Exploratory Practice:
An Alternative Tool for
Understanding Life in the
Language Classroom

Submitted by

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I certify that all the material in this dissertation which is not my own work has been identified and that no material is included for which a degree has previously been conferred upon me.

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Subhi Ashour
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To my parents,

You are the best parents a son could ever ask for!

To the two angels who have been holding the torch of love and hope,

Lighting my way wherever I go,

To Afaf and Ola!

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List of Abbreviations:

AR: Action Research

ELT: English Language teaching

EP: Exploratory Practice

HLI: Higher Language Institute

ITT: Initial Teacher Training

LTR: *Language Teaching Research*

MEd: Masters in Education

PAOR: Plan, Act, Observe and Revise

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Prologue

In this study, I begin with a reflection on my experience of the pre-service research component of the Initial Teaching Training [ITT] programme at the Higher Language Institute [HLI], Damascus University. I back up my opinions and views of that component with my fellow colleagues' through a questionnaire I analysed in a previous paper (Ashour, 2008a). Following that I shall address the issue of the relevance of classroom-research for teachers in my institution and some practical issues related to the impediments of classroom-research there. Armed by my experience in the MEd programme, I shall propose Exploratory Practice [EP] as an approach to research in the HLI classroom. I shall discuss the principles and characteristics of EP in the light of other approaches. Finally I shall flesh out the skeleton of my argument with some examples of research projects informed by EP principles adding to that my own intended work with EP at the HLI.

This study:

- Is the result of my ongoing pondering over my experience of the research practices at the HLI and during the MEd programme as a course participant.
- Is mainly an invitation to myself and my fellow colleagues at the HLI to pursue our professional development through taking stock of current effective trends in ELT.
- Is context-bound: it discusses the specificity of the HLI context and proposes EP in a way that suits the specific context at hand.
- Presumes that the target teacher is someone who is committed, responsible and willing to continually improve the quality of life in their classrooms (Allwright, 2003:128).
- Is composed of three chapters: Chapter 1 discusses my home context and the classroom-research status, Chapter 2 sets out to analyse different approaches to research and ends up with EP, and Chapter 3 offers criticism, practical examples and plans regarding EP.

Chapter 1

Current Research Practices at the HLI

This chapter discusses the context of my teaching in the HLI, Damascus University, the courses run there and a little about the teachers and their responsibilities. It also provides first-hand insights into the research programme, both the one propagated in the ITT and the actual practice of it by serving teachers. Afterwards comes a more holistic view of the research status by looking at perspectives from different angles: from the student-teachers' and from the teachers'. The chapter concludes with the teachers' voices section where I incorporate some of the data of my previous paper (Ashour, 2008a) into the description of the research programme.

1. The Higher Language Institute

The HLI is responsible for many English language programmes. First, it administers the whole undergraduate non-specialists English programme through offering both General English and content modules. Second, the HLI administers 'special courses for professors and university staff' (the HLI website). University professors often have to speak in international conferences, use publications written in English, or work in partnership with English speakers; hence comes the necessity to improve their English. The last category of courses offered by the HLI, and presumably the most important as it constitutes a major income for the institution, is the General English courses. Here, different students from different colleges join these courses to improve their English and ultimately pass their English exams. A student usually sits for a placement test and then will be categorized in their approximate level. There are 10 levels of General English courses, each one lasting for a month.

2. Teachers' Profile

There are approximately 24 teachers working at the HLI at the time of writing this study. Of those, seven have obtained their Masters degrees in ELT from different UK Universities. The other teachers usually have obtained B.As in English Language

before teaching at the HLI. All teachers have to do a training course before commencing their teaching. The Masters holders usually do the ITT before doing their M.As abroad. The teacher trainers are responsible for the ITT programmes. In the ITT, a student teacher 'is trained to adopt modern methodologies' (The HIL website). Modern methodologies come in the form of a course the component of which are comprised of part-modules sessions such as teaching pronunciation, classroom management, classroom research…etc. The ITT is attached to some practice where novice teachers do micro-teaching, observe more experienced teachers, are sometimes paired up with working teachers where they attend the classes of the working teacher for sometime then they take up his/her place, and/or, most importantly for the purpose of this study, novice teachers are guided to conduct research using their observation, micro-teaching or the actual teaching during the pair-up period. Usually, the teacher trainers look at the student-teachers research projects and decide, depending on the quality of each project, whether or not to accept the teacher to be part of the teaching staff of the institute.

It is acknowledged throughout the profession that language teachers are busy professionals (Nunan, 1993:44; Allwright, 1999); however, looking at the responsibilities of teachers at the HLI mentioned in 1 above, the term 'busy' becomes charged with lots of meanings. Apart from the usual teaching activities like preparation, supplying relevant materials to the syllabus, marking papers and giving adequate feedback…etc, teachers at the HLI are required to be involved in other programmes to pursue their own learning. Some of these programmes are the weekly presentations and workshops where they 'discuss teaching matters, students levels, and developing the syllabus in accordance with the students' language problems and future needs' (the HLI website). Moreover, teachers usually attend conferences and they are encouraged to present in these conferences. One last activity that teachers may be required to do is research. Administrators ask teachers to evaluate the effectiveness of a particular syllabus. Other reasons for teachers to conduct research are abundant such as the effects of new assessment strategies, students' motivation, effect of authentic materials, etc. Worth mentioning is the fact that teachers who are involved in research find that they have enough credit for the promotion that is due every two years.

Having mentioned the research responsibility of teachers at the HLI, the focus of this study will focus on a description and analysis of how research is disseminated in the ITT and what the majority of teachers actually do with research once they begin their actual teaching.

3. Classroom Research at the HLI

I describe in this section the research component of the pre-service programme at the HLI. I present my own reflection on this component. Afterwards, I look at the actual practice of classroom-research and teachers' perceptions of classroom-research at their institution.

3.1 Research at the Pre-service Stage

As has been established so far, research for teachers at the HLI begins quite early in their careers. Towards the end of the ITT programme, student teachers are introduced to research. The introduction to research is usually synchronised with the observation and micro-teaching activities. Hence, student teachers do find some solid ground to fall onto for gathering data.

The head trainer is usually responsible for the research component of the programme. She discusses some of the conventions of research especially the form of the final product of research i.e. report, presentation statistics …etc. One book recommended during the research process is *Writing up Research* by Weissberg and Buker (1990). As the title suggests, it is about the HOWs of writing a research report and presenting it. She managed to teach us the basics of research which were enough to get us started; however, we were not told *why* to do research in the first place. Research played an important role in deciding the career of many student teachers, though the rationale behind it was actually fuzzy to many course participants.

3.2 My own Story with Research

As a scholar sponsored by the Ministry of Higher Education, the ITT did not mean a lot to me or to my colleagues in the same scheme because we were offered a place in

a UK university and the Ministry agreed to fund our studies there. The ITT programme, however, was useful; especially the observation and the micro-teaching. However, when it came to research, it was not obvious to me why we had to do research. When we told the head trainer that we had some doubts about the relevance of the research project, she emphasised that it is an important part of the programme and that they had been running the research strand for quite a long time and it was paying off for teachers. How? No one knew.

