Exploratory Practice as a Practitioner Research on Language Learning and Teaching

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The philosophy of Exploratory Practice is that language classroom learning and teaching practice is a social practice; hence practitioner research on it should pay attention to this socialness rather than only concern the cognitive aspect so that an understanding of quality of classroom life can be achieved before it can possibly lead to the improvement of the practice. The paper introduces the theory of Exploratory Practice in terms of its content spirit, key terms, relationship with other practitioner researches and methodological nature, aiming to help practitioners and classroom-based researchers to understand it.

Keywords: Exploratory Practice (EP), practitioner research, understanding, quality of life

Introduction

The theory of Exploratory Practice (EP) was advanced by Dick Allwright and colleagues in the world (Allwright & Bailey, 1991; Allwright & Lenzuen, 1997; Allwright, 2003; 2005; 2006; Allwright & Hanks, 2009; Murray & McPherson, 2006; Warschauer & Ware, 2006) originated from the second/foreign language classroom research practice. The theory contains three fundamentals and seven general principles, as follows.

Three fundamentals:

(a) The aim of EP is to prioritize the quality of life of our learning-teaching environment above any concern for instructional efficiency.
(b) EP aims to develop our understandings of the quality of learning-teaching life instead of simply searching for ever-“improved” teaching techniques.
(c) EP recognizes the fundamentally social nature of the mutual quest for understanding, in which both learners and teachers can develop. (Allwright, 2003, p. 124)

Seven principles:

(a) Put quality of life first;
(b) Work primarily to understand classroom life (cf. action research, which aims to solve problems);
(c) Involve everybody (i.e., learners are co-researchers);
(d) Work to bring people together (atmosphere of collegiality);
(e) Work for mutual development;
(f) Integrate the work for understanding into classroom practice (EP should not be “parasitic”);
(g) Make the work a continuous enterprise. (Allwright, 2003, pp. 128-130)

The above three fundamentals serve as the tenet of the above set of seven general principles, which,
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According to Allwright (2003, p. 127), is certain to be solidly grounded in extensive local practice and thought, and which is believed to be adaptable to any sort of practitioner research.

Since the production of EP, it is widely used as an approach to practitioner research in the world and its global principles are increasingly developed and the understanding to them is ever-increasingly deepened. For example, Wu (2005, p. 415) points out that the understanding in EP is an continuous one, a journey of knowing, in which one can never reach a status that gives him/her a sense that he/she can at any time stop understanding because he/she has acquired the whole understanding. But misunderstandings or puzzles about this theory also exist. Hence the production of this paper is to help understand this theory.

Three Key Terms of the Theory

As is mentioned in the previous part, EP is a form of practitioner research, a *rethinking* of the traditional practitioner research in language classroom, which focuses on *understanding* and ultimately on a concern for the *quality of life* in the language classroom. It 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. It is essentially a way for teachers and learners to work together to understand aspects of their classroom practice that puzzle them, through the use of normal pedagogic procedures (standard monitoring, teaching and learning activities) as investigative tools. Here three terms form the core of the theory: *rethinking*, *understanding*, and *quality of life*.

About Rethinking

Rethinking here means a critical thinking, or a reflection of the practitioner research. It is Allwright’s critical reflection on the previous practitioner research that has led to the production of EP. In his rethinking he pointed out the problems of the traditional practitioner research, as is seen in the following:

> We seem to have got some very important things very wrong: First, we have been seduced by the prevailing “wisdom” that participant research must essentially aim to improve the efficiency of classroom teaching, typically by isolating practical problems and solving them one by one. Secondly, we have largely accepted that such “improvement” will best be achieved by the practitioners involved (the teachers) addressing their classroom problems as mainly technical ones, to be solved by the development of “better” teaching techniques. Thirdly, this implies that we accept that language teaching and learning can therefore be reduced to a relatively unproblematic, asocial matter of cause and effect relationships. (Allwright, 2003, p. 113)

Then on the basis of this rethinking, he presented EP, starting with a new set of three proposals:

> First, we should, above our concern for instructional efficiency, prioritize the quality of life in the language classroom. Secondly, instead of trying to develop ever “improved” teaching techniques, we should try to develop our understandings of the quality of language classroom life. Thirdly, we should expect working helpfully for understanding to be a fundamentally social matter, not an asocial one. Simple causal relationships are most unlikely to apply, but all practitioners, learners as well as teachers, can expect to gain, to “develop”, from this mutual process of working for understanding. (Allwright, 2003, p. 114)

