Edited by
Kenan Dikilitaş
and Judith Hanks

# DEVELOPING LANGUAGE TEACHERS WITH EXPLORATORY PRACTICE

Innovations
& Explorations
in Language
Education

# Developing Language Teachers with Exploratory Practice

"Focus on quality of life. Work to understand local puzzles. Involve everybody as practitioners. Bring people together. Work for mutual development. Integrate work for understanding into normal practice. Make it sustainable. These are the Exploratory Practice principles, forcefully voiced by practitioners from Turkey and Northern Cyprus and their mentors, all sharing professional development processes in this pioneering book. May they soon be joined by other voices from around the world!"

—Inés Miller, *Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil*

Kenan Dikilitaş • Judith Hanks
Editors

# Developing Language Teachers with Exploratory Practice

Innovations and Explorations in Language Education

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# 1

# Introduction: Exploratory Practice: Explorations in Language Teacher Education and Continuing Professional Development

**Judith Hanks and Kenan Dikilitaş**

Exploratory Practice (EP) is a dynamic and empowering form of practitioner research in language education. It presents an original and rigorous approach to practitioners researching their classrooms. To date, however, there have been relatively few accounts of/by practitioners themselves engaging in their own EP work. This book presents chapters written by language teaching professionals encountering the EP principles and enacting EP in Turkey, Northern Cyprus, and beyond, for the first time. Crucially, we take an ethical stance of honouring the time, effort and commitment of practitioner-researchers by clearly acknowledging their authorship. In reading their accounts, we gain not only the practical examples of voices from the field, but also engage in theorising our practice as language teachers and teacher educators in meaningful ways.

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We believe this book will benefit those interested in professional development in different fields of (language) education with a special focus on:

- encouraging teachers, teacher educators, and others who are interested in engagement in EP by providing examples and discussions from the work of practitioners
- describing and discussing the enactment of Potentially Exploitable Pedagogic Activities (PEPAs) in/through classroom language learning/teaching
- creating a resource of teachers' (and ultimately learners') written work which links with similar work in other settings such as Latin America and the UK

Because of its original approach, EP has already had a major impact upon the field of language education. But for those who are new to EP, it is necessary to explain what we mean by 'principles' and 'practice' right from the start. In considering 'practice' we include all forms of teaching and learning activity, including language teacher education, continuing professional development and curriculum development, as well as considering what goes on in the classroom itself. The principles which underpin Exploratory Practice have been developed with and for practitioners in language education over the past twenty-five years (see Allwright, 2005; Allwright & Hanks, 2009; Hanks, 2017a, for detailed analysis of what these principles mean and how they were formed). The EP framework is summarised by Allwright & Hanks as follows:

**Principles for fully 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 under-standings.
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.

(Allwright & Hanks, 2009, p. 260 original emphases)

EP prioritises the notion of puzzling about language learning and teaching practices; of asking 'Why?' and really deeply trying to *understand* why things might be so. It is argued that this is a more important, and potentially more productive, approach than leaping directly to solutions (Allwright, 2015). The first principle in the framework is to promote Quality of Life, in language learning, language teaching, and researching language education (see Gieve & Miller, 2006, for an in-depth discussion of the meaning of 'Quality of Life' in the language classroom). EP advocates using our normal pedagogic practices as investigative tools as a way of maximising sustainability and minimising the burden on already overloaded teachers and learners, and in this way, it is argued, Quality of Life is prioritised. EP therefore stands outside the prevailing 'problem-solution' paradigm of most traditional forms of educational research.

A distinctive feature of EP is the principle of integrating pedagogy and research. This may seem bemusing for those who have not yet tried it, since in many areas research is traditionally divorced from practice, but it is remarkably effective in the form of 'Potentially Exploitable Pedagogic Activities' or PEPAs (see Dar, 2015; Hanks, 2017b; Miller, Cortes, de Oliveira, & Braga, 2015 for previous examples). In another original move, EP promotes the notion of learners as co-researchers alongside their teachers (Allwright, 2003). In other words, practitioners may be teachers (practitioners of teaching), but they may also be learners (practitioners of learning), and both groups may have much to learn from one another. The notion of positioning teachers as 'people who (also) learn' has been discussed extensively elsewhere (Malderez & Wedell, 2007; Miller, 2003; Slimani-Rolls & Kiely, 2014; Tajino, Stewart, & Dalsky, 2016), and the EP principle of 'including everyone' (learners, teachers, teacher educators, curriculum developers, and those in charge of assessment) has informed the conception of this book.

Since EP is relatively new in the field of practitioner research, with few published accounts from practitioners working in language teaching, language teacher education, and language curriculum development, despite much activity on social media, there is much that may appear mysterious to an 'outsider'. Much of the work on EP has taken place in primary and secondary schools, language institutions, and universities, in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil (Allwright & Hanks, 2009; Allwright & Miller, 2013). Although EP certainly had a presence in Turkey (see, for example, Özdeniz, 1996), it seemed to have gone quiet in recent years. It was timely, then, to begin work afresh, by setting up a network to link language education professionals in Turkey with those in other parts of the world. This was supported by a British Council/Katip Çelebi/Newton Travel Grant in 2015 (see Chap. 2 for an account of this project).

Recent teacher education movements favour teachers' own engagement that investigates classroom practices to develop understandings of language teaching and learning (Bullock & Smith, 2015; Dikilitaş, Wyatt, Hanks, & Bullock, 2016; Wyatt, Burns, & Hanks, 2016). In line with this developing trend, this book provides a unique insight into professionals' accounts of their work as they engaged with the EP framework. For those who are unfamiliar with EP, questions are often asked such as: 'Can EP be transferred to other contexts?' 'Is EP only workable in certain situations?' 'What are the challenges as well as the benefits of EP?' 'What do you actually *do* in EP?' and 'What do practitioners themselves think about EP?'.

In conjunction with a UK-based sister volume (Slimani-Rolls & Kiely, Forthcoming), which examines EP in the related fields of teaching Modern Foreign Languages (MFL) and English for Academic Purposes (EAP), we aim to address these questions emanating from the field. The chapters that follow provide a platform for the voices of language teaching professionals who expressed their puzzles regarding pedagogical challenges in the classrooms and beyond, examined the beliefs they, their colleagues, and their learners hold, and critically analysed how they developed their own, context-specific, insights into issues that puzzled them. While each puzzle was personal, and hence deeply relevant to each individual, it is also clear that the work encompasses issues that are of keen significance to others in the field.

The book is organised around chapters written by language teachers, teacher educators, and curriculum developers, who tell their stories of engaging with and through EP. In Chap. 2, Hanks and Dikilitaş discuss the processes of planning, implementing, and evaluating EP in a range of Continuous Professional Development (CPD) settings in Turkey and Northern Cyprus. They foreground the EP principles of putting understanding before problem-solving, involving everyone, and working together. These principles are examined, with the notion of 'puzzling' and asking 'Why' questions coming under the microscope. Hanks and Dikilitaş conclude that mutual development and Quality of Life can be enhanced in CPD as well as in language classrooms, and that 'involving everyone' means keeping an open mind to include others who might initially have been overlooked, and that this is to the benefit of all concerned. The principles of working together and mutual development are also examined by Trotman in Chap. 3. He unpacks the differences between Action Research and Exploratory Practice, and shows how they relate to one another in the practitioner research 'family' (see Hanks, 2017a; Wyatt, Burns, & Hanks, 2016). He notes the importance of puzzling for those working in Language Teacher Education, and he concludes that EP's emphasis on minimising the burden for busy professionals is an important aspect of making practitioner research a viable enterprise.

Focussing directly on the language classroom (as opposed to teacher training or teacher education), in Chap. 4 Karanfil looks at issues of student reading (or apparent lack thereof) in his EAP classes. Through his PEPA, he exemplifies the need for understanding the issue before jumping to conclusions: assumptions need to be questioned, as students may provide surprising information about their reading activities. Likewise, Ergünay in Chap. 5 considers reading issues from his learners' perspectives: What did they think about the struggles they had with reading comprehension in examinations? Why were they having so much difficulty? By engaging his learners in a joint PEPA, Ergünay concludes that not only did they gain insight into their own work, but they began to understand their peers, and he too was able to understand their struggles. In Chap. 6, Mumford also demonstrates the importance, and the process, of mutual development, this time in the area of student presentations in EAP. Mumford worked with his students to investigate their struggles with

formal speaking in public presentations. Crucially, Mumford notes that his investigations were fully integrated with the curriculum and with his pedagogic practice (EP principle 7).

Working in the field of assessment, (Chap. 7) Öncül and Webb showed the serendipity of coming across EP at just the right time: Webb had been puzzling about the imposition of 'unannounced quizzes' (ie tests) in her institution, while Öncül had been working on a research proposal on the same topic. When they were invited to share their puzzles in a CPD workshop, they discovered a mutual interest, and decided to work together to investigate student attitudes to these quizzes. Like Karanfil, they conclude that first impressions can be misleading, as their students led them to some surprising answers. Thus, they emphasise that working together could lead to enhanced understanding of the issues at stake.

Moving beyond the classroom, to consider Learner Autonomy, in Chap. 8 Biçer critically examines the lack of student involvement in the design of a Foundation programme for language students. His findings shed light on the need for student voices to be heard in academic institutions. In addition, he notes the EP principle of 'Quality of Life', in the shape of learner empowerment, and although he describes both the ups and the downs, he concludes that this was enhanced by his PEPA. In Chap. 9, Webb and Sarina demonstrate the EP principles of working together (in this case across time zones, linking Australia and Northern Cyprus) as colleagues in different institutions, as well as with their learners, to empower students. They consider the principle of integrating research and pedagogy (Allwright, 1993; Hanks, 2017b) and link this to Healey's (2005) notion of inquiry-based learning in Higher Education. They conclude that EP afforded opportunities for knowledge and expertise to be exchanged between diverse cultures, and that their own, as well as their learners', understandings have developed in relevant and useful ways.

Finally, in Chap. 10, Doğdu and Arca take EP beyond the language classroom again. This time it is to consider questions about Curriculum Development, as they worked with teachers as well as managers, supervisors, coordinators, and the Director of their School of Foreign

Languages in their institution to investigate their puzzle about why the 'integrated skills' strand was re-interpreted by students as grammar/vocabulary. Like Öncül and Webb, they had already been puzzling about this for some time, and the EP workshop appeared at a fortuitous moment in their deliberations. They point to the principle (6) of sustainability and continuity in their chapter, as they indicate the next steps for their EP work.

These chapters showcase examples of EP for others who might be thinking of trying it for themselves. However, this is not with the intention of providing 'replicable studies' (a vain hope in education due to the vast array of uncontrollable variables both within the classroom and outside it, and one which we therefore believe is not worth pursuing), but rather to offer the experiences of language teachers, teacher educators, and curriculum developers as a springboard for discussion and further explorations. Equally importantly, we aim to critically and systematically examine the EP framework of principles: the practitioners, now our co-authors, have engaged with one or more of the principles in action, and can shed further light on those principles. In doing so, we believe that the agency of the practitioners (and indeed ourselves) as co-researchers has been brought to the fore. Each person set their own research questions (their puzzles), they worked individually or together with colleagues, learners, teachers, or managers, to investigate rigorously, systematically, and (self-)critically, and, in their reportage (in this book, and at conferences nationally and internationally), they have disseminated their findings so that others can learn from their work.

We have thoroughly enjoyed working with the teachers, teacher educators, and curriculum developers who are now our co-authors and co-researchers. Just as their understandings of their puzzles have developed, so also has the process helped develop our understandings as teachers, mentors, teacher educators and researchers, as well as writers and editors. In keeping with the EP principle of sustainable research, we suggest that this book is not the end of the project but rather the beginning of further development for the future. We hope that these chapters will inspire others to begin/continue their personal and professional development journeys, and to report back along the way.

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# 2

# Mentoring Language Teaching Professionals in/through Exploratory Practice

**Judith Hanks and Kenan Dikilitaş**

## Introduction

Exploratory Practice (EP) is a form of practitioner research with potential for personal and professional development. Underpinned by a philosophical framework of principles (see Allwright, 2003, 2005a; Allwright & Hanks, 2009), it promotes the idea of teachers and learners working collaboratively to understand their learning and teaching worlds. Crucially, it steps out of the popular 'problem-to-solution' paradigm, arguing that before pedagogical conundrums can be solved, they need first to be understood (Hanks, 2017a), and they need to be understood by the practitioners themselves. By insisting on an attitude of

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puzzlement, or of 'being puzzled', opportunities for deeper understanding are opened up. And, in an original move, by utilising normal pedagogic activities as investigative tools (Allwright, 1993; Hanks, 2017b) research and practice are brought together.

The chapter discusses how mentoring through EP, as an initial research experience, can help practitioners develop knowledge of research and understanding of their own teaching, educating and training practices. We outline the challenges as well as the benefits of setting up an EP Network in Turkey and Northern Cyprus to connect with pre-existing EP networks in other parts of the world. As we proceed through the chapter we consider practical as well as theoretical questions such as: Where to begin? What does one do? How much (or how little) guidance might practitioners need? To answer these questions, we draw on our mentoring experience in three Case Studies of teachers, teacher educators and teacher trainers from local contexts engaging in EP for the first time.

## Exploratory Practice and Mentoring

We begin by considering EP itself. A flexible, constantly evolving framework is built around a core of principles for practitioner research first outlined in the early 1990s (Allwright & Bailey, 1991). These are perhaps most succinctly expressed as follows:

*Exploratory Practice involves*:

1. practitioners (eg: preferably teachers *and* learners together) working 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*;

2. in order to contribute to:

  (f) *teaching and learning themselves*;
  (g) *professional development, both individual and collective.*

(Allwright, 2003, pp. 127–128 original emphases)

It is the last part of this definition that interests us in this chapter. We make a connection between the EP framework and a Vygotskian approach to professional development in language teacher development, as outlined by Johnson and Golombek: "…a sociocultural perspective allows us to not only *see* teacher professional development but also to articulate the various ways in which teacher educators can intervene in, support, and enhance teacher professional development." (2011, p. 11).

Since EP is basically focused on the idea that context-specific knowledge needs to be explored through normal pedagogical activities, we pay special attention to the active use of dialectical thinking, a concept that refers to "the logic of interconnectivity" (Johnson & Golombek, 2016, p. 172) of shared or opposing experiences, knowledge and understandings. Central to the EP framework is the notion of puzzlement, of puzzling about learning and teaching practices. As Slimani-Rolls and Kiely point out, this is "a starting point, a focused question to put to the data [which] thus established the teacher's agenda for the CPD journey" (2014, p. 432).

Of equal importance is the EP principle of sustainability (Allwright, 1997). Wyatt and Dikilitaş (2016) point to the need for networks of support for those engaging in practitioner research. It does seem that making links between people in different geographical regions or institutions helps to sustain the initial commitment. This can also be seen in our sister publication (Slimani-Rolls & Kiely, Forthcoming), where novice practitioner-researchers (and experienced teachers) were mentored through their first experiences of EP, continuing over a period of years. Similarly, Tajino, Stewart, and Dalsky (2016) advocate the notion of collegiality, while Mercado and Mann suggest that "mentoring can result in personal and professional growth for mentors" (2015, p. 52) as well as for mentees, if the role of the teacher as an insider, with access to information crucial to understanding classroom learning and teaching, is taken seriously.

Likewise, Hanks (in press) argues that practitioners already possess much of the knowledge and expertise needed to engage in research, and calls for trust in their capabilities and their findings.

Clearly, the field of mentoring in language teacher education is enjoying a renaissance of interest in the field. Yet little has been written about mentoring experienced professionals as they take their first steps into a new arena: that of practitioner research (here, EP) as a form of Continuous Professional Development (CPD). We present, therefore, three Case Studies which trace the implementations, along with the challenges and opportunities, for us as mentors, as well as for the participants themselves, involved.

## Where Did We Begin?

We applied for a British Council/Newton/Katip Çelebi Researcher Links Travel Grant. Our proposal was to develop a new branch of the EP Network in Izmir, Turkey, focusing on EP as a form of CPD for language teaching professionals. An important aspect of the proposal was to ensure the sustainability of our enterprise, and to make sure that it was not just a 'one-stop shop' with a 'foreign expert' flown in briefly, never to be seen again. We therefore constructed a programme of interactive, hands-on activities, tasks and workshops which stretched from June to September 2015. This activity in Izmir is presented below as Case Study 1.

Objectives were to establish a vibrant programme of EP in Izmir and to help participants to engage in personal and professional development. We aimed to (a) encourage them to initiate their own small-scale research, collecting/generating data from their classrooms and workplaces; (b) motivate them to develop own understandings of English Language Teaching (ELT)/learning; (c) create sustainable pathways for them to continue researching their pedagogy; (d) encourage national and international dissemination of their EP work by engaging with global networks available via social media, conferences and webinars.

Turkey has a vibrant culture of conferences, workshops and seminars (both face-to-face and on-line) centred on language education and applied linguistics. Because of the active engagement of language education professionals in such arenas, this incipient branch of the EP network began to grow. People saw photographs and comments on the Teachers

Research! Facebook page, and became curious. At conferences they asked participants about EP. Consequently, we were then invited to lead CPD sessions in Northern Cyprus (Case Study 2) and Eskişehir (Case Study 3).

In each case, we followed up the direct EP activity by encouraging participants to disseminate their work at national or international conferences, and further, with an invitation to write up their work in the form of chapters for this book. We now turn to look at each Case Study in depth.

## Case Study 1: Izmir

We had initially decided to work with teachers, teacher trainers and teacher educators, because we wanted to initiate a cascade which would make it possible to create further impact on the local level. Therefore, Kenan Dikilitaş made use of his extensive network of language teacher education contacts in İzmir, Turkey. He invited participants from universities and language institutions across the city. Interestingly, however, the participants who arrived on the first day were not all teacher trainers. Two attendees were in fact working in the Curriculum Development Office of their institution—they had stepped in to replace the teacher trainers who were unable to attend. Moreover, others were mainly teachers of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) or general ELT, just beginning to branch out into CPD roles.

There were 17 participants from 8 universities and 1 school in Izmir, and from the start they evinced enthusiasm for the project. They were keen to make contact with likeminded teachers and teacher educators in other parts of the world, and to disseminate their work at both national and international level. However, their enthusiasm was mixed with caution, as the following excerpts from their written feedback show:

- *"I was curious and excited of course and a little quizzical perhaps as I did not possess a lot of information [about EP]. I was very motivated and committed already."*
- *"I felt very excited and honoured to be in this project. I have always been fascinated with all kinds of teacher research. After a satisfactory action research and lesson study experience, it was worth to try another form of teacher research."*

There were ten workshops in total: six in June and four in September. The timing was deliberate, as we wanted participants to take time to reflect, and try out some of the ideas over the summer (many of them worked in summer schools or with colleagues in July/August). In Table 2.1 we provide the initial plan for the workshops, showing the focus of each one, and how it linked to the EP principles. In addition to the workshops, participants met (both face-to-face and virtually via digital media) to discuss ideas and strengthen social ties inside and outside the workshops.

**Table 2.1** Schedule for the first round of workshops (Izmir)

|  | Focus | Comments |
|---|---|---|
| Workshop 1 15 June (17.00–19.00) | Introductions. Aims of the project. EP theories and practice: the importance of understanding. Ethics in educational research: introduce ethical and principled classroom research. Invite participants to think about: What puzzles you? | Link to EP principles as presented in Allwright (2003, pp. 128–130): *Principle 1: Put 'quality of life' first.* *Principle 2: Work primarily to understand language classroom life.* |
| Workshop 2 17 June (17.00–19.00) | Refining puzzles. Developing and analysing narratives. Considering methodologies. | *Principle 2: Work primarily to understand language classroom life.* *Principle 3: Involve everybody.* |
| Conference 18–19 June | IATEFL ReSIG Teachers Research! Conference. | *Principle 4: Work to bring people together* |
| Workshop 3 22 June (17.00–19.00) | Developing Potentially Exploitable Pedagogic Activities (PEPAs) Research Design | *Principle 6: Integrate the work for understanding into classroom practice* |
| Workshop 4 24 June (17.00–19.00) | PEPAs as data collection/ generation tools. Strategies and techniques for conducting investigations. | *Practical corollary to Principle 6: Let the need to integrate guide the conduct of the work for understanding* |
| Workshop 5 29 June (17.00–19.00) | Refining Puzzles and Research Questions. Refining Research Design. | *Principle 5: Work also for mutual development* |
| Workshop 6 1 July (17.00–19.00) | Preparing for data collection/ generation. Discussing ways of doing data analysis. What next?? | *Principle 7: Make the work a continuous enterprise* |

The workshops took place in the evenings, after a full day's work. Participants attended as many of the workshops as possible, despite the conflicting demands of work and family, and by the end of the first month some had already begun to disseminate this work via their roles as teacher trainers, curriculum developers and teachers with responsibility for CPD in their workplaces. Nevertheless, there were still a number of questions—an entirely normal response for those wishing to try something new. In the final week, therefore, we also met participants individually if they wished, to talk through their plans for what they wanted to do over the summer months. It was important to allocate time to clarify, illuminate and try things out in their own time, without us looming over them. They needed to find their own pathways, and, crucially, they needed to prioritise their own quality of life.

The workshop series started with input on EP principles to help participants develop an understanding of EP. We briefly showed them puzzled questions from practitioners in the UK and Brazil (e.g., Lyra, Fish Braga, & Braga, 2003) and this sparked off questions that puzzled participants in their own contexts; their classrooms, CPD sessions and curriculum development offices. A selection of participants' puzzles is listed below:

- *Why do my students have difficulty in learning/acquiring new vocabulary?*
- *Why are my students not able to retain newly learned vocabulary?*
- *Why are some language learners more successful than others?*
- *Why can some students not learn the language as effectively as some others?*
- *Why don't we integrate learner training into our curriculum?*
- *Why are my students so unwilling to read?*
- *Why are they bored in reading lessons?*
- *Why do students avoid attending extracurricular activities?*
- *To what extent do their hobbies direct them to participate in these clubs, or is anxiety a reason not to attend them?*

- *Why do they [students] assume the main course lesson as a grammar-oriented vocabulary course rather than a course which integrates all the skills?*
- *Why is it some teachers are resistant to developing themselves?*
- *Why is CPD seen as a burden?*

A critical point in the first sessions was when participants tried to articulate their puzzles. Many of the questions came with a set of assumptions that needed to be unpicked, and some participants focused on 'how' questions rather than 'why'. In other words, they were very focused on a 'problem-to-solution' approach. It took time to work through this, to really establish the need for *understanding* the issue before attempting problem-solving.

Each participant wrote a short narrative or backstory to their puzzle, and we spent time analysing these narratives using a form of critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1989). Many of the stories conveyed deep emotions, with one teacher memorably describing a student on the point of crying because he could not learn new words; even though he felt he studied harder than his classmates, he said they seemed to do better. The teacher described her resulting puzzle: *"Why can some students not learn the language as effectively as others? Why are some more successful than others?"*

Some practitioners blamed themselves, some blamed the students, and some even described crises with students or colleagues. It was essential to work through this culture of blaming (so common in education around the world, as Breen, 2006, has pointed out) to be able to work positively towards understanding. One participant in particular exclaimed as she realised that her whole narrative was geared towards negativity; it was a revelation when she recognised the sheer volume of self-and-other-criticism that was involved in one short paragraph. She had described how the students *"hated"* the lesson and the coursebook; noted students who were *"complaining about the course's difficulty"*, and added that *"they never showed up for office hours and their exam results were terrible"*. Naturally, her first questions were *"how can I manage such a demanding course?"* and *"how can I motivate my students?"*. Yet through the

analytic process, we realised that this would simply lead into a blind alley of seeking technicist solutions, without actually addressing the underlying issues. As she unpacked her narrative, and the underlying assumptions within it, she was released from the grip of negativity, and began to consider questions about student (and staff) motivation (see Hanks, 2017a, pp. 243–245 for further discussion).

A second critical moment involved grappling with different forms of practitioner research. Some participants automatically assumed that since EP requires some kind of *investigation* in the classroom, then this must be Action Research (see Burns, 2010). Others found it more akin to Reflective Practice (Edge, 2011; Farrell, 2007) since it involves *reflection* upon experiences. It took time to unpick the differences, as well as acknowledging the family relationships (see Hanks, 2016; Trotman, Chap. 3 of this volume, for further discussion). This generated a significant questioning in and out of the sessions. The participants started to convey their experiences and asked insightful questions regarding the specific aspects of EP, which led to participant-driven pedagogy. The workshops coincided with the Teachers Research! IATEFL ReSIG conference in Izmir. Two presenters at this conference were Yasmin Dar and Mark Wyatt, both of whom also had some experience of EP. Working on the EP principles of 'work to bring people together' and 'involve everybody' we invited them to join us for the short time they were in the country. Yasmin shared her experiences of trying out EP with learners in her EAP classroom in the UK, and was able to devote some time to answering practical as well as theoretical questions about what she had done (see Dar, 2015). Mark, too, joined a session and helpfully contributed to discussions both in the workshop and beyond about EP (see Wyatt, 2011; Wyatt & Dikilitaş, 2015; Wyatt & Pasamar Marquez, 2016).

A third critical moment was the introduction of Potentially Exploitable Pedagogic Activities, or PEPAs. The notion of using usual classroom activities as methodological instruments for collecting or generating data may seem simple, but identifying suitable activities that could be bent towards investigating the participant's puzzle took some time. Participants broke the process down into a detailed step-by-step

approach. For example, one participant described how she had identified brainstorming, mind-mapping and group discussion in an English writing class as tools to investigate her puzzle "*Why are some language learners more successful than others?*" She involved her learners in investigating a puzzle that was relevant to them as well as their teacher. Another participant described getting teachers to role-play an interview with a student, with colleagues utilising empathy as they gained insights into attitudes to learning and teaching by acting out those roles.

As with refining puzzles, it should not be thought that designing a PEPA is an easy process. Identifying appropriate pedagogic activities, which are at once helpful to the learning/teaching, and useful for research, and thus for gaining understanding, is a complex intellectual exercise, and some participants reported struggles with this: "*I learnt that it is not as easy as it seems. Creating PEPA was the hardest part, especially PEPAs that are in line with the syllabus.*" Nevertheless, others cited PEPAs as crucial in the sustainability of the work:

- "*Another thing I loved was that we could make use of PEPAs during our research […] that is also very encouraging because we do not need to use or design any other different research tools to make research.*"
- "*The most valuable experience I had was […] perspective I gained, as in my opinion, EP is a perfect match for instructors, teacher-researchers that are to be intrigued by the sheer and subtle simplicity and urgency of some teaching and learning puzzles and their deep and multi-layered roots and the philosophical and humanistic perspective EP has to offer in return.*"
- "*I knew that due to heavy work load and tight schedules many teachers see teacher research as a heavy weight on their shoulders and I was personally looking for something which doesn't involve extra work on the part of the teachers. I needed something more handy and something that I'm not going to use my precious teaching time on doing research. I think, a teacher who is teaching 24 hours per week can only conduct traditional teacher research once or twice a year and this seems quite inefficient when we consider the problems that we encounter during teaching. However, when we integrate research into normal teaching routines, find*

*the correct PEPA for our puzzles, it is easier to create a continuous research culture in our classrooms."*

At the beginning of July, we returned to our workplaces. Some continued with their teaching, or moved into the Summer School phase of teaching, a few went on holiday, while others worked with colleagues as a part of their curriculum development or CPD activities. This meant they had an opportunity to step back, and think about their experiences with EP, and consider how to incorporate PEPAs.

In September we reconvened for four more workshops in which participants reported back on their thinking and activities, and raised further questions for discussion. We invited them to consider writing up their work as well as presenting at a conference. Table 2.2 provides the planned outline for these workshops:

Inevitably, however, all plans are subject to change, and the schedules needed to flexibly respond to matters beyond our control. Personal issues such as funerals as well as national issues such as an unexpected extension of a national holiday, meant that our initial plans changed. This was not

**Table 2.2**  Schedule for the second round of workshops (Izmir)

|  | Focus | Comments |
| --- | --- | --- |
| 16 September Workshop 7 17.00–19.00 | Review of the Principles of EP Report back: What happened over the summer? Evaluating data collection, collation and analysis | *EP principles of collegiality Working for understandings* |
| 17 September Workshop 8 17.00–19.00 | Documenting findings Reporting on your work Disseminating understandings | *EP principles of mutual development Importance of relevance* |
| 21 September Workshop 9 17.00–19.00 | In-group presentations Sharing experiences of EP Considering publications? Conferences? | *EP principles of Working to bring people together Involving everyone* |
| 22 September Workshop 10 17.00–19.00 | Plans for the future: seeking sustainable ways for future collaborations | *EP principles of disseminating understandings, sustainability and quality of life* |

a problem, but it is worth noting that any schedule needs to be flexible enough to accommodate change. So, for example, sessions 9 and 10 could not be delivered on the dates originally intended. Instead, Workshop 8 was extended, and individual or small group tutorials were offered to participants. In the event, this was a helpful development, as it allowed us to read and comment on written drafts in detail with the authors.

Immediately after the workshop series, we elicited participant opinions about their experiences of engaging in EP as a form of research for CPD. We end Case Study 1 with their reflections on their experiences of EP:

*What is the most significant thing that you have learned?*

- *"…I learned from this EP project is that we can explore our puzzles in the same way that we do in our normal pedagogic practices. It is a really practical way to conduct research without worrying about the research methodology and designing new instruments. […] Furthermore, using PEPAs in a more effective way was another contribution of the workshops. So that we could understand how to make use of our normal pedagogic practices effectively to find out the reasons that lay behind our puzzles. Finally, with the collegiality we could see that there are teachers from different schools who have the same or similar puzzles with us. This is a relief for us to see that these problems are normal and we are not doing things wrong."*
- *"The most significant thing that this project taught me was how to work collaboratively with all the shareholders on our puzzles and how to understand and identify the reason or the source of the problem without destroying your life quality and making the research an extra burden on your shoulders. I really liked and appreciated receiving some feedback from colleagues working at different institutions. That gave me fresh ideas about my puzzle. For instance, one of the participants in the workshop pointed out that I was missing the point of view of teachers in my puzzle and that changed my way of looking at the puzzle. Till that moment, I had only concentrated on the student perspective of the puzzle, but then, I decided to question this from teachers' perspective, as well."*

Case Study 1 had already been reported on Facebook teachers research page (https://www.facebook.com/groups/teachersresearch/) and there it had attracted the interest of people in Northern Cyprus. Fortuitously, at this moment Kenan Dikilitaş gave a presentation at an event in Ankara. The head of the Professional Development Unit invited us to lead some

CPD at her institution. This led to Case Study 2. In contrast with the Izmir work, Case Study 2 the participants all worked in the same institution; and, crucially, the participants *themselves* had asked for the workshops, and were supported by their Director.

## Case Study 2: Northern Cyprus

We delivered a series of EP workshops for 17 English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers at Middle East Technical University in Northern Cyprus in September 2015. This had a different time scale: three days of intensive work as opposed to three-four months. We therefore adapted the programme to meet the contextual requirements of Case 2, covering the same content though with a different pace and flow. Table 2.3 below provides the planned schedule:

Here we found teachers, teacher educators and testing and assessment staff who were also extremely enthusiastic, and who also worked over the coming months in their own classrooms and workplaces to investigate their EP puzzles. During the first phase, the teachers explored what

**Table 2.3** Schedule for workshops (Northern Cyprus)

| Day | Time | Focus |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Monday | 10.00–11.30 | Welcome; introductions |
| | 11.45–13.00 | What is EP? What do you normally do in your teaching/learning? |
| | 14.00–15.30 | What puzzles you about your learning/teaching? |
| | 15.45–17.00 | EP principles and practices: What puzzles teachers/teacher educators? |
| Tuesday | 10.00–13.00 | Staff were required to attend institutional meetings regarding marking so no EP workshops in the morning |
| | 13.30–14.45 | What could we do in our classrooms to investigate? |
| | 15.00–16.30 | Designing PEPAs |
| Wednesday | 9.15–11.00 | Discovering the EP principled framework |
| | 11.15–12.30 | Ethics |
| | 14.00–15.30 | Dissemination |
| | 15.45–16.30 | Planning ahead, making links. Any questions? |
| | 16.30–17.00 | Closing remarks |

puzzles them, drafted 'why' questions, and wrote their backstory to their puzzles. Initial puzzles included the following:

- *Why are students bored so easily?*
- *Why aren't students motivated?*
- *Why do they give up so easily?*
- *Why aren't they interested in some lessons? (What makes them interested in some lessons?)*
- *Why do students not want to be in Cyprus/on campus/at university/in classrooms?*
- *Why is N Cyprus demotivating for the students?*
- *Why don't they just do things?*
- *Why do the students not read more? Why can't I get/help them to read more in English?*
- *Why do students have resistance towards learning?*
- *Why is there such a huge difference between learners?*
- *Why do we teach learners as if they are all the same?*
- *Why aren't some students (more) willing to study outside class?*

In contrast with the previous group, the participants grasped the notion of puzzling and using 'why' (rather than 'how') questions very quickly and there was very little need for discussion about the differences between Action Research and Exploratory Practice.

Participants then made links between their puzzles and PEPAs, considering ways of collecting/generating data through normal pedagogical activities. During this process, an interesting event occurred. Two colleagues who did not normally work closely together were in the same group: one expressed her puzzlement about the use of a 'pop quiz' or unannounced tests as a means of assessing students (and perhaps controlling student behaviour). As we talked about this in the session, her colleague exclaimed: *"This is just what I have been working on for my Assessment project!"* This critical incident (Flanagan, 1954) led to a deep collaboration (Chap. 7 by Öncül and Webb, was the result) as they teased out the intricacies of assumptions about assessment and testing, and how these related to student (and teacher) expectations. This first moment of sharing in the session exemplifies the importance that EP gives to the notion of collegiality—so puzzles may be puzzling to the individual, but they

may also lead to a burst of excitement for others as teachers (or learners) discover that they are not alone.

A variety of interaction patterns were used during the sessions including individual writing, pair- and group work, buzz groups and jigsaw readings, which seemed to increase the interaction among them. We also used movement, sticking texts and puzzles on the walls and inviting participants to walk around the room to comment, as a way of generating energy and inviting discussion. Participant-driven exploration was implemented throughout in order to help teachers develop autonomous stances to discovery-based learning not only about puzzles but also about EP as a methodology to investigate these puzzles. The participants created multi-layered PEPAs involving interrelated activities to ensure triangulation of data collection tools such speaking, writing and peer feedback. In this way, the EP practitioners turned normal pedagogic activities into data collection procedures. Such flexibility allowed for greater commitment and developing ownership of their EP work.

Again, we invited feedback and reflections from the participants before we left. A selection of their comments is given below:

- *"I like the idea of EP as I've found it practical, feasible, which is encouraging people (teachers) to do research."*
- *"… it is encouraging in terms of doing research, at least to get started for (possibly) something wider."*
- *"Working on our research in a collaborative environment has been really helpful in our progress."*
- *"This has definitely given us a different perspective towards doing research."*
- *"Personally, I found it (EP) a very practical way to data gathering."*
- *"It is really good to know that we can conduct research in our classrooms in a practical/flexible way using PEPAs."*
- *"These three days have been very motivating for me. EP has encouraged me to explore something that really bothered me during my lessons."*

One of the characteristics of this work was that it was a good example of bottom-up in-service teacher development in that the request for the EP workshops was made by the teachers themselves. Following their request, the Director went through the documents about the programme and decided to support and fund it. She later indicated (personal communication) that she had liked the idea of EP not only because it was

new and promising but also because it was based on a bottom-up initiation as opposed to top-down professional development.

Having completed the sessions in Northern Cyprus and disseminated it in social media, the network expanded further. We now turn to the third Case Study.