As a consequence of being unconvinced by the research project, I decided with my colleagues that we would find a way of not doing it. First, we told the head trainer that we needed the time dedicated to the research project to prepare for the TOEFL test instead. This first plan gave us some two weeks. Next, we resorted to the Ministry's regulations regarding the duties and responsibilities of the prospective Masters students. The regulations did not say that we should do research. We used this argument and it gave us some more time where the trainer negotiated this issue with the administrators. Luckily, the trainer left for her annual leave. When she came back three weeks later, we had commenced our actual teaching. She visited us more than once in our respective classes in order to write her report about our teaching. The report was satisfactory and we had the precious opportunity of teaching three courses, which meant that the administration was satisfied with our teaching.

Once introduced to reflective teaching prevalent in the field of ELT (Schön, 1983; Stenhouse, 1984; Richards, 1990 and Wallace, 1990), I began to examine my research experience. The Practitioner Research module was the first opportunity to re-examine my beliefs regarding research, and to be acquainted with new trends in classroom-research. When I had to choose a topic for my dissertation I immediately chose research, in an attempt to come to terms with research in the first place, and to propose a more convenient version of classroom-research.

3.3   Beliefs and Practice of Research at the HLI

I witnessed a 'research' project that was presented to the administration by a group of three teachers. The teachers were asked to give a report about a new syllabus that had been implemented. I saw how uncomfortable those teachers were once the deadline to present their report approached. Their report, therefore, was *ad hoc* in nature and did

not take into account the learners' voices or opinions. It contained only some of the teachers' views and judgments about the new syllabus and a hazy recommendation to continue using the same coursebook.

The Practitioner Research module urged me to pursue a better understanding of classroom-research. Therefore, I distributed a questionnaire to my colleagues at the HLI and discussed its findings in the Practitioner Research paper (see Ashour, 2008a). For the purpose of this study, I shall highlight the main themes that emerged from the previous questionnaire:

- Most teachers at the HLI are familiar with classroom-research in their ITT or while doing their Masters abroad.
- The majority of teachers at the HLI are not practising classroom-research after the ITT or obtaining their Masters degrees.
- The majority of teachers there believe that it is not part of their duties to do research.
- The majority of teachers have positive attitude towards research and they think teachers *should* be researchers at the same time.
- Time and support come on top of the list of the difficulties that face teachers.
- Research is thought to be developmental once done in a collaborative atmosphere.   (Summary of my previous questionnaire (Ashour, 2008a)).

As the summary shows, teachers have positive attitudes towards the role of research; however, the majority of them are not doing research. Research turns to be a one-off activity, the one that they have to do in their pre-service, unless *asked* by the administration to conduct research.

3.4   'Teachers' Voices'

In this final section of the chapter, I incorporate some of what my questionnaire respondents have said regarding their concerns about research. The data I show here are in response to my final invitation in the questionnaire to add anything they wish to add (see Ashour, 2008a).I believe that the following quotes reveal a lot about the

status and beliefs about research at the HLI, as respondents were given the freedom to express whatever important to them. I present these data here in order to prepare for the emergent themes to be focused on in chapter 2.

The first respondent voices her disappointment with the administration's attitude towards research:

> 'The administrative attitude towards your research is an essential element on the progress of your research. When you come up with some findings and these findings never influence the decisions made at work and remain on papers, this does influence your enthusiasm for conducting research and will diminish from the importance of conducting research. Consequently your next research won't be performed properly.'

Another respondent was still sceptical about teachers' ability to conduct their own research:

> 'I also think that many teachers here lack the methodology and research skills to conduct such kind of research.'

The following respondent shows her awareness of the importance of research as a developmental tool:

> 'In fact, teachers should not be ill in order to get better. In other words research can be carried out as a part of the professional developmental process. Another issue is the collaboration that might happen among teachers which makes research more effective and independent from the heavy reliance on the institution or outsider researchers.'

One last respondent expressed her concern about the parasitical and daunting nature of research as she experienced it at the HLI:

> 'I think researching is a time-consuming process. Therefore, it requires people who can dedicate their time for it. At the same time, it's important that those people are involved in teaching so that they won't be detached from the context in which they conduct their research. So, I think teachers who want to do some kind of research should be part-time teachers so that they will have the needed time and teaching experience. But as for being a full-time teacher and a researcher at the same time, I think this will have negative effects at both levels.'

4. Summary

In this chapter, I have provided a background to my context. I have highlighted the institutional responsibilities of the HLI before shedding some light on teachers and their responsibilities beginning from the pre-service days. I have then described the research component of the ITT from my own point of view as I lived that experience and through the eyes of my colleagues. The final part has been dedicated to the authentic voices of teachers expressing some of their concerns about research.

Chapter 2

Academic Research, Action Research and Exploratory Practice

1.   Introduction

This chapter deals with the theoretical underpinnings of classroom-research. It divides classroom-research into two broad categories according to the agent of research: academic and teacher-research (outsiders and insiders). It begins with a discussion of the traditional type of research from which other approaches have emerged, mostly as a reaction. This traditional approach is the academic research which was conducted to test hypotheses and generate knowledge that transcends time and place in its application as practitioners of this approach claimed. After that, the focus shifts to a more teacher-initiated research, namely Action Research [AR] which asserts the necessity of teachers themselves being the researchers (Richards and Farrell, 2005:171). The chapter traces some of the pitfalls and flaws of this approach, as it is the same programme propagated in my institute and, as we saw in chapter 1, it proved to have some problems that make it a one-off enterprise. The chapter finishes with a discussion of EP in relation to the previous argument of academic research and AR and juxtaposing it with other approaches of research. The principles and procedures of EP are explained in considerable details.

2.   Academic Research

Academic research has had a 'higher status' (Hoban, 2002:9) for ages as it is endowed by being objective (Wright, 1992) and universal. By objective I mean that researchers were not teachers, the thing that gave them the status of not being prejudiced in their research process. They depended on facts and aimed at building theories and generating knowledge (Freeman, 1998:6, Cohen and Manion, 1989:43). By universal I mean that the researchers had in mind the aim of disseminating the knowledge they ended up with to teachers in diverse contexts (Gieve and Miller, 2006:2) simply because their approach is scientific and objective (Freeman, 1998:6). The results of their research are thought to be far reaching in their applications and soundness.

Usually when academic researchers have discovered new theories, they write reports, articles or books and publish them in learned journals or books and present them at conferences and seminars. Classrooms for academic researchers are passive sources of data and as such kept at a distance and teachers are '*recipients* of information on academic research' (McDonough and McDonough, 1990:103 authors' emphasis).

The major claim is that academic research findings will help improve teachers' teaching and education in general. The improvement comes in the form of handing down the research results to teachers so they can use them in an attempt to improve learning and teaching. Ellis (2001b) suggests that such research 'contribute to the appraisal of pedagogic issues […]. The researcher can seek to illuminate pedagogical problems and their possible solutions through conducting experimental and interpretive studies in, and particularly on L2 classroom' (2001b:68).

