A Discussion of Practitioner Research: How Are Reflective Practice, Action Research, and Exploratory Practice Different?

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Abstract

The time has come to see the three major forms of Practitioner Research under a general umbrella as well as distinct choices and commitments to pursue professional self-inquiry into the way and ways we teach and how our students (may) learn. The focus of this paper is on understanding each approach by tracing its origins and key concepts. The aim of this working paper is to take the first step in building an accessible foundation of knowledge from which classroom teachers can then pursue their own interest or concern in the method that appeals to them the most.

Key words: practitioner research, reflection, action, exploration, comparison

Background

One impetus for this paper began many years ago when I regularly attended presentations, seminars, and workshops on Reflective Practice (RP), Action Research (AR), and Exploratory Practice (EP). During these sessions in Japan (JALT), the U.S. and Canada (TESOL), Thailand (Thai TESOL), and the UK (BAAL), I heard about the origins, key concepts, and applications of various forms of teachers studying their own teaching and classroom interactions. Some ideas seemed to be similar among the three ways[1] while other ideas appeared slightly different. While the literature explains each one separately and even side by side, there was not much discussion comparing them (with Ellis, 2012, being a recent exception). I hope that the following discussion will contribute to language teaching research and self-professional development. Thinking about differences can lead teachers to fresh insights into each of the three practices and more importantly to help them decide which method suits them the best.

The underlying belief shared by all three methods is that doing some form of practitioner research (PR) is a natural and logical component of continuous professional development. If we believe professionalism means being the most knowledgeable and skillful practitioner that we possibly can be on an ongoing basis, then there must surely be a place for PR in some shape and form. What adds to my particular interest in studying various forms of PR over the years is my long personal contact with teacher educators (e.g., Dick Allwright, Carol Rodgers, and Anne Burns) with the first two having been my teachers.

Professional self-inquiry revolves around a commonly held belief among the methods that teachers are in an ideal position to observe, analyze, and improve their teaching. After all no one knows a teacher's habits and routines better, not to mention the students and local contextual features, than the

teacher himself/herself.

In this transitional time in Japanese university English education reform that is moving away from traditional teaching and learning toward greater emphasis on obtaining knowledge and skills for global communication, I feel the time is ripe to see all three forms under the general umbrella of PR as well as distinct choices and commitments to pursue professional self-inquiry and development. The focus of this paper is on offering insights into each approach through a discussion of origins[2] and key concepts. It goes without saying that each approach merits much more extensive coverage than I am able to give here (see the references listed for further reading). The aim of this working paper is to take the first step in building an accessible foundation of knowledge from which classroom teachers can then pursue their own interest or concern in the method that appeals to them the most. What follows is a brief review of each approach.

Reflective Practice (RP)

To maintain the state of doubt and to carry on systematic and protracted inquiry – these are the essentials of thinking[3]. (John Dewey, 1910/1997, p. 13)

As for the origins of RP, it is impossible not to mention John Dewey (1859-1952), the influential American education philosopher. From his writings, such terms as 'intelligent action' (to let action be informed by previous inquiry and learning), 'presence' (to be open to observe without any prejudgment), and 'wholeheartedness' (to check one's teaching from multiple perspectives), have been part of the vocabulary still used in teacher training courses in the U.S. and the U.K. I will refer to Rodgers (2002) for an accessible introduction to the key ideas of Dewey whose prose can be 'work' to read and understand. Often his ideas are highly philosophical, yet grounded in practical educational concerns such as finding appropriate materials and teaching methods for each new generation of students. For this reason (among others), he remains the seminal thinker in the field.

One reason why more teachers do *not* do RP can be explained by identifying 'four problems associated with the lack of a clear definition of reflection' (Rodgers, 2002, p. 843): (1) How is it different from other forms of thought? (2) What skills show evidence of reflection? (3) Without a common language, how can teachers talk about it? (4) Without a clear sense of what we mean by reflection, how can teacher and student development be researched?

What distinguishes 'reflection' from usual thinking? Rodgers replies by giving us four criteria for 'doing' reflection. It is: (1) a 'meaning-making process', (2) a 'systematic, rigorous, and disciplined way of thinking', (3) an activity that takes place 'in community, in interaction with others', and (4) drawn to 'attitudes that value the personal and intellectual growth of oneself and of others' (p. 845). By having a better understanding of Dewey's original ideas through these four distinguishing features Rodgers builds a forum to talk about reflection. A shared vision and language can be formed. In this way, teachers can more fully derive 'meaning from experience – thinking to learn' (p. 844).

