involves, and how they interrelate, within EP.

Thinking

‘Thinking’ is closely related to ‘reflecting’ – the traditional realm of Reflective Practice (Schön, 1983, 1987) which is very well established in our field. Its ideas and practices have influenced EP practitioners for many years (Allwright, 2001b; Miller, 2001). What EP brings is an emphasis on inclusivity, mutuality and collaboration, and therefore on action for understanding as an integral part of the working lives of learners, as well as of teachers.

Thinking is part of any and all aspects of all research – from selecting an issue, to analysing data and interpreting outcomes. Good thinking is not easy, however, and many of us lack confidence in our ability to think well. The practices of EP include finding ways to help us develop our thinking. It is a crucial part of our overall mutual, and essentially collegial, development as practitioners.

Doing

‘Doing’ is largely the process of gathering material to feed thinking. For EP ‘gathering’ is a wide notion. It includes assembling background information, monitoring the current situation and intervening to generate new ‘data’. All this ‘doing’ is, as Principle 7 proposes, fully integrated into the curriculum.

These basic processes will permeate Part III, where we look at the practicalities of conducting inclusive practitioner research in the language classroom. Chapter 12 looks at getting started: learners, and/or teachers, thinking about things that are puzzling them, refining their initial questions and beginning to work together on them. We use the term ‘puzzling’ here (rather than the static noun ‘puzzle’) to

help convey the dynamic nature of the constant movement between thinking and doing. Puzzling is both an *individual* and a *social* activity, and all the while an ongoing *curricular* activity. Chapter 13, on conducting investigations, discusses and illustrates further how teachers and learners can use their normal pedagogic practices to integrate research fully into their classroom lives.

Chapters 12 and 13 show how EP's emphasis on collegiality acts as a sustaining force, while the whole of Chapter 14 is a case study in sustained practitioner collegiality, written by Rio EP Group members. Chapter 15 discusses further how teachers and learners can share their experiences and developing understandings in and beyond the classroom, bringing to life our Five Propositions about learners. Finally, taking a last look at our Principles, we make an overall evaluation of EP.

Our final chapter, even though it ends typographically with a full stop, will not, we hope, constitute a full stop metaphorically. Our concern for continuity and sustainability will run throughout Part III. Again, Mariana's words encourage us: 'I think I like everything and I intend to keep on practising EP questions for a long time'.

12

Getting Started on Working for Understanding

This chapter will:

- show how Exploratory Practice can enable learners, as well as teachers, to develop their own agendas by identifying research ‘puzzles’ and turning them into researchable questions;
- suggest ways in which such inclusive practitioner research can become a productive and sustainable part of learners’ lives;
- consider some of the doubts that might arise, and reassurances that can be offered, when practitioners – learners as well as teachers – undertake something like this;
- use case studies to illustrate how teachers and learners have begun exploring their puzzles.

Introduction

Getting started on inclusive practitioner research raises two questions immediately:

1. How do we decide what to investigate?
2. How do we do it without losing valuable language learning time, or giving ourselves too much extra work?

These questions have a very special status within EP, because if learners are seen as practitioners, the ‘we’ in the question must include them fully. The learners must develop their own agendas for what *they* want to understand. We shall see in this chapter how learners, as well as teachers, can go about identifying and getting started on investigating research issues. Chapter 13 will deal with the next question, how to

conduct investigations in a productive and sustainable way.

A key term for us in getting started is ‘puzzling’ – reflecting on situations and asking ‘why’ questions about them, rather than rushing into looking for ‘solutions’. We shall look at puzzling as both an *individual* activity and a *social* activity (see Chapter 10, Principles 3, 4 and 5). Throughout this chapter we shall also look at it as a *curricular* activity, emphasising Principle 7’s recommendation that explorations should, for sustainability’s sake, be fully integrated into the curriculum. We shall see, however, that some puzzling can be curricular-neutral, neither contributing directly to nor detracting from the teaching and learning processes.

Within the framework of EP we use the term ‘puzzle’ instead of ‘topic’ or ‘problem’ (see Hanks 1998a for discussion of this). There are good reasons for this. Early *practitioner* research focused on immediate practical ‘problems’ because its explicit aim was to change things that were not working well. This was a conscious shift from *academic* research’s notion of ‘topic’, which reflected intellectual concern for theory development. For EP, the term ‘puzzle’ represents our concern for developing understandings in relation to issues of immediate interest, whether or not they are ‘problematic’ and whether or not we connect them to theory. What matters is that *someone* is interested enough in *something* to be seriously puzzled about it and so willing to work to try to understand it. The case studies in this chapter illustrate this process.

Deciding what to investigate involves two distinct phases: choosing an issue that is puzzling; and developing it into a researchable puzzle. Sometimes these two come together easily, but that does not always happen. We shall therefore discuss what may be involved in each separately.

Identifying what is puzzling

Not everyone finds this easy. Some cannot choose because there are far too many things puzzling them, others are the opposite. For people in the first category there are several questions worth asking:

- Are any of my puzzles ‘a hot topic’ – something everybody is talking about? If so, it may be easier to get other people interested, and so develop useful collegiality (Principles 3, 4 and 5).
- Are there any that, if not exactly ‘hot’, might resonate with people I know?

- Are any of them more ‘central’ for me than others – things I really care about?
- Do any urgently need understanding, perhaps because they are blocking something else I want to do?
- (At least for a first EP investigation) Do any look easier to manage than others, perhaps because they are less fraught with personality issues? For example, Case Study 12.2 shows a teacher concerned about her personal relationship with her learners. That could have been rather threatening for a first investigation.

For people who can think of nothing that puzzles them, it may help to invoke Principles 3, 4 and 5 (involve everybody, in a collegial enterprise of mutual development) and find other people to talk to. Patience may be necessary, but is likely to be rewarded. Allwright once sat for 20 minutes while a group of British teachers of English in Japan tried in vain to think of something that puzzled them. Eventually, they produced the intriguing question: ‘Why do our students accept being put through “communicative” learning activities in our classes when they would probably resist them from Japanese teachers of English?’

Alternatively, people who resent the implication that they *ought* to be puzzled by something could offer to join in on someone else’s puzzle instead, working collegially and for mutual development again.

Where do puzzles come from?

From experience

The above discussion suggests that the whole process starts artificially with a direct call for people to formulate puzzles. It would be quite wrong, however, to suggest that this is always necessary.

Long-term concerns. Sometimes teachers, and learners, will have been puzzling about something for years, and will have thought hard about it already. All they need is to realise that the time has come for their puzzle to be brought into the open and investigated systematically. For Walewska Braga and Ana Paula Ferreira de Carvalho (in Case Studies 12.1 and 12.2) the prompt came from joining colleagues in an EP group (see Chapter 14). But it can come, less collegially, from simply reading about EP. That is what happened for Zhang in her teaching of extensive reading (described in Chapter 10).

Learner questions. Sometimes learners will spontaneously ask questions which suggest a puzzle worth exploring. For example, Walewska reports (in Case Study 12.1) how an investigation started

because her students were repeatedly asking: 'Why do we have English classes only once a week?'

Like Walewska, the teacher needs first to be open to questions, then to notice that learners are seriously questioning something they would like to understand better, and then to devise ways they could integrate the investigative work into the curriculum.

Events. Sometimes a puzzle will arise from a particular event. In Case Study 13.7 Walewska reports on a girl leaving school because she became pregnant. Her classmates asked themselves: 'Why do many teenagers get pregnant in spite of having so much information?' This may seem remote from language learning, but it was clearly a pressing issue in the learning lives of these students, and one they were willing to work on in English.

From a direct prompt to start puzzling

Sometimes it makes sense to start with a direct prompt. In the early days of EP workshops, teachers tried to elicit 'puzzles' by asking: 'What is puzzling about what happens in your language classes?' The question was intended to start teachers thinking about their classroom experience. A teacher could easily change that to 'our' language classes and offer it to learners in that form. More recently, the implied classroom *events* agenda has disappeared, replaced by a broader concern for the *quality* of teaching and learning lives. Teachers generally intrigued by the ideas of EP are likely to start in this way. For example, Walewska reports that she simply:

...encouraged the 803 students to write their opinions, complaints, suggestions for our English classes. Tatiane said the English classes in public schools should prepare students for the job market and in her opinion this didn't happen. *I told the class that Tatiane's puzzle was interesting and invited the whole class to take part in this exploratory work.* (extract from Case Study 15.3, emphasis added)

In Walewska's case direct prompting also produced the following puzzles that learners subsequently investigated:

- Why do we cheat? (Case Study 13.6)
- Why do we use 'th' after 8?
- Why do we find maths so difficult to study? (Case Study 15.1)
- Why do I dislike wearing my school uniform?

Judith Hanks' group produced a much longer list (see Case Study 12.3, and Part IV, Resource 5 below).

Illustrative example 12.1 Some of Judith's students' (unedited) puzzles

Puzzles about their own language learning

Why I don't speak English after nine years' study?
Why I need so long time before I learn and use a new verb or word?
Why do I always make mistakes of the tense?
Why do I have such problems to write an essay?
Why are you in an embarrassing situation when the teacher ask you about anything and you don't know or you answer any stupid thing?
Why I'm happy to go to the English lessons?
Why do I feel like learning more every time I attend English class?

Puzzles about what teachers do

Why do teachers have no time to answer students' questions?
Why do teachers give so many homework to students?
Why some teachers are not very good at teaching (like don't understand what the problem of someone who not use English as the first language) but they come to be a teacher?

Puzzles about classroom procedures

Why we don't practise the presentations?
When we talk about a topic but we do not the vocabulary, we stop to talk about it, instead of looking for a way to insist on this topic.

Puzzles about what other people do, in or out of the classroom

Why do students often take more time in all activities?
Why English people don't correct you when you speak and say some wrong pronunciation?

Such questions reinforce our claims that learners are:

- 'unique individuals who learn and develop best in their own idiosyncratic ways' (from the first group of questions);
- 'social beings who learn and develop best in a mutually supportive environment' (in the last group of questions); and
- 'capable of taking learning seriously' (in all the questions).

Turning issues and problems into puzzles

The above examples all start with 'why', and all but two suggest underlying problems. So why are we so keen to avoid calling them 'problems'? First of all, some people are puzzled about things that are not

fundamentally problematic. Judith's students' list also includes: 'Why I'm happy to go to the English lessons?' and 'Why do I feel like learning more every time I attend English class?' In a systematic study of teachers' puzzles Lyra et al. recorded 'positive' puzzles such as: 'Why do I continue to be a teacher?' and 'Why am I happy with my teaching?' (2003: 158, 159). It would be sad if people were discouraged from exploring such things because we only ever invited 'problems'.

Secondly, not all teachers are comfortable about admitting to having 'problems' in the first place. Teachers on part-time or short-term contracts, for example, may feel that talking openly about 'having problems' could endanger their contracts. Talking about 'being puzzled' may be safer.

Thirdly, beginning questions with 'why' actually serves to postpone the search for immediate solutions (if a problem *is* involved). It can really open up the underlying research issue to exploration, and so, if change is necessary, it can be based on *understanding*.

Refining puzzles into research questions

This is not just a simple process of forming 'why' questions from topic statements or 'how' questions. Formulating research questions well is a serious problem for research of any kind. It troubles people enough in our experience of EP to make them doubt their own capacity for good thinking. As Miller and Bannell report: 'It is difficult for many practitioners to reflect on the assumptions and presuppositions contained in their puzzle as originally formulated' (1998: 25). Earlier, Lenzuen had reported a teacher working with EP as saying, 'It's frustrating to think that I've started from preconceived ideas...I'd like advice on how to stop taking things for granted' (1994: 16).

Fortunately, careful thinking can be helped by considering the following:

Am I taking anything for granted?

The question 'Why do my learners lack motivation?' seems to take for granted that they *are* unmotivated, that it is a matter of fact, not one of perception. A supplementary question might be: 'Why do I think they lack motivation?' Following that: 'Why do I think motivation is the underlying problem, anyway?' If learners' motivation really does seem to be the problem, then other questions might follow:

- What do I mean by 'motivation'?
- Do I really think *all* my learners have no motivation?

- Do I really mean 'no' motivation?
- Do I really think motivation is a matter of quantity, or might there be different *types* of motivation?

Other types of questions to assist thinking

In general it may also be worth considering the following:

- *Location*: Where do I locate the problem – in other people, in the textbook or in myself?
- *Viewpoint*: How might a parent, sociologist or psychologist see this? Is my viewpoint (as a teacher or learner) preventing me from seeing things clearly?
- *Interest*: Whose interests am I serving by addressing this issue? Am I really thinking of the welfare of others, or only of myself? Am I playing into the hands of the educational measurers?
- *Factors*: Have I thought of *all* the factors that might influence the situation? For example, with a worry about motivation, might being tired or hungry be influencing the situation?
- *Mythmaking*: Am I perpetuating a myth here? Take motivation again – if everybody agrees that learners are not motivated, then might we all be buying into a myth to give us somebody to blame for our problems?

Monitoring to help the thinking

No one is in a position to answer such questions without a lot of thought, and perhaps some more active enquiry. For example, observing learners more carefully for a while to see what it is about them that makes them appear unmotivated, and to see if some are demonstrably more unmotivated than others; or self-reflecting to see what affects motivation levels, and so on. In other words, monitoring the situation, but without tiring yourself out.

As a form of monitoring, video or audio recording is possible (though potentially obtrusive) and can be very instructive. But it can be very difficult to find time for viewing or listening to the recordings, let alone for making a transcription for later study. In short, it may be manageable once or twice, but it is not easily sustainable. Integrating classroom recording into the pedagogy is an alternative, but then it would be so intrusive it would not serve the simple monitoring function that is at issue here. Taking mental notes is one very simple way of monitoring, but it places a heavy load on memory. Writing comments in a notebook

is a useful alternative. This practical suggestion has been taken up by Jane Rose, a teacher in Finland, for her study of learner motivation.

Following Ho's (1995) model, I kept a blank page next to my lesson outline for writing down anything I felt was significant. The writing, which usually took the form of brief comments, was done during or just after the lesson and did not take very long. In this way I was also able to monitor the progress of my own reflections, which were, in turn, reflecting on life in the classroom as it progressed during the year. I did not write something down in every lesson with every group, but I did leave a blank page by each lesson outline in preparation for possible comments. This also meant I could easily connect my entries to particular lessons. My observations, which had a different focus from the action research and reflective practice elements advocated by Ho (1995: 68), were aimed at gaining understanding rather than problem solving or improving efficiency. (Rose, 2007: 487)

We may have given the impression that all this thinking is to be done individually, but EP emphasises collegiality and collaboration. Puzzling, then, is best done as a social enterprise, not just an individual, cognitive one. Finding out if other people share concerns, or perhaps see things very differently (that the learners are tired and hungry, rather than unmotivated, for example) can be very helpful in developing these preliminary understandings.

Harnessing narrative enquiry

Miller and Bannell (1998: 25) were concerned that the sorts of checklists we have outlined above were not particularly helpful in their situation. Such lists drew their attention to the underlying complexity of the thinking involved and so tended to be demoralising. To address this important concern they devised a procedure for aiding thinking based on using teacher narratives to prompt group discussion.

Basically we asked the teachers to write a narrative account of a concrete incident in their classrooms which was related to their 'puzzle'. We then asked them to underline the verbs used in the account and to use them to identify what they (and their students) were doing during the incident. Then, through group discussion of the narratives, the teachers were able to gain insights about what was happening because they were able to notice what was going on in a way that had not been possible even in the writing of the narrative.

Through this exercise, one teacher, for example, was able to 'listen' to her students more attentively and to reflect on styles of teaching (authoritarian, learner-centred, etc). This led her to look at her 'puzzle' in a different light. Such a process 'puts the puzzle to the test' but does not necessarily 'dissolve' the puzzle (although it might do so, with the teacher realising that he/she was looking at the teaching/learning process in a way that was generating the puzzle). Reflecting along these lines, however, is absolutely essential in the process of getting closer to the object of study and of becoming able to select and adapt familiar pedagogical activities to serve as appropriate investigative tools. (Miller and Bannell, 1998: 25)

This sort of language-focused procedure is well suited to language teachers, and could easily be adapted for use with language *learners*, perhaps even focusing on parts of speech selected to suit syllabus requirements.

What about reading something?

Cohen and Manion (1985, as reported for our field by Nunan, 1989: 12) advised: 'Review what has already been written about the issue in question'. However sensible in principle, this is a lot to ask in practice, especially in such an uncompromising form. It is too much for the many practitioners without good library facilities, and for the many more who hardly have time in their lives for lesson-planning, let alone background reading. (The Brazilian teachers developing EP typically need to have at least two teaching jobs at the same time – one in the state and one in the private sector – to generate an adequate income.) We can, and do, encourage relevant reading, but it would be unreasonable to expect much preliminary reading to actually happen. Making it a prerequisite to getting started is impractical, because it would delay everything indefinitely. Thinking is enough in the initial stages. Naidu et al. put it well when, at the end of their exploration of heterogeneity in large classes, they write: 'Confident of our perceptions we now feel ready to share with, to confront and dialogue with the insights of other researchers' (1992: 263). Allwright captured this in extreme form in the slogan: 'I want to read what I read because of what I think, not think what I think because of what I read'.

For teachers, reading 'what has already been written', however desirable, is highly problematic, then, especially in the initial stages of establishing inclusive practitioner research as a normal feature of classroom life. But our case studies will show how it can play a large part in

the conduct of investigations by learners, thanks to ever-increasing internet access.

Doubts and reassurances

Getting started on EP as a teacher trying to understand your own puzzles is challenging enough. Getting started with *learners'* puzzles can be even more challenging.

Who takes the initiative?

Who should take responsibility for starting the ball rolling? If the teacher does all the initiating, EP risks becoming just another teacher imposition, making nonsense of any claim to be taking learners seriously as individuals capable of making their own decisions about learning (Proposition 4). In practice, though, the first move is most likely going to have to come from a teacher. The degree of conviction that the teacher shows when introducing EP is then likely to affect how enthusiastically the learners take up the ideas. Judith's diary extracts from her work for Case Study 12.3 show her concern:

Judith's diary

I do have a strong sense that my own conviction makes a big difference to the attitudes of the students – as soon as I feel doubts creeping into my mind about the validity of what I'm doing, the students seem to lose their way, momentum is lost. When I insist just a little and appear confident of my aims, they really get going.

This suggests that teachers asking learners for the first time to generate their own puzzles may need to fake confidence. Alternatively, and more positively, they can build their own confidence first, perhaps by starting with a puzzle of their own, as Ana Paula did in Case Study 12.2. In this way, the teacher can gradually gain confidence and the learners will see what is involved. Progressively, the learners will contribute more and more, until they are ready to propose their own puzzles.

Coping with initial bemusement

When Judith (Case Study 12.3) began explaining her ideas, her students' first reaction was to look rather nonplussed, as if they had never been asked to reflect on their own learning before. Simply asking them: 'What

puzzles you about your experiences of classroom language learning?’ did not immediately produce the wealth of puzzles we listed earlier. Judith’s students needed a little more support. So she showed them a lot of puzzles that other teachers had produced. Her list (deliberately too long for students to spend much time reading each one) offered enough examples to prompt them to think of their own puzzles fairly quickly. It also set a framework for putting their puzzles into question form, as almost all of them were *Why*-questions.

Providing learners with a list of ‘old’ puzzles to think about reassures them that the task is not entirely open-ended and that other learners have found it do-able. Such a wide-ranging list can also help learners range widely themselves, without fear of being censured for irrelevance. (For an example of a probably surprising but productive puzzle, see Part IV, Resource 1 below: ‘Are we champions? What for? Why?’) They might just adopt someone else’s ‘old’ puzzle to start with, of course, but if they identify with it, that is no problem. An alternative approach is available in Part IV, Resources 3 and 4: an open letter from Dick Allwright to learners inviting them to get involved, and a lot more learner comments from Cherchalli’s data. A learner who identifies with a comment may decide to explore it further.

Meeting curricular demands

Teachers themselves may need reassurance that they will be able to fit EP into their normal working lives in and out of the classroom, without compromising the curriculum. Our case studies illustrate how teachers have managed to reconcile their investigative work with curricular demands. Walewska (Case Study 12.1) represents a special case because she builds her entire curriculum from her learners’ puzzles. For Ana Paula and Judith (Case Studies 12.2 and 12.3) the ‘official’ curriculum is still the fundamental framework, but they have found ways of working within it. Ana Paula worked with students to practise using adjectives (due to be covered anyway) to describe good and bad teachers. Judith, recognising that writing and speaking skills were important in her institution’s curriculum, provided opportunities for both in a meaningful way, and so ensured that her students got the best of both worlds. Indeed, EP work can positively enhance the curriculum. As Walewska says about her situation in Brazil:

I believe that any class should be meaningful for students and teacher. In a public [state] school we have so many opportunities to

teach English AND Portuguese, ethics, citizenship AND ... a lot more.
(Personal communication, 19 July 2006)

Is it too much to ask?

It is not difficult to see how students might develop as practitioners of learning through conducting investigations into their situation, especially if their teacher takes their questions seriously. But teachers may still feel constrained by a narrowly linguistic curriculum, and may not yet feel able to trust their learners to maintain the necessary seriousness of purpose. They might well wonder if they are taking on more, and asking more of learners, than they can all cope with. Our case studies give plenty of evidence that teachers and learners both can and do rise to the occasion.

The case studies

Case Study 12.1 Working *together* to understand classroom language learning life

One of the main planks of EP thinking is collegiality – learners and teachers working together to investigate what puzzles them and to share their findings in their local context. Walewska Braga, working in Rio de Janeiro, relates how she responded when she noticed that learners in her class were continuously asking her about something that really puzzled them.

Walewska's story

Why do we have English classes only once a week?

The afternoon students of Santo Tomás de Aquino school have English classes from the 6th grade on. My 602 students (2003) had their English classes on Wednesdays (a 50-minute class, once a week). Why do we have English classes only once a week? they insisted on asking me every time I entered the class.

I asked for volunteers to 'investigate' the question and two students raised their hands: Julliette [Julliette Israelle da Silva Gomes] and Tihago [Tihago dos Santos Simões]. We prepared together a list of questions, the first one being how the school schedule is made. They interviewed the principal and the coordinator of their municipal school who told them how the school schedule is made. They found out that the schools have to follow the rules set by the Secretaria Municipal de Educação (SME) and students should have foreign languages twice a week. As there was one more class of students (603) and only one E teacher (myself) the 6th graders (602/603) would have to 'share' the teacher of English: E classes once a week.

