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The ethics and practice of L+ classroom research

Symposium on practitioner research at Rikkyo University, Japan (online) on 5 March 2022

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1. Introduction

For most of us, the global Covid-19 pandemic has undoubtedly cast a pall over many of the activities we had previously taken for granted. Nevertheless, it has also encouraged us as an education community to create new connections and foster opportunities for discussions more accessible than traditional in-person events. It was to such an end that this online symposium was organized and hosted by the Centre for Foreign Language Education and Research at Rikkyo University, Japan. Approximately 150 people from around the world pre-registered for the event, bringing participants together with a carefully selected group of presenters invested in practitioner research in additional language (L+)[1] learning. The symposium aimed to offer both experienced and emerging perspectives on the ethics and conduct of classroom practitioner research. In doing so, we hoped to lend momentum to interested parties who might wish to try implementing or further deepen their understandings of this burgeoning area (Consoli & Dikilitaş, 2021). The session included five short presentations before a panel discussion and question time. In keeping with a key principle of practitioner research to reflect the subjective experiences of real people, in this short summary we adopt a first-person perspective.

2. The symposium

2.1 What is practitioner research? (Richard Sampson, Rikkyo University, Japan)

Attempting to make the session practicable for all participants, whether versed in the field or not, in the first presentation I offered a general overview of practitioner research. I structured the presentation such that it moved inductively from a description of three common frameworks for practitioner research to a definition. I commenced by detailing the basics of Reflective Practice, in which teachers (often in dialogue with other teachers) systematically reflect in order to develop as professionals via deepening understandings of their own beliefs, assumptions and practice. I then described Exploratory Practice, stressing the way in which it invites both teachers and students in a learning group to develop puzzles (about successes, failures or anything they would like to understand more) and combines data collection with regular pedagogical materials. The final framework was Action Research, and I noted its distinct focus on problem-solving via a cyclical pattern of planning, acting, observing and reflecting. Whilst describing these three frameworks, I reminded the audience that there are various other forms of practitioner research, and that even elements of the frameworks I had introduced are frequently mixed. I finally drew on the ideas of Hanks (2017) to define

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[1]An additional language is defined as any language learned after one's mother tongue.

practitioner research. I delineated this form of empirical study as purposeful, systematic, ethical and/or critical inquiry conducted by teachers and/or learners to further their own understandings of educational practices in their contexts of learning and teaching. Although I discussed practitioner research as incorporating many of the aspects of more 'traditional' research, I also stressed its different consideration of the ethical treatment of participants, drawing on the example of ethical concerns with experimental studies in education settings.

2.2 An ethical case for practitioner research (Ema Ushioda, University of Warwick, UK)

In this presentation, I outlined an ethical case for promoting more practitioner research in language classrooms, in that it offers a locally and socially responsive approach to systematic inquiry that can directly benefit the teaching and learning communities involved. This is because such research is likely to be shaped by the needs and priorities of teachers working with particular groups of students, with a view to improving practice, enhancing the teaching–learning experience, and improving the quality of life for all concerned. As I argued, this contrasts with much classroom research conducted by 'third party' researchers who are external to these communities and who come with their own agendas and purposes. In broad terms, these purposes are to contribute to theory-building and scholarship, and to distil general principles for practice that may not relate to the actual needs and local realities of the classrooms where the research was located. I discussed how the ethical case for practitioner research links to wider arguments I have made about the imbalance between the academic versus social values and purposes of much research in our field (Ushioda, 2020). However, in making the case for practitioner research, I furthermore highlighted some ethical complexities in negotiating our practices, priorities and identities as teachers who are also researchers. These complexities include how we integrate research tools and processes into our teaching smoothly and unobtrusively without imposing additional burdens on students; how we balance our priorities as teacher and researcher, especially when our practitioner research is high stakes for us because, for example, we are doing a Ph.D.; and how we navigate our identities and positioning in relation to our institutional and academic communities where the kind of research we do as practitioners may not be especially valued.

2.3 Teaching as research: A case in practice (Richard Pinner, Sophia University, Japan)

In my section, I discussed how teaching itself is an activity that may require us to 'wear many hats'. For example, language teachers may act as facilitators, experts or guides; we may try to be amusing at times or serious at others; and we are doing this within another language that our learners may struggle to understand or express themselves in. Adding the 'researcher' role to what is already a profession of many guises may not seem desirable or even workable; however, perhaps viewing the teacher/researcher as wearing 'one big hat' might be a better way of approaching this issue. I gave some examples of how my teaching had intersected and overlapped with my research, as I was attempting to improve my own practice by trying various things with students over the course of my own professional development. In particular, I discussed the value of autoethnography as an approach for reflecting on experience and methodically documenting meaningful interactions as they shape us as individuals. I also advocated Exploratory Practice as an especially useful way of ensuring that the data we collect in the classroom is also part of the students' own learning experience, and not merely third party. I was very happy that several participants in the audience reached out to me afterwards to share their own similar experiences of collecting data as part of the act of teaching. An area I would have liked to discuss in more detail was about writing up, sharing and presenting our research. One of the points I tried to make was that I had collected a great deal of data over the course of my career, yet very little of it has actually been formalized into written-up studies. I was happy that several people could relate to this too, which I think shows that even if we do not always get to publish it, as teachers we are 'natural researchers' (Richards, 2003, p. 232).

