Developing Principles for Practitioner Research: The Case of Exploratory Practice

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Exploratory Practice (EP) has been developed over the last 15 or so years as an approach to practitioner research that is devoted to understanding the quality of language classroom life. It started in reaction both to academic classroom research and to Action Research, the practitioner research model most in vogue at that time in our field. At first looking for an alternative to current academic classroom research practices on largely ethical grounds, EP developed over time primarily as a set of principles rather than as a set of classroom practices. The emphasis on principles relates to their potentially global reach, whereas emergent practices seemed to be essentially local in nature. Of course, the principles were coming from the experience of years of local action, endlessly and intensively discussed in global terms. These principles address (more or less implicitly) the issues at the heart of this special issue of The Modern Language Journal: the technical, epistemological, and ethical dimensions of research on second language learning. In this article, I will therefore set out the principles of EP in direct relationship to these 3 dimensions. For EP, the ethical and epistemological dimensions are the most critical, with the emphasis on understanding rather than problem-solving. I find the common emphases on practical problem-solving and making measurable improvements in student achievement not only unhelpfully shortsighted but also potentially counterproductive. I argue instead for a return to the traditional research aim of understanding, and for focusing our work for understanding on quality of life (rather than quality of output) as the ultimate value. This focus also prompts us to address the ethical issue of the researcher–researched relationship, and to insist that the learners, as well as the teachers, should be seen as classroom practitioners developing their own understandings of language classroom life.

For this special issue of The Modern Language Journal, Ortega offers a framework of the technical, epistemological, and ethical perspectives on research in the field of language teaching and second language acquisition (SLA). I have found these three perspectives especially useful to me when trying to tell the story of the development of the principles of Exploratory Practice (EP). An earlier account of this development (Allwright, 2003), though dealing with some of the substantive issues presented in this article, sorely lacked this illuminating framework. I am therefore very pleased to have the opportunity to present EP here in this new light.


As I now see it, the story of EP is a story of how my disillusionment at the beginning of the 1990s with an overwhelmingly technicist approach to research by teachers in their own classrooms led first to a search for ethical guidelines, with EP becoming defined by a set of design criteria. Somewhat against our better judgment, a temporary reversion to a technicist approach followed quite swiftly, with EP restated as a set of eight practical steps, which at the time appeared necessary in order to help others do their research “in the EP way.” After several years of more or less allowing this technicist approach to dominate how we represented our ideas, we eventually became extremely dissatisfied with this position. So, at about the turn of this century, we returned to our original and primary concern for what we were trying to achieve ethically. Most recently, we added to
our work what now appears to me to be a belated concern for the complex epistemological implications of what we were advocating. We did not, however, see epistemological implications as referring principally to the familiar, but not necessarily productive, debates between ways of knowing or accumulating knowledge, or both (the so-called paradigm wars; see Ortega, this issue). Instead we thought of these implications much more in terms of the relationship between knowledge and life (van Manen, 1995), what it means to the life of a person to "know" something. This question is at the heart of practitioner research, that is, research generated by practitioners working to understand their own practices and their own lives (see Zeichner & Noffke, 2001).

And so EP is now cast in terms of a set of ethically and epistemologically motivated principles for practitioner research. Along the lines of the Friends of the Earth slogan "Think globally, act locally," researchers in EP offer these principles as worthy of serious consideration in all contexts, wherever practitioner research itself would be appropriate.

DISILLUSIONMENT WITH TECHNICIST RESEARCH LEADS TO EXPLORATORY PRACTICE

Back in the late 1980s, I was a classroom researcher who felt closer to the field of SLA than to the field of teacher development. It was in this spirit that I embarked upon the guide to classroom research that was eventually published with Kathleen Bailey as co-author (Allwright & Bailey, 1991). We thought it was a good idea to help teachers become their own classroom researchers, by trying to help them learn the research procedures we used ourselves. At the time, classroom research was for me a straightforward technology for producing understanding about classroom language and teaching. I was unconcerned about the epistemological aspect of what I was doing, simply accepting that it was my job as an academic researcher to try to produce understandings that (a) could be turned into useful advice for teachers, and (b) could perhaps eventually contribute to "grand theory." I was not unconcerned about the ethical aspects of what I was doing, but had a limited view of the ethical dimension of classroom research, confining it to the classical issues of informed consent, anonymity, confidentiality, and so on. But then two things happened that eventually caused me to rethink everything, and so to move from academic to practitioner research, and to prioritize both ethical and epistemological concerns over technical issues. The first was a series of visits to Brazil, and the second an insightful book review.

Establishing Classroom Research in Rio de Janeiro, and Then Meeting Local Realities

In the mid- to late-1980s, I was invited to go to Brazil to talk to people at the headquarters of the Rio de Janeiro Cultura Inglesa (a major non-profit language school) about helping them raise their research profile. As an already highly appreciated language school, they thought it would be appropriate for them to be involved institutionally as a center of excellence for research as well as for teaching. I was invited because my own research at that time was seen to bridge the gap between SLA studies and language classroom research (Allwright, 1984a, 1984b). A classroom-based SLA research project was duly set up and set in motion.