The above citation shows how a kind of understanding or insight appears on the basis of the critical thinking of the traditional practitioner research—language teaching and learning should not be reduced to be technical, a relatively unproblematic, asocial matter of cause and effect relationships. Teachers should put “quality of life” first in the language classroom. It is a great leap of language teaching and learning practice from technical perspective to social one. Then what is “quality of life”?
About Quality of Life

“Quality of life” is in contrast to “quality of work” in language classroom. The prevailing wisdom of the present time for teaching is that what teachers most want and most need is to become more effective language teachers, more efficient “delivery systems” of educational success (quality of work), by discovering and adopting more efficient teaching techniques, which tends to put teachers under constant pressure to enhance their teaching with the latest pedagogical ideas, so much so that some good teachers are at severe risk of “burn-out”, of becoming increasingly tired of the job they are actually doing so well. It is on the criticism of the above prevailing wisdom that quality of life is presented, which means the practitioners’ harmonious professional life, “the authenticity of being” (Wu, 2006, p. 333) in Wu’s philosophical term. In such context “teaching is revealing being through words embraced by understanding; and learning, conversely, is experiencing what a teacher reveals” (Wu, 2006, p. 333). The concern for the quality of life in the language classroom means EP puts the need to get things right for teachers prior to for students, holding the belief that “education must first and foremost be good for teachers’ lives, if it is ever to be good for learners’ learning” (Allwright, 2003, p. 120). That is to say, education must make a contribution to the quality of life in the language classroom before it can hope to make a contribution to the quality of teaching and learning (the work). Thus teachers can free themselves from “the rationality of instrumental or technical curriculum” (Wu, 2005, p. 335), and teaching with their true self and insights by applying their “personal knowledge” or “communal knowledge” (Wu, 2005, p. 29) into the classroom practice, which is the guarantee of all teaching improvements, as Allwright pointed out.

Working for understanding life in the language classroom will provide a good foundation for helping teachers and learners make their time together both pleasant and productive. It will also 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)

The above words show the significance of prioritizing “quality of life” in language classroom to both teachers’ professional life and students’ learning life, and to the shaping of the harmonious teaching and learning environment, which is the foundation for any improvement. In this sense understanding the quality of life becomes critical in the language classroom. Then what is this understanding about?

About Understanding

EP is fundamentally about trying to understand the quality of life in a given classroom context, which holds the belief that the profoundest understandings are somehow beyond words. But the practitioners need ways of using language to develop and express their developing understandings. What EP can offer is suggestions for such linguistically productive ways of developing classroom understandings by exploiting normal classroom activities for deliberate work for understanding. It also holds the belief that any resultant statement of understanding is necessarily only a partial (if not actually misleading) representation of the understanding itself, and is necessarily a situated understanding, valid, if at all, only for its immediate situation. So what EP can produce is not a generalized understanding, but a “situated one”, which, according to Allwright, “if fully articulated, would be directly valuable to the immediate participants and would represent a considerable achievement in itself” (Allwright, 2003, p. 121).

The Relationship Between EP and Other Approaches to Practitioner Research

The three approaches to practitioner research, that is, reflective practice, Exploratory Practice, and action research are closely related with each other, but have their own perspectives, as Figure 1 shows.
EP is about understanding, like reflective practice, but understanding is promoted through action involving all the participants (i.e., learners as well as teacher). This involves thought and reflection, often stimulated through collaboration. In addition, EP involves action, like action research, but the primary aim at the action is to promote understanding rather than to bring about change. Deep understanding is a precursor to meaningful change.

Wu (2005, p. 413) gives a more detailed and insightful comparison of the features between EP and action research (reflective practice in some points) in the philosophical perspective of language classroom life, where the three philosophical concepts “being”, “knowing”, and “doing” correspond to “quality of life”, “understanding”, and “research practice” in EP, as is shown in Table 1:

