

# Exploratory Practice: Uses and Implications

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## Abstract

*The current paper aims to examine Exploratory Practice as a form of practitioner research. It highlights the usefulness of EP for practitioner as well as learners. Adopting an explanatory approach the research discusses the main concepts and methods employed in EP. Informed by literature review the paper attempts to suggest ways in which EP could be conducted as a well established methodology for investigating phenomenon related with teaching and learning. From the statement and identification of puzzle to monitoring and data collection a step by step analysis, the paper studies the various stages of EP and studies their implications.*

**Keywords:** EP, practitioner research, methods, implications.

## Introduction

Today when English has become a global medium of communication and access to information, English Language teaching is considered a field worth exploring. This paper aims to discuss Exploratory Practice (EP), which is a kind of practitioner research. Developments in EP have mainly taken place over the past 15 years .It is a kind of practitioner research aimed at enhancing the worth of language education within the classrooms. Basically EP started as a reaction to both academics oriented research and Action, first as a general framework of rules and regulations not as a set of actual classroom practices. Since principles have a global bearing ,whereas classroom practices are essentially local in their nature ,so the principles were coming g from years of experience and expertise of professionals of the field of education and were discussed with a global perspective.

## Background of the Study:

EP has been developed by Dick Allwright and his collaborators who were situated mainly in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, (Allwright & Lenzuen, 1997).They proposed and explored this framework in a series of research papers which were regularly published in the journal *Language Teaching Research* (Allwright, 2003) during the last ten years or so. The basic principles of EP were recurrently reviewed and altered in various articles written by Allwright since the early 1990s. EP was basically designed as an approach for the professional development of teachers who could not spare time for classroom research.

The group of scholars who initiated this research felt over the past few years that collaborative learner involvement is a must for EP to be successful because *teacher* development cannot be separated from *learners'* growth. Works such as *The Developing Language Learner* by Allwright & Hanks (2009), conceptualize language learners as key elements in exploration of classroom practices and environment. Thus, EP has contributed immensely towards improving learner education as well. The significant works in this regard are of Kohonen (2001), research on *learner agency* (Mercer, 2011), and research on *learner self-regulation* by Zimmerman (2002).

Exploratory Practice (EP) supports a standard approach to joining together practice pedagogy and research in the language classrooms (Allwright, 1993, 2001, 2005; Gieve & Miller, 2006). It presents a lot of ways in which practitioners may examine their own learning and teaching experiences, position their agendas and propagate their conclusions to other practitioners from the same field. (Allwright & Hanks, 2009).

### **1.1 Key Concepts and Assumptions:**

Allwright (2005) defines EP as,

*'Exploratory Practice (EP) is an indefinitely sustainable way for classroom language teachers and learners, while getting on with their own learning and teaching, to develop their own understandings of life in the language classroom'*(Allwright 2005, p.361).

To set the agenda we must recognize that EP is a form of teacher development and can therefore, be compared to other forms of practitioner developments such as *reflective practice* (Farrell, 2007), *Action Research* (Wallace, 1997) or *lesson study* (*Lesson Study UK*, online). However, EP has well defined distinct roles to perform. It is dedicated to exploring what happens within the classrooms. Instead of focusing on teacher *self-awareness*, *problem solving* or *technical efficiency*, EP is interested in '*puzzles*' and whether they can or cannot be solved within the context of language classrooms. It strives to collect shared understandings regarding what forms a better classrooms environment and experience. To an EP practitioner understanding the phenomenon comes. Perception of problem will ultimately lead to a solution and improved practices as well. It's not important whether the puzzle represents a problem or an issue that needs to be resolved. However an acknowledgement of the problem will certainly need to a better understanding of it and will reduce the stress level or anxiety faced by both practitioners and learners.

Specifically EP is focused on improving the quality of language teaching at universities. Its fundamentals are:

- 1) To improve the quality of teaching learning environment before addressing the concerns for academic efficacy.
- 2) It focuses not on finding new techniques of teaching rather on increasing our awareness of the standard of teaching and learning.
- 3) It considers understanding a social act and teaching learning is taken to be shared quest for knowledge which both teachers and learners can develop together.