I returned at the beginning of the 1990s to help the project team and the whole Cultura Inglesa in Rio by teaching classroom research skills to headquarters and teaching staff. It was at this time that I began to have serious doubts about the wisdom of what I had helped set up in Rio. The classroom-based SLA research project was clearly taking up far too much staff time to be worth pursuing, and it was also requiring staff to learn research skills that were not likely to be helpful in their lives as teachers. So it was heavily parasitic upon their normal working lives, rather than supportive of them, or integrated into them. To make matters worse, my weekly workshop on classroom research skills (a highly technicist enterprise that put how to do research above all else) was spreading this academic view of research and asking teachers, outside the official research project, to add a time commitment and the obligation of learning academic research skills to their already extremely busy professional lives.

Fortunately, I was at this time also meeting teachers in various branches of the Cultura Inglesa around Rio. These encounters reinforced my perception of teachers as extremely dedicated professionals who were already putting as much into their work as anyone could reasonably expect of them. And they were very tired. I soon formed the opinion that what they needed from me was not a new set of doubtfully usable academic research skills, but some recognition of how close they were to burnout (for an early discussion of burnout in the second language [12] field, see Grosse, 1982/1985), and, if possible, some help
in getting back their sense of “having a life” in the language classroom.

Why Action Research Did Not Represent a Viable Alternative

It would be reasonable to object that, at that time, Action Research surely offered a practically viable and professionally stimulating alternative to my academic research skills, particularly in view of the promise of such titles as “Becoming Critical: Education, Knowledge and Action Research” (Carr & Kemmis, 1986). But when I looked at what Action Research had to offer in practice (see, e.g., Nunan, 1989), it seemed to me that adopting Action Research as the model for classroom research would only have given a new name to what was being asked of teachers. It simply repeated the demand on them to develop research skills taken from the academic repertoire and to run classroom research projects that would be essentially parasitical on both their normal working lives as teachers and the lives of their learners. Looking at Action Research in action in various parts of the world at that time, it seemed to me it had the same potential to lead to burnout as my academic model of research. More particularly, it appeared to be something that could be fitted into an inservice teacher development course (see Crookes, this issue), where good support was available, and be used as the framework for a final project. This project would be done with great enthusiasm and at a level of energy expenditure that it would not be possible to repeat after the course was over and the teacher was back in the classroom full-time. So a teacher might be expected to be burned out as far as classroom research was concerned, after a first encounter with it. (For much more recent, and more positive, accounts of what Action Research can mean in the lives of teachers, see Burns, 1999; and Edge, 2001.)

This pessimistic view was reinforced when I read a book review (the exact reference for which, unfortunately, has since escaped my memory) that noted with regret that Action Research was so hugely demanding on teachers that it would be realistic only if each teacher was working within the special circumstances of a teacher development course, and therefore with the support of an academic supervisor and with access to a good academic library. This review prompted me to try to rescue the book I was at that time finishing with Kathleen Bailey (Allwright & Bailey, 1991), by writing an epilogue that called for a new look at the whole situation of the relationship between academic researchers like me and classroom teachers, and that proposed the term exploratory teaching for what I had in mind.

Putting It All Together and Drawing the Consequences

All this doubt about the wisdom of what I was doing in Rio, and what I was expecting others to do, needed a fully considered response. By training teachers in research skills, I had intended to enable them to become practitioner researchers of their own classroom practices. But I soon realized that the technicist approach I had so happily fallen into myself was a major part of the problem. Hiding behind their technical expertise, academic researchers like me had typically spoiled their relationships with teachers (and learners) and, in so doing, given research a bad name. And yet now teachers were being expected to add such technical research skills to their own repertoires. Moving to Action Research was not going to help, because it also seemed stuck in an unhelpful technicist framework, in spite of its initial far broader and more radical intentions (see again Carr & Kemmis, 1986, especially chapter 6, “Towards a Critical Educational Science”).

THE DEVELOPMENT OF DESIGN CRITERIA

From my own perspective as an academic researcher, I needed to go back to the beginning, and to work out just what it was I was trying to achieve in this situation in Brazil, and, if possible, find a way of moving in the desirable direction. This thinking led me to draw up a list of design criteria for integrating research into pedagogy. Appendix A is an extensive (but slightly edited) extract from my paper for the 1992 Teachers Develop Teachers Research meeting at Aston University, England (Allwright, 1992, pp. 8–123), which details these criteria. I think it is appropriate, 12 years later, to read this list as essentially and broadly ethical in intention. It marks an attempt to redress the balance after years of well-intentioned mistakes. It leaves the technical questions about how to meet the criteria untouched, though, and says nothing about epistemology unless we are willing to see already in this list a concern for the practitioners—teachers as well as learners—to develop directly from being involved in the research work, rather than having to wait for a third-person (academic) researcher to produce a report.
In large part, then, EP started as an attempt to overcome what we saw as the mistakes of the past. We were confident that research could make a useful contribution to the lives of teachers and their learners, as long as it stopped aping academic practices, and as long as academic researchers like me rethought our role very seriously. It occurred to us at the time, though, that we were not really trying to get research done in the classroom. We were trying to get pedagogy done in a way that incorporated a research perspective, and which therefore fostered understanding. This goal contrasted with academic research and Action Research, both of which seemed likely to result in the prioritization of research itself and to risk losing sight of underlying ultimate purposes.