Another way to think of 'reflection' was popularized in the 90's among teacher-researchers at international conferences such as TESOL by Donald Schön's (1983) widely cited book, 'The Reflective Practitioner'. He makes an important distinction between two types of reflection:

reflection-*in*-action and reflection-*on*-action. This separation of types of reflection clearly aligns them with familiar stages of teaching. Reflection-*on*-action (in the previous lesson) as part of the pre-lesson planning is then followed by reflection-*in*-action during the lesson. This will then lead back to reflection-*on*-action immediately after the class. The teacher recalls moments during the classroom interactions. This three step process is systematic in making sense of both preparation/review of a lesson and carrying it out. Each step informs the next step: planning→ teaching→ reflecting. Next, we will see how AR carries the reflective process further by showing teachers how to take action.

Action Research (AR)

[It is] 'a form of self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations to improve the rationality and justice of their own practices, and the situations in which those practices are carried out. (Carr and Kemmis, 1986, p. 162)

Ellis (2012) explains that the above definition of AR 'applies to a wide range of professional activities' (p. 27), not only language teaching. He credits (along with Carr and Kemmis) the origins of AR to Kurt Lewin (1948) whose research on American factory apprentices (among other types of social practices in the mid-1940's) showed that the highest level of output came from those who made their own 'action plans'. Ellis (2012) in agreement defines AR to be 'a form of self-reflective enquiry undertaken by practitioners in their own contexts of action' (p. 27). Thus we see how the approaches (RP and AR thus far) share a common focus on professional learning (in a 'democratic' sense which avoids dependency on top-down orders) from one's own working environment. Some critics, however, have questioned whether AR is really 'research' in a scholarly sense since the first and foremost concern is localized not generalized.

AR came first to my attention through the teacher training and development projects conducted in Australia in the Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) under the guidance of the National Centre of English Language Teaching and Research (NCELTR) at Macquarie University in the 1980's. Since 1948, this large-scale national ESL program in conjunction with the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs has tried to address the English language needs of adult immigrants coming to settle in Australia from around the world. According to Burns (2006) who was involved in AMEP as a teacher educator and researcher working with ESL teachers, an AR stance was adopted to investigate 'teaching and learning practices and classroom processes' and to apply its insights to 'organizational curriculum and resource development' (p. 1).

Nunan (1989), at the time a colleague of Burns at Macquarie University, in his well-read book, *Understanding Language Classrooms*, drew teachers' attention to the innovative work that was going on in Australia. His important contribution is showing teachers the practical application of AR through clear step by step descriptions and illustrations (see p. 13 which is based on Kemmis and McTaggart, 1985, p. 14). The four steps are: (1) Plan (2) Act and Observe (3) Reflect (4) Revise. Rework the plan then start the next cycle with new action, observation, and reflection. Through these steps, Nunan drew many teachers' attention to the how-to-do procedure.

In addition, Nunan (1989) introduces AR through an alternative perspective consisting of

'developmental phases' (also from Kemmis and McTaggart, 1985): Phase I is the development of a plan to improve what already is being done. Phase II is the implementation of the plan. Phase III is the observation of the effects of actions taken. Phase IV is the reflection on these effects. Phase IV is critical for not only completing the 'cycle', but also for providing the basis for further planning and implement in this ongoing process.

What is characteristic of this approach is its emphasis on the cyclical nature of self-inquiry. Reflection, at the end of one cycle, leads to revising (the initial plan) for the next cycle. AR guides the practitioner clearly on a step by step basis. The ongoing nature of research is exemplified here. The sense of continuity is AR's strength. One possible weakness is attributed more to the practitioner's actions than the design of the method. According to Rod Ellis[4], very few teachers complete a full cycle with findings, let alone move into the next cycle.

In recent years, Anne Burns, now at Aston University, UK, and previously of Macquarie University, Australia, has been at the forefront of applying AR in postgraduate teacher training programs (pre-service and in-service). Burns (2006) emphasizes not only the power of teacher-initiated research to make informed changes to their practice, but also the collaborative dimensions of such an undertaking. Here is a connection with RP that both personal and collective growth is important.

Exploratory Practice (EP)

> Teachers are officially in charge of the practice of language teaching in the classroom, but they have to leave the actual practice of language learning to the learners. … So why not think of learners as *practitioners of learning*, and not just as 'targets of teaching'? (Dick Allwright, 2009, p. 2) Note: italics and quotation marks are in the original.