However, teachers' reactions to such research have not always been as academics may have expected them to be. There has always been a discussion about the dichotomy between the theoretical world of academics and the practical one of teachers. Beasley and Riordan (1981), for example, point out that 'the gulf between research bodies and the teaching profession has ensured that many research programmes are not related to professional concerns and interests of teachers and students' (1981:60). Moreover, despite the claim of objectivity in the process of data gathering, practitioners have voiced their suspicion about the ability of those researchers to obtain data that are representative of what really goes on in the classroom and account for the inherent complexity and uniqueness of classrooms (Tseng and Ivanič, 2006:163; Zhang, 2004:342). Freeman (1998), for example, voices his serious doubts about this process saying that:

> [It] is often assumed, perhaps erroneously, that a researcher can enter a classroom without ever teaching or having taught, can understand what is happening in that environment, can gather information about it and can understand what goes on there.   (1998:6)

Teachers have shown little interest in this kind of research in helping them cope with the demanding nature of their profession (Nunan, 2005:234). Carr and Kemmis (1985) argue that teachers regard theory and research as unfamiliar activities 'having little to do with their everyday practical concerns' (1985:8). Others like Stenhouse

(1975) and Beasley and Riordan (1981:36) blame academics for this problem of vagueness as academic researchers have their own agendas whether or not these agendas are compatible with teachers' needs. Stenhouse contends that academic researchers 'have been more interested in building a theory of teaching […] in a form addressed mainly to the research community, than in improving the classrooms they have studied' (1975:156). Another factor that has helped enhance the mistrust of academic research is the way the research findings are presented to teachers, especially when researchers use all sorts of formulae and jargon. Beasley and Riordan (1981) believe that 'many of the findings are recorded in a form and style which is accessible to the trained researcher but fails to communicate to teachers' (1981: 36). Somekh (1993) also observes that 'there are often serious difficulties in translating the knowledge generated by research into practice, at a later stage' (1993:31).

The apparent distance that academic researchers have assumed during their research endeavors brings to mind the validity of such investigations and their ability to account for the complexity of classrooms. Tajino and Smith (2005) recognise academic research's inability to account for the intricacies of classroom:

> The problems and puzzles of human activity systems may not easily be solved by the hypothesis-testing procedures that are often used in natural sciences, since the elements and factors in human relationships may be interrelated in a complex manner.   (2005:450)

So, theory produced by academics that should ideally strengthen teachers' practice tends to repose in books and journals, undisturbed by teachers.

This is not to say, however, that academic research is of no use; far it is from that. The Second Language Acquisition research conducted to date has helped 'teachers, course designers, and material writers' (Ellis, 1993:4) in their respective jobs and ultimately learning in general. My critique of academic research is centered on the area of classroom decision-making, interaction and management; issues that could only be noticed and interpreted by classroom participants (teachers and learners themselves).

To summarise, academic research has claimed to have the ability to investigate classrooms and report back to teachers in a top-down hierarchal model of education (McDonough and McDonough, 1990:103). In this model, researchers have assumed

the prestige and power of 'knowing' and passing their knowledge to teachers who are seen as implementers of researchers' findings. This division of power and responsibilities has given birth to a relationship between researchers and teachers that is characterised by mistrust on the part of teachers. Allwright (2003), being an academic researcher himself, admits the tyranny of this approach. He mentions that 'academic researchers had frequently handled […] the relationships with language teachers and learners so badly that [researchers] no longer deserve their cooperation' (2003:117). Having the above status of research, teachers have been in a quest to find alternatives to the academic research that assisted them very little and at the same time demanded that they succumb to the belief that the outside researcher knows more about the classroom than the teacher him/herself does. There have been calls for teachers to be researchers themselves and enhance their profession. The result has been a more teacher-initiated research movement that has taken many forms.

3.   Teacher-Research

''Teacher-research' has been used increasingly in recent years to refer to any systematic investigations conducted by teachers, regardless of the methodological approach employed' (Bailey, 2006: xiii)

In this section, I discuss other versions of research that have emerged as a reaction to the canonical academic research discussed above and as a response to the calls for teachers to heighten their professionalism (Stenhouse, 1975; Richards, 1990; Brindley, 1990 and Wallace, 1990). For the purpose of the following discussion, I shall use the terms 'teacher-research' and 'practitioner research' interchangeably. I begin with a general rationale behind the proposal of teacher-research. After that, I discuss AR as a form of teacher-research highly advocated in the literature. I end up with another version of teacher-research, namely EP.

3.1   Why Teacher-Research?

In a highly personal account of teacher-research, Freeman (1998) recalls that when he first commenced teaching, he 'wasn't paid to speculate or wonder; [he] was paid to teach' (1998:2). It is a fair question to ask why teachers should do research. Research is about theory, as academics taught us, while teachers are involved with the everyday

practical issues of classroom. Teachers from the HLI who responded to my questionnaire have the same opinions: they had some training in their ITT about research; still most of them think they are not required to do research and it is an external activity to their daily responsibilities.

If we deconstruct the term 'teacher-research', we find that it comprises an agent, the teacher, and a process, research. Combining both words with a hyphen means modifying both. Teachers assume the role of researchers but in their own classes, and research is now done by the people who are part of the environment of the classroom. As Freeman (1998:6) puts it, 'teacher-research means teachers researching teaching. But the hyphen also calls attention to the differences and possible distance between two separate professional roles and processes: One can teach or one can research. To be and do both is to unite roles by undertaking two processes'. Teachers' closeness and experience of classroom life is an advantage to them in this case. Burton and Mickan (1993) believe that 'like teaching, [research] is a practical activity, so that the effects of the research relate in direct ways to what happens in the classroom' (1993:115).

Once in a psychology class, my tutor compared the human psyche to a glacier. The observable is tiny when compared to what lies underneath. Similarly, Wright's (2006) representation of the classroom as 'a stretch of open ocean with clusters of islands representing the 'observable' of classroom activity' (2006:80-81) heighten my awareness of the deepness and complexity of classrooms (see figure 1 below). If we take for granted the deepness and complexity of the individual human being, then the gathering of a group of learners with a teacher in a place called classroom would be, corollary, complex and rich in experiences of all those participants (Allwright and Bailey, 1991; Wright, 2006:64).
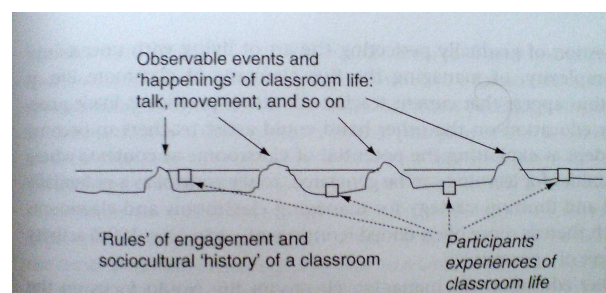

Figure 1: complexity of classroom life (Wright, 2006: 81)

The recognition of this fact of classrooms necessitates that teachers work hard to accommodate to this complexity. Being a good teacher is the quest of many; however, many teachers conceive of the quality of being good as learning new methodologies and techniques that may or may not work for all learners (see Allwright and Miller (2007) for more discussion of the technicist view of teachers' learning). What is more important than learning new tricks and techniques, I would argue, is a better understanding of what goes on in the classroom (Nunan, 1993) . One way of doing this is through being involved in researching our classrooms. In this sense, and as Wright (2006) argues, 'classroom-research […] becomes a learning tool and an educational process rather than an abstract, distance set of procedures' (2006:83). Holliday (1994) also sees researching one's practices as vital to arriving at informed pedagogical decisions:

> In order to arrive at appropriate methodologies, practitioners need to take time to investigate what happens in the classroom. They need to incorporate into their approach the capacity to look in depth at the wider social forces which influence behaviour between teachers and students. (1994:17)

Apart from the wish to dig beneath the surface of classroom, there are other gains once embarked in a research project. As early as Stenhouse (1975), there have been calls for an enhanced sense of professionalism. Stenhouse believes that:

> [I]f the majority of teachers-rather than the only enthusiastic few- are to possess this field of research, that the teacher's professional self-image and conditions of work will have to change. (1975:142)

The new professional that Stenhouse has in mind is 'autonomous' capable of 'self-development' through 'systematic self-study' (1975:144) and agent of change not subject of it (Fullan, 1993). Worth mentioning is that the calls for an enhanced sense of professionalism could be seen in the larger framework of the educational innovations that emphasise teachers' learning, and continuing professional development as a never-ending process (Smyth, 1987; Zeichner and Liston, 1996) learner autonomy. Brindley (1990) highlights the role of research in the current educational change saying that 'the movement towards learner-centred education and decentralised curriculum planning has placed the teacher in the position of being the

principal agent of curriculum development' (1990:7). Thus, research is seen by its proponents as a helping factor in the complex teaching process, not an extra activity scarcely related to what goes on in the classroom (Larsen-Freeman, 1992:269).