So we did not start with practitioner research as our conscious aim, but we were already pointing clearly that way. We started with a perception that burnout, incipient or current, was probably the key factor in the lives of the teachers. We also started with a perception that neither academic research nor Action Research offered satisfactory ways forward for these teachers. Nor did they seem to offer a satisfactory view of learners as practitioners in their own right, a view represented in three of the four aims listed in Appendix A, but still not represented in much more recent published presentations of Action Research, which emphasize collaborative work between teachers (see Burns, 1999; Beaumont & O’Brien, 2000). Very early on, then, we realized we were dealing with teachers’ (and learners’) teaching and learning lives, within which technical teaching problems were the least of anybody’s worries.

It was in terms of these design criteria that in the early 1990s we ran workshops and presented posters at a variety of regional, national, and international conferences. The criteria gave us plenty to talk about, and they clearly relegated to a lowly place all technical questions about how to work with them. We were now firmly in ethical territory, trying to combat years of severe damage caused by academic researchers in their relationships with teachers and learners.

THE REGRETTABLE RETURN TO A TECHNICIST PERSPECTIVE

Although we were happy to operate at the level of design criteria, we were, at the same time, under considerable pressure to produce a list of practical steps that could be adopted by anyone wanting to work within the framework of our criteria. In particular, teachers running workshops for other teachers wanted such a list. We had, in fact, in our own practical experience, been working with a list in mind, even if we did not want to use it to represent EP itself. And so we relented, somewhat against our better judgment, conscious that what made sense as practical steps in one educational setting would not necessarily work elsewhere. Already in 1992, then, we, like Action Research (see Nunan, 1989), had our list of eight steps created mostly from experience in Rio de Janeiro. Some of them related clearly to the ethical concerns expressed in our list of design criteria. Appendix B presents a slightly edited but still extensive extract from the same 1992 (pp. 15–19) Lancaster Working Paper, which sets out our view at that time of EP as a set of practical steps.

It is easy to see that this list of practical steps was, at best, an attempt to provide a technical solution to what was essentially a set of ethical problems. We clearly hoped, for example, that working with familiar pedagogic activities as investigative tools would radically ease the time-commitment burden and not be as unreasonably demanding on teachers (or on their learners) as the academic or the Action Research models of research seemed to us to be. But our faith in a technical solution to an ethical problem was bound to be short-lived.

DISILLUSIONMENT WITH TECHNICISM AGAIN, AND RETHINKING PRACTITIONER RESEARCH

Thinking Our Way Back out of Technicism

Much as we had feared, our eight steps soon dominated much of our presentational work about EP around the world. Two developments, one practical and the other more theoretical, pushed us to change our position. On the practical front, we needed to acknowledge the important and obvious fact that the teachers who were actually operating as EP groups in Rio, and who therefore were most instrumental in developing the notion of EP itself, in practice did not actually need a list of steps at all.2 Instead, they were inventing their methodology in direct relationship to trying to respect the intentions that lay behind our original design criteria. On the theoretical front, we were spending a lot of our own reflection time thinking about the principles of what we were doing and making connections with other strands of thought. I, in particular, realized that I had started off seeing everything from my perspective as an academic researcher trying to make amends for my part of the profession. That
approach had worked well for me as long as I was presenting my ideas to fellow academic researchers, but it was not sensible for presenting EP to the people I really wanted EP to reach—language teachers and their learners.

During this period, several of my doctoral students in Lancaster were working along philosophical as well as pedagogic lines, and looking to see where EP might fit. Wu (2002), for example, was exploring both Western and Chinese philosophies and discovering echoes of Taoism in what we were trying to do. Perpignan (2001) was using the framework to guide her study of her own written feedback to a writing class in Israel. And Miller (2001) was exploring the use of EP thinking as a framework for her study of two one-to-one professional development relationships in her workplace. I myself became involved, as external examiner, in EP-based doctoral research projects outside Lancaster (see, e.g., Gunn, 2001; Lamie, 2001; and Szesztay, 2001), which, of course, pushed my thinking. I also supervised a good number of master’s theses, mostly completed in Hong Kong, that further stretched the thinking we were doing (see Chan, 2002; Chen, 2002; Cheng, 2002; Chuk, 2002; Hanks, 1998; Ho, 2002; Le, 2002, and Lee, 2002). In addition, we formed the Exploratory Practice Centre at Lancaster University, and started a series of EP Events to consider major issues in the field. It did not take long for us to see that EP was not well served by being presented, and thus apparently defined, in terms of context-specific practical steps. Thinking in terms of such practical steps had come from the very technicist tradition that we were trying so hard to leave behind. We wanted instead to represent EP in terms of global principles (see Allwright, 2003).

Before introducing the principles, I need to develop another idea that came through to us at that time. We had rejected Action Research as a form of practitioner research because it seemed to be bound to disappoint, simply because of its technicist emphasis in practice. But we had not rejected practitioner research itself. We liked the fundamental idea that research about practice could perhaps be most sensibly conducted by practitioners themselves working to understand their own practices. What we needed was a non-technicist view of practitioner research, a framework that addressed fundamental issues involved in the conception of practitioners researching their own practices. It would then be possible to see EP as a form of rethought practitioner research. This objective gave us a new and much broader viewpoint on our work.

