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

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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 understandings.
4. Work to bring people *together* in a common enterprise.
5. Work cooperatively for *mutual* development.

The 'how' issues

6. Make it a *continuous* enterprise.
7. *Minimise the burden* by integrating the work for understanding into normal pedagogic practice.

(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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