More than simply finding the answer to their question they came with very interesting information. According to the principal and the coordinator the students' opinions on their schedules were not welcomed. What else should students want besides breaks, physical education and free time? For the coordinator the students as a whole have no culture to deal with such matter. As for the importance of the subjects the coordinator said Portuguese was the most important one and for the principal all subjects were equally important.

It was time to involve the whole class: I was teaching them the days of the week and the school subjects, so I proposed they create the real schedule and the ideal schedule. They were aware that their task was for the research their classmates were doing and no, it was not for grading!!! They took it seriously and produced much more balanced schedules than the one they had (surprise, surprise!!!). Some students considered the learning of foreign languages very relevant: Some asked for more than 4 English classes a week!!! A few students asked for English, Spanish and French classes. Some considered Portuguese the most important subject. And there was not one schedule filled with free time and breaks. At that time Juliette left school for personal reasons. And Tihago prepared the poster and presented it in the 2003 event at PUC.

Some teachers suggested he and his classmates should write a letter to the mayor asking for more languages classes.

Case Study 12.2 Developing understandings and bringing people together

Ana Paula Ferreira de Carvalho, a teacher working in Brazil with 14–16-year-old students, decided to pursue an issue – learner perceptions of teacher/teaching quality – which has certainly been investigated widely in other contexts and in other countries (e.g. Kiely and Rea-Dickens, 2005: 161–77). It was puzzling her as very much a local issue: she was concerned about her relationship with her own learners. Her story shows not only how she got started on her puzzle, but also, for the sake of completeness, what she did to explore it, using PEPAs, to develop her understanding of what was going on in the unseen part of her classroom world.

Ana Paula's story

The question that I set out to investigate was: 'Why do learners seem to like some teachers better than others?' In other words, from the learners' point of view, what makes a good teacher?

I have always admired teachers who are loved and respected by their learners. And although I think my relationship with the learners is quite satisfactory, there seems to be something missing and I thought I could find out more about it by using a PEPA.

I decided to use the activity in classes 701 and 702, so that I could compare the results. We had already worked on adjectives and we started preparing cards with many different adjectives which could describe general qualities of teachers and students, such as creative, patient, sensitive, friendly, educated, organised, tolerant, polite, and so on. We ended up with a list of 20 words. Next, we made cards with the opposite adjectives, which gave me the opportunity to work on prefixes and suffixes. In the end, we had a list of 40 words, one for each student.

I then asked them to walk around the class and find a partner to form a pair of adjective and opposite adjective. The cards were exposed on the board and in the next step we worked on giving definitions to those adjectives. We used the dictionary and many students were surprised to find out the exact meaning of words such as educated and patient.

Next I asked them to work in groups of four and produce posters. Five groups would produce the 'Good teachers' posters and the other five would produce the 'Bad teachers' posters. I asked them to choose five adjectives to describe the good and the bad teacher, in order of the most to the least important quality. They would also have to draw a picture to represent their idea of a good and of a bad teacher.

It was also important that I had already written down the qualities according to my point of view so that I could compare the results afterwards. And I wrote down: 'A good teacher is educated, organised, polite, creative, tolerant' 'A bad teacher is rude, uneducated, disorganised, boring, old-fashioned'.

The results were very interesting. All the groups in both classes 701 and 702 seem to think that the most important qualities in a teacher are those related to being friendly, sensitive, polite, patient, tolerant – qualities that reflect teachers' ability to interact with the group. They don't seem to pay that much attention to teachers' education or organisation, which were the first qualities in my personal list. Their drawings were also very clarifying: candlelight, open books, lamps, the sun, flowers were the images of the good teachers. Witches, skeletons, broken lamps, storms, coffins were the images of the bad teachers.

I came to the conclusion that perhaps my excessive focus on teaching contents and not giving them many opportunities to have group discussions of matters which are not related to those contents might pull them away a little bit. I realised that they need friends and those teachers who are more open to that kind of relationship are closer to their students. I don't know if I am prepared to change my behaviour, but I definitely have a feeling that I learned something new.

Also, to my surprise, they seemed to have reflected upon the qualities that I have and since then, they have been a lot closer to me than they used to be. That image of the 'very serious teacher who is all work and no play' seems to have vanished and I am happy with it.

Case Study 12.3 Getting learners started by puzzling about language learning

The diary Judith Hanks kept when she was working with a group of adults in a British university shows how, in a very simple way, a teacher might encourage 'puzzling' among learners who may never

have been asked what they think about researching their own practices before.

Diary extract

Started off by putting topics on paper round the walls (topics were: Your first language class; Your strongest memory [of a language class]; Something about your classmates; Something about your language teachers; How you learn a language (the best way for you); Your best language learning experience) – played music, st[udent]s walked round the room, when the music stopped, they had to find a partner and a topic and talk about it for 1 minute. Then played music again, they walked round the room, music stopped, they found a different partner & a different topic & talked for another minute. Repeated this 3–4 times until most had talked about most of the topics. (The aim of this was to get them thinking about their previous language learning experiences, as well as to get them talking together [official aim of the lesson was ‘speaking practice’].) They clearly enjoyed this activity – continuing talking even when the music started playing. High sense of energy & enthusiasm in the room.

After about 10 minutes, all sat down. I asked them to think of something which puzzled them in their classroom language learning experiences and write it down on a pink post-it. They looked puzzled & asked me what I meant. I explained; they continued to look puzzled & didn’t write anything. So I showed them an OHT [overhead transparency] of some questions generated by teachers in the past (I told them these were teachers’ questions, and that what I was now interested in was their side of the story – what puzzled them). Aha! They all started to write (except 2 st[udent]s who didn’t seem to want to or appeared confused by the whole thing). I collected in the puzzles, commenting on a few as I did so I said that we would come back to these questions on Wednesday. I also pointed out that the questions were anonymous and that no one’s name would be used.

Having set their research agendas, the budding practitioner-researchers then needed to refine their questions.

Diary extract (continued)

Phase One: *Elicited previous learning experiences through a mingling and speaking activity. Next, asked students to write down their thoughts on a post-it note about ‘What puzzles you about your language learning?’ On finding students a little nonplussed by this question, showed them OHTs of lists of teachers’ puzzles on the same topic. Students then wrote their own puzzles on the post-it notes. Collected them in.*

Phase Two: *In the following lesson, I returned the puzzles to the students, having typed them all out in a list. Students read through the puzzles (including their own) and chose which one(s) they wanted to investigate. This might (in most cases) be their own puzzle, or it might be another one from the list. They then*

went around the class in a mingling activity to find out if anyone had chosen the same puzzle, or one in a similar area. If they found others who were interested in exploring the same or similar puzzles, they then had the option of working together. They then spent some time reflecting on the puzzles they had chosen and wrote a short piece explaining why they had selected this question to investigate.

Phase Three: In the next lesson, we tried to work out how they might investigate the puzzles they had chosen. It was almost a default reaction to say ‘ask the teacher’, so quite a lot of time was spent in discussion (in small groups or pairs), wondering about what other ways they might use.

Two of the students describe this process from their perspective:

Carmen’s story

The last day we began one activity about the different questions that the students think when we learn languages.

The teacher gave us one paper with a lot of questions which we had to choose one special question. In other words, one question that we thought[t] is the most important for us.

Finally, I chose the follow question: Why do most of our students hate writing activities? Really, this question is a usually question that the teachers ask about their students, therefore, it is true, because normally the students don’t like to write in other languages.

Claire’s story

Why do students often take more time in all activities?

Is it possible to become quicker? How?

This question interest[s] me.

I choose this question because I have always the impression other students understand more quickly than me and I have to see that we had do in class for understand, not at same moment. I try to understand but not really. I think I try too much and nothing have sense in this way.

I don’t know if there are an answer to this question...It is like that, isn’t it?

Case Study 12.4 Keeping it simple

Aline Chaves dos Santos Santiago, a Brazilian teacher whose story we quoted from in Chapter 10, asked herself: ‘Why am I so irritated when I have to face the 807 group?’ and then went straight to the group for help, without explicitly refining her puzzle herself. Her trust in them, despite their discipline problems, bore very welcome

fruit (Santiago, 2006: 17):

Aline's story

In the beginning of this year I was in a quite difficult situation because I had to face an eighth grade group that has been seen as the worst at school, principally in relation to discipline. After some bad moments together, I was quite irritated and could not stand the situation. So I decided to start some work based on an Exploratory Principle using the subject I was dealing with according to the course plan ('must' X 'should'). The starting point was a brainstorming considering 'Quality of Life' immediately linked to 'Quality of Life in class' – one of the EP principles. The following moment was to write sentences using 'should' or 'must' regarding the role of students and the teacher in class. I collected the sentences made in groups and, in the following class, the sentences were shared with the whole group. On that day, they had the chance to write their comments about our work and future life in class, taking into consideration the sentences made by them. In addition, they could try to guess what my initial puzzle was: 'Why am I so irritated when I have to face the 807 group?'

To my surprise, my terrible group was able to understand that it was necessary to improve our life in class and really took part in the talk and process of understanding what was happening. They realised that the responsibility of having a pleasant class needed to be shared, it was not only my own concern.

Aline adds:

Also, they helped me realise that I was partially responsible for our bad relationship, because I was unable to listen to them. After three classes sharing ideas, we could understand that respect from both parts was necessary. Also listening was part of our life in class, although we were not exercising this ability. I can say that we have grown with this simple way of understanding something that has made us so uncomfortable in class. Now, we really are a group! Our life in class is much better!

Aline's puzzle might have put her into problem-solution territory, but instead she drew back and simply put her trust in the class, involving them directly, if not explicitly, in the puzzle refinement process we have been advocating. And it worked, so well that we can see how the collegial principles of EP have entered into the communal life of the 807 group.

Two key issues: integration and collegiality

We have emphasised the importance of integrating the research into the pedagogy from the beginning to ensure sustainability, giving

learners the opportunity to develop over time as practitioners of their own learning. We have also stressed the value of teachers and learners working collegially together to enhance their understandings of one another and of their learning and teaching lives. But, as Aline's story in particular shows, it can all be kept quite simple.

In Chapter 13 more case studies will detail how practitioners have carried out their investigations once they have identified what it is they want to investigate.

13

Conducting Investigations

This chapter will:

- show how individual teachers have explored their puzzles with learners;
- show how learners have explored their own puzzles;
- demonstrate further how familiar pedagogic activities can generate the data needed both for investigations and for language learning;
- illustrate how practitioners working together can develop their mutual understandings of life in and around the classroom.

Introduction

Identifying a puzzle and refining first thoughts about it can, as we have seen, lead to the conclusion that just thinking about it is enough. But most likely more action for understanding will be needed, to get more data. To minimise the workload, though, it is worth asking: ‘Must I generate some, or are there any relevant data already available, just waiting to be gathered?’

In Chapter 12 we saw how data-gathering might help the process of puzzle refinement, and we shall see more examples of it throughout this chapter. But now we need to consider creating the information needed to develop understandings. For example, if knowing what people think about something could be helpful, then why not ask them? What they say (or write) gives you new data, which can then be studied to develop further understanding. But is it possible to generate new data without interrupting the language learning work?

Finding appropriate activities to generate data

The importance of familiarity

What normal classroom activities are suitable for data-generating purposes? First, they need to have been tried and trusted by everyone

concerned. Why incur the extra stress of doing a new activity if an old one will do? That said, the range of PEPAs is limited only by the imagination.

Potentially suitable activities that are likely to be familiar to many teachers and learners

We have found it useful, in introducing EP to teachers in workshops, to ask them to start by listing all the activities in their current classroom practice that might imaginably be used to generate useful data. In São Paulo, Brazil, in 1991 this was the resulting random list.

Table 13.1 Possible PEPAs

Problem-solving	Self-evaluation	Discussion
Pair work	Group work	Feedback from learners
Diaries	Dialogue journal writing	Role play
Role exchanging/ switching	Learner-to-learner correspondence	Task work
Consultancy	Projects	Brainstorming
Pre-activity discussion	News reports: radio/TV	Problem box
Suggestion box	newspaper	Storytelling
Games	Seminar presentations	Tests
Tutorial sessions		Interviews
Field trips		

The range is wide, if not always transparent. What precisely was meant by 'consultancy', for example, and just how might 'field trips' generate useful data? But it is easy to see how most of them might be helpful. For example, we have seen a 'non-EP' teacher regularly inviting learners to use 'post-its' to put comments on a board by the classroom door, and then reporting back to the class on their 'feedback' for general discussion. Another 'non-EP' teacher, with very young learners, used coloured stickers (instead of 'post-its') with green for satisfaction and red for displeasure. She could then discuss with the class what to make of the relative proportions of the colours after any particular lesson.

Thinking about activities for their suitability

Finding an activity that is already familiar is only the beginning. There are several other factors to consider.

Keeping a record

Case Studies 13.1 and 13.4 show how Hadara Perpignan used normal writing activities to generate relevant data for her investigations. Such activities produce their own record. Group work discussions, however, do not automatically produce a record of what people have thought, said or done. Audio recording a discussion is quite easy, but who will have time to listen to it, let alone transcribe it? Appointing group 'secretaries' to take notes is one alternative, but best of all, asking groups to produce posters from their work together produces a record that is good for supporting whole-class discussion (and for teacher-learner conferences, see Chapters 14 and 15).

Getting thoughtful contributions

A 'brainstorming' activity is good for collecting first thoughts, but for more considered opinions 'interviews' may be more appropriate. Interviews need to be carefully prepared to yield usable results, however. Questionnaires may appeal because they promise results more quickly than interviews, but they are even more difficult to prepare properly and are too likely to elicit 'instant', ill-considered responses.

Minimising the risks of group pressure

Group or whole-class discussion stimulates thinking, but group pressure may cause some people to conceal their real opinions. One teacher asked learners to role-play arguing with parents about the importance of attending English lessons. She felt that hiding behind an assigned role helped them speak more freely than they would in open discussion. Producing a TV 'news report' also allows learners to express opinions without necessarily being identified with them.

Maximising privacy

Role-playing goes only some way to ensure privacy. 'Dialogue journal writing', where learners correspond privately with a teacher, could help, but it is quite time-consuming, and it is difficult to use the data for any public purpose (stimulating class discussion, for example) without breaching confidentiality. Protecting privacy may be crucial, so erring on the side of caution is advisable.

Maximising sincerity

'Dialogue journal writing' depends on sincerity, but cannot guarantee it. Perhaps nothing can. Data that may be insincere are still usable, though, because if they reveal what people think others want to hear,

that in itself can be very interesting. But that is a compromise. Instead, we can try to make it easier for people to be sincere. For that, whoever wants others to be sincere needs to demonstrate their own sincerity, through their willingness to expose themselves to 'uncomfortable' information. This is visible in Aline Santiago's work for understanding why her group was so difficult (see Case Study 12.4).

Adapting activities to use them for data-generation

Finding a productive formulation of a puzzle

Directness is not always the most productive approach. Aline Santiago did not ask her learners to discuss why they were so difficult, although that was her underlying question. Instead, she used an oblique approach, asking them to 'write sentences using "should" or "must" regarding the role of students and the teacher in class' (2006: 17). In the following class they examined all the sentences and then wrote their comments about 'our work and future life in class' (2006: 17).

Getting background information

People exploring puzzles may want background information before they try to get people's opinions. Library resources and the internet are obvious starting points. In Case Study 13.7 the teacher, Walewska Braga, found internet material on teenage pregnancy (a page from a teenager's diary wondering why she got pregnant) because her students wanted to understand why so many teenagers (including a classmate) get pregnant, in spite of having so much information. Some of the students then undertook their own interview surveys, in school and in the neighbourhood, eventually reporting back by poster.

In Case Study 13.6 some learners took their enquiries about cheating beyond the schoolroom by reading local newspaper articles about cheating in society.

Generating survey data

Getting information and opinions from people is a natural part of working towards understanding. Questionnaires and interview studies are the most obvious research tools, but both are notoriously difficult to do well, as we have noted. There are published instruments, but they are unlikely to be suitable for classroom use, if only because of the amount of classroom time they take up. An exception is the learner-styles questionnaire Joanne Chuk used (Case Study 13.2). She also developed new instruments. That increased the workload, but apparently not unacceptably.

If learners generate their own questions (and in the target language) that may seem to guarantee a poor questionnaire or interview schedule. But it can be such a very productive experience in itself, in language learning and learner development terms, that it becomes well worth accepting that immediate face validity (instruments good enough for people to be willing to respond) is the best we can hope for, at least at first. This was the approach Ana Rosaria de Andrade adopted (Case Study 13.5). Her learners created all their own research instruments.

Using multiple approaches

A whole class may adopt just one issue, but that does not mean they should all use the same research instrument, since no one type of data is likely to suffice for a complex issue. Using several methods to produce multiple perspectives is better. If activities are chosen to suit people's differing inclinations and capacities, that also facilitates a more differentiated pedagogy and helps involve everybody (Principle 3) in the most productive way.

Ana Rosaria (Case Study 13.5) split her 35 learners into five working groups. Some conducted surveys by questionnaire or interview, others analysed each other's needs, arranged a meeting with other teachers, and so on. Not all were involved in direct data generation or gathering, but all were engaged collegially (Principle 4), through productive language learning activities.

Going beyond words

Language learning is about words, so not surprisingly all our examples so far have centred on words as data. But, quite apart from some understandings being ultimately 'too deep for words', learners may be better at expressing their understandings in another way, rather than in the target language. Using the first language is an option, but it risks making bad use of language learning time. Combining words with visual representations may help. For Case Study 13.3 Clarisse Guedes de Sena invited learners to represent their understandings of classroom role relationships diagrammatically.

Dealing with data

Traditionally, this is the realm of data analysis and interpretation. There are plenty of research manuals to assist anyone wanting to know more about these complex areas (e.g. Robson, 1993), but again we would advise against seeking high levels of rigour initially. There are nevertheless some basic guidelines to consider from the beginning.

- First, look after data carefully, and make sure you know where (and who) the data have come from, in case you need to follow anything up.
- Get to know the data thoroughly before trying to analyse it.
- Look for patterns in your data, things that come up frequently, for example.
- Remember nevertheless that frequency of mention is no guarantee of importance. Things rarely mentioned may be extremely important.
- So look for saliency (strong evaluative words), not just frequency.
- Look for surprising absences, too. It may be significant that some things are *not* mentioned.
- Beware of being seduced by the first pattern you see. It makes it more difficult to see others.
- Try to find counter-evidence to any patterns you see.
- Try to find relationships between patterns.
- Don't work alone (Principles 2, 3 and 4).

Interpreting the results of any analysis is very important for EP, and it has immediate workload implications. If understandings so far suggest some changes are worth trying, this could mean moving into Action Research (see Allwright, 2001b), or simply trying things out more informally. Either way, do the understandings so far justify the effort that will be involved? This is largely a matter of common sense, so notoriously difficult to write about, but it may be worth asking at least:

- Is this change really necessary, now?
- Is this change within my power, now?
- Can I really predict how those most affected by it will react?

Alternatively, results may indicate, in time-honoured fashion, that more research is necessary. This may suggest widening the net to encourage more people to put their minds to the issue. EP sees this as a crucial process of continuously exposing developing understandings to further development. It is central to the research process, in other words, not an end-product. Within the classroom, as for Case Studies 13.6 and 13.7, this is often done by a poster presentation, which can then be taken to a conference and a wider circle of potential fellow investigators. (Chapter 15 develops this aspect of dissemination and its special role in EP.)

Some further words on research quality

In Chapter 10 we drew attention to the many published sources of guidance about research instrumentation (for a useful list see Kiely and Rea-Dickens, 2005: 250). But pushing for high rigour in the initial stages of establishing EP can easily, we have suggested, create so great a burden of new learning (for teachers as well as learners) that it threatens the sustainability of the whole enterprise (as people want to give up!). We therefore strongly advise a relatively relaxed attitude at first, leaving rigour to develop over time. Our final chapter will return to this issue as part of the overall evaluation of EP.

The case studies

Case Study 13.1 Good pedagogy in action

In Hadara's first story we see how easily she harnessed her current pedagogic activity – 'free-writing' – to generate data for her investigation.

Hadara's first story (1986)

Twenty years ago, I had a problem with lateness in a class at PUC-Rio. It was a class in composition for first-year English majors, in which, in spite of the generally very structured approach (from Paragraph to Essay), I had started using free writing in class; during these free-writing sessions, I would also usually write myself as well, and I would share all the ideas (the class's and mine) in a future session. One of the topics, for example, was 'How I got my name'. Another, usually given during the initial stages of their writing in English was: 'How writing in English is different for me than writing in Portuguese'.

It was an 8 o'clock class and I never could start on time, but of course had to finish on time. I had never heard of EP, but decided to use the 'free writing' class activity to help answer the question: 'What are the impediments to getting to class on time'. As I think of it today, this was an EP puzzle, and the search for understanding began by involving the learners in the issue, through a class activity.

September 15, 1986

I thought you might like some feedback on the statistics of lateness in this class. I really was curious to see how this assignment would work out and how specific you would get in your examples. In fact, most of your reasons for coming late were very, very specific indeed, and they ran like this:

Reasons for coming late:	(Total: 14)
I go to sleep too late	6
I am lazy/slow in the morning	7

It's other people's fault	2
It's the alarm clock's fault	3
I live very far away	3
The buses are slow	6
I have too much to do in the morning	3
I have to walk my dog	1
In your concluding statement, some of you try to foresee the future. This is what you say (Please note: I didn't ask):	
It's going to be possible to remedy this situation	6
It's a hopeless case	3
I won't commit myself	2

Of the whole group, only one person said she had no impediments at all to coming to an eight o'clock class, and that makes two of us!

Not a very remarkable story, perhaps. 'Just' an example of good pedagogy. But it pre-dates EP by several years, and that makes it important. We know we are only building upon the tradition of such good pedagogy (Allwright, 2003: 118–19).

Case Study 13.2 Adapting published investigatory instruments

Joanne Chuk explored her classroom puzzles by (re-)designing simple activities for classroom use and adapting familiar ones so that students could reflect on their language learning and begin researching it themselves. She worked with two groups: BEd undergraduates at the Hong Kong Institute of Education, and drama students at the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts.

Joanne's story

In week 5, I had my students complete a questionnaire to raise their awareness of the sort of learners they were. According to Ellis and Sinclair's (1989) categories, five of them were analytic learners, while thirteen of them were a mixture of analytic and relaxed learners. Interestingly, none of them were relaxed learners. In week 15, the students were given a final reflection form to reflect on their personal learning styles. Students' greater use of introspection showed that they were getting to be more aware of their preferred learning styles.