The Nature of Practitioner Research, from Our Point of View

Practitioner Research Is Not a Research Method. The term practitioner research does not, for us, describe a research method. Instead it describes crucially a relationship of identity between the people being investigated and the people doing the investigation. That relationship has an important influence on the methodology of any practitioner research investigation, but that fact in itself does not mean that the case for practitioner research can be argued in methodological terms. Any particular practitioner research investigation may be nullified by a poor choice of method, of course, but the choice of practitioner research as an approach to investigation cannot be justified in itself in methodological (technicist) terms. The justification for the adoption of practitioner research as a framework needs to come from elsewhere, from epistemological and ethical perspectives on research. But I should perhaps say more here about the general implications of the relationship of identity between researcher and researched.

Practitioner Research Is a “First Person Plural” Notion. Because humans do not typically operate in total isolation from each other, this relationship of identity means fundamentally that practitioner research is necessarily a first person notion, and a first person plural one at that. Practitioner research must therefore surely mean: “We research our practice” (to be compared with the academic researcher’s “/ research your teaching,” and with the Action Researcher’s “/ research my teaching”). Ethically, this perspective requires a relationship of trust between practitioners (Perpignan, 2001, 2003), and a relationship of collegiality and mutuality (as included in EP’s first set of design criteria in Appendix A). In the absence of trust, it implies at least an attempt to understand why trust is not to be found in the situation under investigation. Ethically it also implies that all persons involved in the practice (the community of practice, in the sense of Lave & Wenger, 1991) have the right to develop their own understandings, and to expect others to help them in this, not to get in their way.

Practitioner Research Must Be about the Lives of the Practitioners. Practitioner research must concern itself with the nature of the lives that people are living together in the practice under investigation. Being forced in this way to deal with the ethical aspects of investigation takes us far from the traditional notion of research by a third party,
where ethical considerations did not go far beyond notions such as anonymity. It may also take us toward rehabilitating the notion of research as a supportive rather than as a parasitic activity. In epistemological terms, however, being forced to deal with the nature of the lives that people are living together gives us our ultimate object of inquiry. Under the technicist framework, we would be looking at technical problems and how to solve them by a technical “fix.” Our view of practitioner research, however, helps us to see how, even if situations present themselves as practically problematic and requiring a practical solution, closer inspection typically reveals a need to deal with quality of life issues. This need itself necessitates going below the level of surface technical issues. For example, in her Lancaster doctoral research project, Perpignan (2001, 2003) started by looking for more effective ways of providing written feedback on student writing. She ended up concluding that it was not the technical nature of the written feedback that mattered if learners were to be helped, but the nature of the human relationship between teacher and learner in terms of interpersonal trust. Her work echoes the unpublished work of Blackler and Kennedy (for background see Blackler, 1995) in the field of National Health Service management in the United Kingdom, where what was presented to them as a problem of improving efficiency at the highest level of management soon turned into an investigation of how top National Health Service CEOs could be helped to regain a sense of “having a life.” It also echoes our common experience working within the framework of EP. “Problems” worth investigating soon turn up aspects of classroom life that themselves need greater understanding, and whose understanding leads to a more satisfactory situation without necessitating any other “solution.”

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. We had been conscious of this need for several years and had seen it as an important distinguishing feature of EP (especially in distinguishing EP from Action Research; see also Allwright, 2001, for an extended, though rather narrowly technicist, discussion of EP in relation to Action Research). However, it had not always figured in our list of design criteria, and it had never been represented transparently in our practical steps. So we made the epistemological issue of understanding a matter of first principle for EP. For a while, we put it right at the top of our priorities, until we came to realize that understanding was not necessarily a good in itself. It needed to be attached to a suitable target, which for us was the nature of life in the language classroom for teachers and learners. We knew we could not expect to be able ever to solve the riddle of knowing exactly what we meant by understanding, but we knew we meant something more than knowledge (echoing the traditional discussions about the distinction between technical and practical knowledge going back to Aristotle; see Erhart, 1994). In this connection, we saw parallels with the distinction to be made between skills, knowledge, and understanding in the field of teacher development, where the notion of development is most strongly associated with understanding (see Allwright, 1998).

Practitioner Research Must Raise the Issue of Agency. Because it imposes a relationship of identity between researcher and practitioner, practitioner research can be seen to offer a new perspective on the relationship between those who get understanding, and those who try to use it. Instead of the traditional third-party research expectation that the researcher must first get an understanding by investigating others and then pass that understanding on to others and any like them in some way, in practitioner research we now have a proposal that “cuts out the middle man.” Before we accept such a proposal, however, it may be useful to look again at the traditional way and at some of the epistemological implications of our alternative proposal.

Two Routes to Understanding: Upwards and Downwards

Looking Upwards. In the traditional academic view of research, it is accepted that it is largely up to researchers to try to get understanding and then to try to pass it “down” to people who can use it. Typically passing it down has been a major practical problem for researchers, but ultimately they have been aiming determinedly upwards, towards the highest levels of intellectual scientific understanding. The closer they get to the “top” (the theory of everything), the simpler are the statements they make, such as $E = mc^2$. And although such statements might sound good for communication to others, in practice they turn out to be doubly problematic. First, the simplicity of the statement in terms of the number of its elements is truly deceptive, because it covers huge complexity. Second, such statements are not practically useful.
because they do not permit us to make precise predictions about what will happen in the real world we are all trying to live in.