Another perspective of research comes from the developmental view of this activity. Underhill (1984) (in Head and Taylor, 1997) thinks that development means:

> [K]eeping myself on the same side of the learning fence as my students. This is the only way I can keep alive a sense of challenge and adventure in my career, and avoid getting in a rut. If I am in a rut, then so is my teaching, and then so are my, students, and learning from a rut is tedious, slow and uninspiring. (Head and Taylor, 1997:7)

This suggests that no matter how proficient a teacher may become, there comes a time when this teacher is a victim of ritualised behaviour where a teacher does what he/she does because he/she is used to doing it and it worked for them at some time (See Huberman (1992) for a detailed analysis of the cycle of teachers' lives). Involvement in investigating one's practice means being willing to review one's own beliefs and ideas about teaching and maybe start anew when necessary or alter things to accommodate to new situations (Burns, 1999:14). Hoban (2002) thinks that taking the research initiative is 'a step outside the comfort zone and preferred teaching style to meet the needs of […] students' (2002:27). Somekh (1993) shows the benefits of research in this regard when she argues that '[because] we are investigating situations in which we ourselves are participants, we have the best possible opportunity of gaining access to the values and beliefs which underpin what we do and say' (1993: 36).

Added to that, Nunan (1993) believes that such an approach to professional development is an 'inside-out' (1993:41) one where teachers' own work feeds into their practices as contrasted with the approach that comes from outside and is imposed on teachers. Hence, a research perspective to teaching makes it a more enjoyable experience for teachers and ultimately for learners. Burton and Mickan (1993) argue that for teachers to do research necessitates 'the need for continuing professional renewal through reflection on and evaluation of practice' (1993:113). Allwright (1993) advises that a research endeavor should not be pursued for its own sake; alternatively, he argues, a research element in a teacher's life could be 'the

driving force for that teacher's personal professional development' (1993:126). Moreover, Rossiter (1993) believes that teachers have the privilege of having a developmental tool handy at their disposal; researching their own classrooms (1993:136).

Finally, teacher-research has important effects on the learning process. Teachers are part of the culture of the classroom and they are alive to the minutest things that happen there, so taking up the responsibility of investigating what goes on there will supposedly serve the purpose of learning itself. Rose (2007) concludes that '[the] culture of the class has the potential to reveal to the teacher the language process as it is actually experienced. In this way teaching language and investigating language learning may be seen to be synonymous' (2007:499). Research in this sense is a natural add-on to the teacher's responsibilities and even a legitimate ethical responsibility if teachers want to improve the experience of language learning and teaching for themselves and their students.

3.2 Action Research

Having discussed what teacher-research is and what it promises teachers and teaching, learners and learning, I move now to discuss a prominent form of teacher-research, namely AR. Most of the tenets of AR are derived from that of teacher-research; therefore, I shall focus on the negative sides of this approach that makes it unpopular, one-off activity to many teachers at the HLI as I have shown in chapter 1.

3.2.1 Definition

Elliott (1991:69) defines AR as '*the study of a social situation with a view to improving the quality of action within it*' (original emphasis). The social situation is the classroom. Improving the quality of actions in the classroom means using interventionist techniques and trying them out to reach a better performance (Cohen and Manion, 1985; Nunan, 1993:42). Kemmis and McTaggart (1992) suggest that AR 'is concerned equally with changing *individuals...* and … the *culture* of the groups, institutions and societies to which they belong' (original emphasis 1992:16). Change is a buzzword in AR. AR aims to improve teaching and learning through intervening

and bringing about change. Needless to say, and as discussed in 2 above, AR is done by teachers themselves (Cohen *et al,* 2000: 227, McNiff and Whitehead, 2002: 9, Bailey *et al,* 2001: 135 and Richards and Farrell, 2005:171). Following is a brief discussion of some of the characteristics of this approach accompanied by a critique of the weak points in this approach.

3.2.2   Characteristics and Discussion

1.   AR is a highly systematic process. It emerges through cycles that have been developed for a long time. The initial cycle had it that an AR project comes in four stages: Plan, Act, Observe and Revise [PAOR]. Other practitioners have ended up with more sophisticated cycles for the AR project (see for example: Zuber-Skerritt, 1996b:99; Elliott, 1991: 71; McNiff and Whithead, 2002: 50; Nunan, 1989:13 and Richards and Farrell, 2005:183). It has been suggested that the PAOR cycle be extended to be a chain the leading to another AR project. Therefore, action researchers keep spinning the wheel and investigating issues that may be related. For example, a research project may begin with investigating students' lack of interaction in group work. As the project advances, a teacher - or a group of teachers- may become intrigued to follow another project about, say, motivation and so forth.

What I find problematic in the above description of AR is that, although it is a reaction to academic research, it tries to approximate to it. One has the feeling that the proponents of AR have a deep sense of guilt and hidden desire to conform to the 'standard' academic research. This is apparent in their emphasis on having a step-by-step procedure (Allwright, 2006:15). The data gathering techniques and analysis are similar to those of the academic approach. Burns (1999: 155) shows a five-stage cycle of data gathering and analysis in AR (see figure 2 below). Such a cycle could be frightening to teachers as it looks complicated and needs high expertise in the field of research itself. I believe that the above mentioned cycles of AR and data gathering and analysis have frustrated teachers when they were about to plan a research project. AR still cherishes the academic legacy of being rigorous and systematic. What happens in reality is that teachers gather momentum for one research project, and once finished they are relieved that they do not have to do it again as it was so demanding.
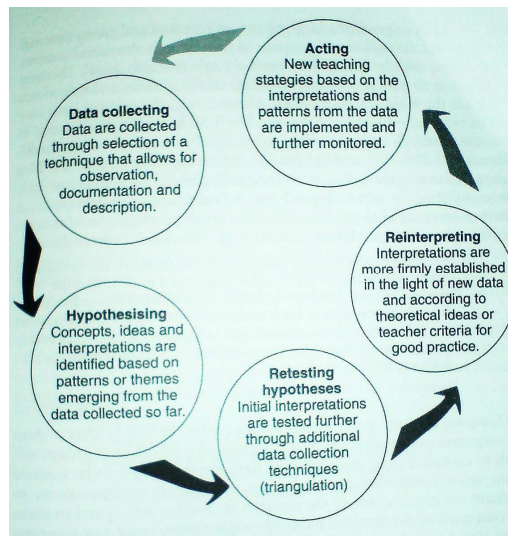
Figure 2: Data collection and analysis cycle (Burns, 1999:155).