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domain</th>
<th>Exploratory Practice</th>
<th>Action Research</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Being</strong></td>
<td>Life oriented</td>
<td>Work oriented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Authenticity</td>
<td>Efficiency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Self seized by everyday dwellings</td>
<td>Self chosen from public discourses for its hero</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Knowing</strong></td>
<td>Understanding in focus</td>
<td>Skill/knowledge in focus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Emancipatory interest</td>
<td>Technical/strategic interest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Narrative (intuitive)</td>
<td>Paradigm (propositional)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Concreteness (primordial)</td>
<td>Generalization (average)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Holistic</td>
<td>Analytical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Personal criteria</td>
<td>Official criteria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Convincing self</td>
<td>Convincing others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Situational interpretation (convictions)</td>
<td>Theoretical interpretation (justification)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No purpose</td>
<td>Purposive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Authentic critique (no value)</td>
<td>Critique laden with a value</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Doing</strong></td>
<td>Standing out by a personal puzzle</td>
<td>Initiated by research and technical agenda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Led by everydayness dwellings</td>
<td>Led by expertise and institutional conventions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Implicit (tacit) change</td>
<td>Explicit change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No deliberate action oriented</td>
<td>Action oriented (behavior manipulation)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sustainability</td>
<td>Project bound</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No steps to follow</td>
<td>Systemic institutional means</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Community tied to an marginal practice</td>
<td>Community tied to an institutional practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Communication with private language (for showing things)</td>
<td>Communication with public language (for exchanging ideas)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Methodological Nature of EP Research

Methodologically EP advocates the use of “normal pedagogical activities as investigative tool” (Allwright, 2003, p. 118) in the form of practitioners’ own stories to gain an understanding of the quality of life in the language classroom. The investigative procedures of EP research projects are in fact an attempt to recreate stories of learning through classroom activities. In this sense one can see that EP research is of qualitative and narrative nature. This nature is in conformity with the mission of EP research: to achieve an understanding of the quality of classroom life rather than to seek an improvement of the quality of work. In other word, the purpose of the EP research is “to gain an understanding of a certain quality of behaviors, rather than the quest to find the immutable and universal laws that govern processes ... with the assumption that there are cause-and-effect relations among these processes” (Perpignan, 2003, p. 263). Thus, an effort to “understand through observing the behavior qualitatively, with more emphasis on interpreting than on counting” (Hillocks, 1994, cited in Perpignan, 2003, p. 263), is consciously made in EP research. EP, as Perpignan mentioned, “aside from encouraging observation and narrating of the chronology and protagonists of classroom real-life events (the telling of stories), also sets understanding these events as the goal to be reached for, rather than prioritizing measurable efficiency” (2003, p. 263). Therefore, the way that the qualitative social scientists adopt is particularly appropriate to the scientific understanding of the quality of classroom life in EP perspective. In that sense, EP is non-science, embracing “the role of creators and narrators of social myth, media ecologists and presumably other social scientists” (Postman, 1988, p. 17, cited in Perpignan, 2003, p. 263) to enrich the field of study immeasurably.

Another reason why EP echoes qualitative social scientists’ ways of research is that it focuses on the socialness of practice of classroom interaction. EP recognizes that classroom language learning and teaching activities are embedded in specific social contexts, thus classroom-based language learning and teaching research is particularly benefited by qualitative research methods. As Erickson (1991) pointed out, “qualitative research is appropriate to a number of topics in classroom language instruction, because of the necessarily interpretive nature of decisions of sociolinguistic and communicative competence” (cited in Perpignan, 2003, p. 263). According to Allwright and Hanks (2009), classroom as a site of social practice, the practitioners’ (students as well as their teacher) actions (including discourse actions) are complicated and idiosyncratic when they involve in activities. And EP’s goal is to achieve an understanding of that complexity and idiosyncrasy before it can actually help students make any improvement. Therefore, Perpignan (2003) argued that approaches to research that aim to characterize the rich complexity and particularity of human experience deserve all the exposure they can get, especially in a world where reigning scientific approaches typically accomplish their goals at the direct expense of such knowledge. (p. 263)

Indeed, in classroom-based research, the social context is an indispensable element of the setting to interpret a learner’s action. Thus, she further argued that a really scientific method for EP is an in-depth understanding of motivations, responses, and reactions, which “needs to be dependent on interpretations of thick data which fully document the multidimensional quality of the social elements of classroom activities, rather than on rigorous scientific measurement” (Perpignan, 2003, p. 264). These principles are much in harmony with the social nature of EP, which sees research as a social enterprise and a collegial process, leading to mutual development.
Conclusion

From the above introduction of EP theory in terms of its three fundamental tenets, seven principles, relationship with other practitioner researches and methodological nature, one can see that what EP achieves, by integrating research into teaching, is a local understanding of students’ actions (including discourse actions) in the classroom interpersonal process or the classroom language socialization process. The aim of EP, according to Allwright (2005, p. 364), is to make the research relevant to teachers themselves, to promote teachers’ reflection, to bring teachers together more, to bring teachers closer to learners, and to promote teachers and students’ development.

References