*Looking Downwards.* Within the general framework of EP we are now exploring the implications of looking the other way for useful understandings—downwards. For us, this direction of exploration means looking for deep human understandings rather than high-level scientific ones. This approach is also problematic, of course, but it does promise to offer some advantages. It is problematic because, at the deepest level of understanding of our human affairs that we can reach, we seem to get to a level of understanding that is literally "too deep for words." This level of understanding is no more helpful for practical communication than the scientists' amazingly cryptic and simultaneously opaque statements of theory. Nonetheless, it does offer a big advantage, if we can work out how best to harness it.

**Our Deepest Human Understandings Can Be Lived, Even If They Cannot Be Described.** People who have a deep understanding of their own human situation may not be able to talk usefully about their understanding. Polanyi (1967) coined the term the tacit dimension to capture this aspect of human experience. It is commonplace, for example, to acknowledge the existence of brilliant teachers whose work suggests a deep understanding of pedagogy but who have nothing to say about it when they are asked why they are so good. But their lack of explanation does not mean that their understanding must go to waste. First, they can and do live their understandings on a daily basis, which is of immediate benefit to those around them. Sometimes it seems that people in close contact with such wise people (as their students perhaps) can find ways to learn from them and subsequently, to behave with apparent wisdom themselves.

*Developing More or Less Deep Understandings.* Far more promising, I imagine, is the implication that the deepest understandings are largely incommunicable, but directly usable by those who generate them. From this implication, it follows logically that all we need to do (oversimplifying wildly, of course) is to ensure that everyone both has the opportunity to try to develop his or her own understandings to as deep a level as possible, and then has the opportunity to try to live these understandings. The results may not be great, but they may be the best we can reasonably expect of ourselves.

**To Summarize**

The thinking we have done in recent years has turned us away from technicism and towards considering EP as a form of practitioner research and has helped us find our own rationale for practitioner research—a rationale rooted in epistemological and ethical thinking rather than in thinking technically. I am reminded of John Holt's trick: When he was giving a talk in a town he had never been to before, he asked for the best way out of town, and then noted that, of course, it all depended on where he wanted to go. You wouldn't just choose the exit that had the best road surface. You needed to have somewhere you wanted to go (Holt, 1970, pp. 62–63). He was making the important, but easily forgotten, point that short-term goals are unimportant, and even a harmful distraction, if you do not know where you are trying ultimately to go with your teaching. Similarly, we have come to think that decisions about research method must be subordinated to thinking about the ethical and epistemological perspectives of trying to understand life in language classrooms. Once we have decided that we want to be involved in research undertaken by practitioners, for the development of their own understandings of their own lives as practitioners, then we can start tackling whatever local methodological decisions have to be taken. As noted at the start of this article, I find the Friends of the Earth slogan, "Think globally, act locally," helpful in this regard. This slogan brings us to the latest, unpublished version of our list of would-be global principles for practitioner research—the principles we work with.

**THE DEVELOPMENT OF EXPLORATORY PRACTICE IN TERMS OF PRINCIPLES**

We developed our ever-evolving list of principles without making a conspicuous effort to see what we could rescue from our earlier design criteria, because we felt that we had moved on in any case, and are always moving on. (We even called our 2002 EP Event in Lancaster: "Catching Up and Moving On.") The list in Table 1 is itself the outcome of yet more thinking since I wrote about EP for an issue of the journal *Language Teaching Research* devoted to EP (Allwright, 2003).

The first two principles listed in Table 1 ("put quality of life first" and "work primarily to
understand language classroom life") record our epistemological decisions about our ultimate aims: to work to understand, rather than to problem-solve; and to understand life in the language classroom, rather than other aspects of language teaching and learning. We do not deny the potential value of other forms of research on other aspects of the field, of course. The next three principles ("involve everybody," "work to bring people together," and "work also for mutual development") reflect our ethical concern to respect the fact that practices are essentially social, and the epistemological notion that understandings are collective as well as individual. One practical indication of what this ethical concern has meant for us in practice is that when we organized an EP conference in Rio in June 2003, we invited both teachers and learners to share their joint EP work in the form of poster presentations, workshops, and panel discussions. We got about 50 learners and about 150 teachers. There was a strong sense of people coming together for mutual development. Not everybody who might have been was, in fact, involved or presumably we would have been overwhelmed with learners, but it was such an exciting and rewarding occasion that a joint learner/teacher conference was also held in 2004, and it is now difficult for us to imagine running a conference that did not seek to bring teachers and learners together.4

The sixth principle states: "Make the work a continuous enterprise." This principle concerns, in part, an epistemological matter, reflecting the perception that understanding will never be final and so will need to be constantly revisited. This principle is also intended to capture the idea that so much teacher-based research is seen in terms of projects, with the implication that teachers only investigate when they are given space in their lives to do a project, such as during a development course. During the course, they can find the extra energy needed for the investigation, but they cannot hope to find that extra energy again after the end of the course.