Dick Allwright introduced the term, 'Exploratory Teaching' in the final section of Allwright and Bailey (1991). The final sentence of the book is a call for those interested in a 'renewed sense of purpose and direction' to work *with* students not *on* them. He calls on teachers, learners, and researchers to collaborate 'so that we can all gradually contribute to unravelling yet more of the mysteries of language classrooms, and to becoming more effective in the process' (p. 200). I think it is important to distinguish EP from RP and AR in order to position its stance as a comparatively recent form of PR to appear in the literature. A formal statement of what would develop into EP was made in Allwright and Bailey (1991). However, the origins of EP go further back to Allwright's interest in Prabhu's (1990) conclusion, 'there is no best method' and before that to Prabhu's noted work (1987) on the Bangalore Project (started in 1979) that is based on the concept of teachers following a regional procedural syllabus.

Prabhu discovered that teachers at the local level will basically teach the way they do/want despite national standardization. In the US, a similar line of inquiry on a large scale was pursued in the Pennsylvania Project (Smith, 1970) where research into finding the 'best method' by comparing grammar translation, audiolingual method (ALM), and a combination of the two showed little difference in standardized test performances. Clark (1969) pointed out inherent problems in the design

such as trying to generalize the effects of a particular method when a wide range of teachers (in terms of experience) were involved. Allwright went on to declare the end of 'best methods' and thus encouraged teachers to explore and discover local contextual solutions.

One insight gained from these large-scale experiments is the difficulty in guaranteeing that teachers can/will provide students with a similar learning experience despite efforts to standardize teaching methods. Allwright argues that teachers matter and what they do individually matters even more. In line with RP in particular, EP offers teachers a way of thinking for themselves in preparation for possible new action. The heart of the matter for EP is connecting what learners do (and learn) with what teachers teach. Learners are an integral part of the collaborative process.

More recently, Allwright's collaboration with Rod Ellis as the special editor of the monthly 'Practitioner Research' section of the *Language Teaching Research* journal has brought EP wider exposure with concrete examples of practitioner research (e.g., Nakamura, 2008). In the lead article which initiated the series, Allwright (2003) addresses a request from some teachers for more explicit guidance in doing EP. What follows are brief paraphrased descriptions of some general principles.

(1) Put the 'quality of life' first.
(2) Work primarily to understand the life of the classroom.
(3) Involve students as 'co-researchers'.
(4) Work for collegiality with other parties involved.
(5) Work for mutual benefit and development.
(6) Integrate the work of understanding (i.e., EP) into classroom practice.
(7) EP should be a continuous enterprise.

Allwright is very much aware of the dangers of adding work to teachers who are already working at their limits. Thus, these descriptions serve as a guide for thinking ('reflection') and consideration more than as a set of instructions to follow to the letter. EP realistically takes into account how busy teachers are already by suggesting that investigative tools and classroom activities should be one in the same, not separate practices. In other words, integrate the inquiry into the classroom practice already in place. EP emphasizes making the research activity a collegial, pleasant, and productive enterprise by looking at 'puzzles' rather than problems and working cooperatively with students, not apart from them for mutual benefit. Without making self-inquiry feasible and attractive, teachers will see any form of PR as simply too demanding of their limited time and resources. Allwright (2005) identifies two ethical concerns as the driving force for what EP strives to correct: 'The damaging split between researchers and teachers and the high risk of burnout associated with current proposals for teacher-based classroom research' (p. 27).

Discussion: How are they different?

Ellis (2012) has been informative in introducing readers to general concepts of each of the three forms of PR. I will begin the discussion of comparing the methods with his thoughts on AR and EP. It will continue with brief mention of how AR and RP are described in a language teaching research dictionary. Finally, this paper will wrap up this discussion with my own ideas on how the three forms

are different.

According to Ellis, three basic differences between AR and EP are in terminology, data collection, and length of study. AR starts with a 'task' whereas EP looks for a 'puzzle'. While this difference may seem trivial and inconsequential, it shows how AR is based on more formal research whereas EP uses what I call a 'teacher-friendly' approach. In this same line of contrast, AR talks about data collection as in research while EP recommends integrating the investigation with the established classroom practice. AR has clearly defined stages and even a completion of a cycle. EP like teaching itself is seen as a long-term commitment with less predictable and clearly defined stages or outcomes. Ellis concludes whether it is AR or EP, 'the significance of such research lies not in whether it can or cannot contribute to our theoretical understanding of L2 classroom but to its relevance to language pedagogy' (2012, p. 33).

According to the *Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics* (1992 second edition), AR is described in its first entry as 'Research which has the primary goal of finding ways of solving problems, bringing about social change or practical action, in comparison with research which seeks to discover scientific principles or develop general laws and theories' (p. 4). The second entry specifies 'in teacher education' and includes such terms as 'small-scale investigative projects' and 'following cycle of activities'. The definitions attempt to bridge the research paradigm between researcher and practitioner (i.e., classroom language teacher). Furthermore, AR is not limited to teaching and learning a foreign language. 'Solving problems, bringing about social change' ties AR with RP though AR stresses *solution* more than *reflection*.