The instruments Joanne describes are reproduced here to show how, with minimal changes, she adapted ordinary classroom procedures to help develop understandings.

<i>Learner Diary Record</i>	
Name: _____	Date: _____
What I have done (Describe classroom activities and what you did in class)	
What I have learnt (Summarise what you think you have learnt in this lesson)	
Reflections (Comment on whether the lesson helps you enjoy learning. If so, why? If not, why not? What have you learnt about yourself <i>as a language learner</i> ? Anything new?)	
Future plans (Is there any particular area you would like to focus on for <i>self-improvement</i> ? If so, what is it? Are you going to do anything about it?)	

In week 5 she used a questionnaire adapted from Ellis and Sinclair (1989) as a 'warmer' to initiate discussion with her students.

Warmer: What sort of language learner are you? Take turns to interview each other. Your partner will ask you some questions about your language learning habits. Your partner will put a tick (✓) in the appropriate box according to the scale below:							
1. Usually		2. Sometimes		3. Almost never		4. Don't know	
Item	Question	1	2	3	4		
i	Do you like to learn new words by heart?						
ii	Do you have a good memory for new words?						

Item	Question	1	2	3	4
iii	Do you hate making mistakes?				
iv	In class, do you get irritated if mistakes are not corrected?				
v	Is your pronunciation better when you read aloud than when you have a conversation?				
vi	Do you wish you had more time to think before speaking?				
vii	Do you enjoy being in a class?				
viii	Do you find it difficult to pick up more than two or three words of a new language when you are on holiday overseas?				
ix	Do you like to learn new grammar rules by heart?				
Total:					

Now, work out your total scores:

3 points for each 'Usually'

2 points for each 'Sometimes'

1 point for each 'Almost never'

0 point for each 'Don't know'

Total each column. For example, if you have two ticks in column 2, then you have a total of four points for that column.

Calculate the grand total by adding up all the column totals.

What do your total scores mean? What sort of language learner are you?

Joanne also used the following needs analysis questionnaire:

Name: _____ School: _____

EVALUATION: Your Needs and Objectives

Self-Assessment of Personal Language Learning Needs and Objectives

Step One:

Use the following scale and put a number in the Level box to indicate your present ability in the sub-categories listed:

Scale	1	2	3	4
Interpretation	Fair	Satisfactory	Good	Very Good

Language Area		Level
Speaking	Pronunciation	
	Stress/intonation	
	Fluency	
Listening to	Conversations	
	TV/radio	
	A talk	
Language Area		Level
Reading	Practical information	
	Newspapers	
	Recreational (e.g. novels, magazines)	
	Professional/study	
Writing	Notes/messages	
	Letters – personal	
	Letters – business	
	Professional/study	
Grammar	correctness	
Vocabulary	range	
	appropriateness	

Step Two:

Consider which three of these sub-categories you can realistically hope to improve within this semester. Put a circle around them. These are your priority objectives.

Step Three:

An Action Plan – How to Achieve Your Objectives

Transfer the three priority objectives you selected above to the box below. Then put a cross (x) in each of the Means boxes which may help you to achieve these objectives.

Priority Objectives	Means to Achieve Objectives					
	In Class		Outside Class			
	Class Practice	Self Access	Personal Contacts outside APA	Cinema, TV, Radio, etc.	Newspapers Books, etc.	Others... (specify)
1						
2						
3						

In week 15 she used the following:

Final reflection

Name: _____

Date: _____

Self-awareness

Are you aware of your own preferred learning styles?

What helps you learn better? What prevents you from learning well?

Language awareness

Can you identify the language areas that you need most improvement?

What are you going to do to improve yourself as a language learner?

Self-evaluation

Have you achieved the goals you set at the beginning of the term?

If so, in what way? If not, why not?

Reflection on the use of learner diary

What do you think are the function of keeping a learner diary? Do you think keeping a learner diary in class helps you reflect on your language learning? If so, in what way? If not, why not?

The (unedited) student responses indicate just how seriously the learners approached their learning:

My own preferred learning style? I still can't find it. However, I know a lot of paper work and textbooks will not help me learn better. I prefer to learn from presentation, listening and television.

(Simon)

I know that I must learn English in an active way. I'm not saying that I don't like read books, but I'm an active person, so 'movies' and 'discussion' can help me learn faster. I like the way we learn in this year. I happy.

(William)

Actually I'm a lazy student. Just learning with books or reference notes are not suitable for me. Watching videos, listening to songs and playing games are my preferred learning styles – and demonstration, it helps remind me how much I've learnt and how much I've got.

(Larry)

Joanne notes:

These comments show that the bitter shadow of how English was learnt in secondary schools was still rooted in students' minds. They did not prefer reading textbooks and doing paper work; they preferred learning English through activities – because it suits their styles of learning. Having a deeper understanding of how their past learning experience shaped their present preferred learning mode, I realised that their passion for performing arts would not necessarily carry them through when it comes to their language learning. Although the carrier content I chose was related to performing arts, it did not mean that their interest in their own area of expertise may be necessarily transferred to their language classroom.

Case Study 13.3 Visualising to prompt thinking and generate data


Clarisse Guedes de Sena developed her visualisation activity when working with adults in a private language school in Brazil.

Clarisse's story

Students were asked to represent graphically (in words or drawings) how they understood the learning process. In the instructions I mentioned only 'class', but my goal was the learning process and that is why I mentioned the elements and how does a class work. I made my objectives clear to the students when I handed out the activity sheet.

NB: Due to the possible difficulty in reading the pictures, some of them have their statements reproduced (as they were originally written by the students).

What do you understand as CLASS (i.e., what are its elements, how does it work...)? You can write or draw your answer.




Camila

Camila Silva Castello Branco

At the base: People that work in the place where you study.


What do you understand as CLASS (i.e., what are its elements, how does it work...)? You can write or draw your answer.



The teachers have + Knowledge than students but teachers also learn with students even this new knowledge isn't so high as the students receive

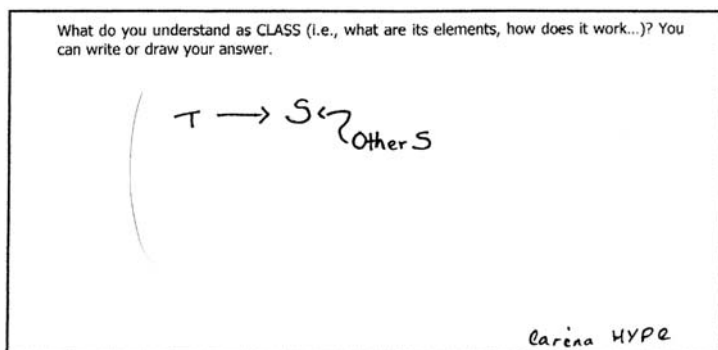
Gabriel Gomes Barreto da Motta

What do you understand as CLASS (i.e., what are its elements, how does it work...)? You can write or draw your answer.



Alessandra Aguiar

Alessandra Aparecida Rodrigues Aguiar



Camila Silva Castello Branco

Case Study 13.4 Working towards *mutual* understanding

Hadara again, now working in Israel, tells a story that, with funding for education and educational support services so problematic, is becoming all too familiar.

Hadara's second story

I was having a problem with both my MA classes. It had been in the air all semester, but came to a head with the knowledge of the rector's decision to reduce the number of MA courses being offered the following year, by granting a waiver to a large number of students of the calibre of those who were actually sitting in the class at that moment. This gave them a sense of having been cheated into taking a course which others will not have to take.

Hadara decided to look for a deeper understanding of what was really going on in her students' minds.

Puzzle: How relevant to MA students are these courses really? How much are these courses worth to me? To the students?

I wanted to understand why or to what extent or whether at all students and rector did not seem to feel the need for what they were getting out of my expertise in teaching writing in English and even teaching in general. I suspected that we may have the wrong objectives for the course, in the view of most of the students. They may be learning things but they are not the things they care about. And that is perhaps why the course is dying out. I wanted the point of view of the other participants in the interaction (since I already had mine and that of my academic colleagues).

I decided to take a whole class period for this fact-gathering activity. It would also be an occasion to clear the air, if there was air to clear, and it would be conducted in English to fit into the objective of practising English.

Phase one: I introduced the concept of objectives and divergent objectives in situations of interaction such as between teacher and learner or employer and employee. Through dialogue, I elicited examples of potential diversity of specific objectives in these two situations. (I took as examples: 3rd grade and a sweater factory.)

Phase two: Individually, the learners wrote down at least three objectives that they personally had in coming to this course and this class. They then prioritised their objectives.

Phase three: In groups of three, the learners compared their objectives and tried to arrive at a consensus for some objectives and an acceptance of diversity for others. They were to put in writing the results, prioritised as far as possible.

Phase four: The groups were joined, two by two, forming groups of six. They again discussed their collection of objectives. I noticed that, as in the three previous phases, the discussion got livelier and livelier as the group grew. There was joking and laughing and discussion of larger topics as well concerning the university.

Phase five: In one big group, each group presented their objectives, and comments were made about each one that was presented, as they went along.

Phase six: I asked them if they had any questions for me. One student said: what were my objectives for the course and what were my objectives for this activity?

By phase six, the students were reaching out and asking their teacher about what *she* wanted – collegiality and mutual development in action.

Case Study 13.5 Learners working collegially

Ana Rosaria de Andrade shows how her Brazilian students designed their own research tools, practising their English and developing their (and their teacher's) understandings.

Ana Rosaria's story

The story of my puzzle began when I entered one of the classrooms in the school where I teach night courses and I realised that some of my students had dropped out. I felt very disappointed because it was the end of the second semester and it would be a pity if they lost almost a year of studies. Then I proposed a class discussion in which their opinion and conclusions were raised.

The students realised that dropping out of school and not finishing the second grade would bring bad consequences in their life. They understood that the time they spend studying and the effort made would certainly guarantee a better job, it's

an investment to achieve a positive result in the future. Moreover, they became aware that it's important to balance if giving up studying was really worthwhile. As I expected, they wanted to do something to help their friends.

After this reflection on our classroom reality and on some social problems, I decided to investigate Why do my students drop out of school?

It was great to see all the students preparing their investigation and the dedication to overcome their difficulty with the language in order to help their friends.

The investigation was carried out in a group of 35 students of ages ranging from 18 to 50. The class was divided into five groups, each group was responsible for one activity, and the activities were distributed according to their levels of knowledge of the language. The students grouped themselves, after they divided the activities. The students devised the activities according to their familiarity with the language. I helped the students with some problems with the language, when they asked for help. All the groups worked in close collaboration and with my orientation they started their research:

1st group: They prepared a questionnaire, with some personal questions in order to collect information about students' different problems and needs.

2nd group: They interviewed the drop-out students (they are all friends and live in the same neighbourhood) and tried to negotiate a special meeting with all the teachers involved in their classroom life.

3rd group: They made up sentences to motivate their friends to keep studying and some advice for the students to be aware of their responsibilities and try to accomplish the tasks.

4th group: They analysed each student's needs, trying to understand their friends' problem and also considering if it was possible to help them in some way. They also organised a meeting with the other teachers involved in their classroom life, where they showed the importance of their help in the process of bringing these students back. To my relief and surprise, the teachers decided to help us.

5th group: This last group reported on the students' experiences in handling working and studying, how they balanced working, family and studying, if the effort made in keeping up their studies was really worthwhile for their future.

Ana Rosaria comments:

This type of activity has proven to be very valuable in all aspects, since it provided a lot of growth for everyone involved. The students shared their experiences and reflected on the quality of life inside the classroom, introducing teachers and learners to the principles of classroom research, through Exploratory Practice.

Besides all that, the students had to put into practice some grammar points like interrogative words, the use of why and because, and in order to write down some advice, the learners had to use some modals.

Case Study 13.6 Learners working together on their own puzzles

Walewska Braga's work in Rio is so rich we end this chapter with stories of and by two of her learners, Carlos Magno and Daniela Lemos da Silva.

Walewska's introduction

I am sending you the comments two of my students made on their participation in our 'adventure' of understanding life in the classroom.

They wrote the texts in Portuguese and I tried to interfere [in the translation] the least possible.

They are not my students any more but I am still in touch with them.

They say interesting things and I am proud of them.

Carlos Magno's story

My name is Carlos Magno, I was Walewska's student in Santo Tomás de Aquino Municipal School. I have just finished the 8th grade and I'm going to high school now.

My classmates presented a lot of posters. My favourite one started in an English class when the teacher announced we could present a work in the EP Event at PUC. We started thinking in a question to investigate. And then I had the idea for the poster: *Why do we cheat?*

We interviewed our classmates and teachers. We got some amazing narratives: how the cheating is prepared, what happens when a student is caught cheating. We found out that some people don't cheat but help others cheating. Most teachers said they cheated. There are lazy students and there are those who work hard and don't have time to study. For some students the subject is difficult to study and learn and they cheat, for others cheating is a habit: they have cheated since they were little. Good grades are important: no one wants to fail.

We all agreed that cheating is wrong, students have to study. It is important for our future.

We also noticed that a lot of people misbehave outside the school. There are a lot of wrong things happening and we may compare them to cheating in tests. We read some articles from the local newspapers showing people parking their cars on the sidewalks, people throwing papers and cans through the windows, on the streets, the elderly being disrespected, so many wrong things...

When my group presented the poster at PUC, many teachers mentioned that their students also cheat. The teachers congratulated us and said our poster made the curiosity of knowing why their students cheat emerge.

I understood that sometimes the students cheat because they don't study and are not prepared, but sometimes we, the students, get nervous and go blank.

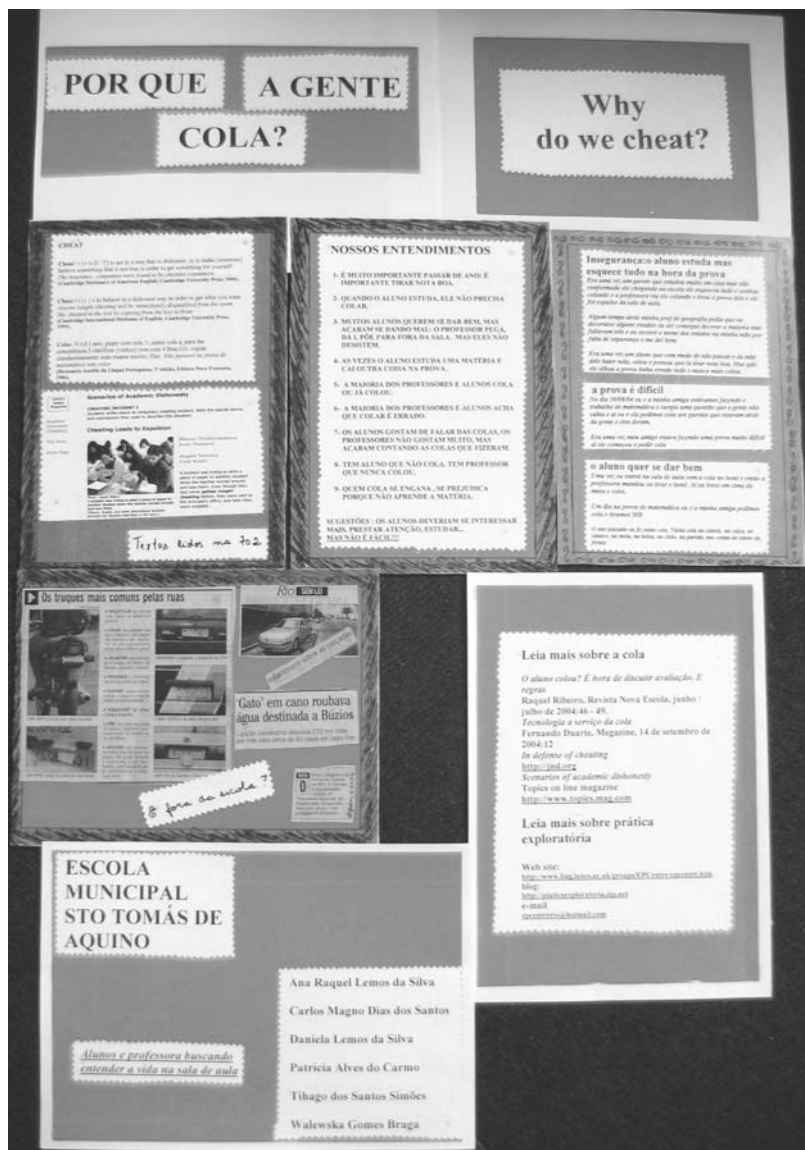


Photo 13.1 Why do we cheat?

Daniela's PS

Carlos doesn't like speaking in public. The presenters of the poster were Daniela and Patrícia.

Daniela's PS reminds us of the importance of collegiality in Exploratory Practice. These students worked *together* on their puzzle, throughout.

We are fortunate enough to have Walewska's perspective on the story as well.

Walewska's account

Carlos Magno went to our EP meetings and presentations but he refused to present any poster. I loved when he suggested a new puzzle: Why do we cheat? I was telling the class how much I hate to give them tests. I simply can't avoid them cheating and it is a waste of time to prepare, to correct and etc. And then...Carlos said aloud: 'Teacher, why don't we do that EP work? Fantastic!!'

I asked them to look up the word 'cheat' in dictionaries. We all laughed when we compared the results. We read in The Cambridge International Dictionary of English that Anyone caught cheating will be immediately disqualified from the exam. In the Novo Dicionário Aurélio da Língua Portuguesa the example is: One shall not pass the maths exam without cheating. Cultural differences.

I brought them an article from the internet telling ways of cheating. They read, we commented and got some ideas.

They started collecting narratives of cheating: how, when, why. They talked to teachers and students and even to their families. They came with fascinating stories. We laughed with some reports and sympathised with others. Parents who beat kids up, lack of time, injustice, so many sad realities!

Case Study 13.7 Learners puzzling together again

The 'widening circle' aspect of the EP work in Rio is also seen in this story, again told from two perspectives: Walewska's and then Daniela's.

Walewska's story

Baby...hold on a second! Why do so many teenagers get pregnant in spite of having so much information?

This is a very powerful work. I soon realised my students' motivation on the subject of pregnancy in adolescence. The group mentioned the puzzle in an EP meeting

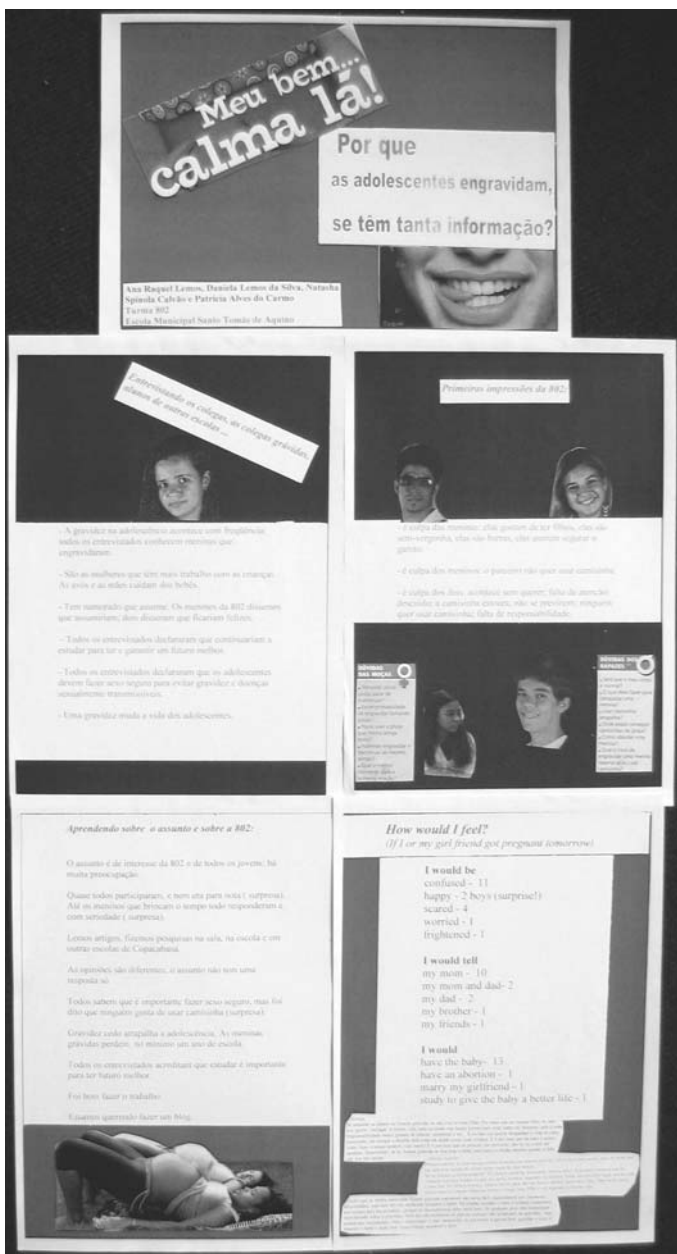


Photo 13.2 Daniela's favourite poster – Portuguese version

where Ana Raquel presented her poster about maths to Solange's students from Barra da Tijuca. They met, they talked, we ate some treats. When we asked them about a new puzzle they came with the idea: they all decided to investigate the same puzzle.

I got something from the internet to warm them up. It was a page from the diary of a teenager who wondered what would happen if she got pregnant. The whole class enjoyed reading, they commented, they discussed a lot. At that time I knew that one of their colleagues was pregnant and facing a very tough situation.

Daniela, Natasha (a new student) and Raquel started asking their classmates what they would do if they (or their girlfriends) got pregnant. At first the boys made jokes but eventually they made interesting comments. The whole class was involved and some of the students' relatives participated as well. Natasha's mother talked about her experience of being a young mother. And she loved the idea of having her daughter discussing such issues in the classroom. I asked the students to answer the diary's question and they produced excellent compositions. They spoke openly and sincerely. A student justified her decision of having an abortion. They all agreed that in spite of having so much information on the subject a lot of teenagers get pregnant, a big puzzle. They interviewed the pregnant colleague who told them how her life was about to change. They interviewed the principal to know how many girls got pregnant that year. Natasha asked me permission to go to other schools in the neighbourhood. In the class there was the opportunity of using *would/will* with the sentences they wrote in Portuguese. They worked with enthusiasm.