The six principles are followed by two practical suggestions. The first of these, "minimize the extra effort of all sorts for all concerned," is closely related to our original design criteria of minimizing both "the inevitable time commitment" and "the inevitable skills-learning commitment" (see Appendix A). These criteria are now reduced to a mere practical suggestion, partly because it is so obviously a practical matter, rather than an obvious matter of principle, and partly because we have come across a surprising number of practitioners (often people simultaneously involved in doctoral-level research) who are apparently willing to find more energy than seems reasonable from the outside! The second practical suggestion, "integrate the work for understanding into the existing working life of the classroom," is partly a practical way of trying to achieve the first practical suggestion and following the sixth principle of maintaining continuity. It is also partly a practical way of ensuring that learners who take part in investigations of their own classroom lives can be reassured that they will not have significantly less time devoted to language learning than before they began their investigations.

BUT WHAT IS EXPLORATORY PRACTICE?

Trying to Describe Exploratory Practice

One of my problems in preparing this article came in trying to decide whether EP would remain a mystery throughout, and an unsatisfactory mystery at that, if I chose not to describe it right at the beginning. I did not want to give such a description at the start, however, because I was conscious that we do actually have a problem deciding how to characterize what we are doing. That problem is the very substance of the bulk of the article. Over the years we have described ourselves in terms of design criteria (Appendix A), practical steps (Appendix B), and principles (Table 1). It has been my interest in writing this article to show how these various sets of terms have reflected development in our thinking about the relative importance to be given to the technical, epistemological, and ethical aspects of research in our field. But do any of these aspects ever stand a

### TABLE 1

2004: Exploratory Practice in Six Principles Plus Two Practical Suggestions

| Principle 1 | Put "quality of life" first. |
| Principle 2 | Work primarily to understand language classroom life. |
| Principle 3 | Involve everybody. |
| Principle 4 | Work to bring people together. |
| Principle 5 | Work also for mutual development. |
| Principle 6 | Make the work a continuous enterprise. |
| Suggestion 1 | Minimize the extra effort of all sorts for all concerned. |
| Suggestion 2 | Integrate the "work for understanding" into the existing working life of the classroom. |
chance of getting close to clarifying what EP is? It may be worth having a try here:

Exploratory Practice offers an epistemologically and ethically motivated framework for conducting practitioner research in the field of language education. It does not offer a technical framework in itself, but it does make practical suggestions, and there is a considerable and growing published literature of examples of EP work in a wide variety of educational settings around the world.  

Another way of describing EP it can be found on our Web site: "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" (http://www.ling.lancs.ac.uk/groups/epcentre/epcentre.htm). Unlike any list of principles we produce, this description seems astonishingly robust and resistant to change. But such a cryptic description does seem to demand its own set of notes. So, I offer the following:

1. *indefinitely sustainable* means it is not forced into time-limited projects;  
2. *teachers and learners* means both need to be involved as understanders;  
3. *while getting on* means no parasitic research activities;  
4. *understandings* means accepting plurality of understanding. It also means putting understandings first, and *problem-solving solutions* second, if anywhere at all;  
5. *understandings* does not necessarily mean anything expressible in words;  
6. *understandings of life* means life is the big issue, not improvement.

**A Practical Example**

Zhang’s (2004) work with an extensive reading class in China illustrates well how a teacher faced with the practical problem of unsatisfactory, unproductive lessons is likely to assume the problem is essentially a technical one, a matter of finding better teaching techniques. Zhang reported how she tried out one new teaching idea after another in an unsatisfactory extensive reading class, all without success, until she came across the ideas of EP. These ideas prompted her to rethink her technical problem and to construe it instead as an issue in the classroom learning lives she and her learners were leading. This rethinking, in turn, prompted her to devise ways to help her learners and herself better understand the learning situation, and this understanding eventually resulted in much more satisfactory and productive lessons.

So What’s Wrong with “Improvement”?

Point 6 raises a tricky issue to deal with briefly, but one that is too important to be left untouched. It would clearly be foolish to be just against improvement. What we are against is so prioritizing improvement that looking for ways to improve takes precedence over the prior need to understand the situation needing improvement in some way. Sometimes we find that a serious prior attempt to understand so changes the nature of the perception of the situation that it no longer seems sensible to see it as a problem at all. For example, Naidu and her colleagues in the English Language Teaching Community, Bangalore, South India—in work that was inspirational to rather than influenced by the ideas of EP—initially saw their very large English classes as a practical problem, to be eliminated as far as possible by finding more efficient ways of managing such large numbers of people (Naidu, Neeraja, Ramani, Shivakumar, & Viswanatha, 1992). But they decided that they needed to understand their situation better first, before deciding what to do about it, and so they devised a plan to visit each other’s classes and then meet again to discuss what they had seen. In fact, they met after their first classroom visit and the more they talked about it the less reasonable it seemed to them to think of class size just as a practical pedagogic problem. What they had seen, in the one class they had visited, was not so much an undifferentiated horde of people in need of a new pedagogical treatment, as a heterogeneous classroom population of people whose heterogeneity was attractive, rather than problematic. These teachers were all against large classes, but not against heterogeneity. What was now needed, they eventually decided, was not a way of solving a class size problem, but a way of respecting and developing the welcome heterogeneity that large classes provided.

But even where such a transformation does not happen, it seems wisest to insist that work for understanding should precede attempts at problem-solving. As already noted, and illustrated in Zhang’s (2004) work, we have found that adopting this approach has brought us typically to recast problems in terms of the quality of life within the problem situation, and not simply in terms of the technical competence of the practitioners.