There is no entry in this dictionary for RP. Instead the definition is specified as *Reflective Teaching* which is 'an activity sometimes used in teacher preparation programs which aims to provide student teachers with a controlled teaching experience and a chance to consider the nature of teaching thoughtfully and objectively' (p. 311). Interestingly, a general description of RP as an applied approach in other fields such as engineering, business, and nursing is not mentioned. RP offers professionals in any field a way to address complex and unpredictable problems. In addition, the above definition is limited to 'student teachers' whereas the true intent of RP from Dewey's view is to help people who are already teaching and often for many years. As for EP, there is no mention, which confirms my earlier claim that it is a relatively recent entry to the PR literature.

My jumping off point into the discussion on comparisons is to look at a difference between EP and AR in their initial assumption. EP starts with trying to understand the situation whereas AR assumes that change is needed. EP would claim that once we have a clearer understanding of the situation from multiple perspectives then we can consider whether change is needed or not. For example, we might find that change is not necessary and that it might even be detrimental. I see RP as taking a middle ground or even a higher ground by its stress on taking 'intelligent action'. Action is taken once we have observed and analyzed the circumstance.

Both EP and AR question the routine and 'ritualized' behaviors of teaching. I would argue that the initial assumption shapes our purpose of inquiry and ultimately what we notice. When we want to change some aspect of our teaching (or our students' learning), we look for what we see as a 'weakness' or 'problem'. In research, a problem is the focus of inquiry, but in teaching it is sometimes associated with a 'shortcoming' of the teacher. Allwright in the spirit of promoting collegiality prefers

the word, 'puzzle', as it is less evaluative and more curiosity oriented.

Another difference among the three forms of PR is geographic and historical. For example, RP is a stand again a trend in American education (in Dewey's time) toward greater rote learning and prescriptive teaching methods and materials. He advocated democratic reform in education by empowering teachers to think and act for themselves. Included is the association with democracy. In Australia, AR provided an immediate way to address a national need to provide the influx of immigrants with English education. Teachers would face a 'new' situation with an emerging context where the students would re-settle in Australia. Learning through self-study would accelerate professional development of relevant teaching skills in a way no previous teacher manual could. The newly recruited teachers would encounter students (of all ages) from very different backgrounds as formal learners and varied entry status from business migration to refugees. AR started with specific agendas in specific periods of time while EP speaks to a timeless universal relationship between teaching and learning with particular contexts supplied by each practitioner. The most wide-spread and organized application of EP is in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil where teachers organize their own communities of practice. EP raises the profile of learners to also be considered 'practitioners' as they are the ones who have to 'get on' with the learning. EP also draws attention to the importance of involving teachers, students, *and* administrators to work in the shared educational environment.

Yet another area for discussion of potential differences between RP and the other two methods is its heavily philosophical view. Dewey gives typically mundane words conceptual meanings. Dewey (1938) sees the fundamental issue in education in terms of 'traditional' versus 'progressive'. One is static in the knowledge determined to be important while the other is dynamic and adapted to a multi-dimensioned world of experience. He cautions against thinking that progressive education is 'planless improvisation'. In this sense, systematic and rigorous inquiry based on the scientific method is essential. In contrast, what Dewey means by 'traditional' education is the routine of handing down of 'plans' and 'programs' from the past without consideration for changing times.

Helpful in better understanding this comparison between 'traditional' and 'progressive', Zeichner and Liston (1996) explain that 'Dewey makes an important distinction between action that is routine and action that is reflective' (p. 9). The former is mainly guided by 'impulse, tradition, and authority' and implies teachers 'uncritically' accepting everything that goes on. The latter 'involves active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or practice in light of the reason that supports it and the further consequences to which it leads'. … RP 'is a holistic way of meeting and responding to problems, a way of being a teacher' (Zeichner and Liston, 1996, p. 9). Through this brief sampling of Dewey's terminology, I feel that RP serves as both the foundation of thought and the aspiring and lofty intentions envisioned for PR in general and AR and EP in particular. There is a level of abstraction in RP that is not found in the practical 'nuts and bolts' approach of AR. While EP has some philosophical terms and beliefs such as 'quality of life in the classroom', the core of EP is foreign language education specific. EP strives for thinking well, openly and systematically, to gain insights into what is normally overlooked in our teaching routines. Reflection in both EP and RP is distinguished from our usual thoughts which may be random and undirected. It is a disciplined type of thinking (not unlike 'mindfulness', a form of mediation) that takes 'practice'.