The poster making was at my mom's home. The girls spent an afternoon there selecting, choosing the data, getting to their understandings. They didn't like the title (puzzle) and decided to make it more intense. They added the hold on part and it made a difference. The presentation in the event was a success and they really loved what they did. It is Daniela's favourite poster and in a meeting one of the teachers thought Daniela was a teacher talking about her class. Daniela was an 8th grade student.

Daniela's story

I presented posters in many EP events with my classmates of Santo Tomás de Aquino school. The work I chose to talk here made me very happy because it dealt with a subject that is a sad reality in our country: teenage pregnancy. Our puzzle was: Why do the teenagers get pregnant in spite of having so much information on the matter?

We had the idea in a meeting with a group of EP students at PUC. No doubt the subject puzzles everybody. Who wouldn't like to have the answer?

My classmate Natasha and I made some research in our school with students and teachers. We became friends and learned a lot about our classmates.

The boys were shy, picked on us, said that girls are naughty and want to get pregnant. The answers given by the girls revealed maturity. According to them there is still lack of dialogue among parents and children. I found that relevant too.

It was interesting to know what boys and girls would do if they had to face an unexpected pregnancy. The boys ... would be happy (!!!). Most of the girls would have the baby and would take care of it. One girl said she would have an abortion: she is too young, it's time to study and a baby would ruin her future.

We also talked with the students of our school who got pregnant. At first they didn't feel at ease but they said that if they had got some precaution things would be different.

Natasha had the idea of doing research in the neighbourhood, in Copacabana. She prepared a questionnaire. She got answers and noticed how similar they were to the ones we found in our school. Her mother loved our work.

Doing the work, presenting it to a lot of people, gave me the opportunity of seeing myself as a young girl capable of learning and teaching. I loved the opportunity of giving my opinion about such an important matter.

I want to go on learning and teaching. I am an Exploratory Practice student.

A reflection on our propositions about learners

From the way classmates and teachers not only worked together, but also got parents (in this case mothers), other school contacts, and so on, involved, we get a very positive sense of learners as social beings who learn and develop best in a mutually supportive environment. A potentially embarrassing (or even explosive) subject like teenage pregnancy has been opened up to mature debate by the learners, who overcame even the boys' initial reluctance (as exhibited by their jokes at the beginning) to examine the subject seriously and collegially. In Chapter 14 we see collegiality on a larger scale, in the work of the Rio EP Group.

14

The ‘Web of Life’ of the Rio de Janeiro Exploratory Practice Group

Introductory note

Previous chapters have included examples of inclusive practitioner research conducted by teachers and learners in relatively isolated professional situations (from China, Hong Kong, and Israel), but most of our examples have been drawn from members of the Rio de Janeiro Exploratory Practice Group (henceforth the ‘Rio EP Group’ or ‘the Group’). This Group has for many years offered a powerful example of inclusive practitioner research. Indeed, it is principally in their work that the principles as well as the practices of EP have emerged and evolved. We therefore invited them to describe their work together, as a multi-voiced case study in sustained collegiality. Highlighting their voices here further underpins the principles of EP we have been advancing in this book. Their account is our Chapter 14.

Members of the Rio EP Group

The authors of this text

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Photo 14.1 Inés and Bebel

Introduction

Writing about oneself, or in this case study, about our life as a group, can represent a serious risk: unwillingly suggesting a finished product, a successful project, and therefore a model to be followed. In trying to avoid these pitfalls, we saw this process as a way to strengthen our understandings of 'who we are', 'what we have been doing' and 'what keeps us together'. As we describe our work together we will use members' voices to help us express 'who we are'.

One of the deepest understandings that we have gained over the last 15 or so years, and probably the most difficult one to convey, is that we have not been *following* the EP principles as guidelines. Nor do our practices simply *illustrate* them. Rather the principles themselves are outcomes of collectively reflected upon EP practices. In a symbiotic relationship, the principles and our practices are what we do and what we believe in. It is in this intricate relationship that, we feel, lies our strength, our enjoyment and the difficulty we find in fully expressing our lived EP experience.

These years have not been easy. We have faced the typical difficulties encountered by non-institutional group enterprises in our field:

- misunderstandings and misrepresentations of practitioner research;
- the unquestioned desire for technical solutions;
- fluctuating attendance;
- bureaucratisation as a potential threat to flexibility;
- issues related to financial support (e.g. the push for projectisation);
- management of personal professional time, and so on.

We hope our text will show how, through:

- our commitment to collegiality;
- our common convictions/beliefs, as echoed in the Principles of EP;
- our common need for a forum to discuss professional matters (puzzles, pains and pleasures);
- plus: perseverance, time, personal commitment, and so on;

we have managed to sustain the group for so many years already.

The structure of this chapter is not meant to suggest any hierarchy or linearity. It is merely one of the possibilities we could have chosen to convey the web of our group life, which we perceive as organically intertwined and indivisible.

The first issues we discuss echo the prime importance of collegiality noted above: the Group's drive for *bringing people together* and how this is intrinsically related to *experiencing built-in flexibility* in the Group's work. Then, we focus on two issues that are key to all practitioners: *harnessing our own and other people's curiosity and courage* and *prioritising quality of professional life*. In *building trust and collegiality* and *doing being EP practitioners* (an unusual phrase to represent a symbiotic unit), we present the Group's work to develop, share and disseminate EP principles and ideas. Finally, we discuss the factors that have enabled us to sustain our work as a Group.

Bringing people together

Julia: The classroom group or the EP meetings transmit energy. Anxiety, identity, tenderness, feelings – if these things are present, the group will always be there.

Bia: When I don't go to an EP Group meeting I feel like I've lost a chance to be in contact with the group and this bothers me. At an EP meeting, you have a chance to speak and express yourself.

Isolina: If you go to a meeting imposed by your job you know you are expected to act in a [certain] way. You can give your opinions but these opinions are frequently within a pattern you're expected to follow.... While here, you know people have experienced similar situations and you will be better understood.

Bringing people together is perhaps what best defines us as a group. We believe in the power of working together and so meet often to build our work collaboratively. Our working meetings vary according to our purposes. For disseminating EP ideas, we participate in or organise workshops, seminars, talks and events. For preparing such activities, we meet before and after sessions to write abstracts and/or prepare our group presentations. Focusing on our own development, we also meet to share our own puzzlements and understandings, exchange views and discuss EP concepts, and to read and discuss published texts or texts members are submitting for publication. To facilitate the connection between groups of EP practitioners, we set up sessions for people to come together to talk about their work. For example, we have organised a special poster session and an inter-school virtual forum for a group of learners who wanted to get to know better the posters prepared by other EP learners.

As a natural consequence of our additional belief in respecting the life and needs of social groups, our meetings have varied organically. We have acted as teachers or as learners narrating our classroom stories, as colleagues discussing academic and professional issues, as co-workers planning group participation and sometimes as participants in what resemble group therapy sessions. Promoting maximal inclusiveness, we welcome all sorts to our meetings, from young children to doctoral students, from newcomers to old hands, from interested relatives and/or interested colleagues to occasional guests.

Since the Rio EP Group is not affiliated to any specific institution, originally we had no fixed place to meet – 'meetings' could happen during car rides to or from workshop sessions, in our homes, in cafeterias

and restaurants, during conferences, and occasionally at workshop venues. Nowadays, our meetings take place at PUC-Rio, the local university which has become our meeting place because this is where some of us work, study or have studied. This is also where our recent events, workshops and courses have been hosted and supported as part of the extension activities of IPEL (Institute for Research and Language Teaching, in the Departamento de Letras). We were conscious of the risk of creeping bureaucratisation (of having an institutional 'home', as we are currently negotiating our own office space), but this particular university environment encourages independent initiatives, and so has not compromised our group's autonomy and operational flexibility.

Over the past 15 years we have seen husbands, mothers, sons and daughters participate in various ways in our events, meetings and work; we have shared our concerns, our losses and our births; we have celebrated our birthdays at our regular meetings, special luncheons and even during conference coffee-breaks; we have found time in our busy schedules for holiday gatherings, especially around Christmas and Teacher's Day! And, on practically all of these occasions, we balance EP affairs with our traditional collaborative snacks. Sharing food seems to help in sharing ideas.

But bringing people together does not necessarily mean bringing them face to face. To meet the ever-present challenge of keeping people both informed and engaged, and so of sustaining group life, a carefully built network of e-mail messages, an EP website (www.letras.puc-rio.br/epcentre) and an electronic newsletter have proved necessary (see the Link section in Part IV). All this management work has been taken up by core members who feel responsible for keeping everyone informed and connected.

Just as important are our less frequent telephone calls, still necessary and preferable for longer and more complex conversations. Another practice contributing to the maintenance of the Group's history is that of documenting sessions, through photos, and keeping what gets produced in electronic files, some of which are available on our website. These documents have enabled members to share their emotions and intellectual productions with each other as well as with other professionals interested in the life of the Group.

So, there has been some 'bureaucratisation'. But we believe we have come well through the paradoxical move from total informality to mild formality. Perhaps the EP principles themselves work as anti-bureaucratisation agents for us as we seek *quality of life* rather than *quality of work*, as we work for understanding rather than for problem-solving,



Photo 14.2 Members of the Rio EP Group

as we really try to *bring people together, involve everybody* and foster *mutual development*. What is more, we are determined to hold on to our flexibility.

Experiencing built-in flexibility

Inés: You know, I don't believe we can put life into closed boxes, compartments, structures... Maybe the longer we live, the more we understand that living involves learning to accept complexity.

Bebel: That's what I like in EP, this lack of rigidity. We have a few principles and a flexible practice.

We have found in our Group a space in our personal professional lives where we can exercise tolerance of ambiguity and respect for complexity – things that we miss in the average workplace. We have noticed that practitioner narratives typically describe life in educational institutions as being highly dominated by rules and regulations, pressed by schedules and deadlines, charged with accountability and pressure for measurably successful outcomes.

So, whenever we bring people together for EP workshops, we let them give vent to what suffocates them about the personal and professional pressures they experience in the extremely difficult social reality of the city of Rio de Janeiro. Allowing time for this initial outburst of repressed feelings and experience kick-starts the building of a professional 'comfort zone' – a place where practitioners can feel free to express

themselves. Maybe this freedom grows thanks to the essentially non-institutionalised character of the Group, which allows room for the built-in flexibility that marks our situated interpretation of EP ideas and has become a defining feature of our sessions.

Flexibility inspires our meetings because we wish not only to bring people together, but also to rescue and safeguard, within a professional framework, the socio-culturally constructed informal and relaxed *carioca* style (the inhabitants of Rio are called Cariocas).

Clarisse: Everyone is welcome. You arrive, you sit, you belong and you can also give your opinion. There isn't a structure, it's a group.

Marja: I see the leadership in our group as a spontaneous initiative of actions, a leadership of care.

This informality in our work helps promote a cooperative environment and weakens the need for predetermined roles or hierarchical functions. Roles emerge naturally and organically, according to the occasion – communications, scheduling of meetings, welfare, practicalities (ordering t-shirts or booking vans), writing, phone calls, food, photography, etc. Participation structure may vary, for example, depending on participants' particular expertise or experience. For example, Clarisse, when a relatively new member, suggested launching a virtual forum involving all the students who had participated in EP events. Since the idea was welcomed and Clarisse felt confident with the technology, the meeting became a brainstorm of possibilities.

It is probably this social flexibility that fosters the inclusiveness, togetherness, group integration and mutual development that characterise us. We are fortunate to integrate younger and older teachers, at different stages in their careers (teachers-to-be, pre-service, in-service and even fully or partially retired ones). Group teacher members, like most teachers in the Brazilian educational system, work in a wide range of professional contexts – public sector (municipal or state) schools, private schools, private language institutes, public and/or private universities and/or colleges. Some work in all contexts. Some also give private lessons or teach at companies, while others are active in community-oriented, non-degree awarding language courses. Some members are also supervisors, coordinators, teacher-educators, teacher-consultants, academic researchers, etc. Our Group has even, on several occasions, been a setting where some teachers recognise former teachers or find colleagues from the same institution, where teachers bring their relatives and children, and where even mentors or supervisors join with their mentees or

supervisees. Furthermore, our Group has, since 2003, managed to make an EP inclusiveness dream come true: learners from public and private schools join our meetings to discuss their ongoing EP work or to organise workshops with teachers or learners from other schools. The presence of learners has added special excitement to our meetings and events, but especially, to our work for understanding classroom life.

We set our meetings according to needs perceived by the group or by members' suggestions, thus resulting in a flexible and group-generated agenda. We tend to meet fortnightly but we decide when and where to meet according to availability. We have met at a member's house due to her responsibilities as a grandmother, at a member's workplace to accommodate her tight teaching schedule, or rotated venues to resolve practical issues of life in large urban centres. Flexibility has also led us to accept and respect people's need to be absent from occasional meetings or for longer periods of time.

Within the EP spirit, we sometimes wonder if our determined flexibility might be externally perceived as 'sloppy' and unfocused. What might have happened if we had succumbed to bureaucratisation and chosen a more clearly defined structure or a clearer division of jobs, such as a web manager, a folder designer, a fund raiser or sustained private or governmental support, for example? Would this have fostered as much space for deep personal involvement or as strong a sense of inclusive partnership in the development of the practices and the ideas? Would it have facilitated sustainability, or threatened it? We cannot be sure. But uncertainty is not a concern for us. We perceive that another strong principle that orients our life as a group is accepting the fact that we develop as we learn to enjoy and to exploit our uncertainties.

Harnessing curiosity and courage

Adriana: Restless minds, restless hearts, anxious teachers who believe the class they give has to be good for them and for the students, as well. Teachers who want more than to give a good class, more than being a professional teacher, but who also want to know what the student thinks, what he says.... Curious teachers who want to try to understand why something is the way it is, if there could be another way, if what's happening is good or bad, why it is good or bad.

Adriana's description of the sorts of teachers who are attracted to EP echoes what we feel and what other teachers tell us. The EP way of thinking offers us space to harness our own, other teachers' and, more

recently, learners' authentic curiosity. Working with the EP notions of 'puzzlement' and 'working for understanding', classroom practitioners rediscover the courage to ask genuine 'why' questions about their classroom lives and, at least in Rio, about their lives outside the classroom. Furthermore, breaking what normally happens in pedagogic contexts, teachers and learners come to accept the possibility that questions are indeed worth asking, even if they have no one answer, or must remain unanswered.

Courage and curiosity have raised hundreds of puzzles: 'Why do we have homework?' 'Why do we need to study English?' 'Why is it so difficult to respect learners' pace?' 'Why are my students so embarrassed when it comes to speaking?' 'Why don't my 3–4-year-old pre-schoolers in bilingual schools keep quiet and pay attention to me?'

Always welcoming puzzled practitioners, the Group acts as a puzzlement support group which sees EP teachers, learners and other practitioners as the agents of their own work for understanding. By exchanging exploratory ideas in this forum, they develop the creativity needed to integrate their investigative attitude with their normal teaching and learning activities. So, for example, two municipal school students, while doing an activity on school timetables, wondered, 'Why don't we have more English classes at school?' They interviewed their school director and their coordinator to discuss with the teacher and classmates why some school subjects have more classes or why some subjects are considered more important than others. In another context, a teacher and her students reflected on the similarity of their feelings when the teacher is observed by the language course coordinator and when the students are observed and evaluated during oral presentations.

It is through such courage and creativity that exploratory teachers and learners address issues that they perceive as central to the quality of their classroom lives.

Prioritising quality of life

Julia: Teachers are very lonely. At school we have to compete. There are many places where we can't be ourselves, with our anguish and our anxieties.

EP's first principle is to prioritise quality of life, to allow the demands of the life of the Group to be the most important issue for those involved. Julia's words show that the teachers of the Group make issues related to their lives – inside and outside the classroom – their priority. The quality

of life that they envisage for their classrooms is the quality of life they see in this group.

Isabel Cristina: We are very close. Some colleagues have just arrived but we feel the proximity of ideals, the wish to do something for education. And this is what involves me. Last semester I was so involved with my studies that I couldn't come [to the meetings] but this semester I organised to have my tutoring, with Inés, on the same days of the meetings so that I could come. Because I want to be here, to learn more, share this good thing we feel around here. While I was involved with my surgery, I was happy because Inés called me, you called me, I missed other people's e-mails but I thought: they may not know... So, this 'people/human' aspect of this group, so characteristic of this EP Group, is something that drives me to being with you...

Isabel Cristina highlights other characteristics of the Group: the personal involvement, the collegial friendship, the Group's involvement that goes beyond exchanging classroom puzzles, and the joy of being and working together. However, it is clear that all this is derived from the work done in the classroom or from the professional work with EP.

Isabel Cristina: You feel the group, you listen to the people, you are very close to the colleagues that are there. And this is the same thing I feel in this group. We are very close.

Doreen: There is this enormous pleasure in being together.

Walewska: It's not doing something new, but understanding what we already do. And this gives us a lot of pleasure.

Building trust and collegiality

Josefina: For some teachers, this is *the* understanding: to realise that you and the participants of the classroom scene are colleagues and can share their feelings and weaknesses openly (because teachers and students already knew each other's weaknesses but did not have a moment or a place to share this perception).

One of the classic memories people have of when they initially joined the Group is the empathy they found towards the feelings and ideas expressed by colleagues. This soon develops into a growing sense of trust and collegiality among co-members. Teachers have come to the

Group driven by curiosity about the existence of other possibilities and realities, by love for the profession, by dissatisfaction, restlessness and anxiety. But what teachers also find in EP and in the Group are opportunities for developing their self-trust. Although some teachers can find it initially difficult to face the Group's orientation towards fostering practitioner puzzlement, we find that it is this very problematising practice that fosters both self-trust and trust in colleagues.

This process is launched when participants discover that, even coming from different contexts, they share similar puzzles about taken-for-granted practices, such as student motivation, classroom discipline, evaluation processes, course-book preferences, mother-tongue interference.

Josefina: Some teachers want solutions, concrete help for the class they are going to face on Monday morning. And when they approach EP they get no answers, no recipes, but more questions.

Julia: But at EP you have a group with the same thoughts, and we all work for this quality. We are all anguished but in this group you can show yourself, you can discover each other.

The EP principled framework and attitude help us develop trust and collegiality among practitioners within the Group, but most importantly, these feelings also develop among EP teachers and their students in their classroom environments.

Within the Group, practitioners can be themselves, with their doubts and anxieties – there is room for exchanging of experience. Doctors who need to share their doubts with colleagues call for a medical conference. Why should teachers not show they are in doubt or in distress and share this with collegial friends? In the classroom, this can also happen. When students see their teacher's questions and puzzles, they see a humanised professional. When students can understand a teacher better, they see a chance to open up *their* inner selves as well. As teachers and students gain possibilities for constructing mutual understandings about the classroom environment, practitioners – students *and* teachers – show growth in their intellectual and critical perspectives. Both discover their potentialities; grow in self-confidence and self-assurance. This is the therapeutic effect that Group members have perceived in Group meetings and in classroom events in which participants are working to understand their puzzles.

Additionally, working for understandings through Potentially Exploitable Pedagogical Activities (captured in Principle 7, the principle of integration) fosters collegiality between teachers and their classroom

groups, since PEPAs offer an official space for personal questions and/or pedagogical puzzles to be addressed.

Bia: Through EP this proximity can be established and achieved.

Julia: I see the same thing happening in the classroom when the group is working on a puzzle together.

Walewska: The link between you and the students is this work, the work is the mediator. There's no need to be a 'social friend' of your students, but a friendly co-worker, a partner.

Solange's understanding of her classroom reality as an EP practitioner mirrors the trust and collegiality that members perceive within the Group:

Solange: The process of proximity of the different worlds – the teachers' and the students' – reinforces the integration that can happen through EP. This integration brings comfort to the teacher and probably to the students as well. Teachers feel more comfortable, although they are aware that they'll face lots of problems in the classroom. EP gives a sense of security to teachers. The integration of students and teachers at work is something new and brings comfort to this time spent together. It takes away the weight of the responsibility: both teachers and students are in charge.

Within the development of the Group, trust and collegiality are intrinsically related to this renewed notion of agency. In EP processes in the classroom, teachers and learners become 'learning or understanding practitioners'. We see teachers understanding their students, themselves, their books, their contexts; students understanding their teachers, their classroom lives as well as life outside the classroom; teacher and students understanding together various things at the same time. Within the Group, we also find ourselves constantly learning from each other. We have been collegially learning: to work for understanding, to disseminate EP ideas, to encourage each other in the pursuit of academic degrees, to take up positions of leadership and representation.

'Doing being' EP practitioners

We chose the unusual phrase 'doing being' to characterise our experience as EP practitioners because we feel the need to emphasise the

indivisibility between 'what we do' and 'who we are'. We wish to illustrate how the beliefs that identify us inform the everydayness of our Group activities: our meetings, our workshops, talks, and poster presentations, and our annual EP events.

Our meetings

In writing this text, we have come to understand that what characterises the Group has been constructed by our meetings over the years.

Maria Geralda: Co-construction, cooperation: this characterises the Group. What we do is co-constructed and this is a strong characteristic of EP. This identifies the Group.

Perhaps this perceived co-construction explains the variety in the nature of meetings according to the group's needs and interests.

Denise: The Exploratory Practice Group plays a very important role in my pedagogic life for three main reasons. Firstly, I really welcome the idea of discussing our puzzles with teachers who work with different realities, such as public or private schools in poor areas as well as in wealthy areas. Secondly, I understand it is a unique opportunity to grow professionally in a more autonomous way since nobody is there to spoon-feed you with a recipe which will miraculously help you find an answer to your questions. Finally, I interact directly with the participants in the Group, in other words, we get immediate respectful feedback to our ideas, and the fact that we can discuss with other people who are involved in the same process that we are help us see our own pedagogic practice from a different perspective.

We have always held meetings to discuss conceptual issues and to prepare our various activities, such as workshop sessions. In retrospect, we see ourselves engaged in defining ideas and principles as well as in discussing methodological options for workshop sessions for municipal school teachers and private language English courses. We can remember long discussions around the notion of 'understanding', over tea, sandwiches and birthday cakes. When having to decide between using inference or deduction to structure our workshops, we find ourselves discussing the pros and cons of 'saving' workshop time or fostering 'deeper' teacher development processes.

As we expanded, the meetings also centred on planning trips to run workshops or participate in seminars in other regions or countries,

organising EP annual events and discussing publication possibilities. A few years ago, as we were preparing a seminar, Julia persuaded us to update the presentation style through the use of Powerpoint software.