## Case Study 3: Eskişehir

Instructors from Eskişehir Osman Gazi University, Turkey, contacted Kenan to invite him to lead a one-day workshop on EP and the EP network we had been creating. The workshop was called 'Developing a research plan through exploratory practice' since the goal was to help them develop a full plan that they can implement in their classroom. At the end of the workshop, Kenan invited them to write up their experiences of EP, and one person took up the challenge (see Chap. 5). Once again, the initial schedule was adapted, this time to fit into one day (Table 2.4).

This workshop was shorter than the others and was a bottom-up initiation in that the instructors themselves organised the day with all the logistics and formal procedures. The participants included three instructors from the neighbouring university (Anadolu University). The workshops were participant-driven and involved a great deal of active involvement with interaction in pairs or groups. The participants had already done some reading on EP and were familiar with the idea of EP though quite superficial, but this helped the trainer to build on the existing knowledge more easily. They were curious to engage in practices since (1) they initiated the workshop and organised all the details as a group, (2) they felt they needed to discuss their pedagogical

**Table 2.4**  Schedule for workshop (Eskişehir)

| Day | Time | Focus |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Friday | 10.00–11.30 | Welcome; introductions What is EP? What do you normally do in your teaching/learning? |
| | 11.45–13.00 | What could we do in our classrooms to investigate? |
| | 14.00–15.30 | Ethics, designing PEPAs |
| | 15.45–17.00 | Planning ahead, making links |

issues that they encountered and reflected from time to time though not systematically. The workshop was a timely initiative, which can also be realised from the puzzles they developed interactively.

The puzzles developed and discussed by the participants included:

- *Why do I feel I have more teacher talking time than students talking time?*
- *Why are my students not interested in the lessons?*
- *Why are my students reluctant to speak in the target language?*
- *Why don't my students like group and pair work?*
- *Why do my students have difficulty in comprehending reading texts? (see Chap. 5 for details)*
- *Why don't my students want to develop their English skills but to get a good grade?*
- *Why do my students have difficulty in speaking and how can we improve their speaking skills?*
- *Why do my students get bored in lessons?*
- *Why aren't my students eager to participate in speaking activities?*
- *What are the reasons for low student motivation?*
- *Why do my students use L1 during discussions in role-plays, group work and pair work?*
- *Why do my students struggle in reading in L2?*

After the puzzles were developed and shared, the next step was to discuss normal pedagogical activities in their classroom and see which of them could be feasible for accessing students' views regarding the content of the puzzle. This process helped them question their practices with a critical look with others too. The participants developed a research plan in which the puzzle could be investigated with more than one research tool.

## What Happened After the Workshops?

After the workshops, participants from all three Case Studies continued researching, writing and thinking. Some presented their work at the IATEFL ReSIG Teachers Research! Conference (2016) in Bahçeşehir

University, Istanbul, others presented at the IATEFL Annual Conference in Glasgow (2017). For many (though not all) this was a major step in their professional development: standing in front of peers and presenting their EP work and responding to questions, engaging in discussions was both challenging and rewarding.

At the end of each series of workshops, we floated the idea of publication. Some participants were eager to write up their work in the form of chapters for this book. Thinking that guidance and reassurance might be needed, especially for novice writers, we shared a template of headings for them to consider (though they were also free to structure the chapters in ways that seemed best to them). We also provided sustained support with the drafting, revision and editing process. Some writers were surprised by the number of cycles of drafting and re-drafting which took longer than they had expected. We took the view that "writing is itself part of the process of qualitative investigation" (Holliday, 2002, p. 130), and, indeed, as the chapter drafts progressed, we could see the thinking: ideas coalescing, understandings developing, in ways that only became clear over time. Through the effort of writing, re-writing, cutting and/or expanding, we worked together to clarify argument. We believe that, like all researchers, writing benefits us (teachers, teacher educators, curriculum developers) in that it gives a clearer sense of the overall purpose of what was being investigated; puzzles were clarified, as was EP itself (often through references to the relevant literature). Like Zhang (2004), authors often engaged with the literature more extensively *after* they had begun their own EP work, and in this way, it was more meaningful for them and us.

## Critical Reflections

The three case studies share a number of characteristics (e.g., the format of moving from eliciting 'normal pedagogic activities' to 'puzzling', and from this to establishing possible PEPAs). However, each was also very distinctive, raising challenges for us as mentors and teacher educators to consider.

An epistemological challenge lay in the fact that some participants had experience with other forms of practitioner research, and needed time to

distinguish one from another. For example, some participants (particularly in Case Study 1), whilst motivated to attend, were resistant to puzzling; they struggled to see the difference between a problem and 'being puzzled', and wanted to conceptualise everything as just Action Research (AR) or Reflective Practice (RP). This may have been because AR was a more familiar construct, or because stepping outside the 'problem-to-solution' paradigm demanded the unpicking of pre-conceived ideas, which may have been a challenge to the self. Our insistence on 'puzzling' and 'why-' questions drew attention to dissonances between traditional ideas about research and the concepts we were introducing through Exploratory Practice (EP). Although this was difficult for some, others could use their pre-existing knowledge, as another participant noted: "*As I had enough background information about action research I could easily grasp the aim of EP and mentality behind it. Making comparisons across these two teacher research forms has helped me a lot to feel more connected with the project.*" For those who made the effort, teasing out the differences led to a renewed burst of enthusiasm. It also helped us (the mentors) in developing our own thinking (see, for example, Hanks, 2016, in press; Dikilitaş, 2015a, 2015b). Participants in Case Study 2 and 3 seemed to grasp these concepts more easily, and, although we had prepared ourselves for similar long discussions about the meanings of 'problem' and 'puzzlement', or the need for 'why-questions', these were not required. One of our own emerging puzzles, then, is: *"Why do some people 'get' the differences (between problem and puzzle; between Action Research, Reflective Practice and Exploratory Practice) quickly, while others do not?"*

We also needed to challenge our own pre-conceptions about who would be interested and who would find EP helpful. We needed to be self-critical and flexible enough to welcome the unexpected people who joined the group. These included those who were not on the original list of teacher trainers, but whose presence added depth and breadth to discussions, and whose contributions were therefore extremely valuable.

In terms of the need for *guidance*, the practitioners varied. Those who grasped EP concepts quickly, seemed able to move relatively smoothly from puzzling, to PEPAs, and beyond. Others needed to spend time and energy deconstructing the principles, or even combatting their own resistance. It should be noted that while we were happy to discuss the differences, and pass on our own enthusiasm, we were keen to ensure that

participants were free to adapt or withdraw from EP if it did not suit their purposes, their styles or their thinking at that time.

Methodologically, the question of how to create PEPAs was another challenge. It was disconcerting for participants to have to work out for themselves what were their normal pedagogical activities, which could be utilised as investigative tools. Particularly in the field of teacher education and/or CPD, this required careful thought. One participant commented: "*We really needed to see the source of the problem from every angle and this is difficult to realize when you are so deep into your own puzzle. However, working in collaboration helped us to overcome this challenge, we all helped each other a lot and discussed on each other's puzzles during the sessions. And without the help of PEPAs which took all the burden away, making a research would be really challenging*." Another participant commented: "*At first, it was difficult to add different points of view into our puzzle while we are trying to refine our questions. However, it was really helpful to work in collaboration with the participants and their contribution improved us and our puzzle a lot. Also, the workshops and its content were designed in a way to develop our puzzles and further EP practices slowly*."

These language teaching professionals did not have any extra time, nor did they have a reduced teaching load, and it was surely challenging for them. And yet, because of their own interest, their own dedication, they *made* time to present at conferences, give teacher development sessions and write up their work. Our experience suggests that mentoring experienced teachers to take part in practitioner research (here EP) needs to comprise longer and sustained support (see EP Principle 7) rather than very limited periods. In our case, we spent more than two-and-half years working with the participants, going beyond face-to-face workshops, to practitioners independently researching their own classrooms (whether as teacher educators, teacher trainers, teachers or curriculum developers), to disseminating the findings. We provided intensive mentoring including discussions and meetings, at the beginning, followed by asynchronous interaction through emails and written feedback and even sometimes synchronous interaction through skype or face-to-face conversations. We were encouraged by the dedication and enthusiasm of the teachers, teacher educators and curriculum developers who have, alongside their teaching duties, managed to make time to write, draft, re-write their

chapters. Of course, not everybody had the time or the inclination to write for publication. This is entirely natural, and true to EP's ethical stance, we respected the competing demands of their jobs, personal lives or agendas. For those who did choose to write, though, interpreting, evaluating and reflecting on EP through presenting or writing added a further dimension to their, and our, thinking.

We see writing not as a separate process of teacher development but an organic part of practitioner and researcher development which kept the practitioner-researchers thinking about their puzzles as they wrote their chapters, responded to the reviews, drafted and re-drafted their chapters. Writing became an integral part of development through engaging in EP. The engagement in EP and writing an account of it for this book gave participants an opportunity not only to reconsider EP as a professional learning tool but also experience the process of engagement before they introduced it to the teachers in their institutions.

## Discussion

In introducing EP as a new form of inquiry in the Case Studies, we automatically undertook the role of *subject-specialists* (Halai, 2006). As the people most familiar with the EP principles, we were able to provide access to key texts that might be useful for practitioners new to this approach, such as Allwright (2001, 2003, 2005a), chapters from Allwright and Hanks (2009) and Gieve and Miller (2006) where the principles themselves are discussed. Just as important, though, was the need for us to share our own experiences (e.g. Dikilitaş, 2015a, 2015b; Hanks, 2015a, 2015b) of EP, along with those of others (e.g., Dar, 2015; Lyra et al., 2003, Miller, Cortes, de Oliveira, & Braga, 2015; Slimani-Rolls, 2003, 2005) and offer opportunities to discuss both practical and theoretical issues. We felt strongly that to be merely a subject-specialist would be limiting, not only because this would contravene the egalitarian principles of EP but also because this would push participants away from their own independent explorations of their own puzzles in their own ways relevant to their own situations. Whenever possible, therefore, we avoided taking on the *expert-coach* (Halai, 2006) role.

Instead, we aimed for more joint reflection to co-construct knowledge through "interthinking" (Johnson & Golombek, 2016, p. 81) with subject-specific support which we provided when required. We provided opportunities for collaborative reflection (Malderez & Bodóczky, 1999; Malderez & Wedell, 2007), created learning opportunities (Allwright, 2005b; Orland-Barak & Rachamim, 2009; Slimani-Rolls & Kiely, 2014) and prepared opportunities for them to become critical friends (Child & Merrill, 2003).

EP-sensitive mentoring requires us to explore our puzzles by exposing untouched or unchallenged ideas likely to be deeply rooted in our learners', our colleagues' or our own, minds. Practitioners may be so absorbed in teaching that they may not even think of 'unpacking' their puzzles long held in the mind but continue with the rationales that they develop without actual evidence. We wanted to keep to the principle of prioritising Quality of Life (Allwright, 2003; Allwright & Hanks, 2009), and that meant having the freedom to *not* engage, or to engage *in one's own time*, at one's own pace, in one's own way. This gave participants a chance to conceptualise their own understandings of what EP is and how to implement the principles relating to their own contexts and with reference to the published literature.

We also undertook the mentoring role of *acculturators* by introducing participants into the research community (Hobson & Sharp, 2005) of EP not only by providing them with articles and book chapters that they might need to read, but also by introducing them to Exploratory Practitioners and other researchers working in the same field of language teacher education, but different geographical/institutional contexts (e.g., messages from Carolina Apolinário in Brazil and Jess Poole in the UK; physical visits from Yasmin Dar, who was based in the UK and Mark Wyatt based in the United Arab Emirates). This was complemented by the role of *sponsor* (Malderez & Bodóczky, 1999) in that we encouraged participants to present at relevant conferences, which then paved the way to writing and preparing for publication. A systematic, coherent, yet flexible, implementation of these roles by both of us during the training helped participants in sustaining their motivation and developing and exploring the meanings of EP. As the professionals we were working with had already accrued experience in language teaching (in some cases over

many years), we had no intention of attempting to tell them what to do, but rather aimed to stimulate discussion and provide opportunities for further learning to take place. For some, this was disconcerting, while for others it was liberating.

## Conclusion

We have deliberately moved away from the term 'training' over the course of this chapter, because we were working with experienced teachers, teacher trainers, teacher educators and curriculum developers, each of whom came with a wealth of ideas, knowledge, skills and expertise. Questioning the discourse of 'improvement'; challenging assumptions about the 'deficit model' of teachers/teaching (see Breen, 2006; Hanks, 2017a; Wyatt, Burns, & Hanks, 2016), and articulating and refining the puzzles, was crucial. By taking a more practitioner-led approach to mentoring research by language teaching professionals, we turned the 'cascade training model' upside down. In doing so, we encountered a wellspring of curiosity, enthusiasm and motivation that bodes well for the field as a whole. The teachers, teacher educators, and curriculum developers had untapped reserves of relevant puzzles, and a range of expertise which could be drawn on to investigate classroom language learning/teaching systematically, rigorously, in original ways.

We see mentoring language teaching professionals in/through EP as a form of collaborative learning based on socio-constructivist theory, in that the teachers were not directly instructed but encouraged to explore issues related to EP as a form of practitioner research. Akin to the process of refining research questions (which can take a year or more for doctoral students), puzzling is an essential step which is too often overlooked in the rush to action. The participants were encouraged to take control of their learning about EP to design their PEPAs. We encouraged simultaneous reflecting and writing which allowed teachers to put together the parts of their EP work: puzzles, backstory and PEPAs. As EP was a new concept for them, a natural curiosity emerged among the teachers, which also promoted deeper, participant-driven, reflection for co-constructing knowledge about EP.

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# 3

# Enacting Exploratory Practice Principles: Mentoring Language Teaching Professionals

**Wayne Trotman**

## Introduction

Exploratory Practice (EP) is an original form of practitioner research in language education. It aims to integrate research, learning and teaching, and promotes the idea of teachers and learners puzzling about their language learning/teaching experience (Allwright, 2003, 2015). To do this it uses 'normal' pedagogic practices as investigative tools (Dar, 2015; Hanks, 2016; Miller, Cortes, de Oliveira, & Braga, 2015). To date, though, little has been done to investigate EP in language teacher education. In this chapter I outline how I mentored five language teachers who used such tools to investigate what puzzled them about their classrooms.

I provide here an account of my first venture into adding EP to the two other forms of practitioner research offered at Izmir Katip Çelebi University (IKCU) as a means of professional development (Trotman, 2015a, 2015b).

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I outline issues involved with mentoring five teachers carrying out EP. In particular, I investigate the extent to which the seven core principles were suitably implemented in their EP studies. The chapter also contains interviews with the teachers which probe their actions and beliefs. First, though, it is necessary to outline the seven EP principles used in this study:

### 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. *Minimize the burden* by integrating the work for understanding into normal pedagogic practice.

(Allwright & Hanks, 2009, p. 260, original emphases)

I also link the outcome of the EP studies to Allwright's (2001) conceptual overview and analysis of the three major processes of teacher development: Reflective Practice, Action Research (AR) and EP. A further intention was to carry out this study with regard for general ethical issues in EP (Allwright, 2005; Hanks, 2015a) and microethical issues outlined by Kubanyiova (2015). This chapter explains my realisation of the benefits of EP to practitioners—both teachers and learners. It then looks at the context in which the study took place. After that I describe the outcome of a presentation I gave to all English Language Teaching (ELT) colleagues at IKCU on EP, following which I mentored five teachers on their EP studies involving students in their own classes for approximately one academic year. Each study is explained as a single EP case study (Stake, 2003). The chapter ends with my reflections on each case, in particular on the degree to which core principles of EP were implemented.

# Background

My recent ELT background had largely concerned teacher education, principally mentoring teacher-researchers. I had completed a doctoral study (Trotman, 2010) into the beneficial features of oral feedback on English for Academic Purposes (EAP) writing, which was largely based on Burns' (2005) model of AR and involved reading work by Borg (2003), Dörnyei (2007) and Richards (2003). I had also worked for three years at IKCU with teachers on AR studies (Dikilitaş, Smith, & Trotman, 2015; Trotman, 2015a) and more recently on the uniqueness and commonality involved in case study research (Trotman, 2016).

## An Epiphany

My involvement began as I joined a series of EP workshops which took place in Izmir over one summer. These were split into two parts: interactive input (in June), followed by sessions in September evaluating how far we had come in terms of setting up personal EP work and encouraging colleagues in our various institutions to set up theirs.

At the outset, although I was familiar with the term 'Exploratory Practice', my initial thoughts were that it was simply a variation on, and possibly less regarded version of AR. I was not optimistic about getting much out of the workshops apart from having the chance to catch up with fellow teacher educators from other universities who I tended to see only at conferences. A more detailed (if rather quirky) account of how I felt about EP mid-way through the course can be found in Hanks (2017). This outlines how I was not at the time exactly 'on-board' with the idea of EP, and especially the constant refinement of participants' puzzles during sessions. Just when it seemed those in the group had summarised what puzzled them about their classroom work, the presenters were at pains to make the puzzles more specific. On reflection, I think my sense of frustration was brought about by the fact that I would not actually be investigating my own classrooms, but working with teachers who I was planning to introduce to EP. Since I felt there was no need at this stage to have an actual 'puzzle' in my mind, it was seemingly impossible to refine

it. It was only later when I began mentoring five teachers that I realised the necessity for this.

The nature of the sessions on EP, which firstly involved presenter-input followed by small group-work discussion, eventually led me to reflect on my earlier doctoral studies (Trotman, 2010) involving AR. I began to compare and contrast my experience on this with the seven core principles (Allwright & Hanks, 2009) on which EP is based. Such reflection produced trigger points, each of which eventually became cumulative in effect. This formed a realisation in my mind that EP had greater potential for research purposes than I had earlier felt was the case.

The initial and most striking realisation concerned three of the core principles. In contrast to the principles of EP concerning *minimising the burden* and *developing collegiality* (Allwright, 2003; Allwright & Hanks, 2009; Hanks, 2015a), in my doctoral study I had imposed upon colleagues who had sometimes only reluctantly agreed to help generate and gather data for me in their own and students' lunch-breaks. I also reflected on how, during my PhD viva, the external examiner had pointed out how I seemed to have simply 'used' the students without requesting the use of their names, thus empowering them by acknowledging their presence in the thesis, or indeed sharing with them any knowledge acquired. In short, a third EP principle, this time of *mutual development* (Allwright, 2005; Allwright & Hanks, 2009; Hanks, 2015b) was noticeably lacking.

On further reflection, such issues were probably the main causes of teacher-participant attrition throughout my five-year part-time doctoral study. For other researchers intending to use students less as subjects and more as co-researchers, Hanks provides an interesting account of the experiences of learners in an EAP context engaging with EP for the first time. She writes there of how "Learners welcomed the responsibilities of setting the agenda (via their puzzles) and driving the EP work forward" (2015a, p. 127). This was in contrast to my experience on the doctoral programme. This time, then, I was concerned about how far teachers and I would be able to adhere to the seven core principles of EP outlined above. The eventual puzzle that I had formed in my own mind by the end of the course, one which had led to my frustration when asked in sessions

to work on this puzzlement (at that time I felt it required no further fine-tuning), was as follows:

> In which ways and to what extent would first-time teacher researchers be able to help implement the seven core principles of EP in their chosen studies, and how would they deal with research-related issues arising?

## The Context for Engaging in Research

The present study took place in a state university in Turkey, a context in which job-security is almost guaranteed. There is no obligation to conduct research of any kind. Teachers' attendance at staff meetings is, however, a must, and although such meetings are usually held for administrative purposes rather than professional development, in a departure from the norm, one was devoted fully to a presentation on EP given by myself. Prior to the actual presentation the thirty participants took part in a ten-minute discussion led by me, at the start of which I asked them to work alone or with a partner to discuss what they felt were the likely benefits of engaging in teacher-research. The discussion elicited the following reasons why teachers might like to carry out their own projects:

- they might discover things that could improve their own, and thus students', classroom performance
- as research is—at least for some people—intrinsically interesting, they could absorb themselves in analysing data in their free time, as a result of which they might achieve realisations about their work
- they could present their studies at a local or national conference and invite colleagues to listen, following which they could publish their work in a local or national journal
- they would strengthen their CV by providing evidence of research-related publications when applying for an Assistant-Professorship positions or any other academic post.

The final point, and one that I hoped would be the most encouraging, was that they were working within what I believed was a supportive

professional environment. There was no top-down pressure from the administration to conduct research, thus with suitable mentoring teachers could explore issues within their own classroom context exactly how and when they wished. These features largely reflect the kinds of action that school leaders can take to promote an environment that is conducive to teacher-research, plus the practical measures that facilitators can take to make teacher-research a more productive experience for teachers. Key features Borg lists for producing a conducive environment include the following:

- actively promoting teacher research and giving it a high profile within the school
- creating opportunities for teachers to share their research findings with other teachers
- rewarding teachers' commitment to research.
  (summarised from Borg, 2015, p. 109)

Key practical measures listed by Borg for facilitators to take include:

- facilitating, as far as possible, teachers' access to resources, such as electronic journals and books on how to do research
- supporting teachers in creating a structure for their teacher research projects—for example, by helping them create a timetable with immediate milestones
- working towards a final concrete output—for example, a short written report and/or presentations at a staff meeting or similar event.
  (ibid.)

## Presenting Exploratory Practice and Action Research

Thirty language teachers attended my presentation which looked at the similarities, differences and possible overlaps between AR and EP, plus a more detailed overview of the seven core principles of EP. Also explained at the session was the concept of a 'PEPA'—a 'Potentially Exploitable Pedagogical Activity' (Allwright & Hanks, 2009, p. 29)—the use of

which would enable necessary data to be collected during lesson time. It was important to explain that activities not normally used in classroom teaching and which may disturb the normal course of events cannot be regarded as a PEPA. I therefore provided examples of PEPAs from our daily teaching lives, such as surveys, questionnaires, writing diaries, interviews, and transcripts of recordings of oral pair and group work. Two examples of slides used in the session appear below.

*What is a **PEPA**?*

   *'**P**otentially **E**xploitable **P**edagogical **A**ctivity'*
   *EP involves using a classroom task (**one that you would normally use with your students**) as a research tool in order to collect the necessary data. Examples: Surveys. Questionnaires. Writing diaries. Interviews. Pair and group work. Others? Maybe you can tell me some….*

My final slide in the presentation illustrated the following, which represented my current thoughts on AR and EP.

*"If it seeks to understand a puzzle by minimising the burden to all involved by carrying out the research in classroom time with carefully planned PEPAs, and involves all concerned in mutual development, then that's exploratory practice. However, if it seeks to address a problem and provide solutions in order to improve matters, while at the same time intervening in (and possibly interrupting classroom events) then that's probably action research. It is quite possible, however, for action research and exploratory practice to contain elements of each other."* (Trotman, in Hanks, 2017, pp. 253–254)

The remainder of the presentation involved teachers discussing together and completing the following guided sentences:

- *"One thing that puzzles me about my classroom teaching is…"*
- *"I think I can collect data to investigate this puzzle in my own classroom by using the following PEPA(s)…"*

# Providing the Initial Impetus

Following the presentation, five colleagues came to me to express their interest in the possibility of carrying out an EP study with me as their mentor. Individual weekly time-slots were arranged for each of the teachers, during which they made more specific their respective areas of intended research involving EP. Time was limited to half an hour at lunch-time on Fridays, so each person had five minutes to provide an update on their work, while others fed back to them. Colleagues who were not currently researching but had previously carried out research with me at IKCU, and whose work also appears in Dikilitaş et al. (2015), were also invited to attend and feed back. My overall aim was—in line with Borg's (2015) practical measures listed earlier—to further develop a culture of research within the preparatory school.

## Ethical Considerations

Prior to beginning the EP studies, I gave a follow-up presentation to the group of five teachers based on Kubanyiova (2015). This summarised her work on the *macroethical* and *microethical* principles of situated research, based on terms originally used by Guillemin and Gillam (2004). 'Macroethics' concerns such matters as gaining informed consent of participants and guaranteeing, where necessary, anonymity and confidentiality. In line with a further macroethical feature Kubanyiova (2015) outlines, it was also agreed that any benefits gained in terms of knowledge acquired from the EP studies would be fairly distributed to the ELT community both at our institution and beyond (Ortega, 2012). The latter point is, of course, once again in line with the EP principle of involving everybody as practitioners developing their own understanding (Allwright, 2005). Kubanyiova separates 'microethical' considerations into *the ethics of care* and *virtue ethics*. In the former, the researcher is expected to show sensitivity to subjects involved in the study, i.e. not bullying them into participation. In the latter, the researcher is expected to show reflexivity when s/he discerns discomfort on the part of subjects. Later in this chapter, I explain how

both considerations applied when one of the five participants unexpectedly withdrew from the EP research group.

## Refining Puzzles

With the onset of the new semester, which for all five researchers meant a heavy classroom load, personal EP studies began to take place in four areas that, while perhaps already well-researched within the ELT profession, are of clear concern for novice teachers: student motivation; error-correction; teacher talking time; issuing classroom instructions.

## Data Collection Via PEPAs

Soon after this a key issue arose concerning the data collection stage. How could 'rich' data be generated for teachers by beginner-level learners unless they—the learners—were allowed to respond in their L1? As a group we thus decided that where possible, to avoid unnecessary L1 use, it would be more beneficial to carry out surveys during class time which were to be completely in English. However, following normal language classroom principles and practices, where necessary, explanations would be given in Turkish. It should be pointed out that the use of normal classroom activities such as surveys (i.e. PEPAs) during class time enables a large amount of data to be collected relatively easily.

## Researcher Interviews

While data analysis and writing up research was on-going, at this point I also carried out individual interviews with the researchers. I had various reasons for doing so. Firstly, I believed it would provide useful first-hand experience for them of the structure of a research-related interview. This would prove beneficial should they themselves wish to interview students in order to probe answers previously elicited from surveys they used as their PEPAs. In particular, by requesting permission at the start of the recording, I was keen to model the principle concerning the ethics of

getting informed consent (Kubanyiova, 2015, p. 177). Secondly, due to time constraints throughout the teaching week which tended to limit contact, I wished to probe the researchers' opinions and attitudes towards research in general, and more specifically their own studies. With participants' permission, interviews were recorded. They were semi-structured and adapted from questions in Borg (2013, chapter five), all of which I had used in Trotman (2015b). There they were used to probe perceptions of an earlier group of teacher-researchers with more experience of classroom teaching. Each of the five researchers in the present study were asked the following:

- *What is your current perception of research?*
- *What type of research are you carrying out; EP or AR?*
- *Why did you decide to engage in this type of teacher-research?*
- *How do you feel about being a teacher-researcher?*
- *Which puzzle are you investigating and why?*
- *If you are facing any issues or difficulties, how are you dealing with them?*
- *What do you feel will be the benefits of your EP/AR studies?*

In the interview accounts below, the dots indicate a pause between the end of an answer to one question and the beginning of the next answer.

## Case Studies

### EP Case Study One: Poppy

In her third year of teaching, Poppy was experiencing difficulty with a beginner-level class which she felt was low on motivation. Her puzzle was:

*Why is it that I think my class have a low level of motivation in English lessons with me?*
*How can I explore and understand this and how, if necessary, can I improve matters?*

For her first PEPA she carried out an initial survey that measured on a Likert scale how motivated this class were. The score was considerably lower than for her other classes. Wishing to probe responses, she next carried out a follow-up survey which asked students to complete sentences in their L1 about what motivated them and what tended to demotivate them in her lessons. Based on her findings, she incorporated within her normal classroom routine relevant activities such as the use of film clips, which students had requested. She later interviewed selected students and was able to detect how many of them appeared to be visual learners. Following this realisation, and due to the introduction of more visual material in the lesson, Poppy noted in our interview how their levels of motivation had improved.

**Poppy**: *Research is a way to understand my students and my teaching… in order to empathise with them I asked questions…at first my study was exploratory practice as I was trying to understand…but when I started to do attitudinal surveys it became action research as I began to search for solutions…I decided to carry out research as I felt inadequate as a teacher…earlier I felt like a novice but this has changed…and now I feel like I'm doing something good for my teaching…my topic is motivation…my class were not motivated and I thought the problem was me….concerning issues…writing my research in a second language is not easy for me…especially novice teachers will benefit from my research…they'll change their views of their students and understand the difficulties they face student responses to my second survey have awakened an awareness of myself as a teacher..*

In her words we can detect how carrying out EP affected Poppy's motivation. She moved from an early feeling of low-esteem into a degree of enlightenment.

**Follow-up**: It is interesting to note how, although the original focus in her study was EP, this later developed into AR. This is a possible and reasonable, if not always necessary or inevitable process. Poppy's study, in fact, reflects aspects of Allwright's (2001) conceptualisation of three major macro processes for understanding. She had moved from contemplation for understanding onto action for understanding and eventually action for change.

Poppy later successfully completed the CELTA (Certificate in Language Teaching to Adults) and subsequently decided she no longer wished to

continue with her study. In line with Kubanyiova's (2015) ethics of care (and all responsible research), we both agreed that the door would remain open should she wish to return. And in fact, on my contacting her six months later, Poppy agreed to allow me to use her data in this chapter.

I now turn to the second Case Study.

## EP Case Study Two: Amanda and Karen

Amanda and Karen, who were both in their first year of teaching, initially decided to collaborate on an EP study. Their puzzle ran thus: *During speaking activities, when and in which ways do our students prefer to be corrected?* This involved explorations of student preferences for oral error-correction among both of their beginner-level classes, which each contained approximately twenty-five students. For a PEPA they each administered the same survey concerning *when* students preferred to be corrected.

For Karen, her quantitative data analysis revealed how, in contrast to what she had learned from her teaching course about the benefits of providing feedback on students' utterances, most of the class preferred instant rather than delayed correction. After discussing the results with her students, Karen invited me to participate in their classroom time in a class debate in English on the pedagogical principles involved in such a matter.

Here is Karen's account of this debate:

**Karen**: *After the written data that l collected from my students l wanted to learn their ideas verbally. Thus l asked them to explain their opinions related to their answers in the data forms. […] The reason why l asked my students their ideas is the surprising results that l got after the survey. Most of my students supported their ideas by saying "we learn better when our mistakes are corrected instantly" and also they wanted to be corrected all the time. We, my supervisor and l, tried to explain that it is not possible to correct each mistake all the time because of the time limit of each class and also the disturbing nature of being corrected all the time. At the end of the discussion they agreed that their teachers may ignore minor mistakes like everyday words or phrases that we use in the class, but still the idea of being corrected (instantly) should not be ignored totally.*

**Interview with Karen**: *Research means dealing with an issue to improve my skills as a teacher because after effort something new comes out… ours is data based research… we're collecting data and according to the results we're going to shape our research, I'm doing it to improve my skills as a teacher… and understand students and find out the gaps, problems in teaching. It's a really good experience for me, especially when I compare myself with friends at other universities who don't have the opportunity… error correction is our topic, even when our students have an answer they hesitate because they're afraid of making a mistake…data collection is an issue…our students are reluctant to speak so I cannot correct them and collect data…so as a PEPA I got them to create dialogues from movie star quotes…our research will help us to see how our students prefer to be corrected…*

It is clear in the following comments that Karen was startled by the outcome of her data analysis. By sharing her findings with her students, Karen both consciously and explicitly acted according to the EP principle of developing collegiality.

**Follow-up**: Karen later commented: *Ninety per-cent wanted to be corrected instantly…I shared my findings with them…because I was surprised… I wasn't expecting to see these results… they wanted correction in each case… grammar…vocabulary… they think this is the role of the teacher… but I disagreed with them… this is something that should not be generalised…they want correction but although I do it… I'm not convinced they all benefit… just the ones who want it…my students kept asking me… how is your research going?*

It is noticeable in this regard that her sharing data and opinions led to the class feeling, as with Hanks (2017), that they were at least partially responsible for setting the agenda. Although they refer to '*your*', meaning Karen's own research, they displayed more than polite interest in knowing what she was finding out.

Since Amanda's data analysis indicated how her own group preferred delayed correction, she and Karen decided to continue separate, individual, parallel EP studies.

**Amanda**: *Teaching requires improvement and research is a good opportunity to assist with this… everybody working in a university should carry out research.…I'm happy as a researcher because I want to be a successful teacher*

*and as a beginner I'm doing my best…our subject is error correction… we have to correct their errors but without discouraging them.…time is an issue but also planning and organising the steps…plus reading about research… students may benefit from our study… it's important to know and prioritise their opinions… and it'll maybe help me find a better job..*

**Follow-up**: After she had completed her analysis, Amanda told me that she had not consciously shared any findings with her class, which perhaps breaches the EP principle of developing collegiality. She did point out, however: *I've learned that the teacher should ask students their preferences…I didn't share them…but I formed my lessons in accordance with their answers.* In this way, indirectly and perhaps only implicitly, Amanda had in fact observed the EP principle of developing collegiality. At the same time she had developed her own understanding of what puzzled her.

That both Amanda and Karen were led to question their own assumptions regarding error-correction fits well into EP concerning principle two, which concerns working to understand before thinking about solutions. At the same time, the work of each once again reflects aspects of Allwright (2001) in terms of firstly contemplation for understanding and then action for understanding. However, unlike Poppy, they felt it was sufficient to stop at this point and not become involved in action for change.

I now turn to Case Study three.

## EP Case Study Three: Harrison

In his third year of language teaching, Harrison's puzzles were "*Why do I dominate the classroom discourse?*" and "*How can I reduce unnecessary teacher talking time and encourage more productive student talking time?*" He had become aware of such issues following his viewing of a lesson which had been video-recorded by an observing teacher-trainer. Harrison felt uncomfortable after noting in the video how he tended to dominate the classroom interaction. To an extent, Harrison had thus experienced Critical Learning Episodes (CLE) during the lesson (Slimani-Rolls & Kiely, 2014, p. 27).

Harrison initially collected data by administering a survey among his class which requested attitudinal information on student preferences in his lessons concerning talking time. From the analysis he realised that pair and group work would at least enable the possibility for an increase in student talking time. Harrison later asked his class to work in pairs, each recording their dialogue on mobile phones and listening to themselves later in the lesson and at home. He followed this up by working with each pair on their dialogue, pointing out how they could extend and improve language produced therein.

**Harrison**: *At first the notion of research was foreign to me…but now I think it's like a mirror in which I can see myself…I can see how I've changed…my study is exploratory practice…which is searching…reading the results of surveys and data…action research also has data but EP's about recording the information you get during teaching …honestly…I want a good cv…but after learning about research I want to continue…I really see that I'm improving myself…it's nice to explain your experiences...and share with colleagues…my topic is speaking less...and getting students to speak more…I used to ask students a question one by one and talk all the time…I was tired and bored...time is an issue...I have lots of things in my mind...I want to write...but it's late at night...a benefit is I can show different things about my style to my colleagues.*

**Follow-up**: Harrison had collected thirty-five short recordings of his students engaged in pair-work during classroom time. Prior to his analysis, he felt that the problem with a shortage of output by the students was due to the dominant teacher, such as he felt himself to be. From anonymous written feedback by his students, his eventual findings were that seventy-five per cent of the time the students admitted their own shyness was the reason. One remark he recalled was: *I don't want to speak as I feel all my friends are better than me.*

Like Karen, Harrison had observed the EP principle of developing collegiality by sharing his findings about this with his class, which once again led to discussion on how they could develop their oral skills. The EP study carried out by Harrison, like Poppy's, concerned all three macro processes outlined by Allwright (2001). He had initially engaged in contemplation then action for understanding and finally action for change.

I end with Case Study four.

## EP Case Study Four: Tracey

Tracey had recently completed the CELTA and was in her first year of teaching. Her initial puzzle concerned how to issue classroom instructions so that her students would be able to engage in tasks. After further refinement, the actual puzzle ran thus: *How can I ensure my pre-task instructions are given to my students clearly enough for them to understand and then participate in the set tasks?* For a PEPA, Tracey firstly prepared an eleven item survey.