**SO WHAT?**

This review of the 15-year history of EP has described how the relative importance given within EP work to the technical, the epistemological, and the ethical has varied over the years, at the
different stages of EP's development. I believe we are in a stable position, now that we have come to the conclusion that research in the human field of language teaching and learning is necessarily and essentially, first and foremost an ethical and an epistemological matter. If that leaves us apparently vulnerable on the technical side, we are comfortable with that. If teachers and researchers interested in EP want practical help in putting it into practice, then we are ready to help and have plenty of ideas to propose. We simply do not want what we do to be defined by the techniques we employ.

Thinking about what we want EP to stand for, epistemologically and ethically, has produced a set of principles written specifically for the field of classroom language teaching and learning, principles that bring teachers and learners together as classroom practitioners. Our principles could quite easily be rewritten in a non-context-specific way. If such a statement of our principles caught on for practitioner research in general, then EP could be seen simply as a form of practitioner research targeted at the field of classroom language teaching and learning. If, however, our principles proved much more parochial than we currently imagine, then presumably our principles would simply serve to define EP as a domain-specific form of practitioner research. Either way, I commend the principles to you for reflection, and I hope that raising the epistemological and ethical above the merely technical will serve us all well.

NOTES

1 I am using the first person plural so often because the development work on EP, both practical and intellectual, has been largely in the capable hands of Inês Miller and colleagues in the EP GROUP RIO in Brazil (see the 2003 issue of Language Teaching Research, entirely devoted to EP). They have “lived” EP for many years, whereas I have written about it, with occasional excursions into practical reality.

2 I have in mind the groups run by Inês Miller, from Pontificia Universidade Católica do Rio de Janeiro, and colleagues; see, for example, Lyra, Braga, & Braga (2003).

3 Information about the Exploratory Practice Centre (housed at the Centre for Research in Language Education, Department of Linguistics and Modern English Language at the University of Lancaster) can be found on its Web site: http://www.ling.lancs.ac.uk/groups/epcentre/epcentre.htm

4 For more about these conferences, visit the EP Web site (see note 3).

5 The best source for such examples is the 2003 issue of Language Teaching Research, 7(2), entirely devoted to articles about EP.

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APPENDIX A
Exploratory Practice as Design Criteria (adapted from Allwright, 1992, pp. 8–12)

APPROPRIATE CRITERIA FOR ANY PROPOSAL TO INTEGRATE RESEARCH AND PEDAGOGY

The Criteria

The criteria that have emerged from development work so far take two forms: seven things we have realized we are trying to achieve, and three sets of problems that we are consciously trying to bear in mind and to minimize.

The Seven Major Aims

Relevance. The least to hope for from our work is that teachers bringing research into their own teaching will ensure that what they explore is relevant to themselves, regardless of what concerns academic researchers, and of course that it is also relevant to their learners, who may well have interesting puzzles of their own to explore.

Reflection. We can also, again at the very least, work towards ensuring that integrating research and pedagogy promotes reflection, by both teachers and learners, given how powerful reflection seems to be as a motive force for development.

Continuity. In addition it seems very important to try to ensure that integrating research and pedagogy is a continuous enterprise, not something that a teacher will try once and then drop forever. Countless teachers on pre-service and in-service courses must have conducted mini research projects that have taken over their lives and convinced them that if that is what research means, then it is not for them. We must somehow encourage continuity.

Collegiality. Teaching is often seen as an isolating sort of job, and we could therefore surely aim to use the integration of research and pedagogy to bring teachers together more, to bring teachers closer to learners. Even more pertinently in the present context, we could (I am sure "should") try to use the integration of research and pedagogy to try to heal the highly damaging rift that has frequently been noted between teachers and academic researchers.

Learner Development. At the same time, it seems very important not to miss any opportunity to help learners develop as learners. Ensuring that the questions asked are seen as relevant by learners as well as teachers, and that learners, like teachers, are prompted to reflect on their experiences, should help learner development.

Teacher Development. I see little point in a teacher integrating research into his or her teaching unless it contributes to that teacher’s own development, and to the more general professional development of the field (leaving aside for the moment any problems we might have about “professionalization” as a potential threat to some of our broader values).

Theory-Building. All of which should enable us to develop our general understanding of classroom language teaching and learning, by building upon the articulated understandings of the people most closely involved, the teachers and the learners, working together to develop their own understandings of their own experiences.

The Major Problems to Be Expected.

This list is short, but the problems involved are extremely important.

The Time Commitment. Doing research in the language classroom is time-consuming, at all points. It will increase preparation time, for example, if lessons must be altered to accommodate a research activity, and it will probably also take up classroom learning time (both a practical and an ethical issue). Afterwards it will then be necessary to spend time sorting out what has been learned. We must be highly sensitive to this time issue, or teachers will simply find the burden unacceptable, and stop the research.

The Skills-Learning Burden. Becoming a classroom researcher also seems inevitably to involve the learning of new skills—specifically the skills required to conduct research satisfactorily, skills lying outside the normal repertoire of classroom teachers. Acquiring them will take time, and intellectual effort, effort which will no longer be available to be put into more directly pedagogic concerns. Some of the skills involved may be useful ones in any case [see the discussion of Steps 2 and 7 in Appendix B] but many (for example perhaps the complex of skills required for
the construction of successful questionnaires) may not be at all easily related to the other skill requirements for a classroom language teacher. Again this burden, particularly in regard to skills that are not likely to be more generally useful, needs to be minimized or it may prove fatal.