More recently, in line with our general concern for educational and social goals beyond language teaching and learning, our meetings have included new topics. As a result we have run EP sessions at an NGO that offers complementary activities to children from extremely poor communities. We also offer independent and private Learning Clinic sessions for pre-adolescents in need of reflection on pedagogic issues.

Our workshops, talks and poster presentations

At the conception phase of these three presentation modes we identify an integration of the principles that we live by. Being together as a group and with other people is at the heart of these practices. Flexibility and creativity are, in our view, intrinsically related to collaborative work and to the interactivity that we consider fundamental in all these presentations. Collegiality is exercised when we write papers, prepare workshop handouts as well as send seminar proposals under the name of the Rio EP Group. Trust is built on the agreement that for our group presentations we can count on each other's thinking and on-the-spot contributions. We can confidently present each other's posters, relying on our shared understandings. Joy comes from the pleasure of sharing innovative work as well as from feeling the value of contributing to an ongoing collective enterprise.

We see workshops and poster presentations as the most productive means of getting EP work and ideas across, due to their possibilities for exploiting all sorts of interactivity and for generating a wealth of learning opportunities for all. This is why we extend the notion of PEPAs to all our presentations, including our interactively oriented talks. These presentations are not only important for participants to exchange experiences but also for Group members to develop as EP practitioners. We have had workshops organised and run by 12-year-old learners and their teachers in which experienced EP practitioners learned how not to rush into offering their expertise and how to wait patiently for learners' creative contributions. The youngsters understood that they could be collegially trusted by their teachers and workshop participants. These, at the same time, gained deeper understandings of EP ideas, besides witnessing teacher/learner integration, echoing the three principles that focus on participant integration. Similar learning opportunities

were experienced in a university context, when future teachers and their tutor planned, assembled and presented a poster based on the articulated understandings of the puzzles they had discussed during their teaching practice course. Such development processes are so rich that what may be termed mutual development can be better understood as multi-development.

Walewska: ...you notice that your student is learning not only what you're teaching, but other things he is taking the chance to learn with you and everything else that all the other teachers are teaching him. Even those teachers who are not aware of the EP job you've been doing with your students.

In our workshops, depending on time and context, we foster intensive and reflective participant involvement by:

- eliciting participants' narratives;
- attending other EP teachers' and/or learners' posters;
- working over lists of puzzles;
- reading excerpts from EP texts;
- sharing participant stories of their everyday classroom lives, etc.

These sessions, typically part of short (half-day) or long (up to 30 hours) teacher development programmes, usually develop by bringing to the surface beliefs and puzzles, elaborating PEPAs, preparing posters – processes that can sensitise participants into the EP reflective attitude. To facilitate this sensitisation we usually run the sessions as a group of five or more Group members, thus ensuring a multiplicity of EP understandings and practices. These are shared as workshop leaders interpret EP principles, orient group discussions, help elaborate PEPAs, reflect on participants' contributions, and so on.

The Group sees poster preparation in particular as a rich opportunity for articulating emerging understandings, rather than displaying a finished product. Posters are practitioners' situated attempts, despite the intrinsic difficulties, at representing graphically their ongoing work for understanding, and encouraging others to get involved in dialogue, to help develop yet deeper understandings. We have noticed with pleasure how a multiplicity of understandings will emerge at every new presentation of the same poster.

Reflecting flexibility and creativity, EP posters have included, for example, pieces of a jigsaw puzzle to be (re)assembled during the

presentation, information obtained from PEPAs, quotes from students'/classmates' written or oral work, pictures and drawings, colour-coded graphs and tables, slips of paper to collect information during poster sessions.

We believe that part of the appeal of poster construction, to youngsters or adults, is that there is room for combining intellectual and manual skills, negotiating ideas and aesthetic decisions as well as the possibility of working collegially – a productive mixture of 'doing' and 'being'.

Lucas Lombardi (13 years old): If the environment is pleasant, not stressed, the students get home, call their friends, prepare a poster, then we go out, we play soccer.

Our annual EP events

Sylvia: We never know how an event will affect people. Then, there are things people say about it that we could never dream of. We never know. But people never forget our events.

The Group is often invited to represent EP ideas and work in seminars and one-day events organised by public and private sector institutions (schools, language schools, colleges and universities) as well as by teacher associations. It has also become part of our Group life to submit proposals for participation in national and international conferences where we have been building our professional profile with the three presentation modes described above. To create our *own* space for the expanding group of EP practitioners to share their work, we started, in 2002, to organise entire events with an EP orientation. They have now become a tradition in the Brazilian ELT community as the EP Annual Events. With up to 300 participants, and a 2:1 ratio of learners to teachers, these events have become opportunities for the wider-scale dissemination of EP ideas and for increasing group maturity.

Our Annual Events are brainstormed in fortnightly meetings, during which the organising committee emerges. These meetings are attended by members of the Group, sometimes including students who discuss how they want to participate, who they would like to work with, how to communicate between sessions, and even arrange other meetings at their workplaces or at teachers' homes. The theme and structure of each event are discussed to represent EP principles. In 2003, for example, when we focused for the first time on inviting learners, we named it

'Learners and teachers working together – a dream coming true'. Aiming at involving participants actively from the very start, we have taken unconventional program scheduling decisions:

- a massive poster session to open the event;
- discussion groups, roundtables and workshops jointly led by teachers and learners from the EP community;
- a plenary session with rapporteurs (invited renowned members of the Brazilian academic community as well as EP teachers and learners).

Sustaining our development

The Group has now been in existence for many years and looks set to continue for many more. How can we understand this somewhat unusual degree of sustainability in a relatively informal group? We started this account with some of the problems we have experienced:

- misunderstandings and misrepresentations of practitioner research;
- the unquestioned desire for technical solutions;
- fluctuating attendance;
- creeping bureaucratisation as a potential threat to flexibility;
- issues related to financial support (e.g. the push for projectisation);
- management of personal professional time, and so on.

We also listed the attributes we have, we think, brought to bear on them:

- our commitment to collegiality;
- our common convictions/beliefs, as echoed in the Principles of EP;
- our common need for a forum to discuss professional matters (puzzles, pains and pleasures);
- plus: perseverance, time, personal commitment, and so on.

Throughout our account we have emphasised collegiality, flexibility and creativity, and the importance of maximal inclusiveness and attention to trust-building. We have seen how these can address the first three of the above problems. We have also described how we have dealt with the potential trend towards 'bureaucratisation', by resisting fixed roles and the sort of strong institutional home that might initially appeal but ultimately stultify.

We should not underplay the importance of the perseverance we have all been called upon to display at times, and the amount of precious time

we have had to find, all of which testify to what is perhaps an unusual degree of personal commitment on the part of the Group's members. But neither should we underplay the crucial point that, because of how we conduct ourselves (with our common convictions and beliefs echoing the Principles of EP), the Group responds closely to our common and continuing need for a forum to discuss professional matters. The expansion of this forum to include learners as developing practitioners is a hugely positive factor which has itself helped sustain our commitment.

Inspired by the EP orientation of working against burnout and for sustainability, we find ourselves integrating our Group life into other dimensions of our professional lives. There are those of us who enjoy doing EP with students, preparing the most interesting posters to present at all possible events; those who engage in classroom activities proposed by students and collegially organise playwriting and staging activities. Some of us dedicate our free time to community-based educational work by teaching at preparatory courses for university entrance examinations and for adolescents entering the workplace, as well as by acting as teacher-consultants at after-school centres for low-income children. Some have been taking every opportunity to incorporate the notion of 'work-for-understanding' in undergraduate and postgraduate courses; others have been introducing the virtue of 'curiosity and puzzlement' in the education of future teachers. Still others guide teacher-researchers who are motivated to work with EP in their dissertations and theses, facing the challenges involved in doing EP and writing about it. Others spend long hours managing online EP teacher development courses and teacher-consultancy programmes, drawing on our face-to-face workshop expertise for the world of distance learning. Some have engaged in clinical work with children and adolescents, developing with them exploratory ways to understand their school lives and studying practices.

Perhaps by relating EP to our wider educational and social goals, and not narrowly compartmentalising it within ELT, we have also made it more sustainable for us.

The issue of financial support is especially interesting for us. Most of what we do as a Group is carried out as professional work on a semi-volunteer basis. We get occasional financial support, but only for specific logistical purposes. Indirect financial help comes from the institutions where we work as well as from governmental and non-governmental organisations that are interested in promoting teacher and learner development. Direct financial support has been rare. It would be a mixed blessing in any case, we suggest, certainly if it

restricted our autonomy as a Group to develop and follow our own inclinations.

Significant psychological support comes from the recognition of the importance of our work by key representatives of the municipal and state school systems, working in collaboration with international sponsors of ELT initiatives. Another strong, yet different, source of support and joy comes from the gratification we find in learners who relate to EP and organise their academic lives so as to study with exploratory teachers; in practitioners who identify themselves as exploratory teachers or exploratory learners; and in former course participants who travel miles to join the Group again.

We also find deep professional satisfaction when local colleagues who are engaged in the development of critical teachers and learners accept the role of rapporteurs of our events, characterising the principles of EP and the work of our Rio EP Group as an 'international avantgarde'. Networking with international colleagues, through e-mail and the EP website, also contributes to the gratifying feeling of belonging to a global community.

A good example is our ongoing collaboration with Dick Allwright, who has been a mentor and colleague, both on his occasional visits to Rio and, at a distance, in his texts and in his thinking. In this process of constant learning, and echoing Dick's caution about the necessarily dynamic nature of understandings, we hope not to have given the impression here that we think we have understood, completely and for all time, the web of life of our Group. Life being so dynamic and so complex, this would never be possible.

15

Developing Understandings In and Beyond the Classroom

This chapter will:

- briefly review our overall argument, focusing on the central theme that learners, by becoming practitioner-researchers, can develop as practitioners of learning;
- discuss the case for the dissemination of EP, emphasising the crucial importance of sharing in the continuous process of developing understandings;
- show how learners, as well as teachers, can share their understandings and their experiences, in and beyond the classroom;
- evaluate EP as a research model for understanding the developing learner;
- evaluate EP as a model for pedagogy, highlighting its contribution to the development of mutual trust among learner and teacher practitioners;
- consider the sustainability of EP as a teaching and learning practice.

Introduction: what this book has been about so far

Our starting point was the realisation that, after years of work on teacher development, taking *teachers* seriously as developing professionals, the time was overdue for a parallel emphasis on *learners*, taking them seriously as *key developing practitioners*.

Two learners, Rodrigo Martins Pacheco and Ludmila H. de Carvalho, make the case very eloquently in an interview with Maria Isabel A. Cunha (Bebel) about their posters. Ludmila's puzzle was: *Right or wrong – how to evaluate*. This was from 2005, when she was in seventh grade (12–13 year

olds). Rodrigo's was: *Why do we have to do a test?* His was from 2004, when he was in sixth grade (11–12 year olds).

Interview with learners 15.1 Bebel, Ludmila and Rodrigo

Bebel: Why do you think people like to see your posters?

Ludmila: I think it's because they think we would never be able to do that. They think we would never question the teacher's method. If the teacher is the authority in the classroom, we shouldn't be questioning the 'why's' of things.

Rodrigo: I think it's also because this work isn't shown in any book. And perhaps those teachers at the events had never thought of doing something like this with their students. And our teachers thought of doing it. So those teachers were surprised because it's an interesting kind of work, it's different, and [something] that almost no one would do, would discuss.

Ludmila: And they even started to think about applying it in their classes.

...

Ludmila: I think that other teachers should show more interest in this kind of work because they could use it with their students.

Rodrigo: It's as if this is a new way of teaching and other teachers could adopt it. A thought, an ideology.

Ludmila: And this could be done in any subject, not only in English.

In Part I we argued that although our viewpoint has a respectable history in the field, developments in applied linguistics and educational policy-making have not generally been kind to it. Seeing learners as essentially passive 'end-points' for curriculum 'delivery systems', rather than as active practitioners of learning, is still widespread, and both politically and practically dominant.

When, in Part II, we turned to review the literature on research approaches we found a somewhat similar picture: a dominant paradigm of third-party research that, even in the form of classroom research, still risks marginalising the learner. We therefore endorsed the developing shift towards practitioner research, but proposed that it should, in line with our Propositions about them, fully involve the learners as researchers in their own learning lives. We put forward Seven Principles for this concept of inclusive practitioner research, under the name of Exploratory Practice.

But principles are not enough. We needed to show what inclusive practitioner research could mean in practice, not just to show that it could work, but also to offer some guidance to anyone wishing to try the ideas out for themselves. Learners interviewed by Bebel can again illustrate what may be involved – both the practicalities and the inclusiveness. Rafael Bolsoni and Vinicius Lousada were talking about the poster they made in 2004, when they were in sixth grade (11–12 year olds): *Why is English the main language in the world?* Ana Rita de Azeredo do Carvalho (also 11–12 years old) was talking about her poster: *Is satisfactory excellent?*

Interview with learners 15.2 Bebel, Rafael, Vinicius and Ana Rita

Bebel: Preparing the posters: what does it mean to you?

Rafael: It's different, but it's interesting. Some of these posters, we had never thought of doing them. Not very conventional, but interesting, different.

Vinicius: It's not only making the poster, but we end up learning things that we will use later, that we will be able to tell our own kids. I don't see this work as just a poster, but as teaching, it's us learning the things better. Preparing a poster changes the routine of the English lesson.

Rafael: I agree. We had never asked: Why do we have to learn English? And there were some explanations that made us understand why we have to learn English, and we had never stopped to think about that. We question ourselves.

Vinicius: We showed the posters to our parents and asked them their opinions. Later we discussed all of this in class.

Vinicius: Yeah, we are not working with what we think, but with other people's opinions.

Ana Rita: It interacts with the people. It multiplies.

Vinicius: It's much better than exposing everything and not allowing the others to express their ideas. We arrived at conclusions with the people who were there. It's much better than to present a work, full of text and you keep on talking.

Ana Rita: The other people also learn with your work.

Ana Rita: It's super-interesting – you exchange ideas with other people, with teachers, they began to interact with us, I improved.

Resource 2 in Part IV is of a photograph of such an exchange of ideas.

In the early 1990s we presented EP as a practice by recommending a fixed set of steps, but to do that now would misrepresent our developing experience and current reality. Development work has established the necessary minimum of routinisation, but preserved a very large measure of local improvisation and creativity. We have no simple recipes, then, but the wealth of practical information in our case studies will, we hope, enable teachers and learners to enjoy developing EP for their own situations, borrowing freely, but overall creating their own unique practices.

Previous chapters have shown just how powerful the framework can be for teacher as well as learner development, and well beyond the classroom itself. But that is not quite the conclusion to our story. At the end of this chapter we shall attempt an overall evaluation of EP both as a research model for the developing learner and as a model for pedagogy. First, though, we shall consider dissemination and the wider notion of sharing.

Disseminating EP

Quote 15.1 Wright on Exploratory Practice

EP is 'practitioner research' in its broadest sense and is vital to an understanding of processes which are implicit and intuitive. Practitioner research of this kind may identify problems which are local or more wide-spread. Only dissemination of findings and questions will ensure the latter. (2005: 428)

Books about research need to deal with 'dissemination' – how to report and communicate research, whether for academic purposes, for conferences or for wider publication. This is especially important for us, but there are at least four questions that EP raises:

1. Why even attempt to tell people about understandings if the only really worthwhile ones are too deep for words?
2. Why should people be interested anyway, if the research is only concerned with purely local issues?
3. Why disseminate procedures, if we want creativity, not slavish imitation?
4. Why interrupt a continuous research process to stop and report on it, with what can only be provisional findings?

The case *for* dissemination is more compelling, however:

- Reporting *findings*, however provisional and local they may seem, makes them available to contribute to educational decision-making.
- It also makes them available to contribute to theory-building.
- Reporting research *processes* enables passing on information about others' research work. It does not need to lead to slavish imitation. Instead, it can help researchers avoid unproductive 'dead-ends'.
- Reporting *findings*, even provisional ones that are ultimately 'too deep for words', may nevertheless encourage others to join in the debate and in the search for yet deeper understandings.

Isn't it a problem, though, if people only investigate matters of local interest to themselves, with no thought to theory development? Won't reports of such purely parochial matters be intellectually 'uninteresting'? That argument, we suggest, betrays an unduly narrow conception of theory and of theory development. An issue investigated for its purely local interest may well have much wider implications. For example, the children trying to understand why cheating was so rife in their Rio school were investigating something of potentially global interest about human behaviour, even though it undoubtedly had characteristics peculiar to that setting. So reports of their work might well resonate with others globally, and their thoughts about cheating – their provisional understandings – might well prompt a look at relevant theory.

But we are representing dissemination as simply a matter of sharing with others a finished research product. EP aims to widen that perspective.

Quote 15.2 Wright on the 'theory practice dichotomy'

Exploratory Practice holds promise for a more healthy relationship between different types of professional knowledge than the traditional 'theory practice' dichotomy that so dominates professional discourse.

(2005: 428)

The wider concept of sharing

Conference papers, journal articles, theses or books like this one are *products* that can be shared. But sharing, we propose, needs to be seen as a *process* that is an integral part of our conception of research as a

social enterprise, from the beginning. Again some of Bebel's interviewees make our point.

Interview with learners 15.3 Bebel, Lucas Lombardi and Lucas Souto

Bebel: Are posters interesting work?

Lucas Lombardi: The discussion is very important, especially when you can talk with people who don't come from the same environment. If you can talk to course teachers or professors, teachers of different subjects, you open your mind, you can find out their opinions.

Bebel: Do you think you can open other people's minds?

Lucas Lombardi: I think so. Teachers can think: Am I doing this with my students?

Lucas Souto: Teachers may not think or have time to think about this topic, but the students who are going through this situation can do it/have to do it. This poster forces teachers to think about this.

Emphasising research's social dimension also takes us beyond our somewhat 'technicist' points about dissemination (for a discussion of the limits of technicism, in relation to research in our field, see Ortega, 2005; and Allwright, in Ortega, 2005). It adds an affective dimension, and reminds us of Principles 3, 4 and 5, emphasising the value of involving everybody in a way that brings them together in a spirit of mutual development.

Quote 15.3 The Rio EP Group on joy

Joy comes from the pleasure of sharing innovative work as well as from feeling the value of contributing to an ongoing collective enterprise.

(Personal communication, 3 May 2006.)

Encouraging others to participate in what needs to become a joyful social endeavour is therefore a matter of principle for us. For that, making the research process interesting becomes key, but just having an interesting topic, or interesting ideas for research processes, is not enough. Communicating enthusiasm, as the Rio EP Group does, becomes vital. It encourages others to imagine what joining in might

bring. It is precisely in this way, by making life more enjoyable, that such inclusive practitioner research can spread and help combat both the burnout that spoils the lives of so many teachers, and the boredom that can afflict learners.

Quote 15.4 Josefina on collegiality in the classroom

For some teachers, this is *the* understanding: to realise that you and the participants of the classroom scene are colleagues and can share their feelings and weaknesses openly (because teachers and students already knew each other's weaknesses but did not have a moment or a place to share this perception).

(Chapter 14, p. 226)

Solange writes of 'comfort' through EP.

Quote 15.5 Solange on 'comfort' in the classroom

The process of proximity of the different worlds – the teachers' and the students' – reinforces the integration that can happen through EP. This integration brings comfort to the teacher and probably to the students as well.... EP gives teachers a sense of security. The integration of students and teachers at work is something new and brings comfort to the time spent together. It lifts the burden of responsibility: both teachers and students are in charge.

(Chapter 14, p. 228)

Sharing the process of working to understand life in the classroom, then, can itself be a way of enhancing the quality of life there (our Principles 1 and 2), and not only in the *language* classroom. EP reaches out, as the following case study shows.

Case Study 15.1 Going beyond the language classroom

For two Rio learners, Ana Raquel Lemos dos Santos and Tihago dos Santos Simões, the priority for one of their explorations was not language but mathematics.

Ana Raquel's story

Let me introduce myself: I am Ana Raquel, 15 years old, and one of the first students that joined the Rio de Janeiro EP group. The first time I participated

in an event was in 2003. My first participation was very good (I presented the poster Why does the 603 have English classes once a week?) but I want to talk about my 2004 poster: Why is it so difficult to learn maths?

It was really nice to do the work. My friend Tihago and I had a doubt and the search for the answer led us to interesting understandings. We talked with some teachers and students, listened to their opinions, we learned a lot.

The teachers we interviewed said that maths was very difficult to study when they were young but they succeeded with dedication and good will. Some said they were good students at some subjects and not so good at others. The same thing happens to us nowadays.

The students said they like studying with their classmates, in groups, because one helps the other. I found the comment very interesting: when a student helps a classmate both learn easily, it's possible to ask silly questions, everybody comes out on top...

As one doubt is always a doubt, we could find no answer to our question.

We decided to make our poster using a math sentence

Students' opinions + teachers' opinions = our understandings

So that's it: I love presenting the posters, meeting my friends in the events and participating in everything related to EP.

Por que é difícil aprender matemática?

Mais da metade dos alunos não sabe matemática
Segundo os dados coletados pela pesquisa, a maioria dos alunos entrevistados não sabe matemática e não gosta de estudar a matéria.

Alunos saem da escola sem saber matemática
Alguns alunos saem da escola sem saber matemática e não gostam de estudar a matéria.

O que os alunos dizem
 na sala de aula: copiam e fazem os exercícios em casa; refazem e ficam os exercícios; gostam de trabalhar com outros colegas; as matérias são fáceis de tirar boas notas são ciências, artes e educação física; é só gostar e ter um pouco de sorte da 1ª série as matérias ficam muito difíceis.

o que os professores dizem
 foram todos bons alunos na 1ª série mas tinham dificuldades - prof. de matemática; ciências: prof. de física; prof. de história; inglês: prof. de inglês; matemática: prof. de matemática; fizemos, refazemos os exercícios, fazemos resumos e questionários, estudando todos os dias, tirando dúvidas com os professores e amigos; alguns professores eram chatos; alguns professores não explicavam bem; alguns professores pensavam muito pouco.

Dicas para os alunos
 aproveitar as aulas; prestar atenção; fazer resumos; fazer os exercícios em casa; procurar ajuda dos professores e amigos.

Novas entendimentos
 (Ana e Tihago)
 - matemática preocupa os alunos da São Tomás de Aquino;
 - reprova muita gente;
 - as notas de matemática não estão boas nas turmas da tarde (602, 702, 802);
 - as notas também não estão boas na PUC;
 - é mais fácil tirar nota boa quando se gosta da matéria;
 - fazer trabalhos com os colegas é bom; não ajuda o outro e assim vão aprendendo;
 - os professores dizem que matematicamente se estudava mais;
 - os alunos não entendiam muito; tinha professor legal e professor chato; matérias fáceis e difíceis; professor que não explicava direito e etc...;
 - está difícil melhorar as notas na 702;
 - muita gente tem dificuldade com matemática.