One of my questionnaire respondents captures this fact when she suggests that the lack of research is due to the lack of expertise and methodology in research as teachers at the HLI do believe that in order to do AR, a teacher has to be fully equipped with research skills usually associated with the academics (see Burton and Mickan, 1993:113; and the Teachers' Voices section in chapter 1). When AR is seen as parasitic and highly demanding, teachers shun it as a natural reaction (Allwright, 1993:125). Allwright (2005) has expressed his disillusionment with the AR approach after some work with AR in different contexts:

> The …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   (Allwright, 2005: 354)

Teachers in such cases run the risk of burnout and early abandonment of the project as Allwright (2000) and Allwright and Miller (2007) note.

2.   Implicit in the definitions of AR, and even the practice of it, is the power division in this approach. The power paradigm in the academic approach had it that teachers receive the research results and are supposed to implement them. In the new AR approach, a parallel pattern emerges which emphasises teachers' power in the decision-making and throughout the whole process, regardless of learners'

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preferences or potential contribution to the investigation process. Auerbach (1994) (in McDonough, 2006:34) asserts that 'action research is teacher defined and directed'. Once teachers gain the power that was previously monopolised by academics; they themselves monopolise it when it comes to their learners' share in the research project. Students receive and abide by the interventions that teachers introduce (See Elliott's, 1996:69; Feldman's, 2007a and Richards and Farrell's, 2005:171 definitions of AR). In this regard, AR, I believe, has fallen victim to the tyranny it once opposed. Allwright and Bailey (1991) aware of both the damage of ignoring learners' contributions and the potential of including it, advise that 'our learners need to be handled sensitively so that they can play their part fully and not come to feel that research is being done *on* them, rather than *for* them and *with* them' (1991: 200 authors' emphasis).

3. AR is problem-driven. Nunan (1989) emphasises that AR should 'grow out of the problems and issues which confront teachers in their daily work' (1989:16).What practitioners of AR have emphasised (see Cohen *et al*, 2003:227, Nunan, 1989:15, Richards and Farrell, 2005: 171; Altrichter *et al*, 1993:4 and Wright, 2005:426 for example) is that being involved in AR will help solve classroom problems. Wright (2005) warns against focusing on problems as the starting point of AR, saying that such understanding would limit the practitioner's status to that of a 'troubleshooter' (2005:428). I believe that focusing research on problems is a symptom of a limited understanding of the nature of classrooms. If we intend to find problems in our classes and solve them one by one, then this means that we are focusing on weaknesses only, which makes the whole research process shrouded in negativity. Moreover, and as discussed in 3.1 above, classrooms are dynamic and complex contexts, which makes focusing on problems equals focusing on the observable and giving up pursuing the unobservable which is often the driving force behind what takes place in the classroom. Allwright's (2003) opinion is that focusing on problems makes AR a 'behaviourist' (2003:114) approach which is only active when there is a problem to fix.

4. Another reason relevant to the limited work of AR is an institutional one. AR is introduced as a high-stake practice at the HLI. Novice teachers have to be involved in doing AR for the sake of doing it. Such an experience blurs the vision of the relevance

of research in general. Teachers, therefore, do it once and for all. Unless *required* to do AR again, teachers seldom venture that territory. I agree with their reluctance to accept AR as there is little impact on practice as such (see teachers' voice in chapter 1). Added to the little relevance and applicability in reality, AR, as described above, constitutes a burden to busy teachers and being involved in it would result in 'getting research done badly, and also […] making the process so demanding that it is patently unsustainable, and therefore soon abandoned' (Allwright, 1997)

The above discussion of AR leads to the discussion of EP as an approach to classroom-research that has been proposed to suit the everyday work of teachers. EP practitioners are conscious of the drawbacks that make other approaches unsuitable for many teachers in many disparate contexts.

3.3   Exploratory Practice

In this section, I define EP and discuss its principals and procedures. Throughout the discussion, I will frequently resort to an epistemological explanation of some of the tenets of EP which will prove helpful for the purpose of this study.

3.3.1   Defining EP

The first point to capture one's attention about EP is the emphasis that research is done for the service of teaching. Doing research should not block or burden teachers; rather it should enhance the practice of teachers and make the process of teaching more enjoyable. Allwright and Lenzuen (1997) define EP as:

> a name given to a sustainable way of carrying out classroom investigations which provide language teachers (and potentially learners also) with a systematic framework within which to define areas of language teaching that they wish to explore, to refine their thinking about them and to investigate them further using classroom activities, rather than academic research techniques, as the investigative tool.   (Allwright and Lenzuen, 1997: 73)

The first adjective to describe EP is 'sustainable'. EP is intended to be integrated to the everyday practices of teachers without making them feel overwhelmed by the research process as is the case with AR. Clear in this definition as well is the power

division in the research process; it is teachers as well as learners who are participant in the investigations (see examples in chapter 3). What is unique, moreover, about EP is the integration of research and pedagogy; usual classroom activities are used to gather data, discuss issues and complete the research endeavour.

3.3.2   Principles of EP

EP was initially developed by Allwright through his involvement in consultancy programmes on classroom-research in different contexts. He proposed EP at a later stage in his career as substitute for other approaches he had previously propagated. Since the introduction of EP, Allwright and other practitioners have developed seven main principles for EP:

1.   *Put quality of life first:* This principal shows EP's concern with the classroom experience as a form of life itself. This concern is a recognition of the complexity and uniqueness (Wright, 2006, Hoban, 2002:26) of classroom life and the joint responsibility of teachers and learners to better improve the classroom life rather than solve problems (Wright, 2006:64). The emphasis on classroom 'life' as such shows an awareness of the personal and professional dimensions of classroom participants (Gieve and Miller, 2006). EP creates discursive space for professionals to address the unrealistic dualistic disintegration between life and work (Allwright and Miller, 2007). AR focuses on 'measurable achievement' which means finding quick solutions to practical problems (Allwright, 2003:128); EP, however, aspires to look at classroom as an organic entity where the more you delve beneath the surface the more you understand it, the more you understand it, the more enjoyable the experience of being in a classroom will be. Improving the quality of life in the classroom means transcending the troubleshooting strategy and attending to the intricacies that could improve the experience of language learning in that classroom. Gieve and Miller (2006) contend that 'individual learners experience a better quality of classroom life when their individual needs are met' (2006:26).

2.   *Work primarily to understand language classroom life:* if we want to sum up the whole EP approach, understanding, then, is what EP is is all about. Breen (2006) asserts that 'it is the attainment of a situated understanding of the life of the

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classroom, not through the time-consuming design and use of conventional research tools … that exemplifies the approach' (2006:215). EP's main goal is to reach an adequate understanding about an issue affecting the classroom life. The issue could be something negative, lack of participation, over-use of L1 for example, or it could be something positive, why learners respond enthusiastically to group work for example. These issues are best described by EP practitioners as 'puzzles'- something that demands to be understood. Uncovering the underlying patterns in both cases (negative or positive) would illuminate issues and bring about a deeper understanding that in itself is an improvement of the quality of life in the classroom. EP practitioners are keen not to rush and offer solutions or solve problems; they rather 'step back from them and see them in the larger context of the life (and lives) they affect' (Allwright, 2003:128). Celani (2006) believes that aiming at understanding is crucial to the development of critical professionals through investigating their practices and understanding them. Understanding is the crucial factor in the research process as we can build on our newly acquired understanding and decide where to go next in our investigation (Freeman, 1998).