**Tracey**: *My research is exploratory practice… I realised a kind of problem in my classes and I wanted to understand the reason for it but I'm not looking for the solution. I want to understand my students better…while teaching I can also learn something new so my students' feedback is very important for me and maybe I can realise the points I'd not noticed before…my topic was giving instructions before the task.. I realised some students didn't understand some points and for some tasks I noticed this immediately…but after a few weeks of this…for more confusing tasks…during the tasks they couldn't do the things they were supposed to do…while monitoring I noticed they were doing nothing…they were asking each other what to do…one research issue for me is that because of their language level students have difficulty expressing themselves…but for it to be EP it has to be in English…my students will benefit from my research because now I know they need more instruction checking questions.*

Following the analysis of data from the initial survey and after sharing the results with her class, Tracey designed a follow-up survey which probed students' perceptions.

**Follow-up**: Tracey later commented on her experience as follows:

*My EP research highlights unnoticed problems about my instructions… survey outcomes showed how 16 students needed to ask for instructions to their classmates…after that I preferred to go deep into the reasons behind these problematic instructions…as a result I found out that several students had problems with complicated, fast and not loud enough instructions before the tasks…so these results reminded me that giving instructions to lower-level classes has a critical importance that can even cause the whole activity to fail in the end…grading my language level to students' level is*

*the key point at giving efficient instructions.to manage it, I should make sure if the class atmosphere is suitable to be heard easily…after that, using short sentences step by step (preferably with sequencing adverbs), speaking more slowly than I generally do, and paying more attention to my voice became priorities for more effective instructions as Jim Scrivener lists in the chapter "Giving Instructions"* (Scrivener, 2012, pp. 128–131).

It is clear from the work carried out by Tracey that, in line with Amanda and Karen, she engaged in the first two of the three processes outlined in Allwright (2001). She firstly contemplated in order to reflect on her puzzle concerning issuing instructions, then she engaged in action for understanding students' problems.

## Writing Up Research

Concerning the above accounts, Kubanyiova's (2015) microethical principles of the 'ethics of care' were taken into further consideration. Those interviewed were shown my summarised accounts of their responses, and invited to comment. From the interviews, however, I noted that researchers were having difficulty in writing up their studies. With this in mind, during an extended period in which they were analysing their data, I wrote a set of guidelines for novice research writers. My intention was to get researchers writing about their work as soon as possible. Later reading of their work indicated how they had in fact made use of the guidance, especially relating to the use of lead-in sentences and focussing on the research topic.

## Discussion and Reflection

Although at the preliminary workshops my initial thoughts concerning the value of EP in ELT were less than positive, they soon altered when I reflected on how EP appeared a more humanistic means of carrying out practitioner research than was the case with my AR doctoral study (Trotman, 2010). For the future, my own understandings continue to

develop. For example, in contrast to what they term "transmissive and input-based Continuing Professional Development (CPD)", working with lecturers in Higher Education, Slimani-Rolls and Kiely (2014, p. 427) adopted "transformational and practice-based CPD". To do so they used a combination of EP and CLE. As units of analysis they each identified in recorded classroom discourse, the episodes enabled teachers to develop a "microscopic understanding" (Walsh, 2011, p. 18) of how interaction worked in their lessons and lectures. On reflection, as this appears to be an extension of the CPD we seek to implement at IKCU, I should have encouraged the five teachers in the current study to record their lessons in order to identify from transcripts actual instances relating to their respective EP puzzles. Future research beckons.

In this chapter we have read how five novice researchers with relatively little experience in the classroom began their EP studies with me, which lasted approximately one academic year. Each of them was able to make discoveries about their puzzles that helped them to question their assumptions about what goes on within the dynamic complexity of the language classroom (Tudor, 2001, 2003; van Lier, 2013). The work carried out by each of them reflects Tudor's (2001, p. 9) comment:

> …in order to understand precisely what takes place in our classrooms, we have to look at these classrooms as entities in their own right and explore the meaning they have for those involved in them in their own terms.

From the five cases above and interviews with each, I identified the following points: Poppy's and Harrison's studies each began as EP but later developed into AR. Contemplation via reflective practice led to initial understanding, which led to further action for understanding via EP. The next step for them involved action for change, i.e. AR, and thus their studies reflected all three major processes of teacher development outlined in Allwright (2001). In contrast, EP studies by Karen, Amanda and Tracey reflected the first two of Allwright's (2001) three processes. In this respect they may be regarded solely as EP. This is not meant as a criticism. On the contrary, it seems likely that in the future they may each wish to engage in further action for change.

## What I Learnt as a Mentor of EP Practitioners

Reflecting on this study I realised how, with suitable guidance, encouragement and support, novice researchers could, in a relatively easy manner, manage their EP projects over the course of one academic year. In order for this to happen, however, I had to wear several different 'hats': those of mentor and supervisor, critical friend and supportive colleague. At times the research group faced challenges, especially with regard to writing up their studies. In response to this I prepared a template for them to use as they wished. I also realised how, when it was not easy for us to meet individually or as a group, even quick chats in the corridor on the way to lessons proved insightful.

## Final Comment

As a result of the above studies my final comment runs thus: far from being a less regarded form of practitioner research, EP is a viable and humanistic means of researching one's own classroom context. Since EP seeks primarily to understand the complexities involved rather than act on them, there is no immediate requirement to seek solutions where there may in fact be none. Understanding may be enough.

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# 4

# Investigating and Understanding 'Free Reading' Experiences through Exploratory Practice

**Talip Karanfil**

## Introduction

In this Exploratory Practice (EP) research, I investigated the amount of extracurricular or free reading activities undertaken by students as separate and distinct to curricular reading. Curricular reading can be considered as intensive reading since it aims "… to arrive at a profound and detailed understanding of the text: not only of what it means, but also of how the meaning is produced. … the intensive reading lesson is intended primarily to train students in reading strategies." (Nuttall, 2005, p. 38). My investigation focused on extracurricular reading activities of preparatory school students, such as novels, stories, newspapers, comic books, blogs and websites in English. I was puzzled by this conundrum: I wondered to what extent this change has affected the amount and type of reading students do, and whether this leads to a lack of exposure to the

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language and negatively impacts language learning (Koda, 2007; Elley & Mangubhai, 1983).

At Middle East Technical University, Northern Cyprus Campus (METU-NCC), we have an English preparatory program where students engage in comprehensive English language learning. The program aims to provide students with communicative competence in everyday English as well as "basic language skills so that they can pursue their undergraduate studies at our university without major difficulty." (http://ncc.metu.edu.tr/sfl/general-info/). Materials are chosen and designed to foster students' knowledge of English for Academic Purposes (EAP), which "…is concerned with researching and teaching the English needed by those who use the language to perform academic tasks." (Charles, 2012, p. 137) Hyland (2006, p. 2) further defines EAP as: "…language use in the academy at all age and proficiency levels, incorporating and often going beyond immediate communicative contexts to understand the nature of disciplinary knowledge itself…"

Reading helps improve vocabulary and awareness of the use of language in diverse contexts (Krashen, 2012, 2006; Pitts & Krashen, 1989), and is useful in language learning (Pazhakh & Soltani, 2010; Krashen, 2006; Cunningham & Stanovich, 2001). With online and mobile based apps and messaging tools, reading habits have also started to change (Johnsson-Smaragdi & Jönsson, 2006; Liu, 2005). Regarding extracurricular reading activities, throughout my research, I prefer to use the term 'free reading' to avoid confusion with the more commonly used term of 'extensive reading'. Nation (1997, 2005) and Bell (1998) suggest that extensive reading activities should be planned and monitored by the teachers. Day and Bamford's (1988) characteristics of extensive reading support the view that extensive reading activities should have a strict framework. The reading activities I tried to investigate were not of this nature, being closer to Krashen's *Free Voluntary Reading (FVR)* (Krashen, 2003) and reading for pleasure, which is more in line with my thoughts regarding this research.

Below, I will provide more information about my research, my institutional context, and how I met EP and what it means for me. I will also present my methodology, data collection, findings and conclusion.

# Context

METU has its main campus in Ankara, Turkey, with its Northern Cyprus Campus situated in Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus. At METU-NCC, the School of Foreign Languages consists of a Modern Languages Programme, providing undergraduate service English courses, and an English Preparatory School (EPS), providing English language instruction at various proficiency levels (Beginner to Upper intermediate or A1 to B2+ in Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)).

The EPS runs intensive courses in two 16-week semesters as well as exam preparation courses in the summer. The enrollment was about 600 at the start of the 2015–2016 academic year, and the average number of students per class was 20. I have been working as an English language instructor at this institution for about ten years and I regularly get involved in various research activities and projects.

During the first semester of the 2015–2016 academic year, I was assigned to Intermediate (CEFR-B1+) level classes, the highest English proficiency level classes, and followed through in the second semester to the upper-intermediate (CEFR-B2+) level. These students are generally quite confident and comfortable using English during classroom activities such as in-class discussions, writing tasks and following instructions. Working with these students is stimulating and there is scope for a wider variety of communicative and interactive activities compared to lower proficiency level classes, which facilitates learning about their interests and how they make use of English outside. Through these discussions and talks, I realized they did not seem to read a lot out of class, missing out on the benefits of reading, especially vocabulary development (Pazhakh & Soltani, 2010, p. 388). I wondered why this might be the case.

I decided to look into the matter by informally inquiring during class about their reading habits and use of English outside the classroom. Not surprisingly, I noticed they had a strong preference for visual media such as movies, computer games and social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. Since they were heavily engaged with digital

media, I assumed they were also exposed to reading texts, but perhaps did not consider this to be explicitly reading. Thus, I was curious to look into details about their reading habits in a more structured way, which fortuitously coincided with my introduction to EP.

## Enter Exploratory Practice

Some of my colleagues had already met EP in language learning (Allwright, 2003; Allwright & Hanks, 2009) and as a result of their interest, our institution invited Dr. Judith Hanks and Dr. Kenan Dikilitaş for a series of workshops and seminars on EP, as part of our continuous professional development activities. At first, I was not really sure about what EP meant to me, and as a matter of fact, I thought it was more like Huang's definition of action research:

> Action research is an orientation to knowledge creation that arises in a context of practice and requires researchers to work with practitioners. Unlike conventional social science, its purpose is not primarily or solely to understand social arrangements, but also to effect desired change as a path to generating knowledge and empowering stakeholders. We may therefore say that action research represents a transformative orientation to knowledge creation in that action researchers seek to take knowledge production beyond the gate-keeping of professional knowledge makers.
>
> (Huang, 2010, p. 93)

One of the issues with action research, as I understood it, is that it seems to focus on change and then based on the results make necessary adjustments and then try again. In our context, we do not have a lot of time for trial and error processes during the academic year. We have a compact and loaded program. Thus, I needed something practical, which could be done while following my regular classroom activities and allow my casual interest into my students' reading habits the potential to develop into more structured research.

At that point Hanks's brief description summarized my aims: "… a form of practitioner research in language education that aims to integrate

research, learning and teaching" (Hanks, 2015, p. 2). I decided I would be a practitioner researcher, and, it would be possible to integrate my research ideas into my classroom activities.

Another important point for me, was the focus EP places on curiosity as expressed in my question: *"Why don't my students read?"* I first wanted to understand the nature of the problem before deciding if a solution or change was needed. According to Allwright that is one main focus of EP:

> Practitioner Research must be about understanding. One of our first big realizations at this point was that we needed to bring understanding back to the foreground in our work, to insist that we were dealing with the notion of understanding, not problem-solving…an important distinguishing feature of EP (especially in distinguishing EP from Action Research)… So we made the epistemological issue of understanding a matter of first principle for EP.
>
> (Allwright, 2005, p. 358)

In fact, I realized I needed to understand what sorts of reading they were involved in, and/or whether I was even correct in thinking that they were not reading. I began to question my own assumptions. Combining practice with research and looking for understanding I thought this was my best option to proceed with my in-class queries or investigations.

I needed to plan, keep track of what I was doing in class and organize it in such a way that the research itself would be part of the class. I invited my students to be my fellow researchers, not just sources of data, which I believe added more quality to the classroom culture (Hanks, 2015, p. 4).

I will not go into detail about how I feel and how I would describe quality of life in the classroom because that is not the main focus of this research. However, it may form the basis for research in the future.

I believed that relating what we study in class to movies, books or anything in our daily lives (in general) would add and hopefully lead to some sort of curiosity among my students to build on knowledge in different aspects and to reflect it to our class culture enhancing it in various ways. This could also be very helpful in our English learning and teaching experience.

Unlike faculty members, research is not part of our job description at our institution, so no allowances are made for the time and energy required for traditional research. While our administration recognizes the benefits of such research-related projects, the lack of direct support meant that the practicality of EP was very appealing at this point.

## Methodology

My research was mostly done during the first semester. First semester intermediate students are interested and aware of almost everything globally. It is easy for them to find information on the Internet because they can use their English for global searches, whereas lower English proficiency level students tend to use their L1 for the same search. So, seeing their interest in using their English and interests in different areas, I wondered if I could learn about their reading habits (especially in English). My assumption, and their responses to our in-class talks, suggested that they did not read.

To find out, I asked them in our classroom conversations whether they read newspapers, magazines, books, novels, blogs, websites, forums, and so on. These were in-class small-talk type of interactions. However, when I decided to look more into it, I needed to continue in a more organized manner.

I frequently tell my students that I expect them to be as 'autonomous' as they can in their English learning experience, and since within our program, we already give them lots of reading activities focused on grammar, reading skills, vocabulary, and so on, I want them to use the language freely in reading. Thus, as many instructors do, while working on some topics throughout the main coursebook (Language Leader Intermediate (Cotton, Falvey, & Kent, 2008)), I like linking the topic to various movies, computer games, books, songs and so on. I also like to have their ideas if they want to share.

During our casual classroom conversations, I came to realize that the students were more into visual and IT-based entertainment and leisure activities. Two quick examples would be *The Lord of the Rings* by J. R. R Tolkien and the *Harry Potter* Series by J. K. Rowling. When we talked

about these in class, it seemed like they knew a lot about the stories, characters and plot. Yet, when I asked them whether they had read the books (either in L1 or English), the answer I mostly got was *"NO."* It also struck me in that they also knew a lot more than what is shown in the movies or games. Thus, I deduced, their knowledge was not only from movies and games. Since they had not read the books either, then where did that knowledge come from? That question was answered during and after my data gathering and analysis, which showed that they were actually reading something.

I also needed to find out what they were reading and why they would constantly answer *"No. We're not reading."* The shortest answer to my questions regarding this was that they were not aware of what they were doing. Perhaps the meaning and understanding of reading might have changed given our digitally and virtually surrounded environment.

I started to realize they were reading but I was not sure what, how and where. Therefore, I would add another question to my query: *"Why are they reading whatever they are reading?"* Although skeptical of both my ideas and their responses, I still wanted to keep my original question: "*Why don't my students read?"*

It took a couple of days to organize and plan the procedure. This was an in-class, built-in research in which research procedures were implemented within the pedagogical, daily classroom activities (one of the important principles of EP). Embedding research material or activities into in-class activities is important for many reasons and was attractive to me because of its non-invasive and non-parasitic nature, as Allwright has argued:

> … Work done for understanding and/or change must not hinder language teaching and learning, and will seek to make a positive contribution to learning. This criterion is intended to counter the 'parasitic' reputation of research interventions into language teaching and learning… This is why EP proposes as a first stage the use of 'monitoring' activities, non-invasive procedures by which the teacher can keep a record of what goes on in his or her classroom. 'Monitoring' here might be as simple a notion as keeping notes while learners are engaged in group work….
>
> (Allwright, 2001, p. 110)

# Procedure

Here are the basic steps I followed. The 'why' question was needed as a start. My initial puzzles outlined above developed now into a more formal research question: *Why do some English preparatory class students not get involved in free reading in English as much as they should!? Or do they?*

Potentially Exploitable Pedagogic Activities (PEPAs) (as discussed by Rio EP Group in Allwright & Hanks, 2009), played the second role in my plan. Although it felt a bit confusing at first to understand this concept, I, later, figured out, again for my purposes, the key word for me was 'exploitable'. This looked scary at first but it turned out to be very convenient.

I think the easiest way to explain how it worked for me is to provide a brief sample session description below:

> We are studying a topic about seas and oceans through the coursebook. And almost every activity leads to a discussion. Then I ask: "Do you know any books or movies about the sea?" I may or may not get answers. Most of the answers I get are about movies and not books. Then I go on: "Have you read "The Old Man and The Sea" by Ernest Hemingway, one of my favourite authors? or "Moby Dick", a classic, by Herman Melville?" If (and usually) the answer is "no", I write the names on the board and suggest reading them, preferably in English; graded readers if they like. So, after every such query, I get puzzled more and more. Then, I start to take notes about these. They haven't read this, haven't read that. Later, these tiny notes turn into part of my data and one of my research tools which I call "The List". I like to keep the name short and with a "The" because it sounds attractive and I think the students fancy it.

'The List', was an idea which emerged after I decided to take notes of what they have read or not. Simply put, instead of writing suggestions on the board, which would be erased soon, I decided to keep a list of items (books, stories, movies, etc.). They suggested, and I posted it on one of the walls in the classroom so it would be there all semester. As part of my research I was going to use it to investigate whether they read or watched any of those items in the list throughout the semester.

That was how I initially embedded research-related material into my pedagogical practice. I also tried to blend research activities into my classroom practice during my questionnaire and my group discussions, which I will explain below.

## The List

I decided to provide my classes with a list including mostly books, websites and other related media. I also asked my students to note down their suggestions if they wanted to. My idea was to see how much interest they showed toward these suggestions at the end of the semester (Table 4.1).

**Table 4.1** List of books read by students

| Books/Work | √ | Authors | √ | Websites | √ |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| The Masque of the Red Death | | E.A.Poe | | www.bbc.co.uk | |
| Annabel Lee | | E.A. Poe | | www.bbclearningenglish.com | |
| The Picture of Dorian Gray | | Oscar Wilde | | www.theguardian.com | |
| War of the Worlds | | H.G. Wells | | www.newsinlevels.com | |
| The Time Machine | | H.G. Wells | | https://newsela.com | |
| 1984 | | George Orwell | | www.gutenberg.org/ | |
| Animal Farm | | George Orwell | | freerice.com | |
| The Catcher in the Rye | | J.D. Salinger | | http://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/en/ | |
| Of Mice and Men | | John Steinbeck | | www.cnn.com | |
| Dracula | | Bram Stoker | | www.discovery.com | |
| The Old Man and the Sea | | Ernest Hemingway | | http://www.discoveryeducation.com/ | |
| For Whom the Bell Tolls | | Ernest Hemingway | | http://discoverykids.com/ | |
| Harry Potter (any) | | J.K. Rowling | | http://kids.nationalgeographic.com/ | |
| The Lord of the Rings (any) | | J.R.R. Tolkien | | http://www.nationalgeographic.com/ | |
| The Hobbit | | J.R.R. Tolkien | | http://education.nationalgeographic.org/ | |
| Silmarillion | | J.R.R. Tolkien | | | |
| The Rime of the Ancient Mariner | | Samuel Taylor Coleridge | | | |
| Journey to the Center of the Earth | | Jules Verne | | | |
| Around the World in Eighty Days | | Jules Verne | | | |
| Perfume: The Story of a Murderer | | Patrick Süskind | | | |
| Hamlet | | William Shakespeare | | | |
| Macbeth | | William Shakespeare | | | |
| Othello | | William Shakespeare | | | |
| Romeo & Juliet | | William Shakespeare | | | |
| Crime and Punishment | | Fyodor Dostoyevski | | | |
| A Christmas Carol | | Charles Dickens | | | |
| Metamorphosis | | Franz Kafka | | | |
| The Trial | | Franz Kafka | | | |
| | | David Attenborough | | | |

| Books/Graphic novels (graphic novels suggested from Metu-Ncc library) | √ |
|---|---|
| The Martian Chronicles | Ray Bradbury | |
| The Jungle Book | Rudyard Kipling | |
| Crime and Punishment | Fyodor Dostoyevski | |
| Othello | W.Shakespeare | |
| Henry V. | W.Shakespeare | |
| Macbeth | W.Shakespeare | |
| Nevermore | E.A.Poe | |
| Romeo & Juliet | W.Shakespeare | |
| Spiderman (Noir) | Marvel Comics | |

The list itself, and the image created of it were both designed and created by the author; thus, both are properties of the author

## Students as Research Partners

> Working for understanding life in the language classroom will provide a good foundation for helping teachers and learners make their time together both pleasant and productive. It will also, I believe, prove to be a friend of intelligent and lasting pedagogic change, since it will automatically provide a firm foundation for any 'improvements' that investigation suggests are worth trying.
>
> (Allwright, 2003, p. 114)

I conducted my research in two classes (18 + 20 = 38 students in total). Since I wanted my students to share their suggestions in my list, and since they were the focus of my research, I thought it would be a good idea to let them know about my plans. I informed them about my intentions in building up on this list. Just like the first practice (linking the in-class topic to books or movies via in-class discussions), I wanted to involve my students in my research, which I believe added variety, quality and above all ownership of the activities we did in class. I introduced it as follows:

| | |
|---|---|
| T: | You know our "List" right? |
| Sts: | Yes.uhuh. |
| T: | Well...I want to conduct a research into your reading habits because it puzzles me that whenever I ask you about whether you read or not, you usually answer "No". ... But I also know that you know a lot of stuff, especially from the movies and the Internet and I can't believe that you are not reading. I guess you are reading but maybe you are not aware or you misunderstand my question when I ask "Do you read?" |
| Sts: | *Hocam* [this is how they address us in class. It is used like a title instead of "teacher, Sir, Dr, Prof, Mr, Ms] Of course we are reading this and that but we are not reading books (a lot). |
| T: | Yes, right. But I want to know why? and I know some of you told me that it was boring, and some books are too long and so on. Now, what I want to do is to find out the real reasons and I want you to help me. I want us to be as honest as possible because there is no right or wrong here and whatever we do during this research, it will absolutely have no effect on your grades. I'll give you the details as we proceed but be assured that nothing that we do in class will change. I'll take notes of my questions and your answers about reading. Then, I'll prepare a questionnaire, of course in English and I'll ask you to answer the questions as freely as possible, preferably in English, but you might also use Turkish and we'll have a couple of group discussions based on your questionnaire responses and you can give me more suggestions and share your ideas. Is that OK with you? |
| Sts: | Uhuh. Yeah, yes... |

So they became my research partners. In a way we were all participants, researchers and practitioners. Our list started to grow with more items either from me or from them. I asked them questions like, if they used to read before university, or if they went to our library to check the items in our list, or if they liked reading blogs and if they had favorite bloggers. These questions and their responses led me to my questionnaire items and helped me understand their motives, ideas and understanding regarding reading.

Toward the end of the semester, I gave them a questionnaire and finally, we had a group discussion. This way I was aiming at a triangulated data gathering process: in-class discussions, questionnaire and a focused group discussion (Fig. 4.1).

I could do all of these within my class time and regular classroom activities: discussions regarding this research turned into speaking activities and the questionnaire became a writing activity. We had the opportunity to provide feedback about this research and share our ideas about reading in English (Fig. 4.2).
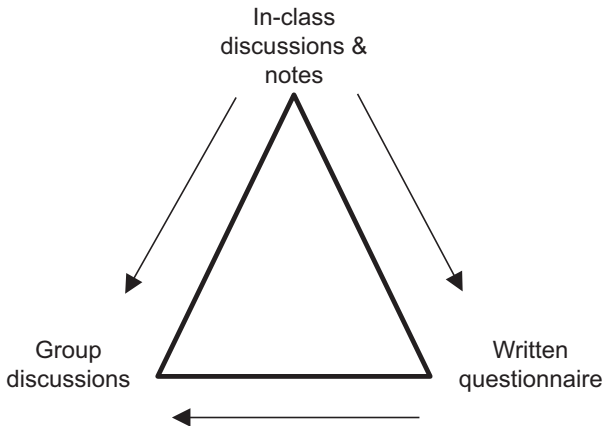


**Fig. 4.1** Data for the study

**Questionnaire Items**

**1.** These books, authors and websites have been mentioned/suggested by & to you during the semester. These could be useful in enhancing your English learning experience. Which one(s) of these have you read? (please put a tick next to the ones you have)

**2.** In addition to the list above, this semester, have you done any reading in English (other than MTR, Lang.Lead, Reading Practices, etc. i.e. any out-of-class free reading)?      Yes – No

If "Yes", can you write some or all of those reading materials/resources?

If "No", please explain why?

**3.** Do you regularly read in Turkish?      Yes – No

If yes, what kind of reading do you do? (newspapers, magazines, books, encyclopedias, blogs, websites etc.)

If "No", please explain why?

**4.** Do you regularly read in English?      Yes – No

If yes, what kind of reading do you do? (newspapers, magazines, books, encyclopedias, blogs, websites etc.)

If "No", please explain why?

**5.** Why do you think you and/or some students do not do extra-curricular (out-of-class/free/not school work) English reading? Please comment as honestly and freely as possible.

**6.** Please share any other comments/ideas that you have about "reading in English".

**Fig. 4.2** Questionnaire items

## The Questionnaire

I devised a simple questionnaire with open-ended questions, to which students could comment on and share their ideas freely. My questions were, I believe, in line with my initial queries regarding my students' reading habits. With this questionnaire I aimed at getting answers to the following five items by Csizér and Dörnyei (2012, p. 75):

- *language learners' intended language behavior, that is, how students plan to respond to certain language situations* [in my case their willingness toward reading to improve their English]
- *people's opinions and attitudes concerning specific L2s and the language learning process in general* [in my case their attitude toward reading]
- *participants' feelings and beliefs about certain L2-related issues* [in my case their feelings about reading]
- *learners' knowledge of certain issues in SLA (Second Language Acquisition)*; in my case their idea of the value of reading

- *various background information and biodata from the students* [in my case how they perceived reading in relation to their acquired English proficiency]

I presented this questionnaire toward the end of the semester. Regarding the question of blending pedagogical activities and research activities; I believe this questionnaire served multiple aims in the language learning class:

1. They are practicing reading and understanding questions, Q&A skills and writing.
2. The 'List', may create an interest in some of the items there.
3. An opportunity to have their ideas and voices heard.
4. In all cases, they are practicing English.

It took 15–20 minutes for students to complete the questionnaire during which there was interaction between each other and me regarding vocabulary items, questions regarding grammar about how to write something in a specific way, and so on.

Analyzing the responses to the questionnaire took quite some time. Around then, Kenan Dikilitaş visited our campus for a workshop. Fortunately, we could get together and decide on the best way to continue. By reading and making notes about students' responses, I was to find topics or categories which would help me to group their individual responses and to come up with themes. Basically, I needed to group responses in an organized and logical manner. This was "…fairly labor-intensive …but this is the crux of qualitative analysis. It involves reading and re-reading the text and identifying coherent categories." (Renner & Taylor-Powell, 2003, p. 2)

## Final Group Discussion

I call this part of my research 'Final' because throughout the semester, we had lots of small-talk and longer discussions about reading habits. I take all of these as 'discussions' since they provided valuable information for this research.

It was the end of semester and my students asked if we could do this out of class. They were my partners and up to that point they had fulfilled their part of the process. So, I thought it was a good idea to make a

change and this provided an opportunity to thank them for their help. We met at a cafe on our campus. I would not call it as one of my best PEPAs but I believe there was much value in it. During this discussion session, I asked them about their responses to the written questionnaire. I quoted some answers (anonymously) and we discussed what they meant, what I understood, what I had expected to see with a specific item, and so on. Most of the discussion took place in Turkish; yet, we analyzed what was produced in English. This took about half an hour. I took notes and then came up with more questions based on their responses. They also had the opportunity to discuss each other's responses and ideas. Two other points of value came out of this: ownership and having an opportunity to have their voices heard, which were among the reasons I had originally decided to try EP.

# Reflections

During in-class small-talk Q&As, most students said that they did not read regularly. At that point, I had to make sure that I was not only referring to reading printed books or classics like *Pride and Prejudice, Frankenstein, Crime and Punishment* but to all sorts of reading; blogs, websites, newspapers, periodicals, social networking sites, and so on. Still, mostly the answer was *"No."*

## Why Do They Not Read?

*"They didn't read",* they said, because, mostly, it is a boring and time-consuming activity compared to movies, gaming and hanging out with friends and this argument was also supported by the questionnaire and the final discussion. I need to state that when I asked them about reading they were always thinking about reading books. Even so, there was still a question about why they perceive reading as boring and time consuming, especially when literature says it can be helpful in their English language studies (Krashen, 2012; Pazhakh & Soltani, 2010; Elley & Mangubhai, 1983). Some of their responses (summarized from discussions and questionnaire) are as follows:

- *It is a boring and time-consuming activity.*
- *I prefer to spend my free time with my friends. Reading is boring.*
- *I play computer games and I use my English.*
- *I study English every day and we have lots of homework. I don't want to read English books.*
- *I read something when I need it. If want to learn something about engineering I google it. Find the information read it and that's it.*

Another reason they gave was the difficulty of the texts and vocabulary. I was a bit suspicious about this because their level was intermediate (CEFR-B1+). I thought that some books I suggested could have been a bit challenging for them, but the main reason should not be their level. Besides, I always pointed out that there were numerous graded-reader books available in our Self-Access Center and the library. If they wanted to read, they had many alternatives to exploit. So the idea that there must be other reasons to why they are not reading led me to question their background and how they had approached reading in L1. Data showed they did not have a regular reading habit and thus, most of them lacked many reading skills in their own language.

I wondered if that could be why they felt uncomfortable reading long texts. Because they felt the need to check every unknown word, reading became a tiresome task for them. This was supported by data:

- *Hocam, when I start reading, I have to look at many words and then I am bored and give up.*
- *Many of us don't have a reading habit in L1. How can we read in English?*
- *I don't read books in Turkish. Why bother in English?*
- *The language scares me. When I have a look at some sentences and do not understand immediately, I lose motivation.*
- *I don't want to struggle to understand.*

Another common reason in the questionnaire was 'lack of time.' According to my students, due to their loaded program (4 hours class) and about an hour extra practice (i.e. homework), they could not find the time to read. Yet, the final discussion session proved this to be an excuse. They said they used the lessons as an excuse for almost anything they did not want to do and in fact 'lack of time' was not an issue.

In addition to these, they came up with other minor reasons why they would not read in L2 (as shown in the poster).

## But Do They Read?

The students told me they use social networking sites and online sources, but they never thought of it as reading. I noticed that the understanding of reading differed among us. I explained that my idea of reading was related to every reading activity they were involved in, including blogs, Twitter messages, magazines, newspapers, books, and so on. Following on that I asked them what they do read.

After I analyzed the questionnaire and asked them about it during the final group discussion, I found out that they did do some sort of reading actually. One common answer was that they read about things when they needed it or when they were curious about something. Thus, they meant reading more non-fiction and factual, short and focused (content-specific) data. They mostly read out of necessity and texts tended to be short and to the point.

- *Hocam, for instance, I am a mechanical engineering student. I want to find something about this topic [meaning engineering]. I just google it, read it and that's it.*
- *We want to find and read real information. Stories….we always have movies and that's more fun.*
- *Maybe, if I watch a movie and I like it. I might read the book.*

Of course, there were also some students who valued reading. Some mentioned that it was a great way to spend time. Some also mentioned that it was a good way to practice their English vocabulary and grammar.

- *I can learn new words and I can use them in my paragraph writing.*
- *I think reading in English is very important. But I think my friends do not understand this.*

- *I know it is important, but I can't find the right motivation. And I have to study for the exams.*
- *When I read a book and understand, it gives me a lot of pleasure.*
- *I like reading. I always have.*

All in all, I believe we need to take a look at our understanding of reading and analyze reading behavior of the younger generations.

## Dissemination

I presented my work using an infographic (see below) at the IATEFL-ReSig-Teachers Research Conference at Bahçeşehir University, Istanbul, Turkey, in 2016.

My first aim was to write a paper and present it that way, but after we (Kenan Dikilitaş, Judith Hanks and I) talked about alternative ways to present it we decided how useful infographics are and how much they could contribute instead. It was agreed at that point that I was going to prepare an infographic poster. However, I also ended up writing this chapter later on.

During the event at Bahçeşehir University, it was really convenient because my audience could follow my workflow at once. They could ask me questions pointing at a certain part in that graphic, so it became livelier and more interactive (Figs. 4.3, 4.4, 4.5).

I would like to explain my infographic. Below the title, there is a color code: red for L1 (Turkish & Arabic) (one student; L1-Arabic) and blue for L2 (English). I used my main questionnaire items to create the infographic.

*Do you regularly read in L1–L2?* This aimed at double-checking their responses given in class discussions. Although their initial response was *"no"* in class, it emerged that many were regular readers.

The next question was about what they were reading. Websites were the most common medium (including news websites, department related or just surfing for fun). 19 of my 38 students stated that they read those items in the list in both languages, and 4 stated that they do not.

**DO YOU REGULARLY READ IN L1?**
YES **#31** – NO **#7**

**DO YOU REGULARLY READ IN L2?**
YES **#22** – NO **#16**

**L1** & **L2** Regular Reader Correlation

**WHAT DO YOU READ in L1?**
Websites
Books
Blogs
Newspapers
Magazines
Encyclopedias
News
Novels
Fiction
Forums
Articles
Games
Non-fiction

L1 #12 #19 L2 #3

#4

**WHAT DO YOU READ in L2?**
Websites
Blogs
Books
Magazines
Games/Game guides
Forums
News
Newspapers
Short-stories
Comic books
Academic articles
Encyclopedias
Wikis

**Fig. 4.3**   Students responses to reading habits in L1 and L2

WHY DO YOU READ?

| Reasons ➡ Languages ⬇ | Good free time activity ❤ | | Language learning | Academic achievement | Necessity |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| L1 | | | | | |
| L2 | | | | | |

WHY DON'T YOU READ?

| Reasons ➡ Languages ⬇ | just don't like it | workload | language constraints | it's not a habit | time constraints | alternative activities | no fun in reading | L2!!! Why bother?! | lack of motivation | there's no need |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| L1 | | | | | | | | | | |
| L2 | | | | | | | | | | |
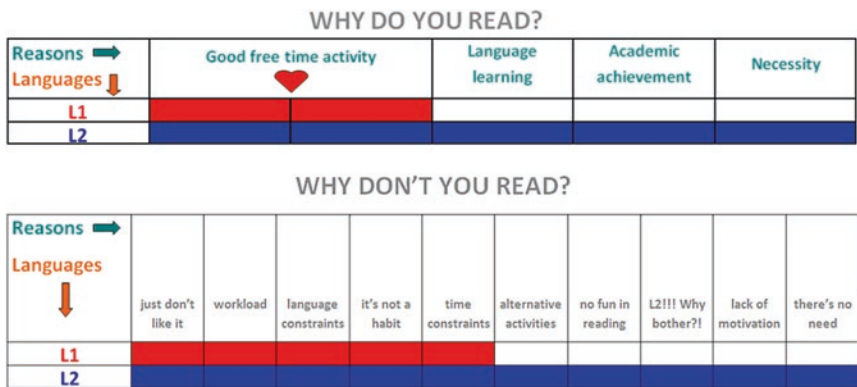
**Fig. 4.4**   Students responses to the reasons for reading and not reading

The next question was *Why do you read?* These reasons are the themes via their responses to the questionnaire. The responses surprised me because, in our classroom talks, they had mentioned that it was not fun and they had better things to do. Surprisingly, some stated that reading was actually a nice free-time activity. Still, through the other themes, we can see that interest in reading in English is mainly related to academic success.