Liza Regalado entrevistou 11 alunos das turmas 602, 702 e 802

Liza Regalado entrevistou os professores de matemática em perfis de seguidores da PUC, as professoras de ciências, inglês e português

É um bom dia em matemática, mas não gosto que não que ninguém não seja muito difícil
 Quando era um aluno copiei tudo e não aprendia na sala. É melhor é que sempre importante para o aluno, porque é para o aluno, de mais difícil e não Regalado.

Quanto de dificuldade os professores dizem sobre a matemática
 Ela é uma matéria sempre difícil quando se trata de física e inglês.

Photo 15.1 The Maths poster – Portuguese version

Felipe Guedes, a Brazilian student who has now left school, sees connections with study in general.

Quote 15.6 Felipe Guedes, on study, in answer to the question: What do you think about EP – how does it affect your life?

EP is something that can change the way students see what it is to study. With me, it was just like that. I realised that I don't need to eat a book to learn something.

(Personal communication, 20 July 2006)

Going beyond the research setting: what teachers can do

Networking and publishing

In Chapters 12 and 13 we focused on sharing as an integral part of working for understanding in the EP framework. In Chapter 14 we saw how the Rio EP Group fosters a continuous process of interaction among the teachers and learners concerned, outside their immediate classroom settings, with regular group meetings and the occasional inter-school virtual forum. We also saw how they run an e-mail network to facilitate communication and manage the main EP website. They also run workshops for other teachers, in their schools, and at conferences both nationally and internationally. These activities typically focus on disseminating the ideas of EP rather than the outcomes of particular explorations.

Emerging understandings are more the focus for conference papers and journal publications. In 2003 the journal *Language Teaching Research* devoted a whole issue (Vol. 7, No. 2) to EP, with extensive discussion of the principles and practices involved, and research reports from Brazil and around the world on pedagogic issues such as group work (Assia Slimani-Rolls, in England), written feedback (Hadara Perpignan, in Israel) and developing communicative competence (Cindy Gunn, in Thailand). In its special Practitioner Research subsection (edited by Dick Allwright) each issue of the journal now carries a practitioner research article.

Teaching teachers

Members of the Rio Group also teach teachers, and this offers a valuable opportunity to disseminate the ideas of EP as course content. But

the best way to share such ideas (such understandings) is probably to live them with people, as Inés Miller now explains. Hers is a long story, but we include it in full here because it shows how EP can be productively integrated into teacher training work, and how it has become a way of seeing teacher and learner development as an inextricably joint and mutual enterprise of working for understanding.

Case Study 15.2 Teaching and learning through puzzles: EP in teacher education

My story about how I've been doing EP with future teachers needs to start by sharing an excerpt from the end-of-course reflective piece written by Admilson Alves Beserra, one of my students in my teaching practice course at PUC-Rio during the first semester of 2003:

During our course I was kind of spotting for a language school. In the beginning of the year I was desperate, because I was unemployed, and even now, I am not much better. I went there and taught what, in the words of the coordinator, was a disappointing class. She was expecting me to be the best candidate. But I was not upset. I apologised and told her that I had other priorities. At that moment I realised that something had happened to me. That was not the kind of work I wanted to do. We have to survive, of course; but I really did not want to do that behaviouristic thing. There were no possibilities of really doing something I understood and could discuss with colleagues as a real way of giving meaning to the teaching of a foreign language.

'Put quality of life first.' We have to make it real, for us and for our students. Maybe I could have found this possibility there, but I don't believe it. There was no room for change.

Admilson's reflection on this episode in his initial professional life emerged after a semester of our EP 'puzzle-driven' discussions on 'working for understanding' and 'prioritising quality of [classroom] life'. What 'has happened' to Admilson? Why does his story fill me with collegial concern as well as with joy as an EP teacher educator? Is it because I sense that Admilson is a teacher-learner who has taken his own professional life seriously and who wishes to take that of his future learners ethically? Is it because Admilson's seems to be a vivid example of critical professional agency? In this excerpt I can see the beauty of EP at work in initial teacher education – its ethical principles as well as the ground for collegiality and sustainability to develop.

I also understand that Admilson took this 'final' reflective paper as a discursive opportunity for continuing the EP collegial reflection that the group had engaged in during the semester. We had organised the course syllabus around our initial puzzles, some of which were: 'Why is the teacher-learner relationship so important to the classroom ambience?' 'Why is the teacher so limited by the course syllabus that she cannot accept changes proposed by learners?' 'Why do I take everything that

happens in class so personally?’ The conventionally required observation hours in schools also offered a rich source of puzzlement: ‘Why don’t teachers find ways of motivating students other than grades?’ ‘Why do schools rely so much on reprimanding and rewarding?’ ‘Why don’t teachers evaluate students based on their differences?’ ‘Why is there so much aggressiveness in schools?’

Within such a puzzle-driven attitude, issues of quality of classroom life that underlie issues of quality of work emerged from the outset. I understand this as an opportunity that student-teachers take to discuss the ‘sad realities’ they have experienced in their school lives and that they are, unfortunately, still experiencing at university. Observation as ‘trying to understand what is going on in classrooms’ rather than as ‘finding fault with what we see in classrooms’ has helped us deal with the challenges of addressing professional issues within an ethical perspective. It was a learning opportunity, for us all, to discuss the work of teachers who had been my students, who are my colleagues, who would very soon be the teacher-learners’ colleagues. Working within the EP framework, we found collective ways of working to understand, for example, the complex relationship between the university and its laboratory school. One of the underlying puzzles in this case is ‘Why is it that, despite so many attempts by some of the individuals involved, it seems to be so difficult to create a culture of more participative/collaborative teacher–learner presence in classrooms and/or to find more usefully inspirational pedagogic practice in classroom life?’

Little by little, with some effort on everybody’s part (the group’s and mine), we grappled with Allwright’s (1997a) insightful notion of ‘planning for understanding’. In the process, we problematised the very concept of ‘planning’ and tried to devise possible layouts for a novel lesson plan – one that would allow ‘physical and mental’ space (on paper and in the mind) for what the teacher and the learners would do, but also for what the teacher and/or the learners might try/wish to understand during the lesson. We discussed the psychological reality of learners preparing lesson plans and what these (do/might) look like; we even wondered about their exploratory potential for both teachers and learners. We considered the possibility of such plans for understanding what could be oriented by puzzles that the teacher and/or learners might be interested in understanding. We also brainstormed adaptations of language learning activities that could offer such understanding potential. This was how the group’s micro-lessons (10-minute sessions taught to peer teacher-learners) and their full lessons (taught to actual learners in school) became potentially exploitable opportunities for understanding puzzling aspects of (classroom) language learning/teaching rather than opportunities for demonstrating mastery of specific teaching skills or for encouraging the belief that language points taught would certainly be learnt.

We thus took the opportunity, even in initial teacher education, to move from the conventional understanding of ‘planning to control’ to the much more complex notion of ‘planning to understand’; we also experienced the stimulating conceptual shift from ‘teaching points’ to ‘learning opportunities’ (Allwright, 2005a). The course was a challenge for us all, especially because I thought we couldn’t miss the extraordinary opportunity of organising, with this group, a teacher-learner workshop on ‘Planning for Understanding’, for the fifth annual EP event. The intense quality of the classroom life we lived during that term was frequently addressed by some teacher-learners in their reflective papers, and by me in a letter I wrote to the group to thank them for having been willing to allow the creation of wonderful learning

opportunities for us all. Personally, I felt that I learnt a lot about teaching, about learning, but mostly about myself. Among other things, I wrote:

Without a doubt, what I found more difficult in the entire process was to allow the planning process to evolve at its own rhythm, at the group's rhythm. I seemed to want to do more than my share and, possibly, I wanted to do it 'as well as possible'.

Maybe, I even did more than I should have during the workshop itself. And, as you said, I was more nervous than you were. I apologise if I did, but I thank you again for the opportunity of developing my personal professional self-understanding.

Ever since I started involving teacher-learners in EP, I've been asked whether I'm pushing my undergraduates in initial teacher education too far, if it may not be 'too big a jump'. When I take my puzzles to our EP Rio Group sessions or discuss them with my teaching practice students, various views are voiced. Some say 'it's too early to feel puzzled', others reassure me by wishing they had been encouraged to 'accept puzzlement in early professional life'. I find the strongest reassurance in the depth of understandings generated within the teacher-learner groups themselves. They are best expressed, I find, in Admilson's story or in Luciana Ache's words, when she said in the middle of our class: 'I get it! In Exploratory Practice the lesson becomes interesting for the teacher!'

We are very encouraged by this example of teachers becoming practitioner-researchers at the very beginning of their careers. If it helps make lessons interesting for the teacher, then early EP may help teachers avoid burnout later (see Allwright, forthcoming; Allwright and Miller, 2007).

Bringing teachers and learners together: the annual EP Event

The most strikingly innovative contribution of the Rio EP Group to 'sharing beyond the classroom' was undoubtedly developing the annual EP event to include learners as practitioners in their own right, as *key developing practitioners*. This was fully in tune with our Five Propositions (long before they were formulated), and with the inclusive focus of our Principles (especially Principles 3, 4, and 5). About 50 learners and about 150 teachers came to the first inclusive conference in Rio, in 2003. In 2006 there were roughly 200 learners and 100 teachers! Most of the learners come thanks to the EP work their teachers have done with them during the school year. For the teachers the conferences generate a sense of urgency and represent an important 'punctuation mark' in

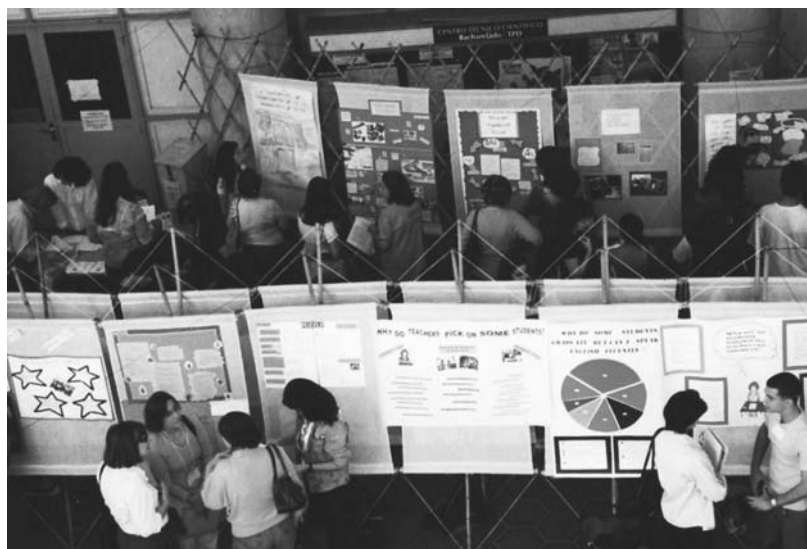


Photo 15.2 The 1999 EP Event in Rio – part of the poster ‘labyrinth’

the research process. They help teachers and learners sustain the work throughout the year, conscious that there will be a major public opportunity to try out their developing understandings and spread their enthusiasm for it all, to teachers and to learners well beyond their own institution.

Case Study 15.3 Walewska and the ‘Event’

Another story from Walewska (this time excerpted) relates the whole process from the class adoption of an issue to the follow-up back in school after the ‘Event’.

Why don’t the English classes in public [state] schools prepare us for the job market?

In one of the first classes of 2003 I encouraged the 803 students to write down their opinions, complaints, suggestions from our English classes. Tatiane said the English classes in school should prepare students for the job market and in her opinion this didn’t happen. I told the class that Tatiane’s puzzle was interesting and invited the entire class to take part in this exploratory work. We read an advertisement for waiters and waitresses being required for summer jobs in England from an English book and worked on some vocabulary. The English teacher inside me was satisfied, but the EP multiplier was not: I was excited by this opportunity.

After group work on job advertisements from local newspapers the learners carried out an interview survey in Leme, where most of them lived.

They did a wonderful job. Each group presented it to the rest of the class. They found out that in Leme, a tourist destination, English is essential. Some hotels and restaurants pay for courses for their employees. A receptionist said she had been studying for more than four years and still had difficulties in speaking English. They found a shopping centre porter who insisted on writing his answers in English. One group interviewed a street vendor who said that he learned English at school but it was useless: he knew the verb 'to be' but in 'real life' he needed to know greetings, numbers, names of products. He learned everything from the tourists.

In class they shared and deepened their understandings. They understood that even though some of them had to work to help their families they should be studying not working. They were very young to be worried about the job market.

They understood that learning a language is not the same as the preparation of instant soup: it demands time and persistence.

And then: It was time to prepare the poster for the Event and choose the presenters. The volunteers practised, the class offered advice (speak up, look at the public, don't cover your mouth with your hand, and so on). Most of the students went to PUC to support their classmates.

A few days after the event (where they also participated in a roundtable) a group came to me. They said that they had seen the importance of speaking English and that all my work aimed at reading. I explained my beliefs, listened to them, we negotiated. From that day on we had oral classes on Mondays...and reading classes on Wednesdays.

Walewska mentions her initial excitement as an 'EP multiplier' (her role in the Rio EP Group of developing and spreading the ideas of EP). Her story shows how participating in the 'Event' encourages her, because it allows her students to share, well beyond the classroom, their experiences, their emerging understandings and their enthusiasm. It also shows how much they impressed her with their understanding of their language learning lives that she made a significant change to her pedagogy to meet their perceived needs – mutual development (Principle 5) in action. Her story also reveals her wider educational and social goals, in line with her 'beliefs and reflections on [her] role as a responsible citizen in a world of injustices and lack of opportunities for most of them to become real happy citizens' (Personal communication, 26 June 2006).

Walewska's story also reminds us of the centrality of the learners in all this, so we should now look more deeply at what learners can do.

Going beyond the research setting: what learners can do

The following extract from another of Bebel's interviews gives the learners' perspective.

Interview with learners 15.4 Bebel, Pedro Henrique Albuquerque and Calvin Tamanqueira do Couto about their posters from 2004 and 2005:

Why isn't Portuguese the most popular language in the world?
How can you best use your time?

Bebel: *What do you think this poster means to you and to you as learners of English? What do you think this work is all about?*

Calvin: *This poster stimulates us to learn English, because we do everything in English, we research, and this gives the classes and the English culture more dynamism. The learning gets better because it's something more interesting for you to learn. And everything being dealt with on the posters are about what matters to us, are about us, about humanity and this makes it interesting not only for us but also for other people who come to see them. I think they find them very interesting because in these two years of poster sessions this [interest] has happened every time we present a new topic. First, we presented a poster about the Portuguese language and why it is not the language used across the whole world. Last year we worked on a different topic: How can we use our time, because people tend not to use their time wisely.*

Pedro: *I think these posters are good because we deal with different topics, other than those we usually work on in our everyday classes. This topic about using our time is very important because people don't know how to spend their time and they think time goes too fast. They think they don't spend their time wisely. With this poster we can think about this topic and present it to other people.*

Calvin: *And besides, you exercise your oral English fluency and become more 'cultured' in the English language. The written language as well. And all this stimulates us and those who come to see us. Especially for the large number of people that come to the poster sessions. The more the public, the more stimulated we are. And we want to do it again – we will present more posters this year.*

Pedro: *It's always good to see that people appreciate your work.*

So it is not only the work of putting a poster presentation together that is stimulating, nor is it only the act of presenting findings to the public. It is the combination that these two key developing practitioners enjoy: the sense of continuously developing understandings of themselves, of their in-group and of others elsewhere. It is easy to believe that their enthusiasm will be infectious, and that the evident pleasure they take in the exploratory work in all its phases will prompt others to think they would like something like this in their own learning lives (see Resource 2 in Part IV).

We have already seen that these learners sometimes produce Portuguese versions of their posters. This makes it easier to use them in other classrooms, outside English language classes. Some of these learners also want to spread EP ideas themselves across the curriculum,



Photo 15.3 Calvin and Pedro explaining their poster to Inés Miller at the 2004 EP Event in Rio

as we see in the following discussion from the virtual forum in Rio mentioned earlier:

Guilherme: Let's talk about extending EP to other subjects ... all of them, who knows? And how we can do it, I leave that to you.

Milene: It's a good idea to do EP in other subjects – after all, it's not only in English classes that we have impasses like the ones that have been presented.

Daniela: Of course! Because there are various subjects, besides languages, that are extremely boring for us to sit and listen to without dynamic classes.

Jorginho do Brasil: Well, EP, in my opinion, is not a 'practice' for English or foreign languages. It's up to the teacher to find a way of using it in his/her subject.

Eduardo: EP can be used in all subjects. Maybe in maths it's a bit complicated. But all other subjects can be worked in that way. As a suggestion: history classes could use a lot more dramatisations, always with lots of humour.

Gaby: I don't know. It's a little complicated to about maths. Maybe Portuguese would be easier...

Felipe: Of course! It would be really cool! There are school subjects in which students have problems, very often because they think the subject is boring and there's nothing attractive to change this. Don't you think this can be changed with EP? If you say no, you don't belong to EP!

...

Felipe: *Can you imagine what would happen if you arrived in your classroom and you already knew the topic to be studied. But you and your friends would not give a normal class, you'd give a different class, one in which even your teacher would be interested. Can you imagine his face?*

Gaby: *It's possible, but it all depends on the teacher. If it's a teacher like Julia, of course it will be successful. Now, with a teacher like my Portuguese teacher, it won't be possible.*

Some learners also see the benefit of extending the ideas beyond education.

Quote 15.7 Felipe Guedes, after leaving school, responding to our question: 'Do you think you will continue with EP? Why? How?'

Of course I will. It's something for the rest of your life. Because it makes studying easier and less boring. It makes learning easier... I'm working now. I finished school. And I guess I can use this idea in my work too. Try to change the way of doing things that I may think are boring or difficult. Believe me! It works.

(Personal communication, 20 July 2006)

Another example of learners demonstrating a wider view on language learning life comes from Joanne Chuk, the teacher of English in Hong Kong from Case Study 13.2. Three of Joanne's students gave her permission to tell us about how she found out about their enterprising use of the 'world wide web', and for us to include the story here.

Case study 15.4 Joanne's web use story

I have never realised how seriously my students take the learning of English until I was pleasantly surprised to find out what they have been doing at xanga.com. In the beginning of the term, three first-year Mainland Chinese students, Littlewin, Suki and Beryl, came to my Help Desk [a one-on-one language consultation service] and asked for advice regarding how they can improve their English academic writing skills.

They were very open in admitting that they had no time to read lots of English academic books. The discussion was then directed to the issue of time management. I asked what they like to do in their leisure time and they said one of their favourite pastimes was writing an on-line diary at www.xanga.com, a website where many of our students post their diary entries to be shared with friends. Littlewin told me that she usually wrote her diary until 2 am! It seems to me that writing her on-line diary is an important part of her life and I asked her why she was so serious about this. She said that it is by keeping this on-line diary that she can share her life in Hong Kong with her friends in China and any of her new friends can visit her site and leave comments on what she has written in her diary.

'Do you write your diary in English?' I asked.

'Of course!!' Littlewin smiled.

'Brilliant! That's a great start!' I concluded the language Help Desk session by emphasising to them that it is important to make English a normal part of their life if they want to improve their English because learning would be much more effective if they find it interesting and enjoyable, especially when it has some personal relevance to them. Keeping an English diary will certainly help improve their writing in the long run.

At 11 pm the same day, I received an email from Littlewin, inviting me to visit her site, with a surprise that she had written something about me in her diary that day. I immediately popped in and looked at what she had written and I was amazed at her expressiveness after reading the vivid description of her experiences and feelings. All of a sudden, I realised that students do take their learning seriously – they are writing English in their daily life, not for the sake of practising for exams.

Xanga is one of the most popular communities of online diaries and journals largely used by young people, with an estimated 27 million users worldwide (Xanga - from Wikipedia, 2006), and 10,000 in Hong Kong alone (xanga.com: information retrieved 28 August 2006). It appears to offer an excellent place for learners to share, as Littlewin does, their local work for understanding, and their developing understandings of themselves, with other learners anywhere in the world. And, as these students at Kyoto's University of Foreign Studies in Japan say, there is much more at stake than just local understandings:

Shinya Mitani: *Another thing about learning language is this school's motto 'Pax Mundi Per Linguas' which means 'Through languages, peace in the world'.*

Noriko Fujinawa: *That's our real topic. Language is a major way to understand each other, understand conflict.*

Sayaka Fujii: *If we can use language properly, we can't have a conflict or fight. We can talk and discuss things.*

Chihiro Sagai: *Discussion is important.*

(Personal communication 24 June 2003)

There is a lot that teachers and learners have done and can do to spread the ideas of EP, then, but is it worth doing?

Evaluating EP as a research model for the developing learner

In Part III we tried to make a convincing practical case for EP both as a way of bringing to life our Five Propositions about learners and as a principled form of inclusive practitioner research. But is EP overall a satisfactory research model for better understanding the developing learner?

EP originated in the early 1990s, in an attempt to help bridge the teacher–researcher gap, and to help teachers resist burnout. Despite our early interest in learner development, the focus was squarely on teachers, especially with regard to the threat of burnout. So, initially, EP was primarily a research model to help teachers find teaching more interesting and fulfilling. The relatively recent focus on fully including learners is belated recognition that they had always been central, and were already contributing much more comprehensively than we had previously recognised. So now we evaluate EP not primarily as a way of avoiding burnout, and not only as a research model for teachers wanting to develop their understandings of language learning and of learner development, but also, and especially, for learners who want to develop those understandings for themselves.

But on what basis can such things be evaluated?

In Part II we argued that the traditional third-party research model would not meet our needs. Even practitioner research risked marginalising learners, we argued, and so was unsatisfactory both for furthering our general understanding of the learners' role in classroom language learning and for developing understandings in a way that actually helps learners develop as learners – our twin purposes for a research model. We also wanted a model that would help us deal with the ethical issues arising from research being a social enterprise, not just an intellectual one, and with the epistemological issue of who needs to develop understandings. In short, we wanted a research model that would bring to life our Five Propositions about learners. We proposed a fully inclusive model of practitioner research, based on seven principles.