Areas for further discussion include philosophical comparison of AR and EP in the stances they

take. For example, EP is similar to RP in the priority given to work for understanding, but different in that RP is broadly based in education of any and all fields (e.g., nursing, engineer, business) while EP is directed at foreign/second language teachers and learners. EP varies to some degree with AR in that understanding is more directly seen as a step to be taken *before* action. AR appears to assume that change is necessary thus some action needs to be taken to change the status quo. According to Carr and Kemmis (1986, p. 165), two aims of AR are to '*improve* and to *involve*' (italics are in the original). They elaborate three steps for improvement in the order of: practice, understanding of the practice, and the situation. EP, in contrast, would even argue that once we have a clearer understanding of the situation, change might not be needed.

AR like RP appears to prioritize the actions that teachers take to better the classroom environment. On the other hand, EP seems equally concerned with teachers empowering learners through improved knowledge and skills to bring a closer connection between what teachers teach and learners learn. One of Allwright's students, Slimani-Rolls (2005) encapsulates the spirit of EP in the title of her thought-provoking paper, *Rethinking task-based language learning: What we can learn from the learners*. The following passage from Schön (1983) explicitly brings AR and RP together in a joint endeavor in a procedural sense.

> The development of action science cannot be achieved by researchers who kept themselves removed from contexts of action, nor by practitioners who have limited time, inclination, or competence for systematic reflection. Its development will require new ways of integrating reflective research and practice (p. 320).

EP was still several years away from being introduced (at that time, in 1983), but we can see how EP would guide explorations into new and innovative ways by making links between research to practice and researchers to teachers *and* students. In addition, EP unlike the quoted statement above for AR and RP, tries to *include* 'practitioners who have limited time', not to exclude them.

I conclude this discussion on comparing RP, AR, and EP with a look at the names of each approach for further implications and differences. For instance, for RP, the distinguishing feature is captured by the word, 'reflection'. Much attention is given to how this type of thinking is different from our everyday thinking (and what we *think* about 'experience'). Reflection is an essential part of all forms of PR, so the word is all encompassing. 'Practice' implies ongoing effort to refine a skill, namely a disciplined way of thinking. When we think about AR, the first word encourages taking action right now. It is no coincidence that AR is the clearest of the three in describing a step by step 'action' plan. The strength is the clear instruction. One possible weakness of putting the word 'action' in front of research is it is no longer the stand alone concept of Research with a big R, but rather a qualified form of research with a small 'r'.

There is some confusion in academia of AR's place as it is done by teachers in researching their own teaching and classrooms (rather than a large-scale study of others' classrooms). An attempt is made in the design AR more than the other two methods to base data collection on formal research methods even though Dewey does mention that RP does have ties with the 'scientific method'. EP sets exploration as its first order of business as a teacher. Explore and the teacher may be surprised by

discovering the unexpected. 'Practice' lets us know that it is skill-based and that it takes time to learn. It also implies that others can use the same principles of the practice to share what is found locally to a larger community. 'Practice' in EP is more about principle than procedure. Thinking well takes practice.

A final difference is AR has fully embraced giving teachers a step by step procedure to follow. What personalizes the experience is the specific area of investigation that each teacher brings to the study. EP, in contrast, is about articulating principles and values in a similar way to RP where democratic and ethical concerns are always present. EP champions the rights of the learner and RP starts with supporting teachers. RP is at once both a form of PR as well as the core feature of all forms of PR, namely reflection on a teacher's experience in the classroom. The title of Dewey's (1910) classic book, *How we think*, makes a case for education reform that starts with the practice of learning how to think so we may be able to take 'intelligent action'. I give the final words to Dewey who shows that thinking well is ultimately about what students do.

> The teacher's problem – as a teacher – does not reside in managing a subject-matter, but in adjusting a subject-matter to the nurture of thought.
> (Dewey, 1910/1997, p. 204)

Notes

(1) I use various terms throughout the paper interchangeably (e.g., ways, approaches, methods, forms and practices) when referring to Reflective Practice, Action Research, and Exploratory Practice as a group.

(2) 'Origins' are selective and open to interpretation as to which authors and ideas came first. This is not a definitive history of the approaches, but rather some background information commonly referred to in the literature of language teaching and research.

(3) The quote is taken from the 1997 Dover edition of the unbridged work originally published in 1910 by D. C. Heath & Co., Boston.

(4) This observation was made at an Action Research workshop at a JALT conference some years ago.

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