3.   *Involve everybody:* there are two facets of EP involvement. The first one is learners' involvement in the investigation process. Learners know their own needs and involving them in the decision-making of classroom through investigating puzzles -with them rather than on them- shows EP awareness of the social dimension of classrooms. Learners could play an active role in the investigation rather than passively experience the changes introduced solely by teachers (Irujo, 2000:243). Fanselow and Bernard (2006) contend that '[s]tudents who explore classroom interactions are researchers just as are teachers or researchers or teacher-trainers who investigate classrooms' (2006:175). The other facet is the involvement of fellow teachers. As Freeman (1998) observes, teaching is the 'egg-crate profession' (1998:37) where teachers work in isolation and have little time for collegial dialogues. The notion of involving colleagues defies the 'egg-crate' concept and promotes sharing of expertise and opinions. This is easier said than done, however, because in a competitive culture, teachers are not usually comfortable to expose their practices to other colleagues or the administration. One of the aims of EP is to break the silence and promote a collegial dialogue at the institutional level that is characteristic of a learning community.

4. *Work to bring people together:* this principal is related to the previous one. The emphasis here is on creating a 'social harmony' (Allwright, 2003:129) within the institution. Traditionally, teachers have been separated from researchers. Corollary, there has been a division between teachers and learners as teachers enjoyed the power of decision-making. EP, on the other hand, aspires to bring different categories of the learning community together. Teachers within the same institute are encouraged to work closely and bring about new understandings of their work, and learners and teachers are working closely together to make sense of what goes on in their classrooms.

5. *Work also for mutual development:* investigating practices and being continually curious to understand the fluid nature of classrooms are characteristic of developmental activities for teachers. Learners, as well, are developing when they actively participate in understanding the underlying patterns related to their learning. A general institutional development movement is thought to be instigated by being involved in EP (see Slimani-Rolls, 2003).

6. *Integrating the work for understanding into classroom practice:* a distinctive feature of EP is its emphasis on making the research process doable for every teacher. In this regard, EP practitioners have suggested using standard pedagogical activities (See chapter 3). This integration has many advantages. First, teachers do not run the risk of burn-out as in early forms of research. Second, learners are in central position researching their own learning and participating actively. Moreover, classroom time is not wasted for the sake of research; rather research is contributing for the enhancement of learning in all its stages. Allwright (2003) suggests that 'in the language classroom […] this can mean simply giving learners an opportunity to discuss whatever is puzzling you and /or them in the time you would normally set aside for discussion anyway' (2003:130). EP, hence, is a 'linguistically productive' (Allwright and Lenzuen, 1996) approach into researching language learning and teaching. After all, EP is not a way of getting research done; it is a way of getting learning and teaching done in an informed and principled way through integrating a research perspective into learning and teaching.

7.   *Make the work a continuous enterprise:* as a reaction to many AR projects that has been characterised by being one-off projects, EP emphasises the sustainability of the research project. Sustainability is achieved through making the research project doable without much pressure on teachers or learners. At the same time, research is not blocking learning, so it could be done at any given time. The idea behind EP is introducing research into teachers' lives without it becoming an intolerable burden (Allwright, 1997). Finally, I agree with Allwright (1997) when he argues that:

> *Without* sustainability there is going to be nothing of value happening in the long term. Sustainability is crucial because the adoption of a research perspective (an ongoing concern for understanding) is arguably much more important than the production of one-off research projects, especially if the projects are poorly conducted and lead to burnout (author's emphasis. 1997:3).

Having discussed the principles of EP, I move now to a discussion of the procedure of an EP project.

3.3.3   Procedures of EP

The procedure of an EP project begins with the curiosity and commitment of a teacher to always reach a degree of understanding of what is happening in the classroom that facilitates both teaching and learning (Ashour, 2008a). There are seven stages of an EP project according to Allwright (1996, 2000a, 2000b). However, not all of the stages are mandatory; in many cases a teacher does not have to follow them all:

1. *Identifying a puzzle*: in this initial sage, a teacher may decide (with his/her learners) an area of their classroom life which they would like to explore in more depth. It could be students' participation, teacher's feedback or any puzzling aspect of classroom-life. The important point here is that what initiates an EP project is not a problem or weakness that we wish to respond to, what initiates EP is a wish to be better in teaching and improve the understanding of classroom life. AR as mentioned above usually begins with a problem; which makes many teachers -including teachers at the HLI- shun away from it as they do not want to show their problems or weaknesses.

2. *Reflecting upon it*: this step involves 'puzzling about' (Allwright, 2000) the issue in question. The main aim of reflecting on an issue is to get an adequate understanding of the issue without taking any direct action. Reflection could be individual or collective where a group of teachers try to think about an issue. An example of this step is reported by Naidu *et al* (1992) about a project the writers undertook in Bangalore, India. The writers puzzled about how to manage large classes. They gathered and decided to do something about this issue. After an initial period of collective reflection they decided to visit each other's classrooms to get a better sense of what was going on in the large classes. But after the first school visit, they sat down again and decided that they did not want to see their large classes as a 'problem' *per se*. They preferred instead to see an issue of heterogeneity, and they decided that they did not want to eliminate heterogeneity but rather to celebrate it in their classes. They wanted to find a way of enjoying and profiting from the fact that they had so many different people in their classes. That new understanding left them with the very considerable practical task of turning this new perception into a new classroom reality. They did not want to see this as a 'problem', but more as an opportunity.

   The example of Naidu *et al* is a special case where the level of understanding which teachers involved in this project reached was sufficient to jump right on to stage 6 and 7 below.

3. *Monitoring:* is a 'matter of gathering naturally occurring data about whatever you are still puzzling about' (Allwright, 2000a). It means paying special attention to the phenomenon: that is, puzzling to see if a better understanding could be reached. Keeping notes while learners are engaged in group work, for example, instead of spending all the time circulating to directly oversee their work, would be one way of monitoring. Again, it is important to note that 'monitoring' may bring enough understanding and therefore a teacher may wish to skip the next stages altogether and go straight to stages six and seven.

4. *Taking direct action to generate data:* when a teacher decides that the previous stages have not generated enough understanding to comprehend the issue in question fully, he/she may wish to take a direct action to generate data by using

standard pedagogic activities- e.g. : group work or 'Post It' notes. Allwright (2000a) argues that 'it is well worth trying, in the spirit of Exploratory Practice, to find classroom language activities that will themselves generate potentially very useful data' (2000a). This mode of collecting data is a major departure point of EP from other research methods which are characterised by being, as Allwright puts it, 'intrusive' and time-consuming (see Bailey *et al,* 2001: 143 for an example of the intrusive methods and their effect on students) . An example of the intrusive and time-consuming method is reported by Nunan (in Bailey *et al,* 2001). EP, on the other hand, uses normal pedagogical exercises and activities that would save the time -and trouble- that is usually wasted using interventionist techniques like the on reported by Bailey *et al* . EP has provided us with a new innovative way of not diverting from teaching and at the same time pursuing our investigations.

5. *Considering the outcomes so far, and deciding what to do next:* this step is marked with many questions. Here the teacher should ask him/herself whether they by this stage understand what puzzled them sufficiently to justify taking decisions about moving on, or whether they need another period of reflection and perhaps some more data. If more data are needed, does the teacher need to generate more, or is it naturally occurring? This stage is for data analysis and interpretation. Allwright (2000a) emphasises the importance of this stage and highlights the intellectual demand and ability it requires in order to arrive at conclusions and decisions that are mature and informed. Another option is that perhaps a teacher may decide that he/she needs more brains to join in so that an adequate understanding is reached.