In Chapters 12–14 we set out the practical implications and possibilities of our inclusive model, as it has been developed since 1990, enough to show, we believe, that EP does indeed promise to meet our requirements, in practice as well as in principle. But there are still some important issues to consider.

First, are we right to emphasise principles over practices? We do so because, after years of a primarily technicist approach to research, ethical and epistemological issues are now urgently in need of attention. Quite fortuitously, attending to them seems itself to help people think about how exactly they want to conduct their 'explorations', to give them ideas for investigative activities, and so on. As we saw in Chapter 10, when Zhang chose group work as an investigative activity, she was prompted by perceiving that she had to go beyond technical matters and prioritise EP's first two principles: quality of classroom life and understanding.

But is it too much to expect that the principles will suffice without a precise specification of recommended practices? Perhaps, but we see hope:

- in the wealth of practical examples we have provided;
- in the fact that they present experience ‘in the round’, rather than extracted and divorced from the complexity of their settings;
- and in the very collegiality that promises to bring people together to work out their own particular investigative practices.

People may wish nevertheless to start with the standard works on classroom research in general and practitioner research in particular. We feel strongly, however, that the substantial new learning these involve constitutes an additional workload that may threaten long-term sustainability. Reflecting the traditional third-party-ness of even some practitioner research, their practical suggestions may also make it difficult to imagine truly inclusive ways of working. We would rather encourage teachers and learners to get involved, from their own perspectives as practitioners of teaching and learning, and to develop their own ways of working, and, most especially, of understanding. If they find that unsatisfactory because they lack confidence in their capabilities, we hope they will appeal to others to help them develop, perhaps initially by borrowing freely from our examples. In Rio the structure is already there to give both teachers and learners strong collegial support. Elsewhere it may need to be developed, via more teacher/learner groups or by more people joining the wider EP community via our website (see Part IV for this and other possibilities), and seeking help there.

But is EP good research?

This all depends on what is meant by ‘research’ and how its quality is assessed. It is easy to imagine professional researchers not finding learners’ posters at all convincing as ‘research’ (see Part IV, Resource 7 below). It is equally easy to imagine practitioners creating a ‘cosy’ classroom world for themselves where premature understandings go unquestioned because nobody is pushed to think very hard. Unsatisfactory as such complacency is, ultimately we think it is preferable to a world in which teachers and learners are so convinced that research is strictly for the ‘experts’ that they do not even start trying to think and understand for themselves. More positively, ‘cosiness’ is unlikely to appeal strongly for long, if we are right about learners. Trust them, involve them fully, and

they will encourage each other, and their teachers, to think as well as they possibly can.

Evaluating EP as a form of pedagogy

Does EP ask too much of beginning teachers?

This is a crucial issue for us. Our answer is ‘perhaps’, but unless we try, we risk beginning teachers seeing research (and understanding) as something other people do for them, or at best as something they may eventually do for themselves, but only at the cost of a lot of extra work. So why not help teachers incorporate the ideas right at the beginning of their careers? Inés Miller’s pioneering work with beginning teachers in Rio has shown us (Case Study 15.2) how what we advocated in Chapter 5 might be done, viewing her teacher-learners as our Five Propositions see them, and using EP as the pedagogic model for her teaching practice course (see also Allwright, forthcoming; Allwright and Miller, 2007). So, yes, it asks a lot, but it is worth doing, and it can be done.

Does EP ask too much of people under strict curricular control?

Teachers under strong pressure to cover the curriculum may well feel they cannot possibly fit in anything else. In practice, though, we have seen that very little space may be needed – perhaps virtually none, if simply choosing a puzzle as a discussion topic can suffice. So again, EP may appear to ask a lot, but that need not prevent anyone from getting started, in however small a way.

But is EP good pedagogy?

For those who believe pedagogy is only ‘good’ to the extent that it produces high test scores, we have no evidence one way or the other. Our view of education is broader and we believe richer. EP can help make time spent in class to be more enjoyable, and so enhance both learner and teacher motivation. Participants also report finding EP a good use of class time in learning terms. It also helps people develop understandings, both intellectual and empathetic, as practitioners of teaching and learning. So it can serve both pedagogic and research aims, integrating them productively, rather than compromising either.

Does EP make any special contribution to pedagogy?

Our original ambition, in 1990, was that EP would help jaded teachers rediscover their interest in teaching. That happened, but it brought a

significant discovery: too that EP could help develop trust between teachers and learners. If teachers like our Five Propositions but find it hard to believe their learners are like that, then trust is key to making them come true. Teachers need to trust learners, even if such trust seems hopelessly optimistic. But trust is a two-way matter. In our final extract from Bebel's interviews, three learners talk about their 2004 poster, *Why do we have homework?* made when they were in sixth grade (11–12 year olds):

Interview with learners 15.5 Bebel, Lucas Lombardi, Pedro Baulman and Lucas Souto

Lucas Lombardi: *What helped us do this kind of work was the fact that we did it in Claudia's class and we like her very much. She helped us, she didn't criticise us when we chose this topic. She did not think we wanted to look at homework to make fun of the topic, and that we would make fun of the subject. It's a topic that many students had tried to talk about, but teachers did not help or back them up.*

Pedro Baulman: *This work would not have happened if Claudia had not helped and understood us.*

Lucas Souto: *She didn't think the questions were ridiculous or funny. She understood that it was something serious and important for us, for the teachers and for those who would see it.*

The relationship was already good in Claudia Bolsoni's class, but in Chapter 12 we saw how the poor teacher–learner relationship in Ana Paula's class changed after EP work:

Quote 15.8 Ana Paula on relationships

... they seem to have reflected upon the qualities that I have and since then, they have been a lot closer to me than they used to be. That image of the 'very serious teacher who is all work and no play' seems to have vanished and I am happy with it.

(Case Study 12.2, pp. 187–8)

Trust breeds trust.

Case study 15.5 A question of trust

Another Brazilian teacher, Rute Siqueiros, trusted her learners enough to ask them to help her understand their behaviour. She discovered the importance of their trusting her when she used EP to investigate her puzzle: *Why do some students insist on speaking Portuguese in class?*

Rute's story

I didn't have much time, just two months, but the little I did was enough to show me students are capable of developing as practitioners of learning.

I found out they sometimes didn't have the confidence to keep speaking English all the time and that they would like the teacher to help them and remind them of that. I also found out that if they don't trust the teacher, they don't take risks. It's such a great effort, they need someone to monitor them and someone to share the same effort.

In the following classes they started to make that effort. They couldn't speak English all the time, but I could feel they were trying. I kept using the 'No Portuguese' reminder and they started observing one another. I was amazed sometimes at how well they could speak and one of them developed a weird strategy. Whenever she wanted to speak Portuguese because she didn't know the English words, she would say, 'Oh my God'. She kept saying 'Oh my God' through a whole class, but she didn't once speak Portuguese.

Trust between teachers is also important, and can be fostered by engaging in EP, as we saw earlier.

Quote 15.9 The Rio EP Group on trust

Trust is built on the agreement that for our group presentations we can count on each other's thinking and on-the-spot contributions. We can confidently present each other's posters, relying on our shared understandings.

(excerpt from Chapter 14, p. 230)

But, the final question: is EP sustainable?

EP did not develop itself. People developed it and are developing it – remarkable people perhaps, teachers and learners who inspire each other to keep going. Tihago dos Santos Simões, one of Walewska's students, is one such learner.

Case Study 15.6 Life gets in the way!

Tihago's family moved within Rio, he had to get a job and eventually he was no longer able to get to Walewska's school.

Tihago's story, told by Walewska and Solange

Walewska: I was worried because he started missing classes. He said he had moved to Rio das Pedras [a poor community in Barra da Tijuca] and he was working. He had to face a long trip to get to school in Leme.

At the end of the year he told me he would go to a school near his home. It was sad to know I was not going to see one of my pioneer EP students any more. I told him about Solange's school in Barra. But I could not guarantee there was a place for him there.

But he talked his way into the school where Solange Fish was working, not close to home, but nearer than Walewska's. Solange takes up the story:

Solange: I found Tihago in my 803 class in 2005. On the first day of school I asked my former students to introduce me to the new students. They said I loved theatre, I was fond of Shakespeare and one student said I liked Exploratory Practice. What a surprise! Then I noticed Tihago's presence. I already knew him from our EP events and it was very nice having in a class a student committed to EP. I asked him to talk to the class about EP. He explained to the group that EP was 'a work students and teachers do when they want to understand a question that emerges in the classroom'. Trying to be more precise he gave as an example the investigation of his puzzle Why do we find maths so difficult to learn? Later during the break the maths teacher of the class mentioned Tihago as a student who participated well in class.

And it was Friday, EP day at PUC. I could hardly wait to tell the news...

Walewska: Solange and I reflected on Tihago's story and we noticed the importance of EP in the lives of our students. As multipliers we have been presenting the way we live EP in events and meetings at schools, courses and universities in Brazil and abroad.

Tihago chose a school in Barra da Tijuca (not exactly close to home) at his teacher's suggestion because he would like to give continuity to his work of reflection on his questions. We have been so busy we had not time to see EP growing in our gardens.

The presence of such people cannot be taken for granted. In fact, Tihago soon had to move away from Rio altogether.

Walewska: Unfortunately, at the end of the year, Tihago's mother sent him back to his family in Pará [in northern Brazil] and we lost contact.

As we believe EP is indefinitely sustainable, we are sure Tihago is an EP multiplier, wherever he is.

But if we cannot guarantee the presence of such remarkable people, what hope is there? First, EP may actually help people be 'remarkable', because it does not ask people to do something that is inherently unsustainable.

Our optimism grows when we consider EP in the light of experiences around the world. From his own considerable professional experience, and from surveying a wide range of reports of language education in development contexts (Kenny and Savage, 1997), Savage writes that sustainable development work is:

- change-oriented,
- experiential,
- pro-autonomy,
- collaborative and
- communicative (1997: 283).

These 'five notable characteristics' (ibid.) will help us establish the inherent sustainability of EP.

'Change-oriented'

EP is primarily about understanding, not change. Claiming now that it is nevertheless 'change-oriented' requires some justification. EP's attitude to change is complex. We certainly oppose change for change's sake, and argue instead that by prioritising understanding over change, EP becomes, as we have seen, an agent for profound and lasting change (see also Part IV, 9). Savage (1997: 289–91) relates his 'change-orientation' to the sort of flexibility the Rio EP Group discussed in Chapter 14, and that we see more generally in EP practice – an openness to change that arises from a willingness to try to understand, and to use one's understandings to guide future behaviour.

'Experiential'

For Savage (1997: 293–6), good practice must be grounded in the experiences of the practitioners themselves. Echoing Kohonen's (2001b) 'experiential learning', and even Aristotle's *phronesis*, perhaps, he writes that being experiential 'is about generating rather than disseminating knowledge' (1997: 293). This is natural for EP, where practitioners generate their own understandings of their experiences.

'Pro-autonomy'

Savage quotes Crabbe (1993: 444) to insist that 'the aim of fostering autonomy ... must "pervade the whole curricular system and not simply be an occasional part of it"' (Savage, 1997: 297). Even though we may rarely use the term autonomy itself, EP encourages practitioner autonomy in basing the entire curriculum on EP principles and practices, in a context of fundamental interdependence among all. As for Savage, autonomy does not just mean individual independence for a few bold teachers.

'Collaborative'

This fundamental interdependence is at the heart of EP's support for a collaborative relationship among all practitioners. Our central concern for collegiality, a quality that runs throughout our stories, goes beyond Savage's recognition of the value of 'collegial contexts' (1997: 303).

'Communicative'

Noting that communication problems abound, Savage writes about the importance of '[o]pening channels of communication' (1997: 310). Again,

our stories (especially Ana Paula's and Aline's – Case Studies 12.2 and 12.4) show how EP opens up channels between teachers and their learners.

Savage's 'notable characteristics' may permeate EP, but they offer no guarantees. They do reinforce our claim, however, that EP is designed for sustainability, through its principles.

Seven principles for inclusive practitioner research

The 'what' issues

1. Focus on *quality of life* as the fundamental issue.
2. Work to *understand* it, before thinking about solving problems.

The 'who' issues

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.

The 'how' issues

6. Make it a *continuous* enterprise.
7. *Minimise the burden* by integrating the work for understanding into normal pedagogic practice.

Curricular integration (6 and 7) offers the best hope of maintaining control of the workload and so keeping things going indefinitely. The emphases on inclusivity, collegiality and mutual development (3, 4 and 5) also help foster continued engagement, because they encourage the notion of a common enterprise. Finally, focusing on understanding rather than measurable improvement, and on life issues rather than technical ones (1 and 2), further humanises the experience. That may not only help more people *be* 'remarkable', but also to enjoy it. As Walewska writes:

It's not doing something new, but understanding what we already do. And this gives us a lot of pleasure.

Part IV

Sources and Resources for Inclusive Practitioner Research

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Sources and Resources

We have two main sections in Part IV: sources and resources. ‘Sources’ are places to go to for more information and ideas that will feed an interest in our sort of inclusive practitioner research. Because there is relatively little that directly addresses our particular concerns, let alone addresses learners, we have added a selection of ‘resources’. These are items, including classroom materials, that can be photocopied and used directly by teachers and/or learners to pursue that interest in practice. We hope this book will encourage teachers and learners (especially) to enrich the sources and resources by contributing some of their own, perhaps via the EP website: <http://www.letras.puc-rio.br/epcentre>.

Most of our ‘sources’ are addressed to teachers, which is a pity, but is hardly surprising. We would like to see more for learners, but are conscious that in the nature of things we as teachers are less likely to know about them, and in any case they are likely to be ephemeral and local, like the inter-school virtual forum in Chapter 15. This is no problem, except for compilers of lists. Here we can only encourage learners to get on with doing whatever it suits them to do, like Joanne Chuk’s students in Hong Kong who independently discovered the value of Xanga.com, and perhaps let us know so that we can encourage others.

Our ‘resources’ are items that can be used directly as classroom materials, and include four short, unpublished, pieces that Dick Allwright has written over the years for use as discussion starters for teacher and/or learner groups. They develop issues from the main text that deserve further, and continuing, attention.

Sources

Books

Rather than being simply a selection of the specialist texts we have recommended at the ends of chapters, these books have been chosen to provide background for an interest in our sort of inclusive practitioner

research. They may never mention it, but most of them nevertheless point the way towards taking learners and learning seriously, as well as teachers and teaching.

Ashworth, M. 1985 *Beyond Methodology: Second Language Teaching and the Community*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press. Ashworth reminds us powerfully that involvement in the community is a major resource for language teaching and learning.

Breen, M. P. (ed.) 2001 *Learner Contributions to Language Learning*. Harlow, Longman. This volume foregrounds the social side of language learning, resonating with our Five Propositions, and suggests ways of researching learner contributions.

Falcão, A. and M. Szesztay (eds) 2006 *Developing an Association for Language Teachers: An Introductory handbook*. Third edition. Canterbury, IATEFL. Based on a 1988 Lancaster University original, this handbook distinguishes usefully throughout between informal and formal associations.

Freire, P. 1972 *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Harmondsworth, Penguin Books. A key text for furthering understanding of participatory approaches to education not only in Brazil, but everywhere.

Gieve, S. and I. K. Miller (eds) 2006 *Understanding the Language Classroom*. Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan. This has been a direct source for our book. It deals with which includes crucial conceptual issues such as collegial development, quality of life, understanding and complexity in the classroom.

Hamilton, J. 1995 *Inspiring Innovations in Language Teaching*. Clevedon, Multilingual Matters. This book cheers you up! It shows that there are people out there doing interesting things in difficult circumstances.

Holliday, A. 2002 *Designing and Writing Qualitative Research*. London, Sage. Although not concerned with an inclusive practitioner research perspective, Holliday provides a thoughtful approach to thinking about research, focusing on the importance of research writing.

Murphey, T. and K. Sato (eds) 2005 *Communities of Supportive Professionals*. Waldorf, MD, TESOL. Good for strategies for participating in and cultivating collaborative teacher learning communities.

Richards, K. 2003 *Qualitative Inquiry in TESOL*. Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan. Richards offers a wide-ranging introduction to research skills for teachers, though, like Holliday, from a third-party research perspective.

- Rubin, J. and I. Thompson 1982 *How to be a More Successful Language Learner*. Boston, MA, Heinle and Heinle. This book is the only one here that directly addresses learners. It does so with helpful ideas about classroom language learning in brief accessible chapters.
- Stevick, E.W. 1976, 1996 *Memory Meaning and Method: Some Psychological Perspectives on Language Learning*. Rowley, MA, Newbury House.
- Stevick, E.W. 1980 *Teaching Languages: A Way and Ways*. Rowley, MA, Newbury House.
- Stevick, E.W. 1989 *Success with Foreign Languages: Seven who Achieved it and What Worked for Them*. New York, Prentice Hall. In these three highly influential books Stevick offers a thoughtful and often deeply personal account of language learning, emphasizing the relationship between teachers and learners.
- Tarone, E. and G. Yule 1989 *Focus on the Language Learner: Approaches to Identifying and Meeting the Needs of Second Language Learners*. Oxford, Oxford University Press. The subtitle says it all! Despite the focus on teachers rather than learners, we found this book inspiring because it places understanding at the centre and emphasises flexibility and responding to local context.
- Tudor, I. 2001 *The Dynamics of the Language Classroom*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press. A good, if teacher-focused, source for thinking that fits well with our Seven Principles, Tudor's 'ecological perspective' recognises the essential complexity of the interdependent and highly interactive relations between teachers and learners.

Journals

Applied Linguistics

<http://applij.oupjournals.org/>

This highly specialised journal offers articles on a wide range of applied linguistics topics. See particularly special issues 24/3, 2003 on 'Researching the Discourses of Workplace Practice', and 27/4, 2006 on 'Language Emergence'.

Educational Action Research

www.tandf.co.uk/journals/titles/09650792.asp

From its beginnings in 1993 this journal has been interested in fostering a thoughtful approach to Action Research.

ELT Journal

<http://eltj.oxfordjournals.org>

This journal has the advantage of being written mainly by teachers currently engaged in teaching, and so may be of interest to those who wish to find out what teachers are thinking about and researching in their classrooms.

English Teaching Professional

<http://www.etprofessional.com>

A practical journal full of ideas for classroom activities for practising teachers.

Essential Teacher

<http://www.tesol.org/et/>

The TESOL association's practitioners' journal, with an interest in research matters.

European English Messenger

<http://www.essenglish.org>

A newsletter for teachers that learners might like to contribute to.

Language Teaching Research

<http://ltr.sagepub.com>

Each issue carries a practitioner research article. See also 7/2, 2003, entirely devoted to Exploratory Practice.

Mindbite

E-mail: contact@aplierj.com.br

The Journal of the Rio de Janeiro State Association of English Language Teachers (APLIERJ). Particularly good for coverage of EP, and a good example of a local newsletter.

Modern English Teacher

<http://www.onlinemet.com>

A practical journal with a focus on professional development in English language teaching.

Modern Language Journal

<http://polyglot.lss.wisc.edu/mlj>

See particularly 89/3, 2005, on Methodology, Epistemology, and Ethics in Instructed SLA Research.

System

<http://www.elsevier.com/locate/system/>

This highly specialized journal offers a range of articles on theoretical and practical topics in applied linguistics. Watch for occasional special issues.

TESL-EJ

<http://tesl-ej.org>

An electronic fully refereed journal for teachers of English. Valuable for reviews.

TESOL Quarterly

<http://www.tesol.org>

The TESOL association's scholarly journal. See particularly 33/3, 1999, Critical Approaches to TESOL.

Websites

A good number of the websites listed below are, happily, either for learners or have sections specifically for them. Some are directed at professionals, and especially at people interested in joining, or setting up, an association.

Aardvark Forum

<http://www.englishforum.com>

A website with resources for learners and teachers of English, with a useful message board for anyone wanting to discuss learning.

Associates Website

<http://www.dudeney.com/iatefl/associates>

Good for information about associates of IATEFL, and for an electronic version of IATEFL's teacher association handbook.

Collaborative Action Research Network

<http://www.carn.mmu.ac.uk>

A major UK-based networking organisation for Action Researchers.

Dave's ESL Cafe

www.eslcafe.com

A popular website with a forum for learners to discuss learning, among other things.

Dogme

<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/dogme>

Dogme advocates 'a pedagogy of bare essentials', with lessons developed from immediately available resources, not published textbooks.

Edublogs

<http://learnerblogs.org/>

Billed as the 'largest educational blogsite on the web', this has a special section for English language students.

Education Guardian

<http://education.guardian.co.uk/tefl>

News, articles and resources for English language teachers, of interest to learners too.

Exploratory Practice

<http://www.letras.puc-rio.br/epcentre>

How could we not recommend our very own website? This bilingual (English and Portuguese) website offers a goldmine of information, articles and photographs of learners and teachers involved in EP.

ELTeCS – English Language Teaching Contacts Scheme

<http://www.britishcouncil.org/eltecs>

This British Council-run website offers news and views from teachers worldwide. Useful for information about language teacher associations worldwide.

FanFiction.Net

<http://fanfiction.net/>

A wide-ranging website with forums for people who want to improve their writing skills and share their experiences.

The Linguist

<http://linguistlist.com>

A website run by Eastern Michigan and Wayne State Universities, it includes chatrooms, etc, for language learners.

Speaking Skills

<http://www.toastmasters.org>

An example of an international organisation devoted to helping people develop their public speaking skills in English as a first or second language.

Teaching English

<http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk>

A practical website run by the British Council and the BBC World Service, for teachers.

Webheads in Action

<http://www.webheads.info>

A website for communities of practice of teachers and educators.

www.xanga.com

This is one of many websites set up and used by learners and teachers alike (though mainly learners), in which they discuss issues relevant to their own lives.

Yahoo Groups

<http://groups.yahoo.com>

A way of setting up an interactive online group of learners and/or teachers.

Associations and conferences

There is less for learners and more for teachers here. We list the largest and most international, but strongly recommend that teachers and learners should also check the internet for local associations (see websites list, or set one up for themselves, see Falcão and Szesztay, 2006; Murphey and Sato, 2005)

AAAL (American Association for Applied Linguistics)

<http://www.aaal.org/>

Runs an important annual conference that attracts many of the scholars quoted in this volume.

AILA (Association Internationale de Linguistique Appliquée)

<http://www.aila.info/>

Not an association for individual members, but providers of a regular newsletter and a conference every four years in different parts of the world that welcomes poster presentations.

BAAL (British Association of Applied Linguists)

<http://www.baal.org/>

Good links and publications as well as conferences and other professional meetings.