### **2.1 Working for Understanding: Explained**

Allwright, who has been the central figure in developing EP, defines how it's different from other teacher development approaches and why it's important to develop understanding of teaching learning environment.

*'We have been seduced by the prevailing 'wisdom' that participant research must essentially aim to improve the efficiency of [professional practice], typically by isolating practical problems and solving them one by one. We have largely accepted that such 'improvement' will be best achieved by the practitioners themselves, addressing their classroom problems as mainly technical ones, to be solved by the development of 'better' teaching techniques'*(Allwright,2003,p.113-114).

Allwright is against the notion practitioner research which emphasizes on the social aspects of learning and increasing awareness of all the participants taking part in the action. Allwright (2003) thinks:

*'Working for understanding life in the classroom will provide a good foundation for helping teachers and learners make their time together 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).*

### **3.1 How to do EP:**

EP is to be done in four steps, however these are not strict prescriptions rather suggestions for getting started:

#### **3.1.1 Puzzle:**

The first step is to identify a puzzle; it means recognizing a research question to be solved. For this first the peculiar nature of the puzzle is to be identified, and then the researcher refines his thinking about the puzzle and focuses on a particular topic related with the puzzle area.

#### **3.1.2 Method:**

Select a suitable method to solve the puzzle .i.e. role-play, classroom discussions, group activities etc. The researcher must adopt the method he/she finds appropriate for his classroom and adopt it as a data collection tool.

#### **3.1.3 Implications:**

The last step involves interpretation of the data collected. The researcher must reflect on the findings and outcomes of his research and identify their implications within his own classroom context. These findings will aid the researcher in planning his classroom procedures for future.

The procedures mentioned above do not follow a chronological order and often take place concurrently. Basically what it involves is taking steps towards understanding classroom issues to consciousness and thinking about other practitioners in terms of what they experience in their classrooms. It involves deep reflection on what goes on within the class. In the end this process leads one to plan effective pedagogic procedures for more effective teaching. On the other hand, EP also involves understanding the content involved in the process of teaching. This includes communicating ones personal insights into teaching, thinking about what are the common conceptions of *change* and sharing collective experiences for improving the process.

### **4.1 Significance: Why EP?**

EP does not declare that it aims to find *generalizable truth*; it rather tries to find *localized understandings*. It is not a one sided process in which academics are involved in fact finding; it is a two way process in which both learners and teachers work collaboratively to have improved understandings of the teaching learning process. In this way EP as much aims at learner development as at teacher development.

EP concentrates on classroom *life*. The quality of classroom practices relies on what the individual participants bring to the class room in terms of their personality and actions; that is who they are and what they do in the classroom. This on the whole forms a communal experience of learning and become a lived experience. EP believes that classroom practices are highly influenced by what goes on outside the class room; that is how one lives as a teacher and learner (Gieve & Miller, 2006). The chief aim of EP thus is to improve the learning environment and make it more conducive to learning through collaborative engagement. EP is an ongoing and emerging process which does not stop while the researcher is evaluating the process of teaching and learning. It makes use of classroom activities for understanding the learning that takes place inside the classroom.

Briefly, the s core principles of EP are as under (Allwright & Hanks, 2009, pp149-154),

1. Center of attention is quality *of life* as a starting point for research.
2. Efforts to *understand learning* prior to bringing about changes in it.
3. Involvement of everyone as practitioners expanding their understandings about classroom practices.
4. To join practitioners together Work to bring people *together* in a collective endeavor.
5. Cooperate for *mutual development*.
6. To turn teaching into a *sustainable enterprise*.
7. *Integrate* the research into actual practices to reduce the weight.