READING in **L2** - STUDENTS' BELIEFS

| positive | excuses | negative |
|---|---|---|
| • academic development | • not appealing enough | • not my type of thing |
| • self-development | • need more time | • I've got more important and appealing stuff to do… |
| • importance | • looking for motivation | • too difficult at this level |
| • fun | • torn between school-work and reading | |

**Fig. 4.5**  My students beliefs about reading in L2

Then, the next question: *"Why don't you read?"* There were more reasons not to read, such as workload (we forget how much work they have to do), language constraints and lack of motivation.

Then, in the last section I compiled their responses to my query *"Please share any other comments/ideas you have about reading in English."* I could group them in three sections: those with a positive approach, those who were not sure and those with a negative approach toward reading in English.

## Concluding Remarks

I am aware I cannot make any generalizations with such a small-scale research, but I can share some comments. The definition and understanding of "reading" as well as reading habits and approaches are changing (Liu, 2005). As seen in the mismatch of student responses, I believe they are often not that aware they are doing a form of reading while they do so. Therefore, I came to a conclusion that our shared prejudice "*We are not reading*" was somehow incorrect. My EP question *"Why are they not reading?"* was answered in an interesting way, which raised more questions for me. They read, but the texts were (mostly) non-fiction. The digital world has become pervasive and we need to find ways to exploit it effectively. This would be another topic to discuss in another paper. Yet, for future reference, I think I can make use of different strategies like suggesting more online tools such as Google Alerts, Flipboard, websites such as http://www.newsela.com, http://newsinlevels.com or, simply more graded readers.

I am sure EP research means something different for everyone. Understanding EP initially was a bit difficult for me. During our first EP sessions on our campus, sometimes I felt lost because it all seemed too free and frameless. Then, I also had some difficulty with PEPAs. EP gave me focus though it was not easy. As with any research or any academic endeavor, one needs to spend time, energy and put a lot of effort into it. In any case, I am glad that it motivated me to pursue this work with my students. It helped me focus easily on both class work and research activities.

As a language instructor, I always thought that there was something which was not quite right about research related to language learning and teaching. It was the researcher, observing, taking notes, asking questions, trying to understand and to match the findings with literature and previous work and (sometimes) hoping to come up with an idea that would make learning more effective. However, there are a lot of things that are missing in this kind of an approach (with all my respect to all researchers); I believe the classroom is a very dynamic entity and one can only try to understand how it behaves by spending a lot of time in it, just like the teachers and students do. One needs to be a part of it to be able to understand how it functions as a whole (and the word 'understand' plays an important role here). EP helps us to understand the classroom better because it involves the individuals in it.

With the fast pace of technology surrounding us, I believe we need to be ready to face many other challenges and may need to change many methods and approaches to teaching that we have taken for granted for so many years. In my case, EP was one great tool to see this need for myself.

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# Investigating Self-Reported Reading Comprehension via Exploratory Practice

**Onur Ergünay**

## Introduction

The chapter discusses an Exploratory Practice (EP) study which was carried out in my language classrooms. I collected the data through normal pedagogical activities, namely individual essays and posters. I carried out this study at the Department of Foreign Languages in my institution, a state university in Turkey. Following the introduction part, the chapter provides a detailed explanation of my EP study. I begin by explaining how I started, and provide a brief review of relevant literature. I then explain how I designed and conducted the EP study. I move on to analyse and discuss the data. The last section of the chapter provides my reflections on the overall of the study.

We, as teachers of English language, try to survive in a complicated school context full of puzzles. Identifying these puzzles in our classrooms seems crucial to focus on the further steps and hopefully to understand.

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Learners are also involved in these puzzles as a matter of course. Therefore, both teachers and learners, as practitioners themselves, are the ones to do the work for understanding the issue (Allwright, 2005a). Earlier, Allwright (2003) proposed teachers' engagement in research to understand their puzzles in their classrooms. More recently, Borg (2010) has also highlighted the need for language teachers' engagement in research in order to understand their local contexts.

Allwright (2005b) explains the need for EP as a principled framework for practitioner research in language classrooms. Focusing on their own puzzles may naturally contribute to teachers' continuing professional development as they start to work for understanding their own experience (see, for example, Hanks, 2015). On the other hand, it may seem interruptive to focus on highly demanding research procedures. Therefore, Allwright and Hanks (2009) proposes designing studies which include daily in-class activities for data collection procedures. These would not block the on-going language learning process. Instead, they would provide opportunities to focus on the puzzles in language classrooms. This standpoint is highlighted in "Potentially Exploitable Pedagogic Activities (PEPA)" procedures (see Allwright & Hanks, 2009, p. 194) as a useful way to develop understanding of the puzzles in language classrooms without interrupting the usual language learning work.

## Context

Most of the universities in Turkey offer English-medium BA programmes which require the students to complete the compulsory language preparatory curriculum successfully in order to study their majors. These language preparatory programmes are usually designed and implemented by Departments of Foreign Languages in universities. In my context, our department offers an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) curriculum for BA students of engineering, architecture and international relations departments. The students are placed in one of three levels, namely Beginner, Elementary or Pre-intermediate, according to their scores in the placement test at the beginning of the academic year and they are constantly exposed to an intensive and integrated EAP curriculum in their assigned classes by the end of the term.

After completing the preparatory curriculum successfully, these students will be able to attend their English-medium BA programmes.

## Engaging in Exploratory Practice

As an instructor teaching at a state university in Turkey, I first met the terms 'Exploratory Practice' (EP) and 'Potentially Exploitable Pedagogic Activities' during a workshop held in my department in 2015. The teacher trainer Dr. Kenan Dikilitaş had already sent us some introductory papers beforehand to provide us with some background on the issue. I was really interested in both the underlying philosophy of EP and the practicality of the workshop. The initial design for the current study was created and developed with useful feedback from the teacher trainer and other colleagues in my department during the workshop. I developed the following puzzle:

*Why are my students having difficulty in reading comprehension tasks both during classroom activities and in exams?*

I shared the puzzle of my students about reading comprehension activities during the event and got feedback both from the teacher trainer and my colleagues. After the workshop, I also tried to review the literature related to both the EP research and reading problems of EFL learners. It was inspiring to see that there are a lot of other colleagues dealing with students' puzzles about reading comprehension in their classrooms.

## Review of Exploratory Practice Literature

Developed as a form of practitioner research, EP aims to improve the teachers' and learners' quality of life by integrating research, learning and teaching processes through the use of teachers' everyday practices (Hanks, 2015). Writing almost 15 years ago, Allwright highlighted the underlying principles of EP:

Exploratory Practice involves 1. practitioners (e.g.: preferably teachers and learners together) working 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*; 2. in order to contribute to: (f) *teaching and learning themselves*; (g) *professional development, both individual and collective*. (Allwright, 2003, pp. 127–128)

The definition emphasizes an involving process during which the practitioners aim to understand the issues collaboratively by using pedagogical activities which are familiar to the learners.

Allwright (ibid.) underlines another feature of EP as contributing to teaching-learning process and professional development in his broad definition. This has been further developed by Hanks:

Exploratory Practice is a process-oriented approach to exploring language learning and teaching, done by, and for, teachers and learners. These practitioners are (i) invited to puzzle about their own experiences of language learning and teaching, and, having (ii) identified puzzling issues, to (iii) explore their practice(s) together, in order to (iv) develop their own understanding(s), (v) for mutual development, (vi) by using normal pedagogic practices as investigative tools. (Hanks, 2016, p. 22)

These definitions highlight an involving process, collaborative work, developing understanding and using normal pedagogical activities. In addition, seven principles noted by the same authors help us make better sense of EP. The principles are explained under three main headings, namely the 'what', the 'who' and the 'how' issues (Allwright & Hanks, 2009). As will be shown, my EP study reflected all the issues emphasized in the principles.

Regarding the 'what' issues in EP, the learners and I enjoyed ourselves throughout the process. In other words, we did not focus on any measurable improvement or achievement but just "humanised the experience" (Allwright & Hanks, 2009, p. 260) by working to understand a puzzle

instead of trying to solve a problem. This encouraged us to develop our quality of life together.

The 'who' issues in EP principles highlight inclusivity, collegiality and mutual development (Allwright & Hanks, 2009) in practitioner research. These principles were considered in all phases of my EP work. It started with a productive workshop during which EP was introduced and we received encouraging feedback from the teacher trainer and my colleagues. The interaction among the colleagues in my institution continued in all phases of my EP study. We later enjoyed sharing our findings with other colleagues working in other institutions during the IATEFL ReSIG event at Bahçesehir University in Istanbul. Related to inclusivity, it was motivating both for my students and me to focus on a puzzle in our classroom and to initiate the analysis together by summarizing the poster presentation session (see Fig. 5.2 below). In brief, we worked cooperatively and developed mutually, which addresses the middle principles of EP.

The sixth and seventh principles of EP, which address the 'how' issues were also reflected in my EP. Regarding the sixth principle, which highlights sustainability, my EP developed my understanding of both the puzzle in my classroom and practitioner research. This also applied to my students. They worked on one of their puzzles in the classroom, discussed it, analysed the data and took part in a research actively and cooperatively—apparently for the first time in their lives. In doing so, their understanding of the teaching-learning process and of research in general developed. The seventh principle emphasizes using normal pedagogic activities. This helped to control the workload of both the learners and myself. As teachers and learners, we all have a lot of work to do. Working on a puzzle through familiar classroom activities together did not interrupt the teaching-learning process. Rather, the learners had an opportunity to practise more language learning activities such as essay writing, group discussion, presentation, asking questions, etc.

Another key term in EP is using the term 'puzzle' instead of 'problem'. EP encourages teachers and learners to consider the idea of puzzling about their teaching and learning process (see Allwright, 2003; Hanks, 2016). Puzzling is explained as "reflecting on situations and asking 'why'

questions about them, rather than rushing into looking for 'solutions'" (Allwright & Hanks, 2009, p. 176). Using the term puzzle indicates that 'understanding'—a basic term in EP—is of concern to teachers and learners instead of 'solving', which allows both groups to feel less pressurized.

However, as teachers, it seems impossible not to be challenged by puzzles in our classrooms. In my school context, I planned to work to understand one of these puzzles in my EP. Having read chapter 13 from Allwright and Hanks (2009), which is about conducting investigations, I started to think about the puzzles in my classrooms. Taking a role of puzzle seeker, I began to observe my own classroom procedures and initiate informal conversation with my students. So, the puzzle in my EP seemed to come both from classroom experience and a direct prompt to start puzzling as Allwright and Hanks (2009) suggested.

## Procedure

In my EP study, I investigated the reading comprehension puzzles of the EFL students in my language classrooms. Based on informal interactions with the learners and my informal observations during the lessons and exams, comprehending reading texts in classroom procedures and answering reading comprehension questions in exams appeared challenging for the learners in my classroom. Working on the puzzle collaboratively led both my students and me to understanding it in-depth. Therefore, the overall aim of my study was to explore my students' puzzles about reading comprehension using normal pedagogical activities.

I conducted the study in two elementary-level classes in which I had taught English since the beginning of the 2015–2016 academic year. The elementary-level students had 24 hours a week. I taught 12 hours in the 1st class and 6 hours in 2nd class a week. The other hours were carried out by my colleagues. There were often three teachers responsible for each class and we carried out the integrated curriculum collaboratively. I often tried to emphasize using productive skills in both classrooms, so that the students could participate in activities such as writing essays, group works, discussions and poster presentations.

# The Learners in Collaboration and PEPAs

There were 19 students in one of the classes and 21 students in the other one. They were the students of English-medium programmes of Engineering and Economics and Administrative Sciences Faculties in my institution. However, they could not start in their departments. This was because they had failed the English language proficiency exam at the beginning of the academic year. They therefore had to take English language classes. Before the data collection, all the students were informed about the study procedure and they took part voluntarily.

Two data sets were gathered from each class with two different productive tasks. The first data set was collected from each student through their individual essays on their reading comprehension problems. In total, 25 students from two classes (1st class: 12; 2nd class 13) wrote and submitted their essays. For the second data set, group poster presentations were organized and employed in each class. Table 5.1 shows the number of participants who took part in the study.

As presented in Fig. 5.1, the study procedure started with the workshop, followed by specifying the puzzle, feedback from my colleagues and reviewing the related literature. After deciding on the PEPAs to be used and fulfilling the ethical considerations of my institution, the innovation was initiated. The overall design of the study is represented as a flow chart in Fig. 5.1.

The students' individual essays and poster presentations were used in the study because they were already very familiar with such classroom

**Table 5.1** The learners in collaboration and PEPAs

|  | Class 1 | | Class 2 | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
|  | Number of participants | Total number of students in class | Number of participants | Total number of students in class |
| Essay | 12 | 19 | 13 | 21 |
| Poster preparation | 19 | | 21 | |
| Poster presentation | 18 | | 20 | |
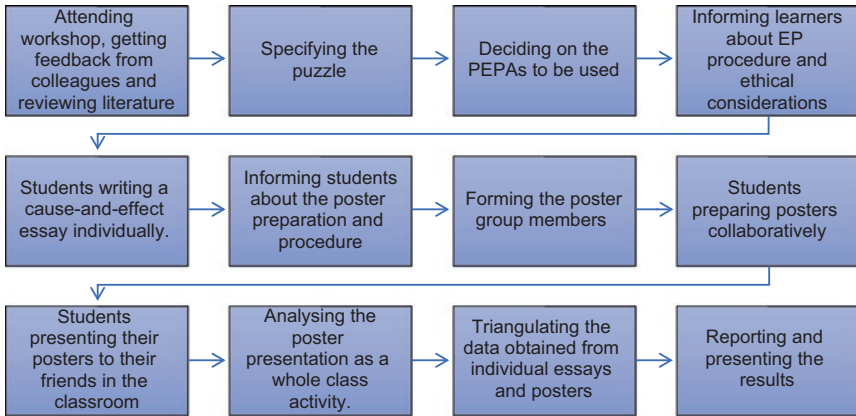
Fig. 5.1    The flow chart of my EP

activities. First, I asked them to write a cause-and-effect essay individually. They knew this kind of essay because they had already practised how to write it in the previous month. After completing the individual essays, I also informed them about the poster preparation and presentation procedure. They decided on their group members first and prepared their posters collaboratively. I did not interfere in their lively discussions, but I had the opportunity to monitor their group preparation in the classroom as one classroom hour was devoted to the group preparation.

They had one more day after the preparation session in the classroom to prepare the posters and rehearse their presentations. Thus, three days after they started the procedure, they were ready to present their posters to their friends in the classroom.

We then wrapped up all the views that they highlighted in their presentations at the end of the poster presentation session, in a summary. This might be considered as the first analysis of the collected data (Fig. 5.2).

Having collected the first round of data, I then coded and categorized their views on their reading puzzles inductively. First, both learners' individual essays and their group posters were coded. Then the codes were categorized separately for each PEPA. This led to the combined
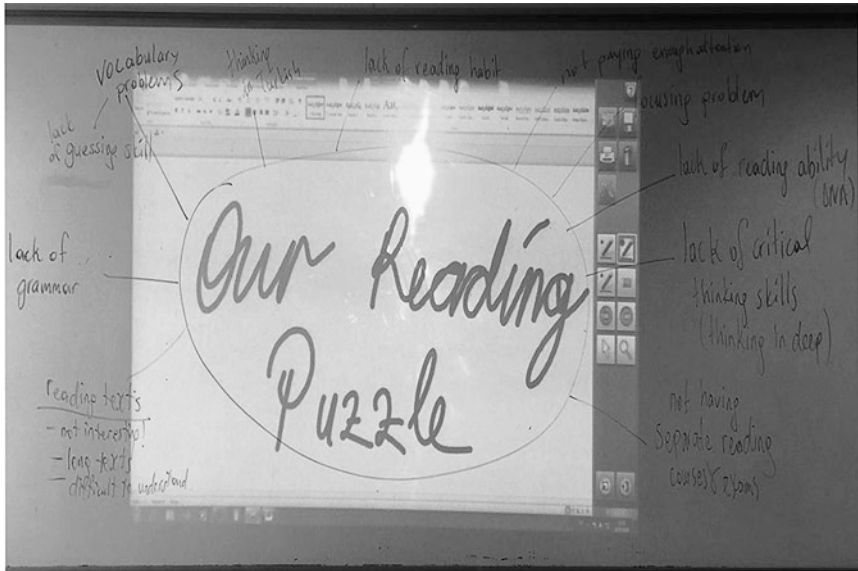
**Fig. 5.2** Board view at the end of wrapping up session

categorization of both PEPA under four emerging themes, which I will now discuss.

## Interpreting and Discussing the Results

The analysis of the data obtained from both the individual essays and the posters suggests that their understandings on the reading comprehension puzzles can be categorized under four themes namely student-related, text-related, exam procedure-related and the other puzzles (Fig. 5.3).

As shown in Fig. 5.3, most of the learners (70%) saw the puzzle in reading comprehension as being rooted in themselves. The reading texts presented to them are the second reason given by the learners (18%). Exam procedures are perceived as another challenge in reading comprehension (8%). Three reasons for the puzzle cannot be categorized under these themes and I have therefore shown as 'Other puzzles' with a relatively small percentage (4%).
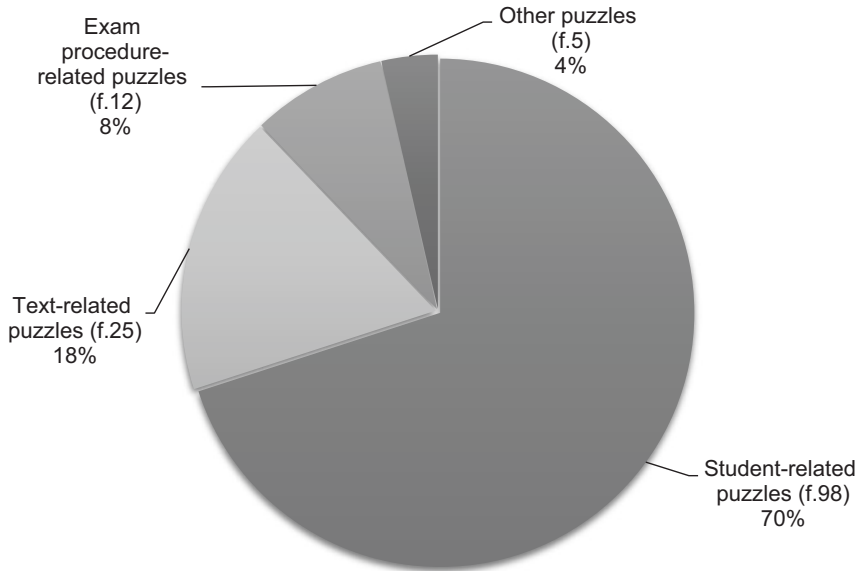
**Fig. 5.3** Students' self-reported reading comprehension puzzles

## Student-Related Factors

Having 18 codes under student-related theme indicates that the learners in the study are eager to take the responsibility for the puzzle first (Fig. 5.4). 'Lack of reading habit', 'lack of vocabulary knowledge', 'lack of focusing on the texts' and 'lack of reading exercises' is widely expressed by the learners. The other issues stated by the learners include their lack of using appropriate reading strategies and lack of grammatical knowledge. There also appear to be some interesting reasons that puzzle them such as wasting time on social media a lot, laziness, lack of ability and studying only for the exams.

The highest rate under the student-related theme was 'lack of reading habit'. This was expressed by nearly all of the learners in the study. It is clear that they are aware of their lack of reading habit in both first and target language, and they put it as the primary reason for the puzzle. The
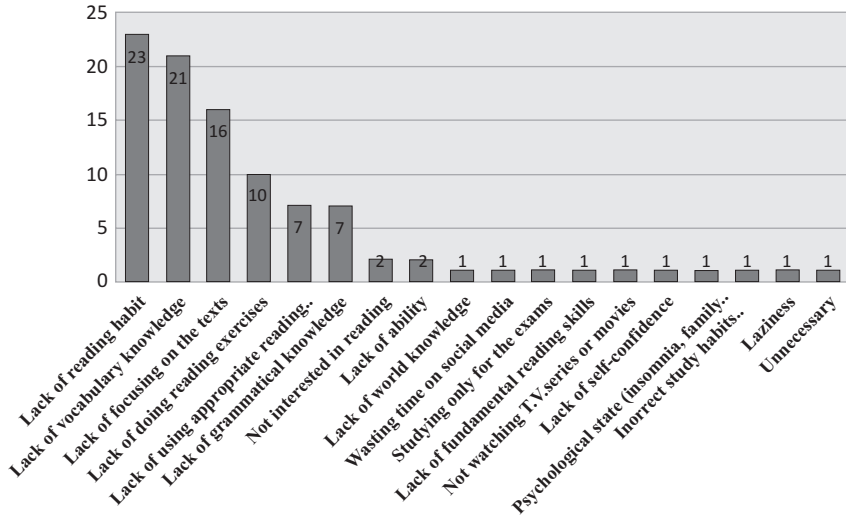
**Fig. 5.4** Student-related factors

extract below which is taken from one of the learners' essays stresses the lack of reading habit in their first language:



First of all, in Turkey, most of the people -specially students- don't like reading due to laziness and they haven't gotten right education from their parents about that reading is the most important and beneficial habit in our life. How can we do it right in English although we couldn't do it in Turkish? So that we should read more often to get more successful.

(Class 1-P3)

In the extract, 'lack of reading habit in first language' and its negative effect on reading in target language is highlighted by the learner (P3). In addition, another learner emphasized lack of reading habit in target language in the extract below:

> The first and the most common reason of falling in reading exams is that prep. school students don't read enough in daily life. They prefer Turkish news instead of English news because they find English news difficult to understand. As a result they don't spend time to read in English so they can't experince how to be succesful in reading exams.

(Class 2-P4)

Another puzzle widely cited by the learners in the study is 'lack of vocabulary knowledge' in the target language. Having limited vocabulary knowledge is stated in almost all of the individual essays and poster presentations, as exemplified in the extracts below:

> The first cause is vocabulary. Although students study in preparation school, they don't know meaning of lots of vocabulary. Thereupon, when they read some paragraphs, they don't understand what they read. That reason cause their failure while they solve some questions.

(Class 2-P3)

> First of all, the preps don't have enough vocabulary knowledge to understand english texts. Most of them just memorize vocabulary. Therefore they forget quickly them. Although preps see many times them, they don't really learn them. So preps don't understand reading text and answer questions.

(Class 2-P10)

The extracts taken from the learners' essays show that unknown words are among the most serious problems which really puzzle them in reading comprehension procedures. They clearly state that it causes failure in understanding the texts and thus in answering the comprehension questions.
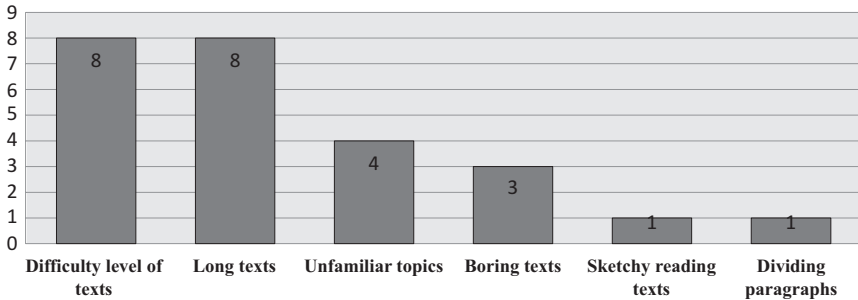
**Fig. 5.5** Text-related factors

## Text-Related Factors

As presented in Fig. 5.5, the texts themselves are also perceived as one of the puzzles in reading comprehension by the learners in the study. The difficulty level and the length of the texts may cause the learners to be puzzled in the reading tasks. In addition, some learners perceive them as quite unfamiliar and boring and so do not appear to be delighted with the topics of the texts.
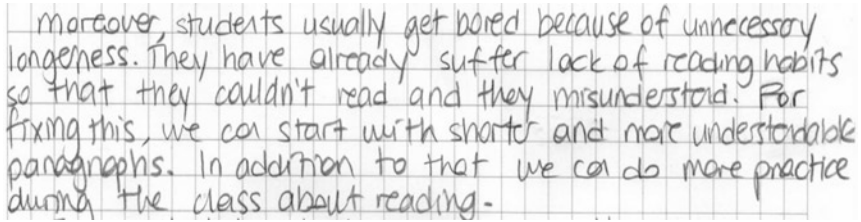
Difficult and long texts are not welcomed by the learners in my classroom. The following views taken from their essays reflect the puzzle which is felt by the learners:



> Firstly, there were some hard reading activities in quizes. I think, it is wrong. If students understand, they don't hard put to reading parts. I think teachers ask questions about their lessons and their units. The words that students don't know shouldn't be taught in exam.

(Class 2-P12)

The learner in class 2 (P12) highlights the difficulty level of the texts used in the quizzes and the exams indeed. The learners often faced questions assessing their use of strategies to guess the meanings of the words

from the context they read. Unfortunately, this seems to direct them to perceive themselves as being assessed through the meaning of the untaught words.

> Moreover, students usually get bored because of unnecessary longeness. They have already suffer lack of reading habits so that they couldn't read and they misunderstoid. For fixing this, we con start with shorter and more understondable paragraphs. In addition to that we con do more practice during the class about reading.
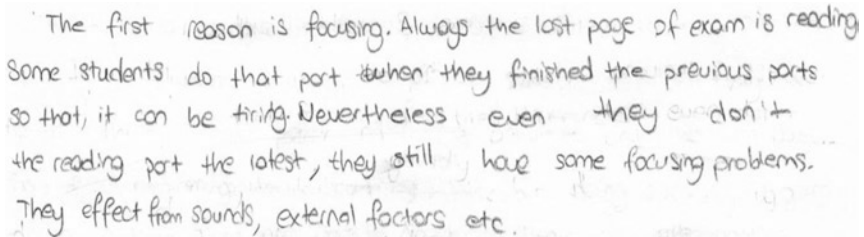
(Class 1-P3)

A learner in class 1 (P13) seems more positive and quite sensitive to the puzzles that her friends 'suffer'. Her practical and useful suggestions reflect her attempt to go further.

## Exam Procedure-Related Factors

The third theme was the exam procedure. Some students perceived limited time in both reading comprehension classroom activities and exams as an issue. They also said they felt tired of long exams and thought that reading-specific exams may help them in the puzzle. It is worth noting here the fact that reading comprehension parts are always at the end of the exams (Fig. 5.6).

It is quite clear that some learners are not so pleased to deal with the reading comprehension part at the end of the exams. Views from two learners in my classrooms are as follows:

> The first reason is focusing. Always the last page of exam is reading. Some students do that part when they finished the previous parts so that, it con be tiring. Nevertheless even they don't the reading part the latest, they still have some focusing problems. They effect from sounds, external factors etc.

(Class 2-P8)
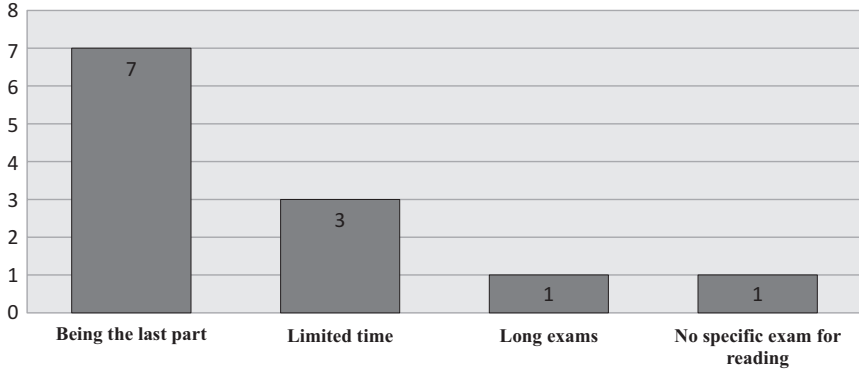
**Fig. 5.6** Exam procedure-related factors



the exam. Questions can be misread. Because reading parts at the end, students can't focus on reading. For example, I'm tired of the exam in the first part and the reading part I don't understand clearly.

(Class 2-P12)

Both learners (P8 and P12) stated that they feel tired when they reach the last part of the exams which are always devoted to the reading comprehension section. They also expressed the problem of concentration and thus feel exhausted at the end of the exams.

## Other Factors

Following the three themes covering most of the puzzles mentioned by the learners in my classrooms, I could not categorize the ones in Fig. 5.7 under any theme. Nevertheless, I wish to draw attention to them here.
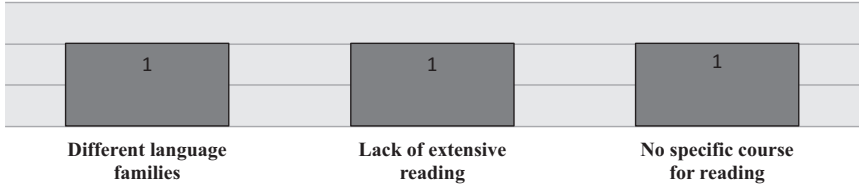
Fig. 5.7   Other factors

One of the learners tried to explain his puzzle as our native language (Turkish) has a different language family than English language.

> First of all, the most important cause is native language and learning longuage belong diffrent language families. A person who know a native language is diffrent language family for learning language, think native longuage reading on text, paragraph or essay. For instance, Most of the Turkish student is not succesful reading part because of thinking for Turkish.

(Class 1-P2)

Considering all the findings in the study, I conclude that the puzzles the learners in my classrooms 'suffer'—as one of my learners put in her essay—already deserves our efforts to understand. That appears to be the initial step for further actions on the issue. The findings indicates that the learners in my classrooms explain their puzzles in reading comprehension under three themes and 'the others'. I learned that lack of vocabulary and grammatical competence usually lead them to struggle in reading tasks. They are mostly aware that their lack of reading habit in both native and target language is among the issues that somehow need more work.

The purpose of my study was to explore and understand the learners' puzzles. However, the findings also present some practical and useful suggestions for the future, such as reconsidering the difficulty level and the length of the reading texts in my classrooms and thinking over the assessment procedures again.

# Reflections

My reflections centre around several major points. First, the learners in my classrooms got the opportunity to discuss one of the puzzles they faced during the study. They shared their views on the puzzle, wrote an essay about it, prepared a poster, worked collaboratively to present their ideas, got feedback from me and their friends and discussed the issue as a whole class. Also, they took part in research, and they even helped with the data analysis by summarizing the views that appeared during the poster presentations.

Second, I, as the teacher, have gained throughout the study. Monitoring my students in the poster preparation and the group discussion tasks, reading and analysing their essays on the puzzle were helpful to me. These are the procedures that each language teacher would like to observe and feel. As the teacher, I also learned so many new reasons for the puzzle and it helped me have a deeper understanding of their struggles in reading comprehension.

Moreover, my own development continued. Considering all the process from the inspiring workshop to the presentation of my paper in IATEFL ReSIG event at Bahçeşehir University, the current study functioned as an integral part of my own continuing professional development. I designed research, shared my views and the findings with other teachers, got feedback and fully enjoyed it. Thus, as Allwright (2003) suggested, the study involved collegiality between the teacher and the learners as we all collaborated in the study. There was also a motivating collegiality among the teachers in my institution. We attended the workshop, shared our views, prepared our papers to present in IATEFL ReSIG event and enjoyed the event together. Finally, collegiality between us—as the practitioners—and teacher trainers was supportive and encouraging for the future chapters of this EP story.

The current research is not the first study I have carried out up to now, and probably will not be the last one. I have taken part in a lot of studies and several research projects so far. Nevertheless, this study looks rather different from them. I remember the days when I started my M.A. programme in 2004. I was a teacher at a state high school in a small town

and always rushed between the graduate school in the city centre and the school. They really sang different kinds of songs! The context may help develop our understanding of one of the ethical concerns out of which EP was developed. As Allwright (2005a) suggested, there still appears a split between researchers and teachers. That may also explain Borg's (2010) reasonable argument that teacher engagement in research is not so popular in our field. Using normal pedagogical activities in this EP study made me feel quite independent during the whole process. It also did not interrupt the flow of the course as I used familiar activities to collect the data for the study. Thus, I felt part of an attempt to close the gap between practitioners and researchers.

The results of my EP study also raised my awareness of the learners in my classrooms. This will definitely help me understand the learners' needs in reading activities and assessment, which may enhance my facilitating role in my classrooms. In future years, I plan to integrate more extensive reading tasks that might foster their reading habits. In addition, the realization that they feel insecure about their grammatical and lexical competence in reading tasks leads me to emphasize more strategies in my classrooms on overcoming grammatical and vocabulary issues during reading tasks. The findings about the assessment procedures such as limited time and placing the reading comprehension tasks in the last part of the exams lead me to share my students' perceptions with my colleagues and particularly the assessment unit in my department. Thus, they might take student opinions into consideration in assessment procedures.

In conclusion, the current study, which was intentionally designed according to EP principles described by Allwright (2005b) and Allwright & Hanks (2009), seems to reflect those principles. Both the teacher and the learners (as practitioners) worked together in the study to understand the puzzle through normal pedagogic activities that were used for the data collection and it was an attempt to contribute to both teaching and learning. The study can be considered as useful and significant for several reasons. On the learners' side, they had the opportunity to express their views on their own reading puzzles. Thus, they became aware of their peers' perceptions of the reading puzzles. On the teachers' side, I was better informed about the students' perceptions of the reading puzzles. This led to my own deeper understanding this specific issue afterwards. Finally,

the study did not interrupt the pace of the class. We worked in such a way that the learners performed the regular classroom activities during the data collection period. In other words, they continued learning while engaging in understanding the puzzle.

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# Understanding the Challenges of Academic Presentations for EAP Students: An Exploratory Practice Approach

### Simon Mumford

## Introduction

This chapter tells the story of my engagement with Exploratory Practice (EP) in a freshmen academic skills course in the Spring term of 2016. On a normal academic skills course, students give presentations on a topic on an area of their own choice related to their studies, and this area is worth 25 per cent of the term grade. Students are also expected to do two practice presentations on topics in the course book as for a final assessed presentation.

My puzzle related to the stress and nervousness that many first-year students feel during presentations, and their failure to take on board advice given in lessons. Most students find presentations difficult, despite previous experience in the university Preparatory programme. I wondered why they found presentations so difficult.

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# Engaging in Exploratory Practice

Rather than participation in a particular group or workshop, my introduction to EP emerged through a combination of (i) attendance at the 2014, 2015, 2016 IATEFL ReSIG conferences in Turkey, where I became familiar with the work of Dick Allwright, Judith Hanks and others, and (ii) personal contact, particularly with Kenan Dikilitaş, who provided inspiration for this study. As a late-career (after 30 years of teaching) teacher, familiar with research, I appreciated the opportunity for a new outlook that EP offered. Having a background in academic writing, I found this less formal approach to researching and writing a refreshing change. This was the first time that I had elicited students' opinions and analysed them in a systematic way.

The context of this study is the teaching of presentation skills. After ten years of teaching academic skills, I still feel rather daunted by the speaking component because input on presentation skills often fails to produce effective student presentations. The aim of my EP work, therefore, was to develop my own understanding of the factors that cause this.

# Review of the Exploratory Practice Principles

EP is a form of Teacher Research that emerged due to the need for teachers to integrate research into the curriculum. As a practising teacher with 12 contact hours in addition to preparation, marking, testing and proofreading duties, I was attracted by the premise that research should not be an extra burden. The approach in this short project reflects the seven principles of EP set out by Allwright (2003).

In particular, I aimed to bring myself nearer to my students, and therefore promoted interaction between students and the teacher (me) to bring about learning (principles 3: involvement, 4: bringing people together and 5: mutual development). At the same time, it took the form of a teacher-directed language lesson, which was typical of the context (integrating into existing curricular practices, principle 7). Furthermore, it was aimed at understanding, rather than change (Principle 2). Overall,

it potentially enhanced quality of life through breaking routine, and bringing a shift of balance in teacher-student roles (principle 1), in way that was sustainable (principle 6), i.e. requiring no extra work for teacher or students. The key principles that motivated my work were principles 2 and 7: to bring about understanding through a classroom discussion.