BALEAP (British Association of Lecturers in English for Academic Purposes)

www.baleap.org.uk

This is a specialist organisation, with an annual conference and other events for staff working in higher education in the UK, providing language support to international students.

Exploratory Practice Events

<http://www.letas.puc-rio.br/epcentre>

Check it for news of the annual EP Event, a Rio conference for teachers and learners involved in EP.

<http://www.kobeinst.com>

After the successful EP-related conference there in spring 2007, watch for news of future events.

IATEFL (International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language)

www.iatefl.org

We particularly recommend the following Special Interest Groups (SIG) for interesting discussions with contributions from practitioners in the field as well as academics: Global Issues; Learner Autonomy; Research; Teacher Development; Teacher Trainers and Educators. IATEFL's large annual conference is usually in the UK, in springtime. There are also events worldwide.

Independent Learning Association

www.independentlearning.org

An association for professionals, rather than learners founded in 2003 with a conference every two years (so far in Australia, New Zealand, and Japan).

JALT (Japan Association of language Teachers)

www.jalt.org

Japanese association for teachers of English with SIGs, resources for teachers, and annual conferences in Japan.

LEND (Lingua e Nuova Didattica)

www.lend.it

A very active organisation for language teachers in Italy. There is also a LEND-Europa.

TESOL (Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages)

www.tesol.org

Another international teacher association. Offers publications, resources, interest sections (like IATEFL's SIGs), large regular annual conferences, and many other events around the world. For information about TESOL's Interest Sections see www.tesol.org/s_tesol/seccss.asp?CID=420&DID=2048

Resources

These could all be used by learners and/or teachers for classroom activities or in discussion groups. We start with a highly imaginative poster, and include more of Cherchalli's data and Judith Hanks' puzzles. The last four are brief statements written over the years by Dick Allwright to prompt discussion among practitioners about lines of argument they may like to consider in reaction to the main challenges that we have faced over the years.

1. *Are we champions? What for? Why?* Part of a whole-wall display at the 2003 Rio event
2. A photograph of people at a Rio EP event poster
3. An open letter to learners
4. More extracts from Cherchalli's diary and interview data
5. More puzzles collected from learners by Judith Hanks
6. Why should practitioners get involved in research at all?
7. Isn't EP just an excuse for sloppy research?
8. Surely the classroom is about 'work', not 'life'
9. Is EP against change?

1 Are we champions?

Against the background of Brazil's renowned prowess at football, Rio children explore what it means to be a 'champion'. Practitioners might like to relate this to the issue of competitiveness in classroom language learning. The display could also encourage others to be equally imaginative.



Photo IV.1 Are we champions? What for? Why? Part of a whole-wall poster display at The 2003 Rio EP Event

2 A picture to discuss

What's happening here? We like this picture for what it says to us, but we leave it open for you to interpret as you wish.



Photo IV.2

3 An open letter to classroom language learners

Dick Allwright wrote this originally for a teacher in Malaysia who wanted to get her learners interested in exploring their learning lives. The letter has since been revised for use in Denmark, and now again for this volume. It ends with practical ideas for getting started on EP, perhaps using the next two classroom resources: a set of learners' comments about their language learning lives, and a set of initial puzzles from learners.

WHO I AM AND WHAT I AM TRYING TO DO

I am a retired university teacher trying to understand life in the language classroom – the sort of life you lead every day in your language lessons. I am trying to understand it mostly because I think it is very difficult to be a good classroom language learner (and it's very difficult to be a good classroom language teacher, too!). But the people who really need to understand it better are yourselves as learners, and your teachers as teachers. That is because it is you who have to live the classroom life that I find so interesting, and so *your* need to understand it is clearly more urgent than mine. (In any case I am now retired, so it's a little late for me!)

I want teachers and learners to enjoy classroom life more, and perhaps in that way also make their lessons more satisfying. If people understand better what they are doing, then they will get more enjoyment out of it. And if people get more enjoyment out of understanding lessons, then they will probably get more from the whole experience as well.

For nearly twenty years now I have been working with people in a number of countries, but mostly people in Rio de Janeiro in Brazil, to try to find ways of *using* classroom lessons to better understand classroom lessons. Our starting point is people's 'puzzles'.

The things that puzzle learners

Do you ever wonder *why* life in the language classroom is the way it is? Are there things that happen that you do not understand? For example, a lot of language learners around the world feel that teachers never explain exercises enough. So they don't really know why they are doing any particular exercise. One secondary school learner in Algeria, some years ago, told Safya Cherchalli (a doctoral research student of mine at the time):

I have no idea why were doing this kind of exercise! I know that teachers always have some idea in mind, but I don't know which one.

(I should tell you here that this learner, like the others quoted here, is anonymous, so I can't thank him or her for it, and secondly, all these quotations have been translated by Safya Cherchalli from the original French or Arabic.)

Also, a lot of learners don't understand why it is so very difficult to ask questions during language lessons, although they know it would be a good idea to ask a question when there is something they don't understand. Another of Safya's learners said:

Sometimes I feel like asking the teacher a question, but just realising that perhaps the rest of the class understand, I hesitate.

And yet another, even more frustrated, learner said:

Sometimes I only understand a lesson after having exhausted the teacher and my classmates.

I think it would help us all if we understood better why this sort of thing happens in language lessons. Here's another sad quote:

I'll never forget today and the shame I felt. Everything started when the English teacher asked me to read a few sentences on the blackboard. In one of them there was the word 'knives' and when reading it I pronounced the 'k'. I knew I shouldn't have pronounced it but I did it inadvertently. At that moment I saw all my classmates laughing surreptitiously. They thought I hadn't seen them but I had and I shall never forget it.

I hope this sort of thing doesn't happen to you, but you can imagine how humiliating it must have been.

What you can do with such puzzles

After this letter there are many more quotations from Safya's learners. If you find them interesting, why not ask your teacher to try to find some class time to talk about them? This is my suggestion for classroom activities.

1. Get into small groups of not more than four people. Each group should have the list of quotations, but preferably only one copy per group, to make sure you work together.
2. Look for quotations that you sympathise or identify with, and would willingly work with a bit longer.
3. Add your own thoughts about classroom life.
4. Produce a short list of the most interesting 'puzzles' on a group poster.
5. Have a whole-class discussion on all the posters, to see if any one puzzle interests most people.
6. In another lesson you could then spend a little time working on the chosen puzzle, to see how far each group can get in understanding it better. Remember, if the puzzle represents a problem, try to *understand* it before thinking about how to solve it.
7. The groups could then produce new posters, or perhaps even little essays (if you don't mind writing essays), which again everyone could discuss.

8. After all that work think about taking your posters to other classes to see if that gets other people interested and brings in more ideas to help you develop your understandings.

If anyone worries that you might waste important lesson time on all this, you could promise to try to use English for it, to get good language practice while you're also developing your understandings of language classroom life.

You, and your teachers, may wonder where all this might lead. If you write to me (r.allwright@lancaster.ac.uk) I will put you in touch with teachers and learners, mostly in Rio de Janeiro, who have been doing it for years. We call it Exploratory Practice because we like the idea of people exploring the life they are living every day, in and between lessons. We have a special Exploratory Practice website at www.letras.puc-rio.br/epcentre.

My very best wishes for your classroom language learning.

Dick Allwright
Lancaster, England.

PS: Remember: this is supposed to be enjoyable. If it's boring, stop doing it!

4 More extracts from Cherchalli's diary and interview data

The informants in Safya Cherchalli's 1988 doctoral study for Lancaster University were more than 100 Algerian students in their last years of secondary education. This selection is by Dick Allwright.

Important note

If you use these extracts, *please make absolutely sure* that you acknowledge Dr Cherchalli as the researcher who collected and translated them.

1. I would like the marks to be given less importance so that we concentrate on learning.
2. Sometimes I feel like asking the teacher a question, but just realising that perhaps the rest of the class understand, I hesitate.
3. I try to speak even if what I say is meaningless.
4. I have no idea why we're doing this kind of exercise! I know that teachers always have some idea in mind but I don't know which one!
5. Sometimes I only understand a lesson after having exhausted the teacher and my classmates.
6. When the bell rings the teacher rushes to give homework. She says: do this exercise and this and that, but she doesn't explain what the exercises are all about, what we're supposed to do, etc.

7. Ah! A teacher is a teacher...they're made to make trouble for us!
8. We try to understand the words and that's all. For example, when the teacher explains the lesson, well...I don't seek to understand the lesson I seek to understand the words and that's it...I normally translate.
9. The teacher didn't want to ask me today, perhaps because I'm not good at expressing myself properly.
10. If one day a student happens to miss a word, another day he won't understand a whole sentence, and then it will be a whole paragraph. OK, you can tell us that the students must ask the teacher for whatever explanation but OK, once, twice, often and the teacher will get [very fed up].
11. When the teacher is giving explanations my heart beats strongly and I keep saying to myself: 'It's going to be my turn now'.
12. Something bothers me: when I have the answers the teacher does not ask me, but when I don't know the answer the teacher asks me. It is as if she does it on purpose.
13. The teacher should not question the students. It would be better if the students chose to participate when they want to.
14. Sometimes we're blocked by a word. While we're thinking about it the teacher goes on talking about other things and we can no longer follow so we switch off.
15. I wanted so much to be asked, so it's a pity I didn't get that chance. I was very hurt because the teacher often ignores me when I raise my hand. I don't know whether she does it on purpose. I can't tell.
16. If I don't write either I keep quiet or I say catastrophes.
17. In class, for the marks, I prefer what is easy, but to learn I'd rather have those complex exercises.
18. When I work in a group my friends help me, encourage me, but when I'm alone I'm lost.
19. Sometimes the teacher offended me but I just quickly forgot all about it because as far as I'm concerned English is an entertainment.
20. I don't know why I blush when the teacher calls on me, and of course I don't know what to say. Yet my teacher is very good and very nice, but...
21. The group does not work. It's me who contributes all the ideas. I prefer to work by myself to better concentrate...I learn more that way.

22. The teacher says: don't worry about the mistakes. But how can we speak well if we don't know the tenses?

5 More puzzles collected from learners by Judith Hanks

Learners might like to see and discuss these (as well as the 14 in Chapter 12) to help them get started. Teachers could use them much as Judith did for Case Study 12.3 (although she started with even more). Learners might like to use them as suggested in Resource 3, instead of or in addition to Cherchalli's set.

NB: the puzzles have *not* been edited for their linguistic accuracy.

Learner puzzles

1. Why do some students fail in English test even though their ability in class exercises is almost high? It's a problem of time? It's a matter of emotion? It's a matter to feel themselves judged?
2. Why sometimes student, especially who don't good speak English, are not talking?
3. Why do I cannot catch what the most local English people said except Judith?
4. Why do I feel like learning more every time I attend English class?
5. Why so few hours of English class? I would like to have more hours.
6. Why the students are bored in class?
7. Why do I sometimes understand quite well and sometimes I find difficult, despite I speak with the same person?
8. Why does it seem that I can only remember an English word when I know how to write it (but not every time ...)?
9. Why can some students correct spell the word but write get it wrong?
10. Why don't some students do their homework?
11. Why do most of our students hate writing activities?
12. What should I do to practise my speaking for there are so many people from my own country and I have no chance to speak English?
13. Why don't you remember the new words when you have just learned a few minutes ago?
14. Why do some teachers think only to teach to improve the accuracy level of their students and not the fluency?

15. Why do I can't speak like I want to say?
16. Why some teachers have no enough patient to explain us the themes 'slowly'. Have they tried to learn another language in a foreign country?
17. Why one days can I speak/understand better than other days?
18. Why some teachers have not time after the lecture to listen students' questions?

6 Why should practitioners get involved in research?

*Standard reasons for **teachers** to get involved*

1. Getting involved in research is valuable as an apprenticeship, so that teachers will be able to conduct satisfactory academic research projects alongside their teaching work.
2. It will enable teachers to improve their pedagogy, because through their own research projects they will find out empirically what works for them and will be able to reproduce it as appropriate.
3. It will also help teachers understand and thus take wisely from academic researchers' publications.

*Own preferred reasons, for **all** practitioners*

1. Because it is a part of being a practitioner to try to understand what you are doing and what its effects may be for yourself and for those you are doing it with.
2. Because it is the key to being intellectually alive as a practitioner, which can make an otherwise highly stressful situation not only tolerable but actually stimulating.
3. Because it promises to be the best way for language learning and teaching to move towards a more extensive knowledge base for its decision-making. We cannot expect outsiders to have all the ideas.

Dick Allwright
(adapted from a 1992 text)

7 Isn't EP just an excuse for sloppy research?

I am prepared to accept that much of what practitioners are likely to do under the heading of Exploratory Practice will be seen by outsiders to

be 'sloppy', at least in the first instance, and in the senses that:

- a) it is not apparently well done 'technically', by the standards of 'academic' researchers, and
- b) it is not apparently the product of well-honed critical consciousnesses.

But I see the EP process as itself formative and as naturally prompting a demand, on the part of the practitioners themselves, for help in improving the technical quality of their explorations, and, even more importantly in my view, in improving the level of critical rigour they bring to their thinking about these explorations.

I see this formative process as being more effective in the long run, though no doubt requiring considerable patience, than the 'traditional' approach of trying to teach technical quality and intellectual rigour BEFORE establishing a personally-felt need for them.

I also see that a profession in which everyone is doing research as part of their practice, but some of which research is 'sloppy' (at least by outsiders' standards), is preferable to a profession in which no research is getting done except by outsiders, or by insiders who see it as essentially separate from their 'real' work.

I hold this view primarily from my interest in general practitioner development, rather than from my otherwise equally strong interest in the overall research enterprise of 'increasing the sum total of human knowledge', but I would still hold out the hope that a healthy profession in which research and pedagogy are being actively combined (in the sense intended in 'exploratory practice') will in the long run be the sort of profession in which it is easier for the general research enterprise to flourish.

The key mechanism I am relying on is that of practitioners realising for themselves that they need help, from each other and/or from 'consultants', if they are to really get a feeling of understanding what is going on in their own classrooms.

That is in large part why I advocate starting with 'puzzles' rather than with 'problems': because it can be expected to be that much easier to share 'puzzles' than 'problems' (since sharing a puzzle does not imply admitting to a deficiency in the way that sharing a problem may).

I am then expecting that this natural sharing of so far inadequately understood puzzles will itself lead to an increase in critical awareness, as more minds bend to each particular task of understanding.

I am also hoping and expecting that this sharing spirit will spill over into public events such as conferences, which might then become places to share puzzlements rather than places to hear about others' achievements of certainty.

If all this happens, then the profession will already be a healthier one in which it may be more easily possible to combine practitioners' insights into an overall enlargement of the knowledge base for educational decision-making, which I take to be the equivalent of the classical academic research aim of 'increasing the sum total of human knowledge.

Dick Allwright

1992 (slightly edited)

8 Exploratory practice: rethinking 'life' and 'work'

1. I find it difficult to explain the distinction intended between 'work' and 'life' in our EP thinking. On the one hand, we seem to be making it a fundamental distinction, one which leads us to want to advocate focusing on 'quality of life', rather than on 'quality of work' – even if the context suggests that there is actually a 'quality of work' issue to be investigated. And yet, on the other hand, and at the same time, we seem to want to claim that making the life/work distinction is itself perhaps the source of our troubles.
2. I think some intermediate notions between 'life' and 'work' may help us make the point that we are not separating 'life' from 'work' but only trying to get our priorities right. The term 'work' is no longer needed, I find, and that in itself may be helpful.
3. I now see four conceptually separable but interrelated notions, which can perhaps best be visually represented by four embedded spaces, as below, representing levels of inclusiveness.

At the centre is the smallest space, set apart for the least important matter:

A. The quantity of *measurable efficiency*.

The next space is a considerably larger, to contain the more important notion of:

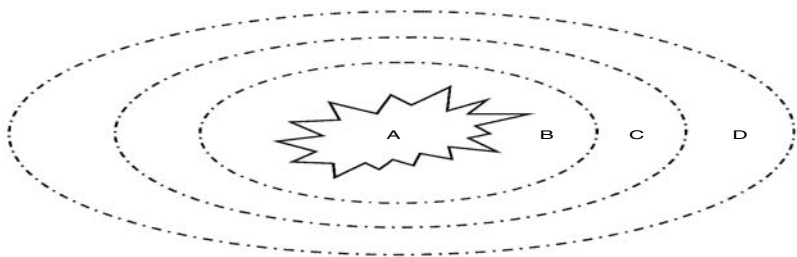
B. The quality of *learning*.

The third space is larger still, to reflect the even greater importance of:

C. The quality of *education*.

The largest space, including all the others, is given to the most important matter of all:

D. The quality of *life*.



The dotted lines represent the fact that the boundaries involved are seen to be permeable. The bold line around 'measurable efficiency' suggests, by contrast, a perhaps clearer boundary between 'measurable efficiency' and 'learning' (recall the learner who told Safya Cherchalli 'In class, for the marks, I prefer what is easy, but to learn I'd rather have those complex exercises'). The jagged shape suggests that the pursuit of 'measurable efficiency' may not sit comfortably with the pursuit of quality of learning, and may actually threaten it.

4. *Measurable efficiency* is now represented as the least of our concerns, then, but also as central. This ambiguity may serve us well, since whatever is 'in the centre' may naturally preoccupy us, but dealing with it in isolation from its surroundings may mislead us.

5. *Quality of learning* is now introduced as an inherently greater 'good' than 'measurable efficiency', and the bold boundary around 'measurable efficiency' may serve to remind us that *good learning* is not guaranteed by focusing on measurable efficiency. In practice the two may be commonly seen as mutually antagonistic – for example, when a focus on achieving examination success seems to be directly detrimental to more fundamental learning. Focussing on measurable efficiency in isolation, we might also argue, is unlikely to be successful even in its own terms.

6. *Quality of education* is introduced as an even greater good than quality of learning. The boundary between these two is represented as being permeable because we may hope that good *learning* (however we define the term), is a part of good 'education', and a good education will itself guarantee good 'learning'.

7. *Quality of life* is now represented as including all the others, even 'measurable efficiency', but the bold and jagged boundary around that 'hard centre' suggests, as already noted, that a narrow focus on 'measurable efficiency' may actually hinder reaching the 'higher' levels.

8. In summary, a fully adequate approach to understanding a situation (even if we hope ultimately to improve it) will need to take a broad view and be first and foremost concerned about the 'quality of life' currently experienced in that situation. Any restriction of the investigation to any of the less inclusive levels will inevitably lead to a less comprehensive understanding. In particular, trying to restrict the investigation to the lowest level, measurable efficiency, will run the risk of producing necessarily ill-understood 'solutions' that are likely to produce as many problems as they solve.

9. If, however, we start by focusing on the quality of *life* in a situation, we will naturally find ourselves also considering (in any *educational* setting) both the quality of *education* and the quality of *learning* there. Understanding these may then help us to deal helpfully with problems in the realm of 'measurable efficiency', if there are any.

10. As soon as we begin to consider other settings (medicine, law enforcement, etc.) we can quite easily imagine elements corresponding to the 'levels' suggested here. So we may be on to something of very general relevance.

Dick Allwright,
2002 (slightly edited)

9 Is EP against change?

1. NO, but it sometimes appears to be, because change is commonly associated with:

Problems of teaching effectiveness,
whose solutions are expected to come from
*teaching practice **changes**,*
reflecting the view that learning is primarily about
*quality of learning **work**.*

2. Whereas EP wants to be associated with:

Puzzles about learning,
whose resolution is expected to come from
*exploratory work for **understanding**,*
reflecting the view that learning is primarily about
*quality of learning **life**.*

3. So EP is actually promoting change—a fundamental shift in perspective, away from prioritising change to prioritising understanding.

Logically, understanding is closely related to change. It is difficult to justify changes in teaching practices, unless they are based on an understanding of:

- the problem that is held to require the changes,
- the proposed changes themselves, and
- the situation into which they are to be introduced.

Change proposals may well be based on expert understandings of the general educational situation, but, if they are to be successfully implemented, particular local understandings are required, not just general ones.

If such local understandings are developed they may:

- Indicate that the diagnosed problem
 - is not found in the local situation,
 - is found but not precisely as expected,
 - is found precisely as expected.
- Indicate that the proposed solution
 - is not appropriate to the local situation,
 - is appropriate but only with modifications,
 - is entirely appropriate.

Such local understandings may therefore:

- Inform intelligent resistance to any imposition of the proposed changes.
- Inform intelligent local modifications to them.
- Set up the optimal conditions for their successful implementation.

4. Understanding sometimes even produces change:

Sometimes, when practitioners (teachers and learners) develop their own understandings of something that looks initially like a problem, these understandings bring about a change that resolves the problem without the need for any deliberate remedial action.

5. So, EP is by no means 'against change'.

Prioritising understanding itself constitutes a fundamental change of perspective on change, complexifying it considerably, but it should not predispose anyone against change. It should only dispose people against changes that are locally inappropriate.

Where changes are locally justified it should lead to their intelligent endorsement and implementation.

Dick Allwright
(Adapted from a 2002 text.)

Postscript

We wrote this book because we believe that working together to understand classroom life as it is is the best way for learners and teachers to make their language classroom lives both satisfying and productive. We started with our Five Propositions about learners, and then proposed Seven Principles (Chapter 15, pp. 261–2) for inclusive practitioner research.

As a teacher or a learner (and you can be both at once) you might like our Propositions for learners, but be disappointed and frustrated by how difficult it is to bring them to life in your classroom. Or you might like our Principles for research, but find current research practices in our field disappointingly and frustratingly inadequate. We hope you will have found ample evidence throughout Part III that Exploratory Practice can help you make language learning both satisfying and productive.

However you get on with these ideas, we would like to hear from you via the EP website (www.letras.puc-rio.br/epcentre) and learn about whatever you do to enjoy life in your language learning classrooms around the world. The story does not stop with the end of this book; we hope that in fact it is just beginning. In his first e-mail to us Felipe Guedes issued an invitation that proved very productive. Now we would like to extend a similar invitation to you all.

Hello, how are you?

I'm Felipe, a student of Alex. I'm from Brazil.

I completely got involved with Exploratory Practice. And that was simply wonderful! Bebel from PUC told me that you are interested in testimonials about that. I have many things to talk about it. If you are really interested, answer me, OK?

*And next time you are in Brazil, say Alex to talk to me. I'd really like to know you.
And talk more about E.P... So I'm waiting for your answer.
See you, bye bye!*



Photo IV.3 People at a Rio EP Event poster

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