## 5.1 How to Conduct EP:

*'Eight basic steps are involved in Exploratory Practice. The first three cover the initial identification of a 'puzzle area', then a concerted attempt, using specific questioning procedures, to reach an understanding of it through thought and discussion, followed by a formulation of the understanding you have reached so far.... The fourth and fifth steps involve selecting and adapting the appropriate classroom procedures to investigate it further.... The sixth step is to actually conduct the investigation in class, and the seventh is the crucial step of analysing and interpreting the outcomes of the investigation....Once this has been done then the eighth step is to decide on the implications of your new level of understanding and to plan accordingly'*

(Allwright & Lenzuen, 1997, p.74).

### 5.1.1 Main Assumptions:

What is important to note is that the teacher /practitioner must understand the phenomena before investigating it .He /she might discover that there is no need for a change in the existing system. All the while when the teacher is exploring issues they should not lose focus on their main job that is teaching itself. The practitioner must investigate or initiate a puzzle that he/she is truly interested in; in this way it will sustain the interest of the teachers involved. The practitioners must try to integrate their research into their practical life so that it becomes a part of their routine they not feel over burdened by the work.

The main assumption underlying EP is that pedagogy and research should be integrated so that activities can be used as tools for investigation.

Within this construct, practitioners can adopt and even adept already known exercises for data collection to solve the puzzle.

Another important belief of EP is that only those investigations can lead to understanding which is relevant to both teachers as well as learners. And that this whole procedure should be sustainable for a longer period of time.

## **6.1 Exploratory Practice as a Proper Methodology:**

Allwright (2001) proposes EP as a proper form of teacher development. Allwright (2001) suggests '*think globally*' and '*act locally*', as a rule for applying EP as a suitable methodology for teacher development. It simply means to think free of context about the implications of the classroom practices, the ongoing research and their results in a global scenario. It means that though our practice is context bound, our principles should rather be free from them. Since research should aim at situational understanding, EP is more suitable than Action Research as Action Research aims at finding practical solutions to practical issues (Nunan, 1989).

### **6.1.1 New Role for Academicians and Learners:**

EP views the researcher in a new role as a consultant rather than a director. In this new role teachers are expected to guide classroom investigations and proceedings. This will allow them enough freedom to have their own research agendas as well, while at the same time enable them to lend a helping hand to other researchers in the same field. On the other hand, the learners also have their part to play in the research process. They can contribute to the overall investigation process and at the same time can have their own agendas and interests in the classroom environment as well. Thus, EP views language teachers and learners as making sense of the process of teaching and learning in the classrooms.

From the above theoretical foundations EP developed into a practical set of procedures for research, some of the steps involved in the application of EP to classroom situations are given below:

### **6.1.2 Identifying a Puzzle:**

Allwright points out:

*'I advocate working with 'puzzles', rather than problems, partly to avoid the negative connotations of 'problem' (which may be seen as an admission of incompetence), and partly to involve areas of learning-teaching life that are not obviously 'problematic', but which we might well want to try to understand better'* (Allwright, 2003, p.117).

It consists of identifying an issue that is puzzling the researcher in his teaching learning context. The term puzzle means something which needs investigation but is worthy of use. It teaches the practitioners the how approach instead of a why approach ; which means turning their difficult situations into valuable insights rather than considering them problems to do away with . The entire focus of the procedure is on understanding not eradicating a problem.

### **6.1.3 Reflection upon the Puzzle:**

*Reflecting* means *puzzling* about the issue (Hanks, 1998, 1999). A preferred case in this regard is of the *Classroom Interaction* group of the English Language Teaching Community in Bangalore, India, which researched their perceived problem of handling large classes (Naidu et al, 1992). Following some initial reflections upon the issue the teachers decided to visit each others' class rooms for a better understanding of the problem. However, after these deliberations they decided that large classes was not their problem, they arrived at the issue of *heterogeneity*, which they wanted to maintain not eliminate from their classrooms. This new perceptions enhanced their awareness of using so many different people in their classrooms as a source of joy rather than trouble.