In line with Allwright (2015), the emphasis was on understanding for its own sake, rather than bringing about any kind of change or improvement in teaching. Another aspect of the project was its non-interference in the syllabus, as suggested by Hanks (2015, 2016). The research was the lesson, and the lesson was the research: I was teaching students presentation skills, so reflection and discussion on presentation preparation was entirely appropriate. As Allwright (2003, p. 130) states, this lesson was "simply giving learners an opportunity to discuss whatever is puzzling you and/or them in the time you would normally set aside for discussion anyway", i.e. making a genuine attempt to elicit learners' views within the framework of a teacher-led lesson.

My EP work has parallels with Dar (2015), who used classroom discussions to focus on the reasons for failing to submit homework in a university pre-sessional class, and Miller, Cortes, de Oliveira and Braga (2015), in which collaborative groupwork was implemented to reach greater understanding of the use of nicknames, and resolve a problem of nickname abuse in class with seventh grade students. The current study is slightly different in that the main data collection tool was a teacher-directed class discussion rather than collaborative groupwork. This reflects the cultural context of a Turkish university. The Potentially Exploitable Pedagogic Activity (PEPA) was a class discussion, guided, but not dominated, by the teacher.

The issue of student presentations has been addressed by other teacher researchers, although this is usually through Action Research (AR), rather than EP. For example, Mason and Nazim (2014) and Nazim (2015) describe AR projects that sought to improve teaching materials based on English for Academic Purposes (EAP) students' opinions on the preparation lessons for assessed oral presentations. Students reported that while theoretical aspects relating presentations were adequately covered, they were given few opportunities to practise the assessed presentation.

Moran (2015) presents her work as exploratory AR, which aimed to improve teaching of presentation skills and discourage plagiarism. She also hoped to encourage implementing feedback from the teacher. Choice of topic was found to be important motivating factor. Similarly, in a Teacher Research study focusing on student presentations, Akyazı (2015) highlights the key role of subject matter in the motivation to speak, and the need to allow students to choose their own topics, although these were recorded and presented online rather than live. In the current research, there is a similar focus on the role of topic and the need to practise, but, in line with EP principles, it is not a key aim to provide suggests for solutions or improvement, instead, I aimed primarily at gaining a deeper understanding of the issue.

## Methods

The approach used was a series of PEPAs engaging students in discussion to understand their perspective. The participants were a class of 12 students, 8 of whom took an active role in discussion and 6 contributed written comments. After eliciting the key difficulties they faced (the 'what'), discussion and writing was used to gain deeper insight into these problems, (the 'why'). The PEPA I particularly focus on here took the form of a class discussion and short notes written by students in a single lesson. The lesson was video recorded and extracts were analysed to establish the findings. The reflections section offers some interpretations of students' attitudes to presentations.

I began with a class discussion, lasting about 20 minutes. The discussion was divided into two sections, about 10 minutes each. One section was devoted to eliciting problems, and the other to solutions. At the end of the lesson, the board contained a list of problems and solutions (see Table 6.1). Although I recognise that EP tends to avoid the problem-solution paradigm, I felt this was a suitable starting point as students were very familiar with generating ideas this way. As the discussion developed, it became clear that the reality was more complex than the lists suggest, and by tracing the interactions between the various problems and solutions, new understandings emerged.

**Table 6.1** Problems and solutions

| Problems | Solutions |
| --- | --- |
| • Stress/nerves/lack of confidence | • Practise with friends/camera |
| • Memory vs memorisation | • Remembering who the audience is |
| • Body language | • Breathing exercises |
| • English language/vocabulary | • Relaxing drinks, not coffee |
| • Content knowledge | • Focus on important ideas/cue cards |
| • Preparation time, research | • Dress |

The discussion was directed by me (the teacher), but contributions were encouraged from all class members to get the students' point of view of the relationship between the factors. Each section started with a short period of pair work to encourage the generation of ideas before the whole class discussion session.

After the discussion, a period of approximately ten minutes was given for writing. The aim was to see how far the problems and solutions mentioned in the discussion were reflected by other members of the class. Written data was in the form of short notes. Participants were encouraged to choose the three most important problems and three most effective solutions from the board (Fig. 6.1), and explain these with a few sentences. The notes were anonymous, and I collected these to use in the research, with the students' consent.

The discussion was conducted during one 50-minute lesson, and this fitted with the syllabus, as the week's lessons were allocated to preparation for presentations. All lessons at the university are video recorded by permanent cameras in the class. I accessed and transcribed the recording, listening carefully and reflect on the discussion, further deepening the learning process. The sources of data were the lesson transcript, the written comments, the list of problems and solutions on the board, and my own observations. The discussion allows detailed examination of individuals' view on the difficulties, while the writing allowed me to examine the views of a section of the class (six contributions). The writing provided further support and gave greater insight into the data from the discussion.

I then moved on to discuss academic presentations (a normal part of the syllabus). Academic presentations in this context refers to a brief (5 minute)
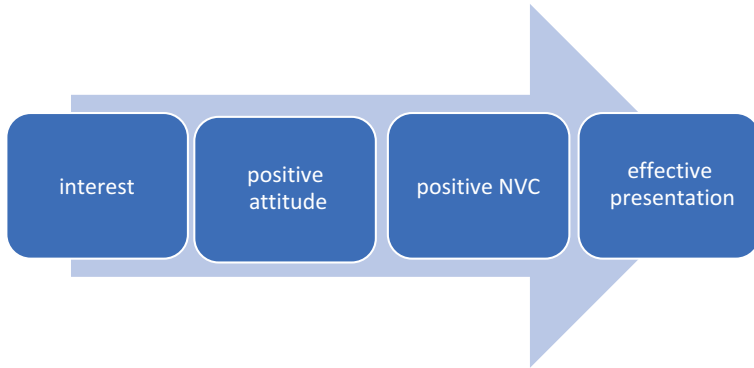
**Fig. 6.1**   Interest comes from topic

presentation on a topic related to the student's academic discipline, and graded on language (accuracy and fluency), Non-verbal Communication (NVC) (voice and body language), the appropriacy and use of visuals (short PowerPoint presentations) and response to a question at the end. Students were familiar with this type of idea generation, which is well-established in this educational context.

## Analysing Data

I took a thematic analysis approach. The idea was to select extracts from the transcript that seemed to represent key moments in the discussion, and that led to greater understanding, particularly my own. Written data was used to support and shed light on the findings of the class discussion. There was no intention to quantify the written data, although certain tendencies were noted, e.g. the general absence of issues relating directly to language. Four short extracts have been selected from the transcript to illustrate points that led me to new understandings of *presentation stress* and various influencing factors, including practice, topic, body language and language proficiency.

Interestingly, *stress* is the first problem mentioned, and its adverse effect on concentration (i.e. *forgetting*). As a language teacher, I tend to focus on

language as a source of problems, but S2, picking up from S1, emphasised that stress is related to *self-expression*, but is *not* specifically a (foreign) language problem. In this exchange, S2 develops the point made by S1, highlighting that students with adequate language resources may be unable to use them when stressed. It is noteworthy that S2 has above average fluency; therefore, presentations can be regarded as a special kind of speaking activity where normally confident students can be affected by stress, which diminishes their language capabilities.

1. Stress as a source of difficulty

T. What kind of problems might you have?
S1. Stress
T. Stress, meaning what?
S1. Forgetting.
T. Forgetting. OK is that something different or…
S2. Self-expression.
T. Is that language knowledge in English?
S2. No, self-expression in a presentation.
T. Is that a language problem?
S2. No, it's not a language problem

Managing stress was seen as the key to good presentations; all six students who participated in the writing reported stress as a source of difficulty. One made the connection between practice and stress: stress leads to forgetting, whereas practice reduces stress in a more positive cycle. Practice reduces the chance of forgetting, and this in turn brings a sense of confidence. According to this view, practice, rather than language ability, is the key, and, interestingly, specific language issues such as vocabulary were infrequently mentioned in the data.

In the next extract, which followed the discussion in extract 1, S3 pointed out that preparation using an outline can prevent problems. S4 contributed, stating that memorising a presentation word-for-word can lead to breakdown due to memory overload. I initially interpreted *preparation* as being simply a time issue, but a rather more sophisticated

response was given by S4, who built on S3's remark; the investment of time in a full understanding of your topic is key.

2. The link between preparation, presentation structure and confidence

> S3. Preparing, preparing.
> T. (gestures for repetition).
> S3. Preparing.
> T. Preparing. O.K. right. What's the problem there?
> S3. I think before the presentation if you don't… er outline, you will have some problems. T. Yes, exactly, and that takes time and research too (writes *time* on the board). Any other problems?
> S4. We should not memorise the presentation. We should be aware of it. If we are memorising it we can get lost and forget the sentences of course. But if we know what we are talking about we can…

One written comment was *Memory can be a problem. To avoid this, we can practise more and write key words on a paper to help us remember*. These students seemed to regard preparation (i.e. preparing an outline) and practice (i.e. rehearsal) as two interlinked aspects of good presentations. They understood that the responsibility lies with the presenters themselves. Thus, practice builds confidence, something that I myself am well aware of through my own experience of presentations, but perhaps I had not emphasised this sufficiently in class.

Another student wrote: *When I prepare and make a presentation to other people, I nerves [sic], also stressed. I know solve this problem with practising and preparation*. This developed my understanding that students know what they should do, but, naturally still feel stressed. Presentations are stressful for everyone, but this is especially so for novice L2 presenters. Unfortunately, therefore, we realised there is not necessarily a direct relationship between instruction on the technical aspects of presentations, and students' level of confidence. This led the students to consider the connection between body language and interest.

3. The connection between body language and interest

> T. Content knowledge and interest is important and if you are interested in it, it is much easier, and you were talking about forgetting. (Writes *memory* on board). Remembering, but not memorising, yes that's difficult. (pause)
> S5. Body language.
> T. OK yes (writes *body language* on board). What's that connected with?
> S5. Interest.
> T. Interest? (genuinely surprised) Is connected with body language? How?
> S2. You use your body language to show interest...
> T. OK, so showing your interest.

In this exchange, I asked how body language is connected with interest, partly to prompt further comments, but also from genuine surprise at their words. In retrospect, I realised I tended to view NVC, including body language, as divorced from the words of the presentation, perhaps due to its having its own slot in the programme, and its own criterion in the evaluation rubric. This exchange led me to question the usefulness of 'teaching' NVC divorced from topic. I was beginning to puzzle further.

In the final extract that I considered, the student showed that the point of practice is not simply to remember the presentation, but also to make an active effort to improve performance. By looking at her performance on a camera, this student said she can see her 'mistakes'. This required some unpacking.

4. Types of practice

> S: Before you do your presentation, you can do some practice, we can do some practise with friends. We can also do some practice with cameras. We can record ourselves with a camera and we can see our mistakes.

Rather than language mistakes, I understood she was probably referring to visual aspects, seen on camera. This student showed awareness of the need to monitor one's own NVC. Watching oneself, becoming aware

of one's own strengths and weaknesses as a presenter, is clearly the best way to improve, further highlighting the presenter's own responsibility. I took from her words the notion that practice is not just a way to remember your presentation and gain confidence; it is an opportunity for feedback and self-evaluation.

## Interpreting and Discussing the Results

In the discussion, a number of minor factors, such as breathing exercises, appropriate dress and avoiding caffeine, were mentioned as having the potential to boost confidence and reduce stress, but none of these made significant appearances in the written stage, which instead focused on two major implications.

Implication 1. Interest comes from topic

One student wrote *If we don't know enough about what we are presenting we could fail during the presentation. Because it is harder to talk about something you have lack information*. This underlined the key role of topic in the success of the presentation, and the effect of interest.

Another written comment underlined the connection between knowledge and interest, and communicating that interest to the audience: *If you know the general knowledge (and a little specific) about your topic, it will help you answer questions easily and draw attention of audience*. Interest, an affective factor, dominates all other factors. Trying to 'teach' various aspects of NVC such as body language may therefore may be ineffective if enthusiasm and interest is lacking. On reflection, I realised that students are likely to be aware of NVC from their L1 interactions, and that 'teaching' it is unnecessary. Perhaps the term 'body language' is misleading here, because it suggests it can be taught in the same way as verbal language. I realised that the danger with 'teaching' body language, rather than letting it develop naturally, is that it is then adopted in an artificial and unnatural way.

As students were allowed to choose their own topics within their academic field, a high level of interest might be expected. However, I was

surprised to find that interest in the topics often seemed lacking. In trying to understand this, I wondered if freshmen students with a limited knowledge of their own subject area may choose topics that are too complex or too simple; too narrow or too broad. The lack of familiarity with their field, combined with the 'freedom' of choice, i.e. the lack of any guidance, can result in topics that are not well-defined or understood.

Implication 2. Practice is key to reducing stress and building confidence (Fig. 6.2).

The need to practise was a dominant theme in the data. It was felt that practice allows the presenter to recall the information, leading to a reduction in stress/increase in confidence, and therefore facilitating, *self-expression*, as one participant put it. This student did not see *self-expression* as a (foreign) language problem, but as being connected with the amount of practice. Similarly, Hill and Storey (2003) conclude that, at tertiary level, language proficiency is not an automatic indicator of success in presentations, and that the native/non-native speaker distinction is less important than factors such as preparation. Interestingly, (foreign) language ability was almost completely absent from the written data in the current study.
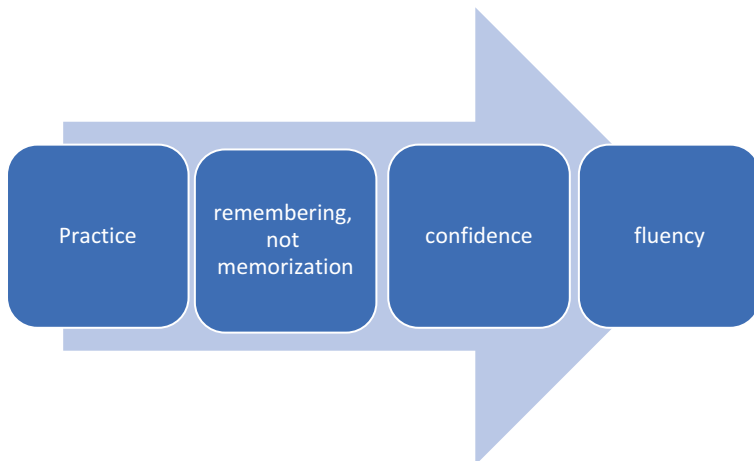


**Fig. 6.2**  Practice is key to reducing stress and building confidence

Some students noted that practice has another beneficial effect, as it gives opportunities for feedback, both via self-recording and informal audiences. The written data included the statement *we should do lots of practice in front of our family in order to prevent feeling stressed*. One participant in the discussion recognised opportunities for improvement through supportive feedback from friends outside class. I believe, then, that practice therefore serves multiple purposes, as a technique to improve confidence, to become familiar with the content, but also to get feedback from friends/family, and to perform self-assessment.

## Reflections: Two Metaphors

Based on the data, I would like to suggest a metaphor for comparing the views of the teacher and the students in the current context. In my view, an effective presentation results from a series of steps, as in a staircase, i.e. the syllabus, as a set of discrete aspects that need to be mastered, including choice of topic, structure of presentation, specific language, body language, effective use of voice and visual aids. In the students' view, however, the process is represented by a lift. The lift has two stops before arrival at the goal, in line with the two implications above. Powered by initial interest in the topic, it reaches the practice stage, and then moves on to the final stage, an effective presentation (Fig. 6.3).

Clearly, these metaphors are a simplification, and I am not suggesting that students need no help with, for example, topic selection or structuring. However, the metaphor may lead to insights for taking a more holistic view of presentation preparation. It affords a more individualised approach, focusing on students' interest in a specific topic and then providing practice opportunities.

This EP process enabled me to come to a new understanding of presentations in my teaching, as summarised in Table 6.2. From an initial focus on problems and solutions, the discussion led to deeper insights into the issue of presentations from novice L2 presenters' point of view.

In line with principle 2 of EP, the aim was to develop our understanding of the puzzle rather than changing or improving anything. In fact, the key implication, that motivation is based primarily on interest in the
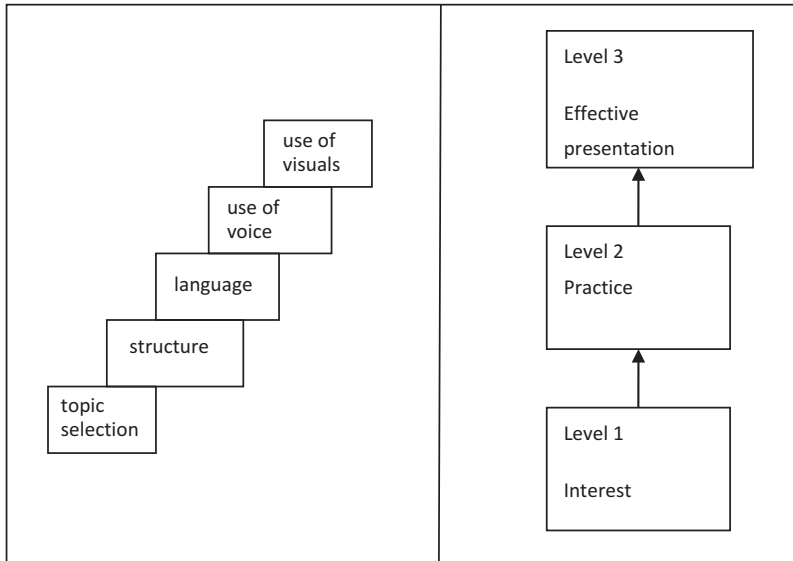
**Fig. 6.3**   Metaphor: Stairs vs lift

**Table 6.2**   Previous and new understandings

| Previous understanding | New understanding |
|---|---|
| • Students are blocked from effective presentations by many separate issues. <br>• Students often choose topics ineffectively and carelessly. <br>• Students are unaware of presentation skills. <br>• Teaching is often ineffective because it is ignored. <br>• Students lack time to prepare. <br>• Presentation quality depends mainly on foreign language skills. <br>• Breathing exercises can help students feel more relaxed and confident. <br>• NVC can be taught. | • The issues are all related, and largely depend on motivation. <br>• Choice is difficult without guidance for novice presenters. <br>• Students are aware, but the challenges are great. <br>• Teaching can only help to a degree; an individual's motivation is more important. <br>• Preparation takes commitment, not just time. <br>• Presentation quality depends mainly on interest and motivation. <br>• Breathing exercises are no substitute for the confidence that comes with practice. <br>• Effective NVC arises naturally from the speaker's attitude to the subject. |

topic, relates only indirectly to the role of the teacher. The class discussion covered all aspects of preparation of presentations, thus it fulfilled principle 7, integrating with the curriculum. Interestingly, this was not originally planned by me; the issues emerged naturally from the discussion with the students. Of the other principles, arguably all were in evidence, especially principle 5, mutual development, and particularly my own in terms of insights into presentations.

One broader implication of the research is that teachers can guide students to areas of interest, even where presentation topics have to be related to academic studies. Simply put, this means that students can be encouraged to combine their personal and academic interests, so, for example, Engineering students can give presentations on technical aspects of building safe, robust football stadiums, Business students can compare the business practices of fast food outlets, and Computer students can talk about Computer Generated Images in their favourite films.

Such understandings have sparked a number of further puzzles for me. As topic is key, it would be interesting to explore whether a lesson devoted to guidance on topic selection would be more beneficial than a lesson on body language or advice on how to structure a presentation. In the future, the findings could be turned into a lesson material, i.e. a presentation on presentation skills for another group of students, as a stimulus for further discussion, extending the EP to understand whether other students have the same perspectives. These would be interesting to explore in future EP work.

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# 7

# Intertwining Exploratory Practice with 'Standard' Research Practices in Foreign Language Education

**Gamze Öncül and Rhian Webb**

## Introduction

For teacher-researchers, seeking a deeper understanding about what goes on in the classroom with their learners is a very practical common-sense approach to practitioner research. The cornerstone of Exploratory Practice (EP) is to "work with emerging understandings" (Allwright, 2003, p. 124). In effect, this means that EP is not necessarily about seeking to change troublesome things about foreign language learning and teaching. On the contrary, EP is more about seeking ways to understand puzzling aspects concerning foreign language learning and teaching. Hanks describes endeavours to understand puzzles using EP as "a continuous loop of learning and development" in that "what helps the teacher should also help language learners and/or other teachers, and vice versa" (2015, p. 614). Additionally, EP seeks to use "normal classroom work" as a way

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to investigate their own particular puzzles (ibid., p. 615). This is commonly achieved in EP by using PEPAs (potentially exploitable pedagogic activities—see the Rio EP Group in Allwright & Hanks, 2009) in one's classroom or educational setting.

This chapter, written as a case study, provides insights into how two language instructors working in the same university discovered that they were both puzzling over the same aspect, namely the use of frequent testing on a preparatory program for English as a foreign language (EFL). The chapter starts with an elaboration of how our combined stories took us to the point where we decided to collaborate with each other in an attempt to bring our puzzling issues to what Allwright (2003, p. 124) has called a "shared consciousness"—in that we wanted to better understand the complexities our learners faced while learning EFL at our institution. Next, we describe how we developed our thinking by involving other instructors in our department as well as EFL students in an attempt to include learners as "legitimate investigators of classroom language learning" (Hanks, 2015, p. 630). We go into some depth regarding our justification for our research design, explaining how we moved our research focus from the "*how* (to) and towards the pedagogical, philosophical implications of exploring *why*" (Hanks, 2015, p. 630). In an attempt to offer insights into the nature of EP, we demonstrate how the EP approach can be intertwined to good effect with standard research practices in education particularly with regards to drawing the nexus of pedagogy and research closer together. This is followed by a discussion of our findings. We then conclude with our critical reflections regarding how EP helped us develop a better understanding of our learners and of ourselves as 'research-led' teachers.

## Context

We conducted this study at Middle East Technical University, Northern Cyprus Campus (METU NCC). At METU NCC English is the language of instruction. Students wishing to gain access to their departments are required to show a certain level of proficiency in English. They can do

so by passing the in-house English Proficiency Exam (EPE), or getting a minimum IELTS score of 7.0 or a minimum score of 86 in the TOEFL IBT.

As stated in the Registration Guide (METU NCC, 2016a, 2016b, p. 6): "[Students who] do not hold a valid TOEFL or IELTS exam result, must take the English Proficiency Exam… to be able to register as a first year student. The pass score is 60 out of 100… If [a student's] exam score is lower than 35, [s/he] will have to attend the English Preparatory School for a full academic year." The English Preparatory School offers pre-sessional English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses for these students, which typically last for one academic year, running from October to June. If students fail to qualify for the METU NCC English proficiency exam, then there is a possibility of their attending a course in the extended semester running from July to August.

On the English preparatory program, frequent, short tests, known as quizzes, are an important feature of the assessment regime. This is because students' quiz results are put towards their 'yearly achievement grade' (similar to a grade point average), which, when coupled with the instructor's grade, contributes to 10% of the overall yearly grade. Quizzes are categorised in the following way:

- 'P' refers to an unannounced, pop-up, quiz (the date and time is not announced in advance),
- 'A' refers to a scheduled quiz date (the date is announced but not the time), and
- 'BP' refers to a 'bonus' unannounced quiz.

Most quizzes typically last about 10–15 minutes, with a maximum length of 30 minutes. Quiz content usually tests students' skills and knowledge of previous language points covered in the preparatory program. Quizzes can include reading skills, listening skills, language in use, and grammar-based foci. The questions on the quizzes are typically multiple choice questions or short answers. In the following section, we elaborate, by telling our individual stories, how an introduction to EP helped us to move forward with our puzzle.

# Engaging in EP: How We Got Started

## Gamze's Story

I started working at METU NCC in September 2014. After many years of not teaching on the preparatory program, I found it interesting and yet disturbing that frequent unannounced tests were a major focus in EFL learning and teaching at this particular institution. I wanted to find more about the issue, but it was quite challenging to come up with a research question which was not judgmental and/or biased. In addition, as I was new to the institution and not teaching any of the English preparatory classes, I knew that the data collection options would be quite limited, and that I would not have a chance to conduct experimental research with a control group. Therefore, I decided to look into instructors' and students' perceptions of frequent unannounced quizzes. Thus, my research question at that time was: *"What are the real impacts of frequent (unannounced) testing on students, teachers, and instruction?"* To start with, I reviewed the literature to find out what educational researchers have discovered about frequent testing. I found that researchers, in academic fields other than Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL), have made mostly positive conclusions about the impacts of frequent testing on learners. I collated the research findings under two main categories: possible benefits and drawbacks of frequent testing. To find out more about instructors' and students' perspectives regarding the effects of unannounced quizzes on attendance, study habits, exam anxiety, learning and retention, performance, instruction, and feedback, I designed two questionnaires (one for the instructors and one for the students)—22 teachers and 312 students responded to the questionnaires and the results were mostly in line with the literature. However, I was aware that the data I had collected (via questionnaires) was mainly quantitative rather than qualitative, and I felt it was therefore limited. The interviews I conducted with four of the participating instructors allowed me to move closer to the qualitative end, but I did not have a chance to interview any students. I was looking for ways to go deeper in understanding the 'whys' and the 'why nots' of learners' perceptions of unannounced quizzes.

Fortuitously, at this point EP cropped up as a possible means to help me to refine my research question and take my investigation to a deeper and richer, qualitative level. I decided to attend the EP workshops organised through the Professional Development Unit at the university. It was at our first session that Judith explained that the starting point in EP is usually when an educator has the feeling of 'being puzzled' or when an educator is 'puzzling about' something that concerns or affects him/her in the teaching profession. Judith and Kenan encouraged us to approach our practitioner-led research not solely from the 'how' stance but also to ask the question 'why'. I thought rewording my question with 'why' would help me to dig deeper. I was especially attracted to the idea of forming a puzzle around my investigation into frequent testing.

I realised that, in fact, right from the beginning of my previous study, I had been trying to understand why there is a need for frequent testing and unannounced quizzes. So, when Kenan and Judith asked me to write my story and the puzzle to go with it, I came up with this: "*Why do we need frequent unannounced quizzes in language testing?*"

Initially I had thought I alone had this question. So it was comforting to hear Rhian had also come up with a similar puzzle. She knew about my story, I read hers and we decided to work together, which was really a good idea, as she was teaching preparatory classes. In the end, EP gave me an alternative route to follow, and Rhian, as an 'insider' in the English preparatory program, helped me to look into my puzzle more closely.

## Rhian's Story

I moved to Northern Cyprus in January 2015 to take up a teaching position on the EFL Preparatory Program with the School of Foreign Languages (SFL) at METU NCC. Prior to this, I had been working in various language schools and universities in the United Kingdom and Australia. I noticed that there were a number of 'pop quizzes' (unannounced) and announced quizzes, or tests.

After teaching on the preparatory program for a semester, I began to realise that both pop and announced quizzes mainly came during the morning classes, and quite often arrived in the first or second class of the

day. I was not sure how the students perceived these quizzes. While sometimes they were elated because the quiz questions were easy to answer, sometimes they were crestfallen because the questions were very difficult, and their quiz results often reflected this. Sometimes the quizzes specifically tested the previous week's content, and sometimes they did not. For instance, they might test some vocabulary that we had not encountered in class before. I began to see a pattern forming in my learners' attendance. Many of them missed the first morning class and would attend the second or third morning class. After a while, I started to question the use of quizzes in my educational setting, and as a result, I was puzzled: *"Why do we give frequent unannounced quizzes?"*

The only person who was doing any form of research into this was my colleague, Gamze. Her research study was about instructors' perceptions regarding the use of quizzes in EFL teaching and learning and particularly in the preparatory school program. Gamze interviewed me about my perceptions of and experiences in using unannounced quizzes with my learners and we instantly found a shared interest. We did not commit to doing any research together at that point of time. However, when Gamze and I attended a series of professional development workshops on EP (held at our university in September 2015 and conducted by Judith Hanks and Kenan Dikilitaş)—we were both really enthused about pursuing a research study on frequent unannounced testing.

## Literature Review

Frequent testing has always been a focus of interest in educational research, but rarely discussed in the field of EFL. There are many studies where the benefits of frequent testing are examined. In addition to the benefits, there are also drawbacks and pre-requisites to frequent testing being discussed in those studies. To narrow our review down to a more practical scope, we focused on Kuo and Simon's (2009) and Bangert-Drowns, Kulik, and Kulik's (1991) meta-analysis to help us to understand the puzzle. Table 7.1 illustrates a summary of major points collated from these works.

**Table 7.1** Major benefits and drawbacks of frequent testing in the literature

| Frequent tests | |
|---|---|
| *Benefits* | *Drawbacks* |
| • Improve students' attendance | • Consume class time |
| • Encourage regular and more effective study periods | • Produce superficial/rote learning |
| • Reduce anxiety | • Boost recall of only the tested material |
| • Facilitate learning and retention | • May decrease the quality of feedback |
| • Provide both teachers and students with feedback | *Two pre-requisites for the efficacy of frequent testing*: |
| • Increase students' exam performance | • Immediate/constructive post-test feedback |
| • Are favoured by students | • Overlapping items between exams (quizzes and midterms/final exam) |

Note: Collated from Roediger, Putnam, and Smith (2011, pp. 1–36) and Kuo and Simon (2009, pp. 156–160) in Öncül (2017, p. 3)

Keeping in line with Öncül's previous study (2017), we focused on the points summed up as follows:

1. Frequent tests encourage students' attendance: "students tend to attend more class sessions when frequently scheduled quizzes or tests are implemented" (Kuo & Simon, 2009, p. 156). The term 'frequently scheduled' is slightly different from our specific educational setting because a majority of the quizzes on the English preparatory school are unannounced (i.e. they pop-up as a surprise).

2. Frequent tests help students cope with exam anxiety: "frequently tested students have reported a reduced level of anxiety, attended more class sessions, and felt generally more prepared for exams" (Kuo & Simon, 2009, p. 156).

3. Frequent tests lead to regular and more effective study habits: "students reported more regular study periods motivated by frequent testing" (Kuo & Simon, 2009, p. 156).

4. Frequent tests have a positive effect on students' learning the course material: "educators generally agree that both increased attendance and frequent study periods represent behaviors that tend to facilitate learning of course material" (Kuo & Simon, 2009, p. 156).

5. Frequent tests measure students' learning and show them what they have learned and what is important: "additional testing would provide opportunities for teachers to correct student errors and reward good performance, and give students good indication of what they have learned" (Bangert-Drowns et al., 1991, p. 89).
6. Frequent tests help memory: "people remember material better after several short periods of practice separated in time ('spaced' or 'distributed' practice) compared to one long period of practice ('massed' practice) even when the total number of repetitions is the same in both learning conditions" (Kuo & Simon, 2009, p. 157).
7. Frequent tests help teaching and learning in the classroom: "[T]eachers can improve the affective outcomes of instruction by testing students more often… students … had a more favorable opinion of their instruction when they were tested frequently. Increasing the frequency of tests may be a way of creating a more positive atmosphere in the classroom" (Bangert-Drowns et al., 1991, pp. 97–98).

It was obvious that the literature contrasted with our specific concerns regarding the use of frequent testing in EFL. We wanted to see whether or not these conclusions could help us to understand our puzzle in more depth.

## Method

We decided to investigate frequent unannounced tests (quizzes) from two perspectives: first as a learning tool, and second, as a teaching tool. As a result, we designed two data collection methods (see Fig. 7.1).

The use of a PEPA (see Rio EP Group in Allwright & Hanks, 2009) was introduced to us at the workshops on how to conduct EP. We found the notion of using a PEPA particularly relevant to our research design because we were both very committed to gathering types of data that would help us to inductively understand our puzzle. As Rhian was working as an EFL instructor in the preparatory program, she was able to experience first-hand the nature of frequent quizzes with her learners. This meant that she had direct knowledge and experience of the
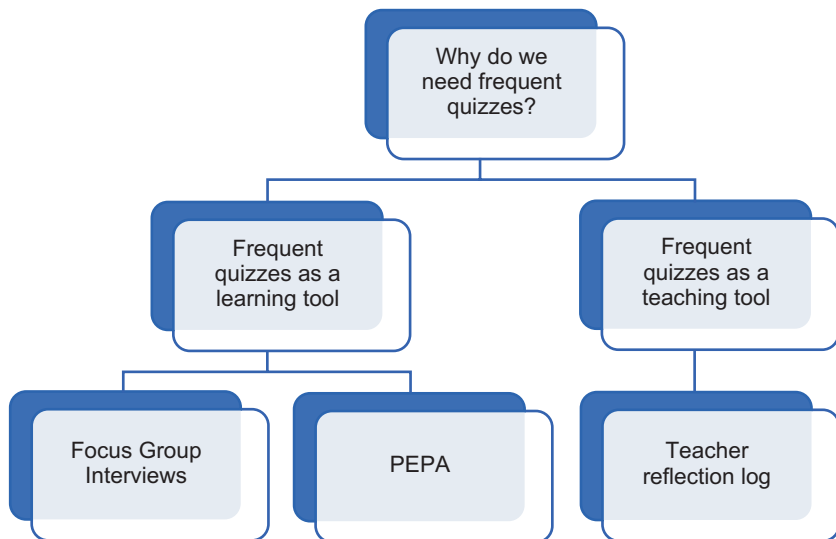
**Fig. 7.1** Data collection methods

unannounced quizzes. It also meant that we could use a PEPA with her learners because she had direct access to a class of EFL learners studying in the preparatory program.

Our PEPA was designed "to integrate the work for understanding into existing curricular practice" (Allwright, 2003, p. 129) and to collectively facilitate learners and instructors "in a spirit of mutual development" (Hanks, 2015, p. 613). We took care to incorporate the overarching principle of raising the "quality of life" (Allwright & Hanks, 2009) for all our participating students by giving them the chance to voice their opinions. In order to collect data from our learners while inside the classroom, we designed a pedagogical activity, a PEPA, which asked students to discuss the pros and cons of frequent quizzes. The PEPA was implemented by creating and facilitating a speaking and collaborative activity that aimed to create a whole class discussion.

Prior to the PEPA, Rhian had paired up and grouped the students based on how talkative and/or how reserved they were so as to avoid having all the talkative or reserved ones in the same group. We considered this to be a useful pedagogic activity for students to practise their English

language skills by sharing their opinions with one another. In actuality, this activity not only required learners to use their EFL communication and collaborative skills but also to reflect on their own learning experiences of quizzes as part of the assessment regime. We cared deeply about involving each and every student in the speaking activity, and we did so with the goal of deepening our understanding "before thinking about improving it" (Allwright & Hanks, 2009, pp. 149–154).

Using a PEPA with Rhian's learners allowed us, as research-practitioners, to go much deeper with our exploration because we could take particular note of the learners' discourse while they were discussing their views of the pros and cons of frequent quizzes from their perspectives. Additionally, this helped us to shift our gaze from our educators' eyes to the eyes of our learners. This was a very important rationale for us to intertwine using a PEPA with other 'standard' data collection methods.

In addition to the PEPA, we made arrangements for some focus group interviews to take place outside of class time. As teacher-researchers, we wanted to avoid causing students any undue stress because we cared about "minimising the burden" on them (Hanks, 2015, p. 613). To this end, we spent time carefully considering the planning of the dates and timings of the focus group interviews. We held them at the end of the semester when the students had adequate experience of frequent unannounced quizzes. We held one during a lunch break, and the others in the afternoon immediately after their classes. We were careful about choosing the right location to ensure the students felt comfortable and sufficiently relaxed to voice their opinions. Similar to the Rio EP Group, we offered them some light refreshments to help create a feeling of well-being (Allwright & Hanks, 2009). We decided to hold these interviews in Turkish because we thought students might express themselves more comfortably in their mother tongue. Focus group interviews offered students an extended opportunity for mutual understanding to occur between each other as well as between students and researchers.