Threats to Self-Esteem. Conducting research in and into your classroom means running the risk of discovering things that you would perhaps rather not have to face. It therefore poses a potential threat to your self-esteem. It may be much less of a threat than if an academic researcher comes into your classroom and produces a damaging report about you, but it is still a threat, and one that we need to work to minimize.

A further possibility in some work situations is that getting involved in research might actually endanger continued employment. One possible way this might happen would be if a teacher began research by identifying a "problem" in his or her classroom, and was then him- or herself identified as "having problems" as compared to other teachers in the same institution who are careful to not get involved in research activity and therefore to not put themselves in a position to reveal whatever "problems" they may actually be experiencing. "Exploratory" teaching's suggestion is to start with "puzzles," rather than "problems," wherever this might help.

APPENDIX B
Exploratory Practice as Practical Steps (adapted from Allwright, 1992, pp. 15–19)

"EXPLORATORY" TEACHING AND LEARNING AS ONE WAY OF TRYING TO INTEGRATE RESEARCH AND PEDAGOGY

It is time to describe "exploratory" language teaching and learning in more detail, before considering how it matches up to the criteria we have established for it.

The Procedures

Work over the last two years or so in Brazil has suggested the following list of general procedures for teachers engaged in "exploratory" work in their classrooms. (For a fuller discussion of these procedures, though inevitably at an earlier stage in the development of the ideas involved, the reader is referred to Allwright, 1991.)

Step 1: Identify a Puzzle Area. This is the starting point, with the term "puzzle" deliberately chosen in preference to the more usual "problem" to avoid the potential threat to self-esteem that admitting to having "problems" might represent, and to capture the important possibility that productive investigations might well start from poorly understood successes just as much as from poorly understood failures.

Step 2: Refine Your Thinking about That Puzzle Area. This is increasingly establishing itself as a key stage, and one for which people do not feel prepared by their previous experiences and by their prior training. For me it revolves around developing the ability to mentally "explore" an issue, and not to accept a first interpretation of it.

Step 3: Select a Particular Topic To Focus Upon. This is also a key step, and one that workshop discussion at Aston suggested might be a terminal one for some teachers, who might feel paralyzed by the complexities revealed at the puzzle refinement stage. My own experience has not yet produced evidence for such pessimism, but it is clear that choices of focus may sometimes have to be dictated by immediate practicalities, rather than by the centrality of the chosen subtopic to the overall issue at the origin of the work.

Step 4: Find Appropriate Classroom Procedures to Explore It. In my experience teachers have not found it difficult to list a good number of classroom procedures, pedagogic activities they already know and trust, that they can imagine exploiting for investigative as well as for narrowly pedagogic purposes.

Step 5: Adapt Them to the Particular Puzzle You Want to Explore. This seems to be a relatively unproblematic stage, consisting simply of putting learning "on the classroom agenda," by for example substituting discussion of the chosen puzzle for more traditional (but not necessarily more engaging) topics such as "pollution," or "holidays." In retrospect it seems entirely bizarre, as well as unfortunate, that the language teaching profession should have taken so long to think of putting learning itself "on the agenda," given the amount of agonizing that language teachers, and textbook writers, must have gone through over the years in their efforts to find topics that might conceivably interest learners, and especially given their probable advantage over teachers and textbook writers for other subjects, who cannot so easily move away from the confines of their ostensible subject matter.
Step 6: Use Them in Class. Again this seems to be a relatively unproblematic stage, although I am not convinced that we have done nearly enough work on helping teachers develop the monitoring skills they will probably need if they are to use activities both for their pedagogic potential and simultaneously for what are essentially data collection purposes.

Step 7: Interpret the Outcomes. This stage is seen as at least as problematic as that of refining puzzles in the first place. My only comfort is that effort expended in these two areas, as I have already begun to indicate in Appendix A in the section The Major Problems to Be Expected, can be of real practical value to the teachers (and hopefully also to the learners) involved, since it is central to learning from any experience. At the moment this remains speculation, however, so future development work needs to focus on this stage, alongside stage 2 [see Appendix A] of course.

Step 8: Decide on Their Implications and Plan Accordingly. There seem to be four very different, though clearly related, possibilities for work following an initial exploratory investigation. The most obvious is that the original puzzle will have been refined in the process of investigation, and that it will now seem necessary to move on to some slightly different conception of it—a new puzzle emerging from the old one. The second possibility, but not a high probability, is that enough will have been learned to justify moving in some other direction with an entirely new puzzle. A third possibility is that enough will have been learned to justify trying out pedagogic changes in the classroom (if these are indicated). This will of course bring the enterprise much closer to the “action research” model, with its focus on trying change as a way of investigating classroom language learning and teaching. The fourth possibility, compatible with any or all of the others, is that enough will have been learned, in some sense at least, for the teacher or teachers involved to want to share their work with others, most probably not as a set of findings, but more as a “recruiting” measure, aimed at bringing more people into the investigation, for the very probable benefit of having more brains involved, and of therefore being perhaps able to come to more convincing interpretations, and perhaps even more convincing contributions to general theory-building.

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