### **6.1.4 Monitoring:**

Monitoring means gathering data that occurs naturally about the puzzle. This is an important stage if the practitioner is not yet sure about the level of his understanding about the puzzle, if he is confident about his understanding then he can jump to the next stage below. Monitoring in EP stands for devoting special attention to the puzzle at hand. All experienced teachers are used to monitoring however; very few can claim competence in the area. One way of monitoring is to keep notes of classroom activities like group discussions to monitor the learners' progress.

### **6.1.5 Taking Direct Action for Data Collection:**

The practitioner can resort to collecting data by employing standard pedagogic activities not by academic ones. The classroom activities taking place inside the classroom can be very useful potential data collection tools for EP. If one is puzzled by the low motivation rate of learners in the class, then giving them a group discussion to engage in talking about their own motivation can lend useful data for understanding the issue at hand. In such a process the learners themselves might also develop understanding of their motivation. In short, EP makes use of everyday routine activities to generate data and doesn't need any specific techniques for the purpose.

### **6.1.6 Considering the Outcomes and Implications:**

This leads one to the decision making stage. It involves analysis and interpretation of the available data. The practitioner must be on the guard against complacency at the level, as it can be misleading. The best way to avoid it is to involve other teachers/ colleagues in the process for self correction. It would also be useful to go back to stage one at this point and analyze the whole process once again for error correction. A reflection on the various stages of the data collection will eliminate error and help the practitioner maintain a sound judgment.

### **6.1.7 Moving On:**

Satisfied with the above mentioned stages the researcher can move on with his practice. One realization can be that the findings of the researcher can satisfactory and what he has found is enough in itself. This in itself shows an improvement upon the 'quality of life' of the classroom, which is the desired

outcome of the whole process of EP. On the other hand, it's also possible that one feels dissatisfied with the results and engages in more research oriented activities for improvement. The dissatisfaction with the state of affairs may lead the researcher to protest for change. This will in any case lead the researcher to an efficient solution to his puzzle.

## **7.1 Exploratory Practice for My Situation:**

I have been quite puzzled by lack of response by my second year students of English department, who I teach language (speaking skills), this puzzle made me ponder over the situation and I decided to use it as a puzzle for my exploratory research. For data collection I asked students to submit their unsigned feedback on my performance and their experiences of the ongoing semester. Majority of students wrote that they were not confident enough to speak, some also commented that due to lack of eye contact with the teacher they were discouraged to speak, some of them thought that teachers preferred active students and gave little attention to hear the views of the others. Two students believed that teachers had favorite students who they preferred to the rest during classroom discussions.

When I reflected back on the whole situation I realized that the large size of the class and unavailability of electricity (because of which mike could not be used) were demoralizing me. My throat was strained and I was often exhausted and anxious about the situation. Perhaps that's why I was focusing on some students and ignoring others unintentionally. I also realized there were internal issues like jealousy among the students because of which some were hyper active and others were reluctant to participate in the sessions.

### **7.1.1 Some Reflections:**

I was amazed when some of my students came to my office to discuss their personal issues that had to do with the jealousy and competition among a group of girls and one boy. The boy felt that the group of girls was favored by teachers and they were teasing him during lectures. I intervened and favorably solved the issue by convincing both parties that they were fellow friends and shared the same anxieties regarding studies. I also felt that students if pressed hard to speak in the class, start bunking the classes and end up failing the course.

### **7.1.2 Implications:**

I realize that feedback is an effective tool for creating understanding among not just teachers and learners but among learners themselves as well. It not just helps one explore the issues at hand but also helps one understand the very process of teaching learning as well. It involves both teachers and students in exploring classroom scenario and increasing awareness of what happens in the classroom and what causes it to happen.

## **Conclusion:**

The principles mentioned in the paper inform one about the recent practices in EP however, they are all subject to changes within the contexts in which they are performed. EP offers a set of practical investigative principles that are adaptable to any context. Since EP involves making use of actual classroom activities for creating understanding of teaching processes, it's one of the most convenient methods of research. EP may not result in mutual

understanding of teachers and students, however, it shows that both parties are involved in creating understanding of the activities they are involved in. It increases mutual co operation and results in reduced anxiety levels in the classrooms.

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