In addition to the PEPA and focus group interviews, we decided to collect data regarding the instructors' pedagogical experiences of frequent unannounced quizzes in the preparatory program. We invited the instructors to reflect on various aspects of their lessons and teaching experiences by filling out a reflection log shortly after a quiz had finished, though we

did not require them to do this after each and every quiz. Many instructors told us that they reflected on the learners' performance in the quizzes anyway, so in this sense, our data collection method was integrated "into existing curricular practices" (Hanks, 2015, p. 613). This was helpful because we wanted to avoid overburdening the instructors with any extra effort for our study.

## Implementation

### Our PEPA

Gamze took the role of the instructor and led the speaking activity. We decided to do this to give the learners exposure to a different instructor. Also, because Rhian was the class instructor, she was familiar with her learners, and therefore, was able to observe whether her students were participating in a way that was true to their personality and typical classroom behaviour. Nineteen students participated in the PEPA. The entire activity took approximately 30–35 minutes and was carefully scaffolded for the learners by breaking the speaking activity down into manageable chunks, so that the students' discussions never lost focus, and as a result, they remained on task. Below, we provide a step-by-step account of how we implemented the PEPA in the classroom (Fig. 7.2).

We gave each student a statement from the relevant finding from the literature with follow-up questions, written on a slip of paper. At first, students thought individually about the question they had been assigned and then noted down their opinions and perceptions. The prompts were as follows:

1. Thanks to frequent unannounced quizzes, students attend classes regularly; attending more classes will make them feel readier and more confident about the exams they are taking; when they feel readier and more confident about taking exams, they will feel less anxious about the exams they are taking.

    *QUESTION: Do you think this is really the case? Do the quizzes really help you deal with exam anxiety?*

| Yes | | No |
|---|---|---|
| *Beginning of the year*<br>- *Afraid of quizzes*<br>- *Feel uncomfortable*<br>- *Feel more anxious*<br>*Now: feel comfortable*<br>- *Relax because we get used to take exams*<br>- *Less anxious*<br>- *Attend classes more regularly*<br>- *Learn to deal with anxiety during the exam*<br>- *Overcome stress with which we face*<br>- *Students can cover old subjects*<br>- *Feel like we are responsible for old subjects* | Do the quizzes really help you deal with exam anxiety? | |

**Fig. 7.2** Sample graphic organiser (i)

2. When students are frequently tested they study regularly and more effectively.
   *QUESTION: Do you think this is really the case? Do the quizzes really motivate you to study regularly and more effectively?*
3. Frequent testing measures students' learning and shows them what they have learned and what is important. Thanks to frequent quizzes, students can see their weaknesses and strengths.
   *QUESTION: Do you think this is really the case? Do the quizzes really measure or give you feedback about your language learning?*
4. Frequent testing helps memory. Students remember the course material better when they are tested frequently. Thanks to frequent quizzes, they perform better and get better grades.
   *QUESTION: Do you think this is really the case? Do the quizzes really help you to perform better in your English language exams?*
5. Frequent testing improves teaching and learning in the classroom, and helps to create a more positive atmosphere.
   *QUESTION: Do you think this is really the case? Do the quizzes really create more positive atmosphere in the classroom?*

| Yes | | No |
|---|---|---|
| *It helps students to show their mistakes.* *It can provide creating study habits* *It provide getting used to overcome the exam stress* | Do the quizzes really create more positive atmosphere in the classroom? | *It creates negative atmosphere* *Students get nervous* *Students get distracted* *They can't focus in their lessons* |

**Fig. 7.3**  Sample graphic organiser (ii)

Next, we put students who had the same question in pairs. We had two pairs for question 1–4 and a group of three for the fifth question. This time, we gave them a graphic organiser to fill in (see Fig. 7.3). We asked them to discuss their opinions in pairs and note down their ideas.

When they were ready, we put students into groups of four and then asked them to share their opinions, try to come up with a consensus and convince each other when necessary with the reasons. Each group had a scribe, who noted down the group's ideas on a bigger version of the same graphic organiser.

The final stage of the activity was to collect the groups' opinions as reported by a student spokesperson. Rhian had chosen a spokesperson for each group beforehand, and the spokesperson was required to collect their group's opinions. The idea was to avoid causing any stress by giving the role to the more confident members of the class, while also ensuring that all students could participate in the group discussions.

By the end of the activity, we were confident that all students from each group had contributed to the final discussion. Some students were very talkative, while others preferred to listen first and then add their comments. None of the students remained silent, as the discussion was carefully designed to ensure that quieter students had an opportunity to discuss their opinions in a pair. All of the students seemed interested in the discussions and carried them out with a mature approach. We didn't record the discussions as we didn't want to put the learners off. Instead, Rhian wrote down her observations of what was said and how students responded to the discussion, particularly whether they had agreed with each other or not.

There were some drawbacks to using the graphic organiser as a method to capture the data generated during the PEPA. In some groups, filling in

the same graphic organiser as a pair and then subsequently as a group caused some grumbling because the students felt they were doing the same thing twice. However, we believe that the staged pair and group discussions helped the students to organise and build upon each other's ideas. This led to a lively class discussion and Rhian's overall impression was that her learners seemed to get a lot out of this activity. However, we consider that if we were to do this activity again, we would give the graphic organiser at the group stage only, so as to avoid the appearance of task repetition.

## Focus Group Interviews

Fifty-three students expressed interest in participating in a focus group interview at the beginning of the semester, but by the end of the semester, only 23 could attend. We conducted two semi-structured focus group interviews towards the end of the semester with 22 Turkish students. Each interview took about 30 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded. We held the first focus group interview with 7 students, and 15 students took part in the second one. We also conducted a one-to-one semi-structured interview with one non-Turkish-speaking student, who had expressed an interest in taking part but could not join the other two focus groups as they were in Turkish. The questions we asked in the focus group interviews were the same as the ones we asked students during the PEPA. However, the focus group was more instructor-led than the PEPA.

## Teacher Reflection Logs

In an attempt to find out more about whether the idea behind frequent unannounced testing was to ensure better learning and whether frequent testing can be seen as a teaching tool, we devised a reflection log for the instructors, our colleagues. Five instructors filled in the reflection log for the quizzes (both pop and announced quizzes). Guided by our questions on the reflection log, they reflected upon the situation in their class before

and after the quiz was given, so as to share how they felt that particular quiz had affected their teaching. They also did post-test reflections on their students' performances in the quizzes and made comments about the quality of learner feedback to see whether or not the pop or announced quizzes were positively affecting learning in any way (see sample teacher reflection log in Fig. 7.4).



| Instructor's in-class reflections: | |
|---|---|
| **Before the quiz** | |
| Were you expecting (could you guess) a quiz this time? (please answer this question if it was a pop quiz) | Yes, I was because the programme for the first 2-hours were not very tight. |
| What was the quiz aimed to assess? | Quiz aimed to assess language leader course book topics such os phrasal verbs and vocab items related to "business" unit |
| Do you think students were ready to take this quiz? Why/ why not (please explain in a few words)? | They were ready because we covered those topics just a week before and I gave HW to revise the topics at the weekend ond too. we go over many times during that week, so, they "exposed" to these structures many times. |
| What were you doing when the quiz came around? | I was checking HW. |
| **After the quiz** | |
| Could you get back to what you were doing after the quiz? | Yes, I did because we were checking a tense exercise, which is quite important for |
| Do you think the quiz affected students' motivation/participation in the activities positively or negatively this time? How (please explain shortly)? | They asked a few questions related to it but they were not worried or anxious They asked out of curiosity and It didn't affect their motivation/participation |
| **Instructor's post-quiz reflections:** | |
| Are you happy with your students' performance for this particular quiz? | Yes, grades were average but definitely higher than "pure-grammar" kind of pop-quizzes. |
| Are you happy with the feedback you gave this time? (Did you have a chance to give oral feedback? Did you have a chance to give individual feedback?) | Feedback session was quite good First, without looking at the quiz results, we matched phrasal verbs with their halves and their meanings and then reused them to solve the questions in the quiz. |

**Fig. 7.4** Sample teacher reflection log

# Findings

From using the PEPA with a class of learners, it was observed that:

1. Some students said that frequent quizzes helped them to reduce exam anxiety. They agreed that frequent quizzes are not anything like taking a midterm exam or final exam. They said they had a more relaxed attitude to the quizzes, which sometimes helped them to feel more comfortable while taking high-stake exams, such as midterm exams and the end of year, English proficiency exam.
2. Some students said that frequent quizzes are better motivators for regular language learning and personal study, as they feel they need to be ready at all times for a quiz while other students said that the announced quizzes motivated them to study more regularly.
3. There was no consensus on whether frequent quizzes actually help to create a positive atmosphere in the classroom. While some students thought it was the case, others thought that pop quizzes caused additional stress and had a negative impact on fostering a conducive learning environment.

In the focus group interviews, students were mainly positive about frequent quizzes, as they felt that:

1. Frequent quizzes demonstrate that the university cares about monitoring their learning. One student, for instance, said that *"we start to question why we are not given a new quiz when there is a long interval between two quizzes."*
2. Frequent quizzes assisted learning English as a Foreign Language because the students could better perceive what it was that they were learning, what they also needed to revise or improve in their knowledge and skills.
3. Frequent quizzes motivated them to regularly revise the materials they had covered in class.
4. Frequent quizzes helped them to develop their abilities to recall vocabulary and grammar rules, which, they said, supported their preparation for the midterm exam and/or English proficiency exam.

5. Frequent quizzes gave them more chances to learn from their mistakes and helped them to see what they needed to work on in order to improve their English proficiency levels. For example, other students agreed when one of them said that: *"Pop quizzes show me what I need to study for the midterm. I can see what I can and what I cannot do well when I take a quiz and plan my study for the midterm accordingly."* However, they also agreed that quizzes were useless without timely feedback from their instructors.

Students also said that they did not think either pop or announced quizzes negatively affected the classroom atmosphere, as both types of quizzes were part of the preparatory program's assessment regime. Many of them agreed that the announced quizzes helped them to study more regularly. Although there were few insistent disagreements about this, the majority of students also accepted that unannounced quizzes forced them to attend classes.

Some students said they cared about their quiz performances whereas others said that frequent quizzes did not cause much stress or anxiety because they counted for very little towards their overall yearly grade. For example, one student said: *"Quizzes are different from big exams. They do not after all have a big impact on our total grade, so I do not get anxious while taking quizzes, but I get nervous when I take midterms [exams]."*

Looking at the issue from a different angle, some students said that poor performance in frequent quizzes sometimes caused them to worry about their performance in the midterm exam or English proficiency exam, and that they felt less stressed about the big exams when they received high marks in the frequent quizzes, and this often boosted their motivation to continue with their English preparation.

Instructors' reflections suggest that there are cases where pop quizzes have a negative impact on teaching and learning in the classroom, but it is also clear that both students and instructors are accustomed to these pop quiz situations. They explained how they have devised their own ways to deal with their negative feelings after the quizzes and built their own coping strategies to deal with this unexpected situation. According to the instructors' comments in the reflection logs, frequent quizzes seem

to affect the majority of their students' motivation and participation in a positive manner.

In sum, according to the data we collected, frequent testing seems to affect students' motivation and participation positively, most of the time. It seems that the students feel more motivated and participate more in class if they think they have performed well in their quizzes. Similarly, getting over a *stressful* quiz situation also gives them some sort of relief and somehow affects their motivation and/or participation in a positive way. Our observations indicated that instructors care a lot about giving quality feedback to their learners on how they performed in their quizzes. As a result, instructors try to devise teaching strategies to ensure their feedback on each quiz is useful for their students. However, students were less keen about getting feedback from their instructors when they received low marks in their quizzes. Unfortunately, it is not possible to observe any kind of pattern between the students' performances and whether they were expecting a quiz or not. Analysing what the class was doing when the quiz came, and how the students performed in that quiz, has not provided us sufficient evidence to come to a satisfactory conclusion about whether pop or announced quizzes are more beneficial in terms of the students' learning experience and test performance. We believe more research is needed to investigate this important matter.

## Reflections and Concluding Remarks

Our goal was to go deeper into understanding our puzzle by collecting a substantial amount of qualitative data, and we consider that the EP principles gave us a firm foundation upon which to achieve this goal. Compared to taking a solely 'standard' research approach, the humane aspects of EP offered us more chances to go deeper with our investigation, and the sincere and genuine qualities embedded within the EP approach were reflected back to us in the quality of the data that we collected from our colleagues and learners.

Taking an EP approach gave us some valuable fine-grained data. First and foremost, we consider that using a PEPA worked well with the learners as a collaborative speaking activity. Giving students questions that

related to their studies and classroom life made the speaking activity more meaningful for them, and many students appeared motivated to participate. The students seemed relaxed during the speaking activity, and some appeared to really enjoy the chance to voice their opinions and concerns, while others voiced these on behalf of less vocal students. This showed us that students were able to practise their collaboration skills with one another during this activity.

In contrast to the PEPA, during the focus group interviews, where we had a large group of 15 students, we found that some students dominated the discussion. As a consequence, not every student who took part in the focus group was able to express their opinion. The smaller focus group of seven students was much easier to manage and ensured a more balanced approach to student contributions. We can say that taking the time to convey to instructors that our research investigation was collectivist and reciprocal in nature and also part of working cooperatively towards "continuous enterprise" (Hanks, 2015, p. 613). The teacher reflection log which was filled out by the instructors was a valuable tool for several reasons. The data we collected helped deepen our understanding of what other instructors' perceptions were of frequent testing as a teaching tool. The instructors also said that their reflection gave them an opportunity to see what they could not see before.

To conclude, in cases of practitioner-based research in English language teaching, we consider that EP principles are very suitable to be linked with 'standard' research approaches, and in particular, the PEPA concept is a very useful research tool which we intend to use again in future research studies. Contrary to our initial expectations when we started our research study, we discovered that the PEPA provided us with the most illuminating data in terms of perceptions, whereas the 'standard' data collection methods, such as the focus group interviews and questionnaires served as a way to complement our PEPA data. In this sense, intertwining PEPAs with 'standard' research approaches has been a worthwhile endeavour, and has helped us to fully understand the social realities of multiple stakeholders in this particular educational setting. Therefore, we would like to encourage other language instructors and researchers to try PEPAs with their learners to see what difference they can make in terms of ease of use, effective resourcing, and research impact

when conducting classroom-based research investigations. We believe that EP has proved to be an excellent professional development opportunity for both of us as teacher-researchers. What we learnt from our experience was that EP helped us to question our own assumptions about what we think is useful or not for learners in the classroom. Initially, we had perceived unannounced quizzes as a hindrance to foreign language learning because we were not aware of the benefits that our learners perceived. We can at this point conclude that frequent testing (either pop or announced quizzes) is not perceived by instructors or learners as negatively as we had originally thought; in fact, we appreciate that they can be helpful as well. We were fortunate to be invited to attend the IATEFL annual conference in Glasgow 2017 to present our findings.

However, we are aware that our findings do not necessarily explain the exact role that frequent testing plays in assessing learners' progress in EFL. For this reason, we perceive that a real need exists for further research into the practice of frequent testing in English language teaching.

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# Student Representation and Inclusion in Academic and Administrative Policymaking in Tertiary Education

**Kerim Biçer**

## Introduction

Student underrepresentation and/or exclusion in academic and administrative decision- and policymaking such as curriculum design, development and/or administration remains a vital but neglected issue in tertiary education. This is not only because it is not discussed and embraced enough, but also because it is essentially a critical matter of power struggles, balance and its fairer distribution in the world of academia. I wondered why students are not usually included in policy decision-making in my institution. More specifically, I began to ask: *why do my learners not have any say in the making and running of the English Foundation programme?*

This small-scale qualitative study is an initial attempt at Exploratory Practice (EP). It intends to highlight the underlying roots of this issue through students' eyes and bring forth an alternative fresh perspective on an important topic. The study—inspired by a series of workshops held

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locally in my city of Izmir—was conducted at an English foundation programme of the preparatory school of a private university in Turkey. It aims at a deeper understanding and analysis of institutional underrepresentation (or no representation at all in plenty of cases) of learners in university administrative and academic boards whilst drawing up academic or administrative decisions and policies.

The study was conducted in a context with student researchers in two of the higher-level classes at the preparatory school of a private university in Turkey. It was part of a series of reading and writing classes at the English foundation programme where over a thousand students study for 28 contact hours weekly to pass the proficiency exam in order to be able to start their studies in their respective departments/faculties. Apart from reading and writing classes, learners also took courses such as listening and speaking and integrated skills. The results of the study were shared with both boards in question, with the aim that they inform future decisions to be made whilst designing and developing curricula/syllabi as well as seeking ways to improve student inclusion and representation in school-wide decision-/policymaking both academically and administratively.

The participants, in addition to me, were two CEFR B2-level learners at my former university where I was teaching reading and writing classes for a weekly 16 contact hours. It was a mixed-ability, nationality and language English Foundation Programme. There were 44 students, of whom 40 were Turkish and 4 non-Turkish students (a Peruvian, an Iraqi, a Somalian and a Macedonian). The average age was 18 and almost two thirds of both classes consisted of female students. Though their designated faculties varied, the majority were social sciences and engineering students. They were high-achieving learners with plenty of enthusiasm to improve their English for further study and work opportunities. Most had some history of learning and/or using English previously.

I was the teacher of the two classes in question, with substantial experience in English Language Teaching (ELT) in Turkey and abroad but relatively limited experience in teacher research. On top of my teaching duties, I was also coordinating the Professional Development Unit (PDU).

## Literature Review

Academic rigour and concern to include learners in the making and running of curricula and syllabi is not a new argument. However, learners have long been, and are still, left out of proposals for curriculum design and development and its implementation (Carroll & Ryan, 2007). Policy- and decision-makers in schools around the globe, whether be it an academic matter or an administrative one, are still pushing their own agendas and continuing to ignore learners' potential. After decades of Communicative Language Teaching, the whole purpose of classroom practice has now dramatically shifted to student-centred and learner-led practices (Thornbury, 2006). Still, when it comes to planning and decision- and policymaking, apart from a few commendable individual efforts, sadly, there is still a lot more to do.

Bovill, Cook-Sather, and Felten (2011) point to the necessity of co-creation of teaching and learning programmes and curricula and/or syllabi, especially with learners, arguing that it is the only tangible way to help learners achieve without overreliance on generic learning material and its synthetic teacher-student interaction. Twenty years earlier, Allwright and Bailey (1991) had hinted at the same problem, suggesting that this hinders facilitation of important learner and learning objectives such as learner agency, self-efficacy and autonomy, in an informed effort to yield higher-order thinking and learning skills.

When Nunan (1988) attempted to theorise the concept of learner-centred curriculum (and teaching) back then, his starting point was the negotiated curriculum but by creating and arguing its existence, he may unintentionally have paved the way for further discussion about who really owns classroom practice and how the power and authority inherent to it should be distributed in the twenty-first-century classroom. Norman and Spohrer (1996) argue that this is a tension and conflict that will perhaps never be reconciled so long as the student is seen as just another stakeholder.

The well-trodden argument to use learner-centred or negotiated curricula in language learning and teaching has more recently gained another perspective thanks to scholars such as Duch, Groh, and Allen (2001),

Polly and Hannafin (2010), Cullen, Harris, and Hill (2012), Savery (2015) and many others with the proposal to apply inquiry-based learning/teaching and problem-based learning (PBL) in curriculum in tertiary-level study to further reinforce goals. This has been praised for its simple but innovative and effective compatibility with learner and learning-centred pedagogy. Till now, however, this has not been linked to the principles of EP.

It has long been a topic of interest in ELT research that, to cope with the demanding and continually changing climate of the line of work, teachers need *sustainable* continuous professional development. However, realistically speaking, the question remains how this would materialise in a teacher's ever time-crunched and busy professional schedule. For some, the answer appears simple. Teachers can engage in professional development by doing it and by reading about or using it (Borg, 2010). Academia, on the other hand, has been wary of such individual, less formal, research activity (see the discussion in Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993). Academic circles began to acknowledge teacher research more widely only towards the end of the 1990s in an attempt to help free teachers from their dependency on generic and formal research. Instead, collective teacher training and development activities (see, for example, Allwright, 1997) emerged, which aimed to equip teachers with more independence to become researchers and investigators of their own unique contexts and situations. Nowadays they do this and more, but more is yet to come. Until recently, both teachers and learners have struggled to be able to probe everyday issues in their classrooms.

Classic teacher research, particularly the earlier implementations, saw the classroom practice as separate from research and never had its integrity questioned. EP challenges this. It is an alternative to other forms of teacher research and is relatively a "newcomer" (Hanks, 2015). Hanks argues that EP brings together research and teaching simply by allowing practitioners to undertake research using everyday in-class pedagogical activities. These are called potentially exploitable pedagogic activities (PEPAs) and, it is suggested, do not require additional burdens such as designing traditional research instruments.

As Allwright and Hanks (2009) point out, EP is a form of research that does not reduce itself only to the profession of teaching. EP chooses to adopt a far wider scope by proposing that learners, teacher educators,

administrators as well as teachers, can engage in the practitioner research concept. This broadens its professional and scientific trajectory and implementation. EP does not detach pedagogy from research. Instead, it strives to mobilise *all* those involved in the learning and teaching process equally and actively. Thus, perhaps, it achieves the pedagogic fluidity that is good for teachers and students in the learning and teaching environment. EP takes many levels and layers of learner involvement. In this way, it offers a deep understanding and analysis of the issue at hand, without having to worry over the ever-dependent and variable "solutions" to "problems" (Hanks, 2015; Miller & Bannell, 1998). The next section describes my own engagement as a teacher and teacher researcher, as the co-ordinator of professional development in my institution, and as a novice exploratory practitioner.

## Engaging in EP

My study began life during a series of local EP workshops I was invited to attend alongside around 15 other teachers sponsored by British Council Newton Katip Çelebi Fund and organised and delivered by Judith Hanks (University of Leeds) and Kenan Dikilitaş (Bahçesehir University). These workshops spanned about six months and were held in two parts (one series in June, the other in September) after which all the participants went back to further promote and conduct EP studies in their home institutions.

The workshops were, for me, surprisingly informal, friendly and reciprocally productive, included both input and output sessions in the form of seminars, individual and/or pair/group self-study, presentations, discussions and individual tutorial meetings for further mentoring and coaching purposes. Participants were from a range of backgrounds. They included senior teachers from local institutions working mainly in teaching or teacher training, as well as those from curriculum design and development. I was one of the three teacher researchers from my (former) university's preparatory programme and its PDU.

As part of the workshop agenda, we were each initially asked to come up with a puzzle of our own, something that for us had been provoking

our curiosity academically, professionally or administratively. I decided to work on student representation and inclusion at tertiary level as it had long been of interest to me.

At first, maybe quite normally, I was not too certain about what was really puzzling me about the topic. After the first of the input sessions, and more precisely, after the stage where we were asked to refine our puzzles through narrative writing and group/pair debriefings, I was eventually satisfied with my puzzle. I wanted to work on the question, *"Why are students as learners not included in the university decision-/policymaking?"*

## Using My Potentially Exploitable Pedagogic Activities as Data Collection Tools

I will now explain how I engaged with EP in my class. Since EP did not require an extra stand-alone procedure of research application and/or intervention (Allwright & Hanks, 2009), we were able to complete the whole study over two days in two separate sessions in a total of eight contact hours, plus an extra half day poster presentation. Below, I will try and give a brief description of the in-class pedagogic activities—namely, my procedure and how I formed the PEPAs.

> Using what the EP literature refers to as 'Potentially Exploitable Pedagogic Activities', or PEPAs (Allwright & Hanks, 2009, p. 157), may seem baffling at first. A novice might ask: What kind of pedagogic activities can be potentially exploited in this way? How is it possible to utilize 'normal classroom work' as a way of investigating a puzzle? EP argues that almost any communicative activity can be harnessed to this end. (Hanks, 2015, p. 615)

So, any routine learning and learner-centred communicative classroom activity a teacher seizes upon every day such as (but not limited to) pair or group work, discussions, debates, note-taking, poster presentation, essay writing, can be regarded as a PEPA and consequently as a data collection tool.

I had already briefed my learners on what they were expected to do and why, and they were all very excited and supportive but did not know

anything further. I had planned the whole implementation scheme in such a way that our research topic would overlap with the language topic in the syllabus. I felt this would ensure a smoother and more natural learning and learner experience.

## Day I

### Activity 1: Warmer

As a warm-up activity, I wrote my puzzle on the board and asked my students to discuss and comment on it in pairs. I asked them to consider the ways in, and the extent to which they are included in academic and administrative affairs at the school for an initial personal reaction. They were very engaged but surprised at the task.

### Activity 2: Reading

Then they read an article from their course book on student-led and student-centred learning that introduced the idea of negotiated syllabi and inquiry-based learning and PBL. They drew parallels with their own situations, trying to explain how and why this was so. Interestingly, they had real difficulties in identifying themselves with student-centred learning.

### Activity 3: Speaking and Writing

They then brainstormed in groups of three or four and made notes on possible causes for their difficulties. Different groups focused on different perspectives and aspects—of learners, teachers and administration—and later exchanged ideas and debated as whole class who or what might be responsible, and how and why.

Although they were not required to come up with any solutions—as is the case in general with EP—I had advised them to come up with a motto representative of their group, which was also featured in their posters as their 'hooks.'

## Day II

### Activity 4: Poster Presentation: Preparation

They worked with their partners to prepare short poster presentations of 5–10 minutes. Many were making notes on important aspects they wanted to draw upon. Using the materials they had brought, such as felt-tip pens/crayons, coloured papers, various cut-up pieces from old magazines and newspapers, glue sticks and scissors, they prepared their posters to share with the whole class and the whole school the following week. They did this work both inside and outside class.

## Day III: One Week Later

### Activity 5: Poster Presentation: During and After

Each group delivered their poster presentations in the conference hall, where there were other students, teachers and some members of the administration. This was followed by a longer individual Q&A mingle session and short plenary debate/discussion with two opposing sides at the very end where two students took minutes for a short report to be shared with the management.

The posters stayed up for another week for fellow students and colleagues who had been unable to make it to the event. The event elicited some very positive comments as well as controversial ideas.

# Analysing Data

For me, this was a small-scale qualitative EP study set off in search of a puzzle I had had for some time: *why do my learners not have any say in making and running of the English Foundation programme?* In-class pedagogic activities such as brainstorming, note-taking, pair and group work, cluster discussions were used for data collection and analysis. Whilst analysing the data, we (the learners and I) tried to create new meanings of what had been said in poster presentations.

## Interpreting and Discussing the Results

Whilst interpreting the data, the students could be divided into two main (rather basic) categories. They chose to identify themselves and one another as:

(a) Romantics, who seemed to really dissect and analyse the problem for a better understanding and maybe for a change but who also at the same time possibly ran the risk of detachment from reality.
(b) Realists, who doubted their own (and others') capacities in the first place, and who were largely uninterested or oblivious to the possibilities of influencing policy decisions around curriculum design.

Though they varied in depth of engagement, the students were very keen on each component of the study. Their discussions spawned some really interesting categories that encompassed management, teaching and learning as well as related factors of a parental or cultural nature. To sum up, the possible issues that the students noted during the plenary debate could be formulated as follows:

1. The management always has an overriding agenda and it takes precedence over what teachers and students have to say or feel.
2. Historically, education in Turkey has always been very teacher-fronted and students are used to being passive recipients.
3. Thanks to the elite, distant and out-of-touch policymakers in the nation's capital, tedium both for teachers and students has been rife, and this can lead to imminent educational burn-out.
4. Culturally, parents have become part of the big picture, often condoning or praising a distorted reality.
5. Students never really stand up to the real problem or its creators since doing so might well mean leaving their comfort zone. They are reluctant to gain and practise new knowledge and learning.
6. Unfortunately, policymakers in schools are not always people with the right professional and personal tools such as qualifications and/or experience or suitable character traits in the Turkish education context.

7. Most systems, whether from a political or a societal view, tend to be centripetal/centrist, often almost completely discarding individualism.

Some key concepts highlighted by the Romantics from their posters (in their own words) included:

1. *"It's not our fault, or either yours, teacher. It's this bloody classic top-down system in Turkey in general that utterly is a disgrace and needs changing."*
2. *"Students, teachers and parents should be more active and outspoken."*
3. *"We surely need training in this. Will you help us teacher?"*
4. *"Education should be free for all."*
5. *"Plenty more romantic teachers and individuals are needed!"*
6. *"We must stop being nice and cooperative!"*

Even students who thought they could really do something together for a change had some scruples as to how they might facilitate a change. Their argument could not go beyond well-wishing and was both simplistic and political, giving a strong sense of romanticism and naivety. However, their motivation and participation was superb. They highlighted the fact that the whole understanding and rationale behind the education system both on macro and micro levels needed an overhaul as well as equal redistribution. Teachers, as well as their students, they argued, must be the real owners of any classroom practice and all else that takes place within its ever-expansive boundaries (Goswami & Stillman, 1987). They noted that teachers and students desperately need to reclaim their home turfs (classrooms) and that all should happen there afterward, not on management floors. Further, they pointed out certain educational policies in Turkey, irrespective of their political or party origins, which have always sold well in a country that is rather controlled.

On the other hand, the Realists posited some really doubtful ideas and personal beliefs that were likely to have influenced their partners' ideas as well:

1. *"We cannot be part of this process simply because we are not trained in it."*
2. *"As learners, I don't think we should be doing it since we cannot be completely disaffected or impartial."*
3. *"It must be teachers' duty and specialism only to design, develop, amend or run curriculum. Students cannot do it!"*
4. *"How can we fully know whether we are doing the right things or not with our little or zero knowledge and experience?"*
5. *"The management won't accept our membership anyway!"*

This cluster of responses, though pessimistic, had substance. Roughly speaking, the arguments listed there spanned two major aspects: (a) students are not trained enough to become a real part of this issue, and realistically and strictly speaking there is no resource or time to do so; (b) even if they have been trained in this, they do not think they or their friends should be involved in a policy- or decision-making mechanism, as they cannot be impartial or disinterested, and therefore they would always skew things for their own benefit.

Ironically, the spirit of the group slowly began to run the risk of turning into a sloppy soap after a while, with emotions overriding logic. Heated and aggressive debates at times replaced solidarity and level-headedness. The topic had clearly touched a nerve. However, both the students and myself were aware of the vehemence of the topic and the mood quickly gave way to robust professionalism as soon as work began on the poster presentations.

Both parties shared some core values as well. For one thing, almost all students agreed there were serious problems regarding the way they had been governed in their schools. For another, they said they knew too well that this change—though hard to gain—would be a real game changer.

I could not help but think of two famous analogies from Freire's (1996) book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Freire talks of teacher-student relationships, which convey an incongruous summary of all the educational meddling and inactivity despite all the reciprocal goodwill. In the first analogy, he paints a really pessimistic picture and reduces teacher-student relationship to a nature of a *narrative character*:

A careful analysis of the teacher-student relationship at any level inside or outside the school, reveals its fundamentally narrative character. This relationship involves a narrating Subject (the teacher) and patient, listening objects (the students). The contents, whether values or empirical dimensions of reality, tend in the process of being narrated to become lifeless and petrified. Education is suffering from narration sickness. (Freire, 1996, p. 71)

In the second one, he wryly likens the education system to a *banking system* in which students are *depositories* and teachers *depositors*:

Education thus becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor. Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiques and makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat. This is the 'banking' concept of education, in which the scope of action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving, filing, and storing the deposits. (Freire, 1996, p. 72)

Puzzled and shaken, I suddenly began to see Freire's work through totally new eyes. Who exactly were the oppressed he was referring to in his book? Teachers? Learners? Both? The system itself? Or another unseen, uncanny force?

I will try and look more closely into how I am poised to interpret the abovementioned findings and their reflection based on my particular stance and that of my students. My puzzling journey continues.

## Reflections

As the students finally wrote up and used their mottos in their poster presentations, our puzzle and its deeper understanding and analysis spanned a number of strata:

• Learner-centred and learner-led curriculum/programme and/or syllabus design, development and implementation is an integral part of student inclusion into both administrative and academic affairs. Yet most schools fail to do so

- Though it is of great interest and concern to them, students do not know how to become part of this process formally. Perhaps they should receive formal training?
- They should definitely be better informed of, and integrated into this process, and should also be better represented in decision-making boards. They need managerial and academic support to do so.
- They hold serious reservations as to whether they can remain non-manipulative; one of the core issues of student-led and student-centred education. They need a knowledgeable and impartial other to advise and mediate.

For my students, as they reported, the whole experience, though (perhaps because) quite challenging, was one of the most liberating in their educational lives. Working on a more even playing field, they were a major and equal part of instruction and of the teaching and learning continuum; thus they were the 'doers' and 'beholders'.

More importantly, they noted the way we carried out these particular classes together. It was apt given the overarching topic we explored as part of this EP research. EP was, they said, significantly *empowering* and academically *uplifting* for their 'voices were really heard'. I could not help but think this alone encompassed most of the (core) principles of EP, particularly number 1 and 2 which discuss quality of life (QoL) and Understanding both for the learners and teacher (Allwright & Hanks, 2009, pp. 149–154).

On many occasions, I saw them struggle to steer the lessons in the right direction on their own as I had purposely chosen to adopt a much quieter role, one that they were not accustomed to no matter how active they had been in the classes. I was acting as more of a facilitator, mentor or resource. I believe that this was the biggest learning curve for them, as I believe my students generally learn better when they go really deeply into something. When they are really puzzled, pedagogy and modes of instruction become inquiry-based.

For me personally, the most intriguing part of this EP study was to be able to align PEPAs with research methodology and to analyse and present the final results just like during the initial EP input workshops I had attended. Of course, I faced many ups and downs. It was definitely harder

work for me professionally to be working alongside my learners in comparison to the mentor/supervisor hat I usually don in school. Nevertheless, I felt it was really satisfying to practise alongside my students as one big investigation unit and probe into such a problematic but often avoided subject. I began to see it through their eyes.

Personally and professionally, I felt further satisfaction when I had an opportunity to present this study at an IATEFL ReSIG conference. I was happy that it elicited an extremely positive interest and reception. A lot of the conference-goers in my session told me that such topics are of great interest and concern to them and thus should be given much more coverage. I felt the research could have been further extended had a few of my students volunteered to stand in front of that wider education community and narrate their accounts first-hand. However, this would have been a big challenge for them. I was glad that some of them were present at the conference and those who could attend watched my session while sitting in the back rows, smiling.

For the management, however, this, once an innocent small-scale study, spawned some really decisive results they will not be able to ignore. For one thing, they witnessed how professional and meticulous students can be during academic work with far wider and higher implications for the learner and learning process. Most importantly, this challenged a great fallacy they held: that students do not often take responsibility for their own learning. Also, thanks to the poster presentations and annual international ELT conference, it managed to catch the attention of the rectorate and I was promised that it would be included in the agenda of the next plenary board meeting with a view to enhance student inclusion and representation in academic and administrative decision-making all across the university.

## Conclusion

As a new teacher researcher, I can happily say EP came into play with its sheer strength in my classroom setting. Since its foundations encourage feelings of solidarity and membership, it enables and empowers its participants to explore and study anything they wish on an even playing

field, free of hierarchy and in far greater depth. I would definitely like to conduct more EP in the future and preferably in collaboration with other colleagues.

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# 9

# The Role of Exploratory Practice and International Collaboration in the University Classroom: A Guide to Fostering Students' Democratic Competences

## Rhian Webb and Troy Sarina

## Introduction

This chapter describes why and how the fusion of pedagogical knowledge, expertise and shared practice enabled two educators, one working at an Australian university and the other working at a Turkish university, to create opportunities to activate, guide and strengthen learners' democratic participation and competences in the university classroom. We align ourselves with Gerrevall's (2002) view that democratic competence

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utilises people's communication to examine their own assumptions. Democratic competences, then, are those which specifically demonstrate learners' knowledge(s), critical understanding(s), skills, values and attitudes towards fulfilling active citizenship in democratic cultures. Both of us wanted to deepen our understanding of how educators can encourage education for democracy by promoting democratic participation in our university tutorials. We agreed that we wanted to take a more hands-on pedagogical approach to our research investigation. Exploratory Practice (EP) seemed a suitable way for us to attempt this.