2.4 For what and for whom is practitioner research? (Sal Consoli, PolyU, Hong Kong)

I began with a reprise of Ortega's (2005) seminal article, 'For what and for whom is our research? The ethical as transformative lens in Instructed SLA', where she made a compelling argument for researchers to orient our investigations towards learners' and teachers' practical needs. More than 15 years later, discourses continue to reiterate the necessity of a stronger teaching-research nexus (McKinley, 2019) and a more dialogic relationship between academic research and pedagogical practices (Rose, 2019). Against this backdrop, I explored the often-cited statements that language teachers have no interest in research, least of all a desire to CONDUCT their own inquiries. However, I drew on one of my recent projects (Banegas & Consoli, 2021) to demonstrate that even teachers who may initially display all the symptoms of disengagement with research can indeed see the benefits of empirical work if this is made relevant to and reflective of their classroom realities. In this study, we report the experience of mentoring a group of primary and secondary school student-teachers completing a teacher preparation programme that included a course on teacher research. Despite their initial hesitation about language education research that, to them, seemed unable to help them 'become teachers', the student-teachers engaged in several classroom research projects. In the end, they revealed various benefits from this experience including, inter alia, an identity transformation from student-teachers to teachers who felt part of a wider international community of practitioners, and the development of a reflective attitude towards their own teaching. In sum, practitioner research can reconcile the disconnect between research and praxis by prioritizing teachers' and learners' needs, through valuing their human dimensions or life capitals (Consoli, 2021) and, ultimately, yield direct implications for language pedagogy.

2.5 Action research spirals into L+ learner psychology (Richard Sampson, Rikkyo University, Japan)

In the final short presentation, I chronicled my experiences with action research that moved into different 'spirals'. I attempted to illustrate such an occurrence by drawing on one of my previous studies with undergraduates in a compulsory English as a foreign language course in Japan (Sampson, 2018, 2019). In the focal study, I had been interested in comparing my students' motivations for L+ study with the professed needs of potential employers. I thus described the way in which the research had started by simultaneously asking learners about their ideas of future English use and what makes a motivating class group as part of a personal profile sheet they submitted in the first lesson of semester. I then provided a narrative of how the research diverged into two spirals based on these starting points: action research cycles in which learners described, explored and expanded messages absorbed from those around them about 'English'; and cycles based on 'ideal classmates' (Murphey et al., 2014) and a regular activity allowing learners to get to know each other more deeply. Reflecting on my experiences with the study, I contended that rather than purely a straightforward series of cycles, the introduction of different, concurrent change-action via divergent spirals might shine light on a phenomenon of interest from multiple angles. At the same time, I cautioned that as action researchers we need to be reflexive in considering our own motivations for forging such paths. This necessity was highlighted by data that suggested the change-action to be extremely beneficial for some participants, yet detrimental for others. As such, we need to be attentive to and supportive of unexpected research directions and outcomes. I finally made the point that practitioners might also discover valuable insights through taking a more historical perspective on collected data after the completion of an action research process (Sampson, 2021).

2.6 Panel discussion and Q&A (Ema Ushioda, Richard Pinner, Sal Consoli and Richard Sampson)

One of the primary areas upon which we focused in this discussion concerned the feasibility of considering ALL in a classroom setting as co-researchers. In particular, proponents of Exploratory Practice argue that not only teachers should have the power to decide research directions, rather, students should also be seen equally as practitioners with their own agency to develop their own puzzles about the quality of classroom life (Hanks, 2017). Whilst noting this as an ideal, we discussed the

impracticality of implementing such an approach in many teaching contexts, for instance, where teachers need to follow a coordinated syllabus. Another point that came up from our experiences was the degree to which some students actually wish to be involved in research. Some learners may have difficulty seeing the relevance of creating puzzles, instead wanting to devote more of their time to the development of their L+ skills. It then begs the question of the degree to which a practitioner researcher ought to attempt to sway such students and convince them about the (researcher-defined) benefits of puzzling. Ema Ushioda (University of Warwick) nicely summarized what has been the conclusion for us all, in that perhaps including learners in any respect in thinking about life in the classroom is an improvement on more traditional studies by external researchers (what one participant in the symposium said her students referred to as 'drive-by researchers'). The Q&A additionally touched upon some crucial issues – the ethically-questionable perpetuation of experimental research in education settings, the empowerment of students via asking them to make a contribution to (even small-scale) educational reforms, and questions of the potential impact that informing learners of research progress might have on their actions and attitudes in the classroom.

3. Conclusion

Practitioner research sees no divide between education and research, combining regular practices with inquiry into specific situations of teaching and learning. The participants in this symposium came from a range of educational contexts, from primary to tertiary, as both students and teachers. While naturally the main focus of the event was the perspectives tabled by the panelists, participants equally added to the conversation in a lively fashion via concurrent chat in the Zoom meeting. By offering the chance for a range of voices from different contexts to intermingle, we hope that the symposium succeeded if even a little in attaining our purpose of supporting the further spread of practitioner research.

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