6. *Moving on:* when the level of understanding sought in the previous stages is felt to be adequate a teacher may now move in different direction(s). The teacher, optimistically, may feel that the understanding reached is enough in itself to 'improve the quality of life' (Allwright, 2000a) in the classroom. Alternatively, a teacher may have discussed the motivation with his/her learners enough to feel that they are already responding positively about the issue that has initially puzzled the teacher or the students. Perhaps, also, at this stage the learners would have responded to the expectations of the teacher as a result of the extensive quest for understanding by both parties. (See chapter 3).

7. *Going public:* any of the decisions in the previous stages may involve a teacher wishing to go public. In the case of reaching an adequate understanding of something and actually improving the quality of classroom life as a result, then going public would be a matter of sharing the experience with others through workshops or conferences or publishing. The hope in this case is that other teachers may benefit from the experience and may even develop it and take it in other directions that are suitable for different contexts and learners. Going public may also generate a sort of discussion that might help in deciding how to use the understanding 'to design possible solutions (for example, a whole-class project)' (Allwright, 2000a). Another reason for going public may be because the level of understanding reached is not enough. So in such a case, going public would be a matter of recruiting other people to join in the search for a more complete satisfactory understanding.

(Adapted from Allwright, 1996, 2000a, 2000b)

4.   Summary

In this chapter, I have discussed three main models of research. First is the academic research that has alienated teachers and made them feel powerless regarding research into classroom. Second is AR which emphasises the teachers' own role in researching their classroom. However, AR has proved to be burdensome to many teachers in many contexts, including the HLI. I discussed some of the main reasons of the negative experience of AR. The last version of practitioner-research discussed is EP. I have discussed EP in the light of the previous problems that have often emerged from academic and AR. Throughout my discussion of EP, I have tried to highlight its capability of empowering teachers and helping them investigate their classes on a regular basis without being a parasitic activity on them. I have discussed EP's principles and procedures; what remains is to flesh out the bones of this argument with some actual examples of EP projects.

Chapter 3

Examples, Criticism and Implications of EP

In this chapter, I shall discuss an example of an EP project as support my argument in chapter 2. The example shows that EP is doable. I review some criticism of EP afterwards. In The final section I conclude my discussion of EP and suggest some practical plans related to EP for myself and my colleagues at the HLI.

1.   EP in Practice

A quick glance at the titles in the *Language Teaching Research* [LTR] journal (from 2003 until now) shows the success of EP through the actual research projects informed by EP principles. These projects are encouraging and sufficient to make teachers try EP in their classes as an ongoing activity. For the purpose of this study, I include an example of classroom-research informed by EP principles in Appendix 1 and shall briefly discuss it below

1.1   Discussion of the Post-it Feedback example

In the example below, the teacher refrained from considering the lack of participation as a problem *per se;* rather she considered it a puzzle that she wanted to explore with her students. She resorted to the 'locally-negotiated' (Tarone, 2006:163) discourse with students using a familiar classroom activity-Post it feedback. Five minutes was the time to respond to the Post-it prompt and 30 minutes was the time the teacher used to tidy up the responses and make them presentable. This means that EP has not, in this example, distracted teacher or learners from their main goal or wasted their time. The teacher has brought her data to class to share it with students which enhances students' responsibility in the decision-making in the classroom. Özdeniz (1996) believes that 'one way of generating multiple perspectives is to analyse the data together with […] the students themselves' (1996:119).

Doing EP in that class has helped both teacher and students understand what was going on in their class and why students were not participating actively. The result of the project is a drastic change in understanding about the patterns of interaction in the classroom and a better quality of classroom life as the teacher reported.

2.   Criticism of EP

In spite of the innovative insights, accessibility and proliferation of EP, it has not gone without suspicion. I discuss two main criticisms here; the first is related to some practitioners' fear that EP would follow the steps of AR and become a sophisticated approach. The second is a suspicion of the over-localisation of EP results, meaning that EP findings and understandings are not generalisible to other contexts.

Burns (2005) claims that EP 'appears to follow fairly closely some of the major processes of action research, while at the same time apparently disallowing the status of research to teachers' investigative activities' (2005:246). Looking at the principles of EP discussed in chapter 2 and the accounts of EP projects conducted to date shows that EP is not similar to AR and practitioners of EP have been empowered by this approach. I believe that among the many differences between EP and AR is the philosophy behind each: AR aims at change through responding to problems while EP aims at a better quality of classroom life through understanding what happens and why it happens the way it does. In our example in Appendix 1, the degree of understanding was a guarantee for better experience of classroom life. Zhang (2004) is an example where a teacher tries to introduce change to a practical problem which is unproductive extensive reading lessons. She reports how she tried one idea after the other without the slightest success, until she came across the ideas of EP. Abiding by EP principles, she was able to rethink the situation and devise ways to help her learners and herself better understand the learning situation. This understanding eventually resulted in much more satisfactory and productive lessons (Allwright, 2005). Moreover, teachers doing EP projects are not deprived of the research status; instead, they are given more power and prestige. The accounts of EP published to date in professional journals (LTR for example) or presented in conferences show the profession's recognition of EP as a valid practitioner research approach and a

recognition of teachers' diligence through sharing it with other professionals all over the world.

The other argument -generalisability and over-localisation- was first predicted by Allwright (2003) and articulated and defended by Wright (2005). Allwright predicted that some practitioners will have some doubts about EP's generalisability and the ability to apply EP findings and understandings in diverse contexts. Allwright's response was represented in the simple loop diagram below:
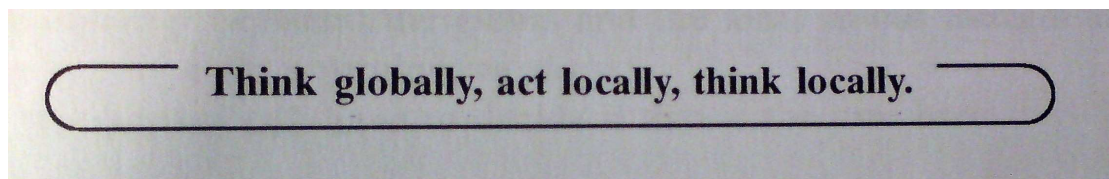

Figure 3: local understanding vs. global principles (Allwright, 2003:115)

Allwright's argument has it that in an EP framework we are aided by global principles, like bringing people together and pursuing mutual development for teachers and learners…etc. At the same time, our understandings and investigations are context-bound. Therefore, the understanding we reach is informed by the global and general principles but suits the unique context it has set to address. Given the uniqueness and complexity of each classroom, EP, I believe, takes into account this heterogeneity of classrooms and thrives while dealing with the intricacies of a specific context. Wright (2005) mentions that '[a] danger of this approach is … over-localisation' (2005:428). Wright argues in the same place that the over-localisation is possible only when teachers' pedagogical knowledge is derived from practice.

I believe that local understanding as such is not something to be considered as a weakness of EP. Allwright (2006) contends that all classroom issues or puzzles are 'reducible, ultimately, and in practice to 'local' ones, and so require 'local' solutions, solutions that respect the uniqueness of all human situations and all humans' (2006:13). Another call for the respect of the local context comes from Tarone (2006):

> A more productive approach […] is the development of local, detailed descriptions of classroom learners, teachers and their activities; such descriptions are more likely to lead to the individual teacher's understanding, which in turn can support a more effective classroom practice by that teacher in his or her local, specific context.   (2006:163).