Our intention was to add an exploratory dimension to our research. The nature of EP means that it specifically targets increasing teachers' and learners' understandings of their lives while in their educational settings and predominantly in classrooms (Allwright, 2003; Allwright & Hanks, 2009). EP takes a practical approach to research by proposing that meaningful research can be conducted during class time, which helps to safeguard against burn-out. Additionally, learners are encouraged to actively participate in EP. The involvement of learners as practitioner-researchers means that the teacher is relieved from the role of sole researcher. It also ensures that learners have opportunities to explore and understand their own learning agendas because EP places great emphasis on discovering "empathetic" understandings (Allwright, 2015, p. 25), many of which would not be explored or discovered if teachers did research purely *on* their learners without also incorporating some of the aspects their learners wished to better understand for themselves. In this sense, EP offers educators a refreshing approach to conducting their research by offering robust ways in which they can become familiar with learner-based research. In this chapter, we elaborate on how our collaboration developed throughout our EP work. In providing this analysis, the nature and value of EP is examined.

## Engaging in Exploratory Practice—Identifying an Appropriate form to Understand Our Puzzles

We first came across EP in 2015 when Rhian attended some professional development training at the Turkish University in Northern Cyprus on how to conduct EP in a university classroom setting. After informing

Troy about what she had learned during the EP training, we both agreed that EP seemed to offer us a way forward to explore our respective puzzles. Applying EP encouraged us to use our imaginations and creative abilities to visualise what we wanted to explore and experiment with. Also, the EP facilitators encouraged us to move beyond the question of 'how' and instead consider the 'why'. We both wanted to explore why we felt it was important for our learners to activate their sense of democratic participation while studying at university and we intended to develop some of their core democratic competences in the process of teaching them our respective subjects. It wasn't long before we realised that in order to better understand this, we would need to create a "democratic space" in the university classroom in order to go deeper into our own understandings of Competences for Democratic Culture (Council of Europe, 2016).

Additionally, we wanted to explore how our students would react to a newly formed 'democratic space' in their tutorials. It was from this realisation that our joint puzzles emerged:

> *How can a 'democratic space' be created in the university classroom?*
> *Why might this space activate students' democratic competences?*

## Troy's Puzzle

As a senior lecturer and course convenor for a human resources management course at the Australian University, my interest in developing undergraduates' democratic competences began with a project to make commerce students more 'business ready'. I found myself confronted with the question: *"how can I help students to better understand the institutions that influence work practices?"* I wanted students to not only be 'business ready' but also to understand the importance of critiquing the institutions in society so that they could become more civic and engaged citizens. As I will explain below, I was experimenting with inquiry-based learning (Healey, 2005) as a mode of instruction which can be used to increase learners' involvement and participation in active learning. Through conducting their own inquiries, they are asked to investigate new ways to construct and apply their knowledge. Ironically, without

being aware of EP at the outset, I wanted to devise systems of learning that would help develop these types of attributes while also encouraging students to share their understandings of institutions in society that shape 'the world of work'. Additionally, I wanted students to develop a deeper awareness of how democratic principles influence the way in which institutions operate. It became apparent to me that I would need to create opportunities for students to actively learn how to identify these democratic principles as well as identify and reflect on the competences they could use to uphold them. EP might provide these opportunities.

## Rhian's Puzzle

I had worked as a learning advisor on the Human Resources course that Troy had convened. After I left the Australian University to take up a position at the School of Foreign Languages at the Turkish University in Northern Cyprus, I kept in touch with Troy. We often discussed how his learners were progressing in his course, and I was keen to learn how the integration of inquiry-based learning had been helping him to prepare his students for life after university.

In my own job, I was teaching an introductory program for English as a Foreign Language to students who were required to develop their English language skills in order to take up their places in their departments. This is because the language of instruction at the Turkish University is predominantly in English. The program was heavily focused on exam preparation and I began to feel disheartened about it, mainly because I believed that I wasn't doing much to develop my students for 'real life' situations. After a year of teaching in the program, I realised that the students for whom I was responsible knew very little about the types of skills, attributes or competences they would need to successfully find employment after graduation. As my learners were young adults with their own academic and professional interests, I wanted to help them explore topics that interested them and also to nudge open the program so that they could discuss these topics during lessons with their classmates.

I started to think about the activities I could introduce into my lessons which would provide my learners with opportunities to develop their

personal knowledge and competences. I wasn't sure how I was going to intervene, particularly when the program's aims were so heavily geared to preparing students for their forthcoming English proficiency exam, held at the end of the academic year.

After attending the workshop on EP, I felt that EP seemed to offer a way forward to explore my puzzle, together with Troy. Using EP to mull over our puzzles encouraged us to use our imaginations and creative abilities. The workshop activities had encouraged us to move beyond the question of 'how' to probe more deeply, by asking 'why'. We both wanted to explore why we felt it was important for our learners to activate their sense of democratic participation and develop some core democratic competences.

## Discovering Exploratory Practice

The nature of EP means that it specifically targets increasing teachers' and learners' understandings of their lives while in their educational settings and predominantly in classrooms (Allwright & Hanks, 2009; Hanks, 2015). EP takes a practical approach by proposing that meaningful research can be conducted during class time. Additionally, learners are encouraged to actively participate as co-researchers (Allwright, 2003). EP emphasises the understandings of all participants (Allwright, 2015; Hanks, 2015), arguing that if teachers purely did research *on* their learners, without also consulting them as equals, the overall findings would be incomplete. EP offers robust ways in which research deepens understandings, addresses all the stakeholders' understandings, and uses class time in a productive way. This egalitarian approach is linked to our stance on democratic participation.

## Discovering Democratic Competences

Around the same time we started our EP study, the Council of Europe announced a pilot program seeking to test the development of a model of democratic competences, which was published in March 2016. The

model, which is available online, has been developed in order to support The Council of Europe's Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education (Council of Europe, 2010).

Democratic competences focus on an individual's attributes and behaviours, such as a person's positive interaction with others and ensuring that individuals are treated equally by each other as well as the institutions that govern society (Council of Europe, 2016, p. 6). In this fashion, learners' democratic competences can be mobilised "in an active and adaptive manner in order to respond to new circumstances" (Council of Europe, 2016, p. 6). Contemporary new circumstances include worrying challenges, such as rising levels of hate crime, increasing support for violent extremism and a general level of people's distrust of politicians and apathy regarding voting in elections. According to Becker and Couto (1996), one of the most effective ways to teach learners about democracy and how to be democratic is to incorporate learning and teaching approaches which convincingly activate educators' and learners' sense of democratic participation in the classroom. The model provides educators with a comprehensive list of 20 democratic competences, which are divided into five key areas (Council of Europe, 2016, p. 7):

- Attitudes;
- Knowledge;
- Critical understandings;
- Skills; and
- Values.

The publication sets out a number of 'can do' statements for learners. For instance, *attitude* can be evidenced when a learner 'interacts positively without certainty of what the other thinks and feels'; *knowledge and critical understanding* can be demonstrated when a learner 'uses evidence to support his/her opinions'; and *values* can be perceived when a learner 'expresses the view that all citizens should be treated equally and impartially under the law'. After discussing the appropriateness of the democratic competence model, we were confident that we were on the right track regarding the types of democratic competences that we could help our learners to develop. This information had a real bearing on how we

planned, devised and implemented our EP. Also, the literature we reviewed (Bîrzéa, 2000; Duerr, Spajic-Vrkaš, & Martins, 2000) helped us develop a greater sense of connectedness to the work that has been carried out by the plethora of organisations and individuals supporting the Council of Europe's Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education.

## Third Space Theory

In order to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the 'building blocks' we would need in the classroom to develop students' democratic competences, we applied the educational theory known as third space theory. Third space theory (see Tracey & Morrow, 2012) proposes that learners' personal knowledges, discourses and experiences are situated in their 'First spaces'—which are mainly comprised of learners' family members, relatives and friends typically situated within the learners' home lives, friendship groups and communities. Third space theory explains how learners' 'First spaces' can be said to integrate with their 'Second spaces'—these are predominantly situated within tangible spaces in schools, colleges, universities and intangible educational spaces, such as degree programs and university curricula. 'Third spaces' are formed at the merging point between learners' 'First and Second spaces' in which learners and educators can figuratively 'step into' a newly formed 'Third space.' Here they can collectively work together to co-construct their own unique knowledges, discourses and experiences of disciplines, fields, subjects and/or topics covered in 'Second space' educational institutions and curricula (Moje et al., 2004).

The third space theory provided us was a conceptual framework, which helped us to understand how we could merge educators' and learners' 'First and Second spaces' to create a new 'Democratic space' within the university classroom. We started to visualise what a 'Democratic space' might look, feel and sound like in its tangible physical form. We visualised a learning and teaching space in which deeper understandings of topics and subjects could spring from the university curricula covered during tutorials and yet also be in step with the notion of fostering a
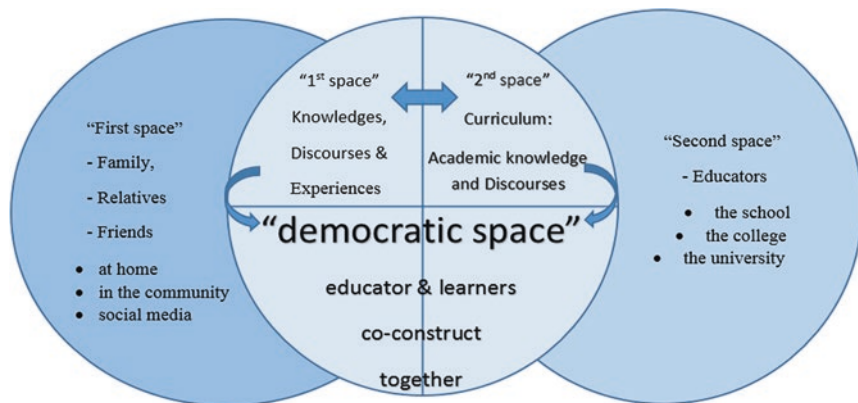
**Fig. 9.1**  Convergence model for creating democratic spaces

democratic approach between learners and educators and where 'new' understandings could be co-created. This linked directly with what we understood from EP.

Taking a didactic view of this, we identified the activity of debating as an effective tool for learners to reflect on their understandings of democratic influences in societies and share their views, beliefs and understandings of these influences with each other. Figure 9.1 shows the building blocks of co-creating a 'Democratic space' in the university classroom.

## Potentially Exploitable Pedagogic Activities

EP provided a research framework which pays close attention to the following: firstly, EP practitioners should consider how the research investigation uses class time in a productive way (Allwright, 2015). These are essential aspects to bear in mind when conducting a research study, particularly when one is feeling overwhelmed with administrative duties that seem to detract from extending practitioners' understandings of teaching and learning practices. Educators generally don't have the time nor the resources at their disposal to develop and implement their research investigations. This is exactly why the notion of incorporating a potentially

exploitable pedagogic/professional activity (PEPA) or a potentially exploitable reflective activity (PERA) during class time is so valuable for teachers and learners alike. A PEPA or a PERA (Miller & Cunha, 2016) is the type of learning and teaching activity that is usually conducted in class time, yet these activities are slightly modified or adapted in order to capture more information or data. These are incredibly useful research tools, as they can be oriented towards helping learners and teachers assume a knowledge producer role as well as a means to encourage them to think and act reflexively, to question critically and to discover new meanings in whatever it is they are seeking to understand about their puzzles.

## Troy's Experience

As I explored the literature about preparing students for employment, I found that my approach and intentions evolved. As a result, I decided to revise the course I was convening so students developed 'business-ready' skills. I decided to experiment with the teaching methodology called inquiry-based learning (Healey, 2005) as a mode of instruction which can be used to increase involvement and participation in active learning. The aims of inquiry-based learning require educators to put learners at the heart of the learning process by asking them to seek information through extensive interrogation of the information available to them. Additionally, through conducting learners' own inquiries; they are asked to investigate new ways of constructing and applying their knowledge. I perceived inquiry-based learning to be a dynamic approach to teaching and learning in which students could explore 'real world' problems and challenges which human resources practitioners often face in their jobs.

I decided that I would introduce debating activities into my course and make it a mandatory part of the overall assessment, which was also mandatorily peer-assessed by students. Debate topics were drawn from various topics and issues covered in the course with the intention of forcing students to argue a point of view and defend it. As this was a human resources course, the material naturally lent itself well to examining important institutions that help form a democracy, including the role of

government, laws, worker associations as well as organisational processes such as skills development and pay systems. My teaching team and I had observed that students responded well to inquiry-based learning and that the debating activities during tutorial time were very popular with learners and tutors alike. Students' and tutors' active participation increased when students could select their own debate topics which offered them greater autonomy over their learning and also offered tutors a greater degree of diversity in learning and teaching. These debating activities were supplemented by my professional experiences working in human resources management. I was able to identify the kinds of competences that students would need to master in order to be successful in their professional careers. As the major assessment, I set a written report where students needed to provide their 'consultation' to a client on how to structure human resource affairs in a fictitious organisation.

In keeping with the principles of both EP and inquiry-based learning, one of the drivers for setting a group assignment was to signal the importance of collaboration in workplace settings. The sharing of ideas, experiences, strategies and knowledge among classmates was emphasised. I didn't want my learners to simply listen to me as a university lecturer and then repeat my thoughts in written form. To me, the combination of these activities reflected the realities that I had experienced of the working world, that is to say—graduates need to voice an opinion, defend positions and articulate their well-informed knowledge and thoughts in both oral and written form. All of this was part of the process of developing a learning and teaching space in which students could explore workplace issues and various important government institutions more generally.

## Rhian's Experience of a PEPA

I wanted to target the development of two specific areas of my students' democratic competences: their communicative linguistic skills and their interpersonal skills (see Council of Europe, 2016). EP offered me a basis from which to explore this by steering me to focus more on what occurs in the classroom. It also encouraged me to reflect on Troy's observations

of students' debating activities at the Australian University. Reflecting on what worked with his learners helped me to justify my rationale that holding debates during class time serves to activate learners' sense of democratic participation. This aspect suggested that debates held in the classroom would also work well with students in the Turkish University setting.

However, introducing debating activities was not straightforward because the program's schedule was fixed, and I realised that it would be unfeasible to change the syllabus or course materials in order to further explore my puzzle. Additionally, I was concerned that my students might not be familiar with debates and might be reluctant to participate. Making the decision to hold in-class debates with my learners was filled with uncertainty. This was mainly because the topics and educational materials, which had been preselected by the department's coordinators, were not necessarily relevant or applicable to the notion of developing students' democratic competences in the classroom. EP provided me with a way to explore this uncertainty and risk-taking behaviour by planning and implementing the use of a PEPA during my classes. Therefore, the concept of using a PEPA in the classroom became instrumental in helping me find some space in the program in which I could introduce and facilitate class debates. Fortunately for me, a few of the topics covered in the program lent themselves well to holding a class debate and were deemed by my analysis to be 'exploitable' for supplementary educational and research purposes.

One of the course book's topics introduced the 'The Role of the Media in Today's Society' in which there was a short section which requires learners to express an opinion on whether or not journalists should always tell the truth. A second topic was about whether or not the Internet should be censored by governments. The syllabus stated that the topic should be introduced to the students as an essay-style question which would form part of their assessed writing portfolio assignment. However, I considered that it would be more beneficial to my learners if they had the opportunity to debate the topic before writing about it. Therefore, I used aspects of inquiry-based learning to design the PEPA, which I used during the class in order to maximise the opportunity for my learners to explore the topic for themselves.

Holding a class debate on the truth-telling (or otherwise) of journalists encouraged my learners and me to co-construct our own personalised knowledges, discourses and experiences from within the 'Democratic space' of the class debate. I considered that this topic could be extended to include a free-flow speaking activity and it would be a great opportunity to introduce my students to group debates in class. I told them that during the following day's class they would discuss the topic in a debate and that I would be assessing their language skills—in particular their fluency in English (which would form part of their speaking grade). The PEPA offered me an opportunity to capitalise on using a pedagogical activity with my learners during which I could assess their speaking skills and at the same time expose them to a situation in which they could develop their democratic competences.

In preparation for the class debate, I carefully selected students and put them into a specific group. My selections were primarily based on matching my learners' language abilities and their previous levels of participation in group activities. Before the activities started, I explained to the students that they had specific learning goals to aim for which they could reach while taking part in the debate. Their learning outcomes encouraged them to focus on their communicative, linguistic and interpersonal skills. Once they were settled into groups of four, I asked them to work collaboratively on developing two to three strong reasons that would support their position. I arranged four groups: two groups were arguing 'for' and two groups were arguing 'against.' To scaffold my learners' approach to selecting these reasons, I provided them with some PowerPoint slides which served as 'just-in-time' information prompts to aid their discussion. After around 15 minute's preparation, I shifted the students into pairs so that each newly formed group included two students arguing 'for' and two students 'against.' I gave them 15 minutes to hold the debate. During the stages of the debate, I decided that I would carefully observe specific details regarding my students and record these aspects in shorthand in my field notes. I considered the following aspects would help me build a picture of how my learners were developing their communicative, linguistic and interpersonal skills:

- what they were doing;
- what they were saying;
- how they were interacting;
- their body language and facial gestures; and
- their timing (thinking time, timing of interactions, response-wait time, and listening time)

## Critical Observations

I do not wish to imply that this was an unproblematic procedure. As with any class, conflicts arose. As a critical researcher, I therefore provide the following story. While observing my students, an incident occurred between two of them. It was very interesting to observe that two male students, who were usually friendly with one another in class, now found themselves positioned on opposite sides of the debate topic. About eight minutes into their debate, during which they had both been taking turns to listen to each other, one of the students accused the other of lying. He protested to me about this, yet I was determined to remain a neutral observer, mainly because I wanted to see which interpersonal skills the students would incorporate in order to deal with their intense situation. I continued to take field notes without getting pulled into their dispute. One of the male students demanded that I 'do' something but I explained that I was not part of their debate. In fact, I actually had to move away from that group and sit next to another one to see if the two students could work out how to resolve their differences. Unfortunately, the quarrel escalated into a row and one of the students chose to leave his group and join another. At the end of the class, and when the other students had left the room, I asked the two students whether they thought they had reached their learning outcomes. The annoyed student quickly replied, *"It is hard to respect someone who lies."* This incident highlights the challenges that my learners and I experienced during this activity. When dealing with conflict is such a crucial part of life, my learners and I were able to observe the social nature of learning during the in-class debates. Ultimately, our observations helped us to understand how learning can occur even if it may feel tense at times.

# Analysis

## Troy's Learners

The debating activities at the Australian University proved to be a very effective means of extending students' knowledge of the subject. Similarly, debates also provided them with opportunities to develop competences in various important skills, such as analytical and critical thinking skills. But this was not all. The debates offered opportunities to see how ideas and knowledge are born, shared and evolve. Additionally, I observed that the debating activities gave me some insights into the types of democratic competences that learners were using to participate in the debates. For instance, I observed that students were displaying competences that enabled them to engage with and tolerate other people's points of view; build logical and persuasive arguments using factual information that required analytical and critical thinking about the public institutions that shape their societies; and clearly and succinctly communicate any ethical considerations involved in their decision-making.

A review of the qualitative data I collected from multiple course surveys suggests that students enjoyed being in this 'Democratic space', commenting on how they find the learning environment exciting and informative. However, I think more qualitative data needs to be captured in order to get a better sense of whether students are at least more aware of democratic principles that are integral to the human resources profession as well the democratic processes that shape the human resources field.

## Rhian's Learners

When the group debates had finished, I asked the learners what they thought were the benefits of holding in-class debates with their peers. The majority of responses I received from my students were very encouraging:

> - *It helps me to trust the others' views*
> - *I can see more of my understanding now I discussed with others*
> - *We have to think and speak quickly – this is good for speaking skills*
> - *I know what my classmates think on this topic and I can understand them better*
> - *It was hard to be "against" but I am happy I tried to say something strong to support this – it was fun*
> - *I liked listening to my classmate talk – he is better in English than I thought!*

## How EP Helped Us to Foster a Democratic Classroom

By using EP as a form of practitioner research, we have been able to identify some of the important variables that educators can introduce when seeking to foster a democratic space in their classrooms.

### Enhanced Understandings

We placed a lot of emphasis on garnering mutual respect towards each other and also towards our learners in order to enhance our understandings. We consider that developing fuller understandings by carrying out the class debates also generated greater respect for each other's views. Additionally, co-creating democratic learning experiences in the classroom required high levels of physical and mental energy from us, as educators, and also from our learners. We think this was because we all needed to be much more active in class and learn to adapt to unfamiliar learning and teaching scenarios and situations.

### Impact of Learning on Life

We discovered insights into how students critically examined and viewed discipline related topics through the process of debating. We observed

students developing democratic competences, such as critical thinking, interacting without certainty of what the other thinks and feels, and using evidence to support his/her opinions during the debate. Additionally, we experienced incidents of "existential" learning (Bîrzéa, 2000, p. 35) whereby significant moments, situations and incidents in the classroom occur and influence aspects of an individual's lifelong learning.

## Life Awareness

Our interactions with each other and our communities of learners kept our teaching practices and EP evolving while also enhancing our awareness and understanding of how aspects of democratic citizenship evolve through social interaction and classroom learning. Throughout our collaboration, we kept learning from each other and from our learners. This quest for greater 'life awareness' also flourished due to our sense of reciprocity which featured highly during our teaching and research practices.

## Plurality of Understandings

EP can act as a guide to extending practitioners' own experiences of learning, for instance, we learnt how to accept our successes and failures in creating a democratic classroom as a necessary part of pedagogical innovation and enhanced understanding. We feel that our experience provides learners and educators with a powerful tool that helps them to more fully understand the importance of these endeavours not only for immediate gain but also for longer-term understandings of how to integrate aspects of education for democratic citizenship into higher education programs and degree courses.

## Sociality

A very important outcome of sharing our understandings was the evolution of our ideas. By activating our respective PEPAs with our learners, we started to develop our own individual teaching capabilities and skills

in stimulating and strengthening students' democratic participation in the classroom. What started as a project to make sure students in a business degree were 'work ready', and preparatory students were able to study in English, transformed into something more profound, namely, an ongoing investigation into how students and educators can, in fact, learn more about the role of democratic competences, or lack thereof, thereby shaping the understanding of us and others in society.

## Sustainability of Mutual Relationships

Strengthening democratic participation in our classes gave us a very real sense that learners and educators can interact in mutual relationships. Having mutual interests in our research was only part of the story during our collaboration. We also put a lot of emphasis on garnering mutual respect towards each other and also towards our learners. Strengthening democratic participation in our classes gave us a very real sense that learners and educators can interact in mutual relationships. What we mean here is that neither the educator nor the learner is dominant or subservient in the democratic classroom; instead, they are interacting on a more equal footing towards mutually beneficial educational purposes. This aspect helped us to sustain our interactions with our learners, as less pressure was put on us, as educators, to tell learners whether they were right or wrong. We were able to observe learners offering each other mutual support, which supported the fifth EP principle of working for 'mutual development' as well as the democratic competence of finding a way to 'respect' other people's views. Throughout our collaboration, we kept learning from each other—particularly how developing students' competency for democratic cultures tied in with our own democratic ideals and notions of democratic citizenship.

## Transferability

These types of positive outcomes encouraged us to attempt to understand how this process of learning worked, as well as ways in which to strengthen it. We identified that EP is no longer a research framework that perhaps
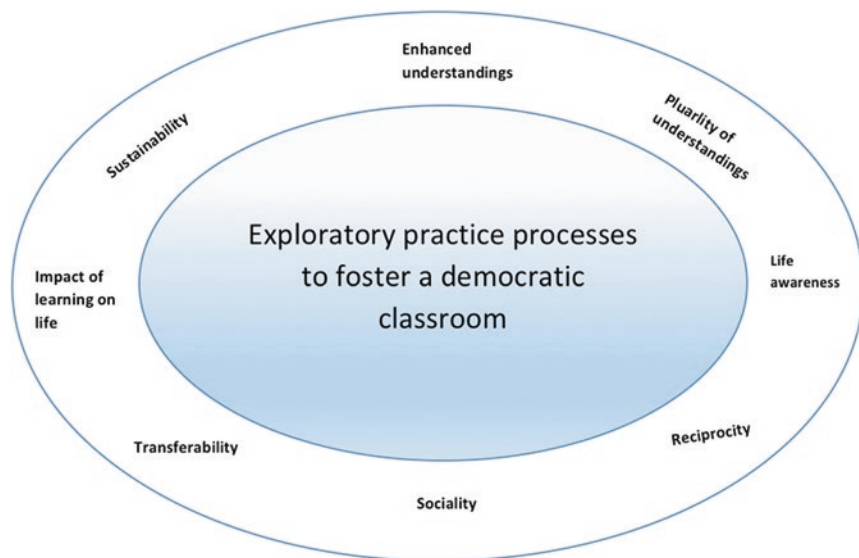
**Fig. 9.2**   A framework for fostering a democratic classroom

is bound to language learning or language school settings. As demonstrated by the collaboration we forged with one another, we have been able to transplant EP processes into very different contexts: one where the focus was understanding contemporary human resource policies and processes and the other which focused on learning English as a Foreign Language. Therefore, our own investigation into our puzzle has proved that EP is highly adaptable and can be applied to very different educational contexts. We hope that this work will encourage learners in other fields to deploy EP in their own endeavours to enhance understanding of whatever aspect of life they may be curious about (Fig. 9.2).

## Our Reflections

The EP principles, as defined by Allwright and Hanks (2009), contributed to the success of our collaborative research practice in many ways. We discuss each of the principles in turn, with reference to our experiences.

## Put Quality of Life First

Inquiry-based learning and regular debates put students at the heart of learning in the classroom, and this echoes the EP principle of prioritising quality of life. Our EP wasn't just solely concerned with holding debates; it was also about what the debates targeted—the institutions that shape and influence people's lives, including governments, trade unions, public and political institutions as well as universities and workplaces. This is a key element to building up an awareness of how democracy functions within cultures. The educational value, ideally, is to learn how to deliberate, to debate and then to question how democracies function. Thinking back to when we first started working together on the Human Resource course, we knew very little about Competences for Democratic Culture. The impact of ideas like developing students' competences in order to sustain democratic (work) cultures has not only become a cornerstone to our approach to teaching and learning, but in reality, has shaped our views about the strategic direction in which universities should be heading. We have found ourselves questioning why university curriculum developers, and steering committees working at universities, aren't being more proactive in addressing the development of students' democratic competences in higher education.

## Work Primarily to Understand Classroom Life

We certainly found ourselves at various junctures of our collaboration where we began to question how we might be able to 'measure' whether students had in fact developed some democratic competences. However, Allwright (2015) reminds us not to become sidetracked by such rudimentary metrics. Instead, the importance of EP is to gather a better sense of the spectrum of understandings that different people might have of a phenomenon rather than chasing outcomes that may not necessarily help to explain why something occurs. We believe that our practice of understanding how students learnt about democratic principles continues to evolve.

In our work so far, we have come across a number of 'puzzles,' including how the process of learning occurs in different cultural settings, and to even define what terms like 'democratic competences' may mean in different cultural contexts. Having worked to explore these questions while teaching in our courses, we feel we experienced the "continuous commitment" to exploring puzzles that Allwright (2015, p. 13) identifies. However, we were not the only ones who showed a continuous commitment to our puzzles. For instance, in the Human Resources course, students pursued avenues which went beyond the classroom to deliberate 'problems' that the debate topics presented. Students began to meet outside their classes, set up online forums to discuss and exchange ideas as well as reflect on their own ideas about societal institutions beyond the boundaries of just one course. Both students and educators can be seen as "practitioners of learning" (Allwright & Hanks, 2009, p. 6) where they were displaying their own levels of independent decision-making, which is also considered to be one of the core democratic principles of active participation in citizenship.

## Involve Everybody

Using an EP approach meant that we could involve our learners much more in our research practices. In this sense, we perceived our learners as "key practitioners of learning" (Allwright & Hanks, 2009, p. 5). Simply by being in our classes and participating in activities during the lessons, there was a symbiotic process where our learners helped us to deepen our understanding of what it is like to create and teach in a democratic space. We could not have done this investigation without our learners and we appreciate and value their active participation in the classroom.

## Work to Bring People Together

We found the experience of researching this topic helped us understand ourselves as educators and research practitioners. It also offered ways for us to gain insights into the reasons why we consider the development of students' democratic competences as important and prompted us to share

our experiences with others. Rhian had the opportunity to present our findings at the IATEFL ReSIG Teachers Research Conference at Bahçeşehir University in Istanbul. She presented to a small group of interested participants on how holding a debate on a controversial topic helped her to establish a participatory and engaged atmosphere in her EFL classroom.

## Work for Mutual Development

We are also aware of the importance of working towards sustaining democratic cultures and this is why we are keen to engage with educators and learners who are also interested in developing Competences for Democratic Cultures. We believe that our research practice is upheld by other educational communities who are active in this area. In this respect, the notion of 'sustainability' is very important to us and it reflects the EP principle of making our practitioner research a 'sustained enterprise'.

## Integrate the Work for Understanding into Classroom Practice

Asking learners what their perceptions, comments, suggestions and opinions are regarding the activation of their democratic participation in the classroom has become a very important part of our teaching practice. We created the possibility of students bringing together their own understanding of the world, and the worlds of their educators, so as to create a democratic space of understanding where students and educators have the possibility to reconsider what makes 'my world, their world' and vice versa. This process encouraged learners to engage more fully in reflecting on the types of democratic cultures they would like to foster and experience. Again, these types of outcomes reflect the objective discussed by Allwright, namely that the understandings developed by EP need to be "lived, rather than expressed in words" (2015, p. 31). This aspect reflected our desire to achieve a greater sense of equality-in-practice in our classrooms by emphasising to students that the sharing of diverse views is one of the fundamental principles of democracy. Our exploration into how

we approach diversity in our classrooms also served to energise our intention to activate a 'diversity by doing' approach by initiating and facilitating discussions and also by co-constructing knowledge during our lessons. We considered that by stimulating experiences of diversity and equality in teaching and learning situations, we could discover more about the nature of students' democratic competences, such as 'otherness' and empathy. We could then find ways to complement and strengthen these competences rather than becoming too focused on merely "finding solutions to a problem" (Allwright, 2015, p. 31). This plurality of understanding could also be seen in the way we as research practitioners engaged with each other. Regular discussions between us was one of the best ways to come to understand our puzzles in greater depth. We are confident that we explored ways of enhancing our professional capabilities in terms of fostering a democratic classroom and extending our research practice into the classroom.

## Final Words

As practitioner-researchers, we continue to be interested in exploring how to effectively develop university students' democratic competences and promote democratic classrooms from within our universities. While teaching in our respective universities, we developed insights into how learners' democratic competences can be enhanced and strengthened when cultivating a democratic space with others. We believe that EP afforded an ongoing exchange of our ideas, shared practices and experiences, and in this sense, our practitioner-led exploration continues. Our EP has also shown us that pedagogical knowledge and expertise can flow between educational settings, and also, between diverse democratic cultures.

EP is aimed at enhancing learners' understanding of life and we certainly feel like we have developed a greater empathetic understanding of our learners. We have been able to utilise these understandings to provide our learners with additional didactic opportunities; not only so that they can learn more about the institutions that influence and shape their society, but also so that they can be exposed to developing their

own repertoire of democratic competences. These include critical thinking skills, willingness to listen and a desire to contribute to challenging discussions which can hold a rich diversity of views from which one can learn much. If our understanding of EP is right, any attempt to 'measure' the extent to which learners had developed their democratic competences in the classroom would have served to fundamentally miss the point of exploration. Instead, we continue to take great delight in observing, participating and opening up the 'Third space', as educators and students alike still have so much to learn about each other.

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# Why Do Students Consider Integrated Skills Lesson as a Grammar and Vocabulary Lesson?

**Betül Doğdu and Dilek Arca**

## Introduction

This chapter focuses on student conceptions of a lesson in an Intensive English Programme (IEP) context at a Turkish university. We realized that our students assume that the Integrated Skills (IS) strand is a grammar and vocabulary lesson, without noticing that it is a lesson where all skills are practised in an integrated way. In order to understand our puzzle *"Why do the students consider Integrated Skills lessons as a grammar and vocabulary lesson?"*, a small-scale phenomenological study was conducted with four teachers working in the same institution through the use of normal pedagogic activities. We adopted an Exploratory Practice (EP) approach to gather data. The data suggest that students' previous learning habits, difficulty in synthesizing different skills, their goals, and motivation affected their perceptions of the IS lessons. We conclude that all

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these factors are so interwoven that they affect learning English as a foreign language in this context.

Students' attitude towards a lesson is an important element for learning, as Dörnyei (2003) argues, since it is one of the main influences for generating motivation. When it combines with a misunderstanding of the aims of the lesson, it can adversely affect the learning procedure. In our institution, we provide students with Integrated Skills lessons (the core), and separate skills lessons such as Reading and Writing. However, most of the students assume that Integrated Skills (hereafter IS) focus on grammar and vocabulary, and they assume they do not need to focus on other skills. Because of this misunderstanding, as the curriculum development officers, we decided to take action for understanding, by finding out the possible reasons for this situation through EP.

We will refer to following meanings throughout the chapter:

- *Exploratory Practice*: EP is a way of doing practitioner research which involves utilizing normal pedagogic activities to understand what is going on in the classroom (Allwright & Hanks, 2009).
- *Integrated Skills*: An IS approach combines instruction and practice in speaking, listening, reading and writing and the core principle of it is enabling learners to use English effectively with the help of four skills and enhancing their communicative competence (Whong, 2011). This approach is similar to communicative language teaching and whole language in terms of emphasizing both the authentic and meaningful language use and production of oral and written language (Su, 2017 as cited in Abdrabo, 2014).
- *Student Attitudes*: Student attitudes are an important factor to motivate students to learn or acquire a second/foreign language, as Dörnyei (2003) suggests. These may include doubts regarding the real need to learn a language that may be triggered by the attitudes of parents towards that language (Gardner, 1968).

With the help of EP, we aim at developing a better understanding of the classroom environment (Allwright & Hanks, 2009; Slimani-Rolls & Kiely, 2014). As members of the curriculum office in an institution, it is crucial for us to understand any problems occurring during the

implementation of the curriculum. One example is misunderstanding the main aim of the IS lessons. Without a clear understanding of the problems, we believe that we cannot empathize and it would not then be right to seek ways to take any action.

Our personal lives and work lives as teachers are so interwoven that, as Gieve and Miller argue, "'work' is a part of 'life' where 'life' is a part of 'work'" (2006, p. 20). The foremost principle of EP for us was to focus on the "*quality of life*" in the classroom (Hanks, 2015). This process involves, as suggested by Gieve and Miller (2006), interpretation of good and poor quality of classroom experience, which varies among classroom participants and external observers.

We begin with a brief background introduction about the institution in which we work. We go on to review the literature defining key concepts for our study. Then, we describe how we engaged in/with EP, including a plan of our research and our potentially exploitable pedagogic activities (PEPAs). We go on to discuss themes and codes from the data, and end with our interpretations and a discussion of the study.

# Background

Many universities in Turkey offer their students a one-year preparatory class. Here the students are expected to learn intensive English in order to be competent in the language they need to study in their departments. Since most preparatory programmes in Turkey last for one year, they are generally intensive English programmes. As English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instructors and members of the Curriculum Development Office of a university in İzmir, Turkey, we prepare the Intensive English Programme curriculum for the preparatory class. Thus, we set the objectives and write course goals and level outcomes for this programme to furnish students with the necessary English language skills to be able to pursue in departments such as engineering, law, arts, and psychology.

In our institution the IS approach is coordinated with separate lessons focusing on individual skills: Reading, Writing, Listening, and Speaking as well as a core lesson called 'Integrated Skills' (see Table 10.1 for a sample timetable). For listening and speaking and writing

**Table 10.1** Sample timetable

|             | Monday             | Tuesday            | Wednesday          | Thursday               | Friday             |
|-------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|------------------------|--------------------|
| 08.30–10.00 | Writing            | Reading            | Integrated Skills  | Integrated Skills      | Integrated Skills  |
| 10.10–11.45 | Integrated Skills  | Integrated Skills  | Writing            | Listening and Speaking | Reading            |
| 11.55–13.25 | Integrated Skills  | Integrated Skills  | Integrated Skills  | Integrated Skills      | –                  |

lessons, students state that they simply do not have enough time and practice for production. Consequently, they often complain that they cannot speak English fluently since they do not have enough practice in the lessons.

The core principle of IS approach is a combined instruction and practice in four skills which enables learners to use English effectively and enhances their communicative competence (Whong, 2011). Yet, something that our students may not be realizing is that speaking and listening as well as writing are a part of their core lesson—IS. Thus, we assume, they must have enough chances to practise the target language presented.

However, whenever we try to cover reading texts during the IS lessons, students ask for the reason with such questions: *"Why do we need to read this? Isn't it a grammar lesson?"* They also want to skip the listening or writing parts and are not willing to speak when given speaking tasks. As instructors, we try to explain the rationale behind it, but the students still view them as grammar and vocabulary lessons. Their comments and complaints show us that there might be something missing in the approach or in the way in which it is applied. This fact triggered us to conduct our research to explore the reasons.

## Engaging in Exploratory Practice

While we were seeking a research method, we encountered EP in a series of workshops in Izmir in June 2015. The participants were language teacher trainers, members of Continuous Professional Development offices, level coordinators, and instructors from universities across İzmir.

At the beginning of the sessions, we felt perplexed, and it was difficult for us to fully comprehend what EP consists of. However, after the second session, when we understood that EP requires understanding of puzzles, not solutions, we felt relieved. Because EP was not a burden on the teacher, it helped us to understand our puzzlements with the help of normal classroom activities. Thus, we did not have to develop new instruments for our research.

At first, we started with a number of questions:

1. *Why do the students assume the main course lesson is a grammar-oriented vocabulary course rather than a course which integrates all skills?*

    (a) *Is it a misconception? If yes, what can be the reason for this misconception?*
    (b) *Is it the manner in which the approach is implemented or just the perceptions of the students that cause this confusion?*

2. *Is integrating the four language skills really possible in EFL classes?*

    (c) *Does the theory work effectively in practice?*
    (d) *Does the IS lesson truly allow students to cross the borders between receptive and productive skills?*

All participants helped each other a lot and discussed one another's puzzles during the workshops. This helped us to overcome the challenges we faced while trying to refine our puzzle. Having another person commenting on it was the most efficient part of collegiality and therefore, our questions coalesced into an overarching puzzle: *"Why do the students consider IS lessons as a grammar and vocabulary lesson?"*

In September 2015, the EP group in İzmir met in two more workshops. Here, the whole group reported on their research. During these workshops our puzzle was further refined to add a management point of view. The rationale behind it was that the management is another stakeholder and their idea could be compared with instructors' point of view while we were discussing the results of our study.

In the future, we plan to extend our EP work in which we involve learners in the same puzzle. The details of this study will form the subject of another paper.

## Literature Review

As teachers, because of our own workload, we have difficulty engaging in research. The traditional way of doing research is very challenging due to being large-scale, objective, replicable, and generalizable in terms of findings, and this discourages us. Furthermore, we feel that traditional notions of research are prone to failure since classrooms are highly complex social institutions (Hanks, 2016). As instructors and members of the Curriculum Office, discovering the EP way of doing research was exciting because we realized that it was actually what all teachers needed as a guide in order to keep puzzling about their teaching and learning experiences.

EP can be defined as a process-oriented approach to exploring language learning and teaching, done by, and for, teachers and learners (Hanks, 2016). It appeals to us as instructors because the aim of EP is to turn issues and problems into "puzzles" since not all puzzles are problematic and also as teachers, we are not always comfortable accepting that there are problems in our teaching experiences (Dar, 2015). Another reason why it was especially appealing to us was because of the principles of EP. There are seven principles which were categorized into three areas by Allwright and Hanks (2009), more recently summarized by Allwright (2011, cited in Dar, 2015, p. 52):

| *'What'* | 1. | Focus on quality of life as the main issue. |
| | 2. | Work to understand before solving a problem. |
| *'Who'* | 3. | Involve everybody as practitioners developing their own understanding. |
| | 4. | Work to bring people together in a common enterprise. |
| | 5. | Work collaboratively for mutual development. |
| *'How'* | 6. | Make it a sustainable enterprise. |

PLUS two practical suggestions to keep going indefinitely:
        (a) Minimize the effort involved.
        (b) Integrate the work for understanding into normal pedagogic activities.

Our puzzling question, *"Why do students consider IS lessons as a grammar and vocabulary lesson?"*, principally focused on the quality of life (Principle 1) in the English language classroom. Our aims were (i) to enhance learning and foster student motivation and participation, (ii) to grasp an understanding of the reasons behind this puzzle (Principle 2), and (iii) to have an idea of the students' viewpoints before deciding to take any action about it.

As EP emphasizes collegiality, collaboration and participation of all stakeholders (Principles 3, 4, 5), we also tried to look at the matter from various points of view and work in collaboration with others in order to deepen our understanding. This led us to an awareness of how and to what extent we need to work with our colleagues in coordination and cooperation. We made our EP a continuous enterprise by applying it during our instructional time (Principle 6). As Allwright points out, continuous enterprise involves ongoing commitment to exploration whenever puzzling issues arise (Allwright, 2003 as cited in Allwright, 2015, p. 30). Also, rather than looking for other research tools, we used PEPAs (see Rio EP Group in Allwright & Hanks, 2009) so as to decrease the burden of the research as these are the activities we are already familiar with from our classroom experience. This makes it less time-consuming and minimizes the burden (Principle 7).

## Methodology

This research is a small-scale qualitative study aimed at finding out the possible reasons for a mismatch between the principles of IS in curriculum design, and the perceptions of students. Because this type of study focuses on what all participants have in common and on conveying individual experiences through description (Creswell, 2013), we decided to take a phenomenological approach. Phenomenological study is a means to describe the understandings individuals have of their own experiences of a situation (Creswell, 2013). Van Manen (1990) defines the starting point of a phenomenological study as describing the understandings from a true phenomenon. As Van Manen (1990, p. 35) suggests, "phenomenological human science begins in lived experience and eventually

turns back to it." In this way, the participants could reflect on their own experiences.

To this end, we collected data from the stakeholders who experience this phenomenon and questioned the use of the existing curriculum. In addition, while doing this, as the EP principles suggest, we wanted it to create a mutual development and therefore included the instructors in the process. We organized our work rather like a teacher training debrief (Crookall, 2010), where instructors first tried EP working in teams and later processed their realizations and reflected on their experiences.

## Participants

The participants were EFL instructors working at the same university's preparatory class as the researchers. Four instructors volunteered to participate in the practice. Their consent was obtained to share their ideas and publish here. Information about the participants' years of EFL experience and position in the institution can be seen in Table 10.2. To preserve anonymity, codes (T1, T2, T3, T4) were used instead of the teachers' names.

## Procedure

In the 2014–2015 academic year, we noticed the difficulties students and instructors were having with IS lessons. Our students were asking us the rationale behind the activities such as reading a text or speaking. When we asked the students why we shouldn't read or speak in IS lessons, the answer was 'It is a grammar lesson, we do not need them.' This situation triggered us to research it.

**Table 10.2** Participants in the study

| Participants | Years of EFL experience | Position in the institution |
|---|---|---|
| T1 | 7 | Instructor & Testing and Assessment Office Member |
| T2 | 10 | Instructor & Level Coordinator |
| T3 | 10 | Instructor |
| T4 | 2 | Instructor |

After this decision, we tried out EP with our colleagues in the summer of 2015. EP recommends utilizing normal classroom activities, namely pedagogic practices such as pair work, group work, warm-up or role-plays as investigative tools (Hanks, 2015). Therefore, in this practice, we decided to use warm-up, role-play, pair and group work just like in a normal classroom atmosphere, but this time as a research method.

Pair work can be a PEPA (Rio EP Group in Allwright & Hanks, 2009) to collect or generate data. These pedagogic activities are an essential part of our lessons. They provide the opportunity to adjust for every activity and skill. For example, while students are working in pairs, they can read a different short text and do an exercise to combine both passages in reading lessons or the peers can check each other's essay and work on the weaknesses together in a writing lesson. Similarly, this activity can be used in a session to learn other instructors' practices as well as the possible reasons for the students' misinterpretation.

With the help of PEPA we could empathize with learners in a way to include them. Having these in mind, we organized this EP session like a loop input process (see Woodward, 2003) where participants practise experiential learning by pairing off and then discussing the steps, content, and their experiences. The phases of our EP research were as follows (Table 10.3):

**Warm-Up**

We asked the instructors some warm-up questions such as *"Have you heard about practitioner research and exploratory research?", "Have you done a research in your classroom before? If so, what was it about?"* and

**Table 10.3**  EP phases

| EP phases | What the phase refers to |
| --- | --- |
| Phase 1 | Warm-up |
| Phase 2 | Engaging with the puzzle |
| Phase 3 | Role-play |
| Phase 4 | Group discussion |
| Phase 5 | Summarizing |
| Phase 6 | Evaluation and reflection |

*"Do you have any puzzles in your language teaching experience? If so, what was it?"* Next, we shared our puzzle and expressed our own experiences which led us to this puzzle. We asked them if they had faced the same issues and invited them to write similar puzzles of their own with anecdotes as a narrative. Then, they shared their puzzles with their colleagues.

## Engaging with the Puzzle

Individually, the teachers wrote at least three questions they could ask students in order to explore the reasons why they consider IS lessons as grammar and/or vocabulary lessons. We asked them to choose indirect questions in order not to make students uncomfortable. Some of the teachers' questions are listed below:

- *What do you expect to learn in IS lessons?*
- *What kind of different study techniques would you like to use in your IS classes?*
- *Do you think we only learn grammar rules in IS lessons? If yes, what kind of exercises make you believe that we focus on grammar more?*
- *Do you think it is a waste of time to do the listening practice in this lesson? If so, why?*
- *Is it possible to practise grammar while reading a text or listening to some audio in English?*
- *Which skills can you improve in IS lessons and why?*

## Role-Play

Working in pairs, teachers role-played a situation where one of them is an instructor asking questions and the other a student trying to answer. While the instructors were interviewing, they also took notes of the questions and answers. With the role-play, the instructors were able to gain insight into students' point of view as well as looking back at the ages when they were students and empathizing with them.

## Group Discussion

Pairs of teachers mingled and discussed the possible reasons for this misinterpretation in a group, taking their notes into consideration in order to see if they have similar misunderstandings or if they came to the same conclusions.

## Summarizing

Finally, we asked teachers to write a paragraph summarizing the issues that arose from the role-play and the group discussion, adding their own opinion about the reasons why students view IS lessons as a grammar and vocabulary lesson (Fig. 10.1). These were typed up and the full texts can be found in the Appendix.

## Evaluation and Reflection

We had not discussed EP up to this point, so we asked the teachers to define what they thought EP was since they had already practised it. Then, we worked on the definitions of EP from the EP Centre:
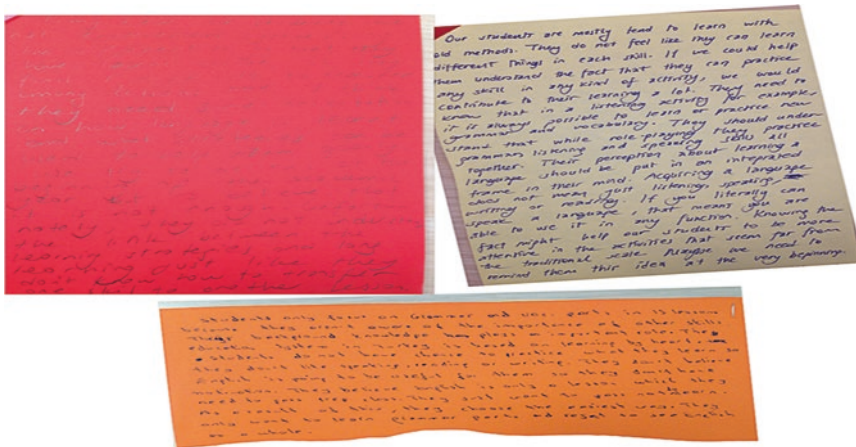


**Fig. 10.1**   Teachers' summaries

Exploratory Practice is an indefinitely sustainable way for classroom language teachers and learners, while getting on with their learning and teaching, to develop their own understandings of life in the language classroom. (EP Centre, 2008)

It is essentially a way for teachers and learners to work together to understand aspects of their classroom practice that puzzle them, through the use of normal pedagogic procedures (standard monitoring, teaching, and learning activities) as investigative tools. (EP Centre website 2001, cited in Hanks, 2017, p. 83)

Later, we asked the teachers if they had realized what pedagogic procedures we had used in this EP. They brainstormed about the session and pointed out that warm-ups, role-plays, individual and pair work, and discussions must be the pedagogic procedures that have been used for EP.

Next, we consulted the Director of the School of Foreign Languages, the Preparatory Class Coordinator, five supervisors who are also the line managers between the management, offices, and the instructors, and also one Materials Development Office member. The questions we asked were:

- *Do you think students consider IS lesson as a grammar and vocabulary lesson?*
- *What might be the reasons for this?*
- *What do you think is the teacher and student perspective on this?*
- *Is there a specific skill that the teachers focus on or neglect in the classroom?*
- *What would you suggest to Curriculum Development Office regarding this matter?*

## Limitations

Any research has its limitations, and our study was no different. Aside from the criticisms typical of qualitative research (small-scale, localized) two further points draw notice.

We could not, at this point, include students' point of view. This is because we held this study in summer and students were on holiday. Yet,

this does not mean that students are ignored. This part is missing now, but will be added in the next phase of our EP research.

In addition, only few teachers could participate because most of them were on their annual leave. We had chosen the summer period in order not to add to the heavy burden of teachers' workloads, remembering that one of the EP principles is to "prioritise quality of life" (Hanks, 2015). However, this was a kind of a pilot study and as a next stage it is planned to conduct interviews and/or questionnaires with the students to go further.

## Data Analysis

As researchers, we decided to analyse the data using a qualitative process that includes identifying important categories, patterns, and relationships in the data (Schutt, 2012). So, to find an answer to our puzzle, we negotiated together to categorise the data. First, data were documented through transcribing on the computer. To preserve anonymity, codes (T1, T2, T3, T4) were used instead of the teachers' names. Later, each set of transcribed data was read separately and common findings were identified as themes and codes. Then, we discussed them as writers of this chapter. For example, 'exam-oriented learning' code was categorized under different themes, which are 'students' goals' and 'motivation'. After a short discussion, we realized that this could be included in both categories since the main reason for students' learning is exams, which fosters motivation.

While identifying themes and codes, we used content analysis, defined as a research technique to make meaningful inferences from texts and contents (Krippendorff, 2004). According to Schreier (2012), "a coding frame is a way of structuring your material. It consists of main categories specifying relevant aspects and of subcategories for each main category specifying relevant meanings concerning this aspect." (p. 61). An example of this practice is in Table 10.4:

Common themes that arose from the data gathered in the practice with teachers were as follows:

**Table 10.4** Themes and codes

| Theme | Code |
|---|---|
| Previous learning habits | Students' background knowledge |
| | Learning methods that students are used to |
| Synthesis | Difficulty in synthesizing different skills students have learnt |
| Students' goals | Aims for learning |
| | Exam-oriented learning |
| Motivation | Reaction to skill-based and task-based learning |
| | Preference of traditional learning methods |
| | Preference of mechanical activities |
| | Exam-oriented learning |

- Theme 1: Previous learning habits

According to the data, students prefer more traditional methods and mechanical activities. They resist if the instructors say they want to practise communicative tasks in the classroom. One reason for this is, as Teacher 1 explained:

> *Due to their previous learnings, they are not aware of the importance of other skills, especially the productive skills such as speaking and writing.* (T1)

What we found from the meetings with the management was similar. The students have been programmed to grammar since the beginning of their language learning experience. This is a big issue. As one of the supervisors pointed out:

> *Our students come from a system in which foreign language instruction is proposed as chunks of grammar rules. These chunks are mostly determined or dominated by verb tenses. The assessment system is also designed to test students' knowledge of grammar rather than the use of language. Thus, repeating this experience every year in their high school draws students to expect a similar approach at the Prep Class.* (Supervisor)

That is to say, the previous learning habits are a significant factor in the perceptions of IS Lessons.

- Theme 2: Synthesis of skills

A second theme emerging from the data was that of synthesis of skills. When the teachers were analysing the outcomes of their practice in Phase 5, they commented that:

*the students had difficulty in understanding how all skills are interwoven* (T4)

and:

*they do not know how to transfer one skill to another as well as their learning into practice* (T3).

We noted that what the students had difficulty in was the synthesis stage of learning. This involves more than repeating the knowledge and requires students to use their previous learning as a base for a different educational context (Andrich, 2002). Teacher 2 commented:

*Since they are used to teacher-centred learning, they cannot get used to interactive teaching methods.* (T2)

- Theme 3: Students' goals

Thirdly, students' goals and aims for learning were also found to be important. Teachers believed that most students are exam oriented and this leads them to focus on passing the preparatory class rather than actual learning. According to Teacher 1:

*They are not aware of the importance of practising different skills. The reason that they reject to see English as a whole is that they do not want to learn but just want to pass the preparatory class and they only would like to learn grammar since they believe it would be the most useful thing in assessment.* (T1)

The management stated a similar opinion. They said they think students are exam-oriented and do not have a reason for learning English. It was suggested that students' only expectations were learning grammar

since they believe it will make them successful and help them to proceed to their departments.

The other issue voiced by the management was the preference of *teachers* for teaching grammar. This may stem from teachers' own previous learning experiences which have been shaped by traditional learning techniques in the Turkish education system. Many language teachers have been brought up learning grammar first and they love teaching it. For them, perhaps, it seems to be easier to teach grammar than teaching the communicative aspect of language. Even when they have to teach productive or receptive skills, they use grammar as a preparatory means of entry. As a result of this, students might get the impression that using the correct structure is all that matters. This may be the result of certain manners of instructors: Teachers constantly correct students during activities or focus more on grammar instead of communicative tasks and inductive teaching even though (i) the course books are communicative and allow students to practise newly learned skills, (ii) the curriculum itself does not emphasise grammar above skills and communication.

• Theme 4: Motivation

Finally, it was suggested that since the students are inevitably exam-oriented, they have little motivation to learn and practise skills. They seem to believe that these will not help them in the exams. The teachers argued that:

> *students prefer more mechanical activities such as grammar worksheets and exam samples* (T1)

and that:

> *traditional learning methods motivate them more than skill-based and task-based learning.* (T2)

The management also stated that the main motivation of students to learn was the assessment. Due to the fact that a high percentage of the assessment system is designed to test students' knowledge of grammar

and since the aim of the students is to pass the exams, teachers feel the need to focus on what the students are assessed on. In short, teacher behaviour may also be shaped by student motivation.

## Summary

When evaluated altogether, we can see that all these themes and codes are deeply interwoven. Learning English as a foreign language in a Turkish context is highly affected by them: one theme affects another, while it is also under the effect of a different theme, in a complex and dynamic system. In other words, learners' previous habits affect their abilities in the learning environment and as a result they have difficulty synthesizing information. Similarly, their motivation is highly affected by their goals and reasons for learning.

Our puzzle about the students' misconception of IS lessons is now also puzzling other stakeholders. Both groups of participants (teachers and the management) think that a combination of our students' background knowledge and their previous learning methods leads them to perceive IS lessons as grammar-based lessons. We can speculate that reasons for this assumption may include the students' mostly negative reactions to the teachers' intention to teach in an interactive way using communicative methods.

The management and the teachers agreed that previous learning habits affect students' motivation because it is directly related to the students' preference for traditional learning methods and mechanical activities such as learning grammar rules. Both parties thought that students' motivation is also fostered by their learning goals and their aim to pass the preparatory class. This tells us that the assessment system of the school is also a factor. The only thing that the teachers did not mention, though members of the management suggested it, is that the teachers' own preference may be to teach grammar rather than communicative skills, since they also learned the language using traditional methods. However, all of these comments and assumptions would be worth probing more deeply.

# Reflections on Learning as Teachers and Researchers

As instructors, researchers, and the writers of this chapter, the first thing we learned was that conducting classroom research in an EP framework is not as difficult as it seems at the beginning. As researchers, we did not worry about developing new instruments to gather data, but instead focused on which pedagogic activities we normally use in class and how we can make use of them in the most effective way. Thus, using normal pedagogic activities as research tools (Allwright & Hanks, 2009) has the potential to ease the researchers' job and helped us to focus on the aim and possible reasons for the existence of the puzzle. We gained insight into learners' and teachers' perspectives. Our initial explorations of the puzzle led us to refine our approach and raised more related questions. At this stage, feedback from our colleagues contributed much to everybody's involvement; that is to say, collegiality was really a thing to appreciate.

When the teachers wrote their own anecdotes during the practice, we discovered that we were not alone in puzzling about these issues. It was a relief for every participant to see that they were not doing something wrong individually, but that it was a puzzle that could be worked on together, with the management and students involved. The participant teachers pointed out that during the role-play they seemed to go back to the ages when they were students and they really wondered what the possible reasons for our puzzle could be.

Allwright (2015) argues that language learning is a social science, in which the relationship between people is important. Therefore, we need the kind of understanding that takes people properly into account, an understanding based on empathy (Allwright, 2015). Our expectation was to have an understanding of the feelings and viewpoints of students and through role-playing the students' part, we, and the participant teachers gained such insights. This is in fact what we mean by 'understanding' in EP.

# Implications

Based on the data collected from the EP research and the meetings with the management, we can infer that the following things can be taken into consideration in the future:

- Teacher education can be prioritized, especially focusing more on workshops on the implementation of the curriculum. Since the curriculum emphasizes teaching all skills, such misunderstandings can be brought out, examined and perhaps clearer group understandings can be achieved.
- Observations by teacher trainers and peer observation of teachers might change teachers' attitudes towards teaching. Teachers may be able to see ways for communicative teaching to work in practice. This might be the beginning of another puzzle.
- One of the teachers (T3) implied that students do not know how to learn a language. The teachers believed that providing learners with better study skill practices might help and guide them in the learning process. A study skills programme which increases awareness of learning styles and enhances learning might therefore be planned.
- Grammar might be included explicitly in other skill lessons' programmes instead of only in IS lessons. For instance, integrating grammar and writing and/or grammar and speaking lessons might be considered as alternatives. This might also provide students with a smooth transition from *learning* grammar to *using* it.

We realize that we might also need to review and revise the curriculum documents and see if there are any objectives or anything on the syllabi that would lead teachers or students to think this way about IS sessions.

# Conclusion

We began by puzzling. We wondered why a core lesson named Integrated Skills is perceived as a grammar and vocabulary lesson by students despite the fact that all skills are taught in an integrated way. As a first step (await-

ing the return of the learners), we tried to work towards understanding this puzzle by consulting with two groups of stakeholders: teachers and the management. Involving teachers gave us an insight into their ideas. At the same time, the participating teachers gained an insight into the students' problems and began to empathise with students. Also, we had the chance to have meetings with the management about our puzzle and match their ideas with the teachers' opinions. We came to realise how significant this is since everyone's point of view should be recognised for a better understanding of the reasons behind the puzzle.

Another point to highlight here is that although we work in coordination with all the departments at our preparatory school (such as Testing and Assessment Office, Continuous Professional Development Office and Materials Development Office), it is also crucial to work together for a better understanding on behalf of the students and their language learning while engaging in this puzzle. In this way, as Allwright and Hanks (2009) suggest, EP serves to bring together teacher and learner development.

Although we have analysed some of the reasons underlying our puzzle with teachers as well as the management, we are aware that the learners' perspective is missing in this research. We therefore plan to invite the students to puzzle about our puzzle in the next phase. After this, we will be able to see how the students' and teachers' responses match each other. The results of our EP might also be used for reference for the curricular changes that we plan to make for future academic years. All in all, it was a worthwhile experience for us to explore this puzzle. We believe that it might also be a reference point for others where similar puzzles arise, while preparing English language curricula and implementing it in various higher education institutions around the world.

# Appendix: Paragraphs of Participant Teachers

## Teacher 1

Students only focus on grammar and vocabulary parts in IS lessons because they aren't aware of the importance of other skills. Their back-

ground knowledge places an important role. The education system in Turkey is based on learning by heart. Students do not have chance to practise what they learn so they don't like speaking, reading, or writing. They don't believe English is going to be useful for them, so they don't have motivation. They believe English is only a lesson which they need to pass the prep class. As a result of this, they choose the easiest way. They only want to learn grammar parts and reject to see English as a whole.

## Teacher 2

Through this session, I have experienced being in students' shoes. What I realized was that all throughout our education life we have been learning through the same system. We have got used to teacher-centred learning methods so much that when we experience learning with a new teacher who tries to implement different methods puzzled us and surprised us. We didn't know what we were doing. Considering these, I see a need in explaining our aims, why, what and how we do it while teaching English to our students who come from high schools with traditional learning methods. I strongly believe in us being role models on guiding them on how to learn. If they know how to cope with the learning process alone, they will have more chances of being successful in the preparatory class.

## Teacher 3

To my view, our students have not experienced synthesizing the different things that they have learnt before. So, they find it difficult to transfer among lessons. I think they need some orientation on how language is learned and what strategies can be used to help them. We try to do this at the beginning of the academic year, but I believe that it's not enough. Unfortunately, they do not understand the link between the learning strategies and life-long learning just like they don't know how to transfer one skill to another lesson.

## Teacher 4

Our students mostly tend to learn with old methods. They do not feel like they can learn different things in each skill. If we could help them understand the fact that they can practise any skill in any kind of activity, we would contribute to their learning a lot. They need to know that in a listening activity, for example, it's always possible to learn or practise new grammar and vocabulary. They should understand that while role-playing, they practise grammar, listening, and speaking skills all together. Their perception about learning a language should be put in an integrated frame in their minds. Acquiring a language does not mean just listening, speaking, writing, or reading. If you literally can speak a language, that means you are able to use it in any function. Knowing the fact might help our students to be more attentive in the activities that seem far from the traditional scale. Maybe we need to remind them this idea at the very beginning.

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# 11

# Conclusion: Developing in/through Exploratory Practice

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Editing this book has provided us with the invaluable opportunity to monitor the whole process of engaging in practitioner research carried out in the Exploratory Practice (EP) framework. Often, practitioners are provided with a one-stop workshop or a series of workshops and left alone during the implementation stage, without identifying how the learning process continued or whether it even did. EP, on the other hand, emphasises sustainability and deep understanding. By inviting practitioners to write up their experiences of the EP process, we have come to see how they developed their understanding of the original puzzles and reported on the development in their beliefs and assumptions. Our mentoring experience has led

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to mutual development as well as a greater breadth and depth of understanding for all those involved in the work leading up to this volume.

In Chap. 2, Hanks and Dikilitaş provided three narratives of how they introduced Exploratory Practice to teachers, teacher educators and curriculum developers in a series of Professional Development workshops in different geographical regions. They concluded that teachers develop their understandings at their own pace and in different ways, which is in marked contrast to what is often expected in more traditionally structured training programmes. Encouraging the participants to puzzle about their language teaching (or teacher training, or curriculum development) experiences, and to engage in researching their own contexts, seemed to enhance quality of life in a variety of ways. In Chap. 3, Trotman described how, by mentoring a group of novice teacher researchers in his university, he had the opportunity to retrospectively compare action research to EP, which led him to developing a stronger understanding of what EP is. He also noted that his understandings continued to develop as he engaged in mentoring EP practitioners. Karanfil in Chap. 4 found out that he was holding assumptions about his students' reading habits. This led him to generate varied further questions. He also reported that these new questions required another engagement in EP in the future. Ergünay in Chap. 5 also mentioned his awareness of the needs of his learners regarding reading and the process of deciding to plan more extensive reading activities. Mumford in Chap. 6 described the process of engaging in EP. He not only developed further puzzles in his mind, but also reported that he could use the findings as classroom materials. This is one of the key principles of EP in that the process benefited learners as they developed confidence in making presentations. His experience was a good example of how EP could allow teachers and students to co-develop their understanding in mutually beneficial ways. In Chap. 7, Öncül and Webb probed their initial ideas about how frequent testing is perceived by students and instructors. They described this process of discovery (that frequent testing can in fact be something positive) as an excellent opportunity. This illustrated Öncül and Webb actualizing a real learning experience for themselves as practitioners.

Another learning experience was reflected by Biçer in Chap. 8. Biçer examined institutional underrepresentation of learners in the school and

developed an EP-based research plan through which student inclusion and representation could be enhanced at the academic and administrative levels. Similarly, in Chap. 9, Webb and Sarina looked into how they would be able to create opportunities to activate, guide and strengthen learners' democratic participation and competences in the classroom in two different contexts. They discussed how they managed to transcend cultural differences, which helped them to create a more dynamic and engaging learning space.

In addition to providing an opportunity to challenge assumptions, EP is a powerful tool for raising awareness in the scope of puzzles. Doğdu and Arca in Chap. 10 described how realization of what lies behind their puzzles helped them learn about the curriculum they were managing and developing. They mentioned that they could consider the emerging issues in the further planning of their curriculum, a real process of addressing in-house needs at macro as well as micro level within the university. Such local adaptations could make the programme and the teaching more relevant, thereby leading to more and better learning on the part of learners.

On the basis of these insights gained from the practitioners' accounts, we draw the following conclusions, related to the EP principles outlined in Allwright (2003), Allwright and Hanks (2009) and Hanks (2017):

1. EP evokes further questions and keeps practitioners thinking (*Trotman Chap. 3; Karanfil, Chap. 4*) in a positive state of 'being puzzled'
2. EP investigations themselves spark further puzzles (*Mumford, Chap. 6; Webb and Sarina, Chap. 9*) as research and pedagogy are integrated
3. EP helps with re-questioning of existing assumptions (*Karanfil, Chap. 4; Öncül and Webb, Chap. 7*) as understanding is put before problem-solving
4. EP helps practitioners make pedagogical decisions and plan further practices (*Ergünay Chap. 5; Doğdu and Arca, Chap. 10*)
5. EP allows for opportunities for teachers, teacher educators and students to co-develop (*Hanks and Dikilitaş, Chap. 2; Mumford, Chap. 6; Biçer, Chap. 8*) in a healthy cycle of mutual development
6. EP enables a sustainable exchange of ideas among teachers, colleagues and students (*Karanfil, Chap. 4; Ergünay Chap. 5; Webb and Sarina*

*Chap. 9*) through the processes of working together and including everyone.

EP is an exploratory process of learning and development, practitioners develop puzzles on the basis of their experiences and ask WHY questions. As exemplified above, assumptions could be could be rigorously and systematically examined, and critically analysed using data and artefacts gathered from the classroom, and so initiate another chapter in the lives of the practitioners.

It should not be thought, however, that the framework of EP principles is static. Instead, Hanks (2017) argues that this is a living structure, which can grow and adapt. We contend that the twin notions of curiosity and puzzling should also be incorporated as essential aspects of EP work. The principles, then, can be reconfigured as a web of interconnected ideas, as shown in Fig. 11.1.
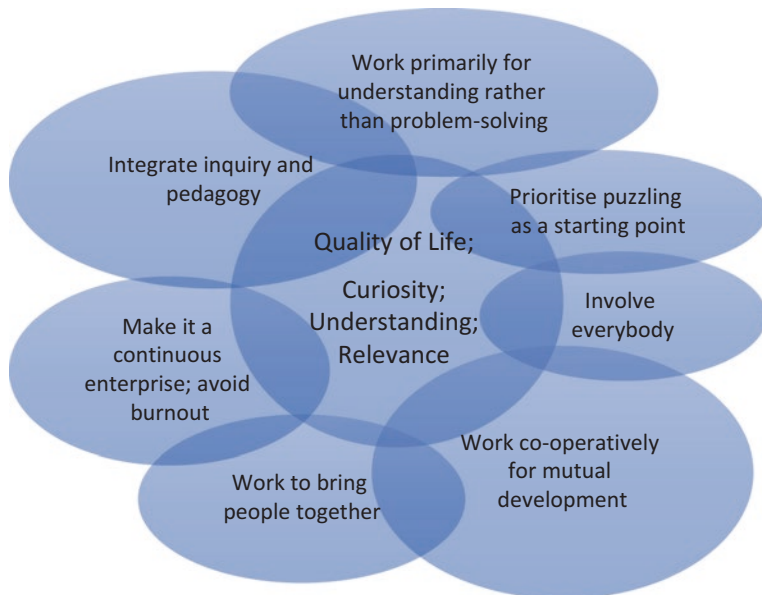


**Fig. 11.1** The Exploratory Practice principles as an interconnected whole (adapted from Hanks, 2017, p. 227)

EP, like any other form of practitioner research, provides opportunities for individually relevant modes of development initiated and sustained by teachers (see Dikilitaş, 2015a, 2015b; Wyatt, Burns, & Hanks, 2016; Wu, 2006). The developmental path occurs differently in that practitioners can proceed according to their own capacities and inclinations, as argued extensively elsewhere (for example, Breen, 2006; Dewey, 1938; Freire, 1970). Depending on their interests, histories and relevance to their specific teaching contexts, they will engage at different levels, different rates and different times, as is appropriate for their working lives.

EP development is person-specific and deeply linked to context. Free from top-down, rigidly structured training programmes, it provides space for practitioners to explore what interests them. By not imposing previously set goals and objectives but by encouraging the freedom to set their own agendas and discover for themselves, we believe that the teachers, teacher educators and curriculum developers who have contributed to this volume were able to exercise their agency in conducting research in their own settings. We observed how they unpacked their puzzles in ways that were most meaningful to them, their colleagues and their learners.

At the same time, we have developed our understandings of EP in the sense of the struggles or challenges that EP practitioners faced. We cannot really know what students think or feel until after we ask them and interpret what they have reported, and the same is true of teachers, teacher trainers, teacher educators and others.

Puzzles can be better explored and understood by the individuals who thought of them (rather than by outsiders) because they often emerge through long-held individual experiences and mental conflicts regarding classroom contexts. So, exploration is a result of the practitioner's ability to connect the dispersed pieces in the context to understand the whole picture regarding the various sources of evidence. Such a process requires the cognitive engagement of the puzzle holders in relating the evidence to their own perspectives. As Holliday (2002) argues, writing becomes an integral part of the analytic research process. This book exemplifies the efforts of teachers to generate context-specific knowledge, which informs their language teaching in ways that could not have been described or prescribed before. We present these chapters not as recipes to be replicated but rather to inspire others to begin their own explorations.

We believe that this book will add to the growing body of evidence of practitioners' researching their own practices and insights. We hope it will inspire other teachers, teacher educators and curriculum developers wishing to research their own classrooms, institutions and educational cultures in/through EP, as well as help develop practitioners' confidence to write up and publish their work, whether formally (in a book like this one) or more informally (using the creative possibilities of digital media). Above all, we believe that such publications might provide professional development sources for others who might like to work with a similar purpose, while also moving the field forward by considering the EP principled framework itself.

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