Teachers in general are more interested in their own classes and improving them rather than reaching understandings or findings that are applicable to diverse contexts. No two learners are the same; so how could we apply what suits one group of learners to another group in a different context and different social, economic factors? In this respect, I believe that EP, by focusing on local understanding informed by global principles, is a powerful tool for teachers to better understand and improve their classes.

3.   Implications of EP Discussion

The above discussion of EP (principles, procedures and focus) leads me to the belief that EP is practitioner-research approach that is 'doable' for the majority of teachers at the HLI. Being involved in EP is not a luxury extra to what we already do in our classes, doing EP is a way of improving ourselves as teachers, empowering our students and enhancing their responsibilities in their learning, and a way of getting together of colleagues at our institution.

My discussion of EP has so far convinced me that I shall be an exploratory practitioner once I begin teaching in the HLI. I shall work closely with my learners to identify interesting puzzles, the exploration of which may make their experience, and mine, of being in a classroom more enjoyable and productive. The next step is to show my colleagues at the HLI what EP is all about. Addressing them in workshops that we hold every week is one way of doing it; however, it is not the best way. Asking them for their opinions and to join in the EP project that I will conduct is another way. One further way could be through showing them what I do in my class and how I am going about it. I believe that this way could intrigue teachers and make them think about EP and instigate the desire to be better teacher through using EP in one's classes. My first target is publishing my EP accounts in the local University Magazine, something which is considered prestigious among teachers at the HLI. When teachers see that EP is doable and it proves to improve the experience of classroom life without much pressure on them and finally they could publish their

accounts or share it with others, I believe teachers would be highly encouraged to integrate EP into their practices.

My initial plan regarding EP cannot be crystallised at this stage as it is impractical to suggest imaginary puzzles and discuss how to work them out. EP emphasises that a puzzle should be interesting not only to the teacher, but also to other participants such as colleagues and students. However, I could draw a rough draft of one possible EP project that is recurrent at my institution. One institutional demand of teachers is the evaluation of coursebooks. As mentioned in chapter 1, such a project usually takes on an *ad hoc* nature where teachers feel pressurised while doing it. One way of rethinking the evaluation of coursebooks could be to do it with learners themselves as coursebooks are, first and foremost, written for them. One way of generating data from learners about coursebooks, suggested by Altrichter *et al* (1993)*,* is through the use of metaphors. Students, after making sure that they understand what a metaphor is, could be asked to draw or write up whatever they think a suitable metaphor of a coursebook maybe. As Altrichter *et al* (1993) argues, metaphors have the capability of 'transforming meaning between objects, events or feeling … and generate meaning' (1993:172) in an interesting way. Metaphors, I believe, could reveal some deep insights and beliefs about an issue by generating associations and feelings of that issue, coursebook in this example. Another way is to train learners to keep a regular journal of their learning which could be used for discussing the coursebook with the administration.

In a lively and productive classroom, a teacher is faced with puzzles everyday. To make an interesting and enjoyable experience of being in the classroom, a teacher, I believe, could use EP as an everyday dimension of their teaching practice.

4.   Final Words About EP

I think that EP is an innovative approach to classroom-research that could plausibly be integrated into teachers' everyday practices without the fear of burnout or early abandonment of research. EP treats the classroom as a complex, unique entity which entails understanding this entity rather than trying to respond to phenomena appearing in the classroom. EP is about life in the classroom and enhancing the opportunity of

learning in that context. The Tseng and Ivanič's (2006) image of EP is both relevant and intriguing. They represent teaching as the sowing of seeds and learning happening when the seeds fall on fertile land and ultimately turn into fruit. Some seeds will, for sure, fall on a stony ground while others will fall on fertile land; EP is thought to increase the possibility of the seed falling on a fertile land, or in more technical terms, often better learning opportunities.

Finally, I believe that in order to start a tradition of EP at the institutional level, a new spirit of trust and sharing of experiences needs to dominate the collegial relationship in the institute. Some teachers are worried about their self-esteem so they prefer not to share what is happening in their classes with other colleagues for fear of public scrutiny and loss of face (Burns, 1999). Therefore, teachers need to, first of all, be attuned to the fact that sharing experiences and opening up for colleagues to assist and participate is a healthy sign of a learning community. Involvement in EP, afterwards, means involvement in a collegial and developmental dialogue that would, hopefully, prevail in the whole institute. I end the story with a recent account of EP from Allwright (September 2008, personal e-mail communication) which succinctly states what EP has achieved so far and promise to achieve:

> "EP did seem to help people work their way through burnout and find pleasure in teaching again. It also seems extremely helpful for situations where teachers are not enjoying a good relationship with their learners."

Student (non-)participation in whole-class discussion

Setting: A class of 25 MA English language teachers (mainly international students from China, Korea and Japan)

Source: Edwards (2005) Available online from ProDAIT website.

The Puzzle:

Whenever I addressed a question to the whole class, very few volunteered to answer. I thought this strange in a class full of experienced teachers studying at masters level, even after reflecting on possible reasons, such as different cultural norms. I felt their reluctance to speak in public was preventing them from sharing views or comparing experiences. I wanted their views and explanations. An EP principle is that the focus should be on exploring puzzles rather than solving problems; although my puzzle was also a problem in my view, my aim was to discover why it was occurring, rather than to move straight to seeking a solution.

The Method:

During the last five minutes of class I distributed very small post-it notes, asked my question, and then asked students to write answers on the note, which they should leave unsigned. They stuck completed notes to a sheet of paper as they left the room at the end of the session. A principle of EP is that it should be conducted through normal teaching activities: I regularly use mini-post-it notes to gather ad hoc student feedback on ongoing course satisfaction, things students would like to ask or tell me etc, so these students were familiar with the technique. Furthermore, as it took only 5 minutes of class time, it did not distract us significantly from the main business of the course.

There were several repeat responses, e.g. 'I think that my opinion might not interest my classmates.' I grouped these and typed them up to return to the students, adding

comments and extra questions of my own. The whole thing fitted onto two sides of A4 paper and took me about 30 minutes. See example

I distributed the collated comments before break for further discussion / post-it feedback. Then something unexpected happened: After break, I had anticipated discussing my further questions, but this was pre-empted by one of the students immediately saying 'We've just been discussing the sheet you gave us' and another interrupted and said 'Yes, and personally, I think it's important to speak out in class, it's just that I felt embarrassed to, because we aren't used to doing that back home.' A third chimed in, 'Yes, it's the same for me, and to be honest, when I read these comments I was really surprised to find so many others felt the same way as I did. We were talking about that, and we've agreed that we should make an effort to speak out. Now we know we are not alone in our feelings, somehow it makes it easier'. It suddenly felt as though a cloak of tension had been lifted from the group. The awkwardness we had all felt had evaporated. By involving the students, the problematic aspect of the puzzle had been resolved.

Observations, Reflection and Interpretation

The understanding gained was not just the relatively superficial one that 'I am not alone in my anxieties about speaking out in class', but the deeper one that it was OK to talk about the classroom processes that were all participating in, and that doing so somehow broke down the conventional social barriers between teacher and students; a new sense of openness and mutual trust improved the quality of classroom life for all of us, and the remainder of the course was far more relaxed, and discursive, than the initial sessions.

Implications

Open discussion of classroom processes among student teachers in a culturally diverse classroom (possibly initiated through a non-threatening medium, like the post-it note written feedback) is a powerful tool in promoting understanding of our own classroom and classrooms in general, not only in terms of the specific process explored, but through the very act of exploring a process, we are confronted with the benefits of involving all participants in exploratory practice

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