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Exploring, reflecting, and taking action through forms of ‘practitioner research’ and why professional development through research is essential for teachers and teaching

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# Exploring, reflecting, and taking action through forms of ‘practitioner research’ and why professional development through research is essential for teachers and teaching

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## Abstract

The focus of this paper is on heightening awareness and deepening understanding of practitioner research by describing and discussing some of the key ideas of Exploratory Practice, Reflective Practice, and Action Research. The review and analysis of the literature serves as a platform for appreciating the importance of reading, thinking, and considering what each approach offers to teachers who want to study more. Gaining and maintaining familiarity with the literature of practitioner research can empower teachers to pursue their own personal and professional development. This paper treats the literature as a type of data that is available to be analyzed. Too often literature reviews simply report on what someone has done without taking the time to reflect and make sense of how ideas evolve and connect with other ideas through the interplay of theory and practice. There is also a cyclical aspect to this study. The first cycle of the literature review was presented at the Reflective Practice Conference at Kobe City University of Foreign Studies in August of 2014. The second cycle of re-reading and re-thinking the ideas presented led to the writing of this paper. Periodic review of the literature reminds us how research plays an essential role in exploring, reflecting, and taking action in our everyday practice. Read the literature, find the studies which are personally meaningful, and begin to form our own answers. As with students, the answers we discover on our own are more powerful than the ones which are given to us.

**Key words:** practitioner research, action research, exploratory practice, reflective practice, professional development

Integrating thought with action effectively has plagued philosophers, frustrated social scientists, and eluded professional practitioners for years. It is one of the most prevalent and least understood problems of our age. (Chris Argyris and Donald Schön, 1974, p. 3)

## 1. Background information

This paper continues to develop an ongoing professional development project initiated in August, 2014, at the Reflective Practice Conference held at Kobe City University of Foreign Studies. The preliminary study reported upon at that time aimed to heighten awareness and deepen understanding of practitioner research within the attending community of teacher-researchers of the characteristics, origins, and purpose of three well-known forms of practitioner research: Exploratory Practice, Reflective Practice, and Action Research. The project began with reviewing some of the literature on these ‘approaches’. This process drew attention to the importance of reading, thinking, and considering not only what each approach is designed to do, but also how each teacher should actively pursue his/her own continuous professional development without waiting for it to be institutionally imposed. What all three approaches share is a belief that teachers are capable of connecting theory and practice: Be informed and take action.

I should mention before going any further why this study goes beyond the title of this collection of papers, ‘On reflective practice: from theory to practice’. My original and early intention was to only examine Reflective Practice. After all, it is the theme of the conference and is also the main form of practitioner research taught at Kobe City University of Foreign Studies where I have been involved as a teacher, researcher, and examiner. Through my reading of the literature, I quickly began to realize that I would have to discard rich and fertile strands of tradition, practice, ideas, theories, and important names, if I consciously narrowed my attention strictly and literally to Reflective Practice. Even within Reflective Practice, there are various branches of theory and practice such as reflective teaching (for both pre-service and in-service teacher-students), journaling (both teacher’s and students’), and interviewing (dialogic reflection) to name a few ways to understand and practice reflection. Furthermore, other approaches such as Exploratory Practice and Action Research are alive and well in the hands of other practitioner-researchers and educators in Japan and the rest of the world.

Finally, comparing and contrasting approaches potentially draws greater attention and clearer understanding to what each reader believes, values, and wants to do. It could be argued that Reflective Practice is the oldest among the three and that Action Research appeals to teachers who seek more explicit instruction in reflection and action.

Exploratory Practice could be considered the most recent entry of the three, but its principles can be traced back to John Dewey, the famous American educational philosopher in trying to address similar social issues. So for the sake of study and discussion, three approaches with their unique backgrounds and thinkers are examined. For the sake of meaningful application of theory into practice, taking from all three approaches should deepen and broaden teachers' knowledge and resources to deal with classroom interactions. The landscape of teaching and learning becomes more vivid and dynamic when we paint from a wider palette of colors and combination of colors.

I have organized this latest attempt to make sense of the literature into three steps: (1) Taking account of where my understanding now stands about the importance of teachers doing research in retrospect after the first cycle of inquiry was completed in 2014 (with my involvement in the conference as co-organizer and presenter). (2) Going through a second cycle of inquiry (of which this paper gives an account) by identifying and examining in greater depth the evolving ideas in Exploratory Practice, Reflective Practice, and Action Research. This journey should both deepen the review of the literature (by drawing in and discussing an array of ideas) and illustrate how previous research plays an essential role in shaping how a teacher does exploration, reflection, and takes action. (3) Taking into account what has been learned and more importantly what still needs to be learned. Hopefully, further discussion about connecting theory and practice will inspire readers to open the doors of professional development to new ideas to consider in pursuing their own interests, needs, and answers.

## 2. Teachers doing research

Research is not a luxury or choice. It is an integral part of our profession (or any profession). It is the energy that sheds light on what had previously been unknown. To put it into real world perspective, it would be unimaginable for doctors not to constantly seek new and improved ways to treat patients. By re-searching our practice, it moves teachers and inspires them to act on their growing knowledge and skills with renewed confidence and control. Research builds analytical skills. Read the literature, find the studies which are personally meaningful, and begin to form one's own answers. As with students, the answers we discover on our own are more powerful than the ones which are given to us.

In the early 1990's, there was a wave of interest in establishing research on teaching the teachers. Well-known language educators presented and published advice to teachers in the form of guidelines on what to do. One example is a collection of papers edited by Richards and Nunan in 1990, entitled 'Second language teacher education'. I will highlight some key concepts raised that have continued to be influential for continuous professional development as a general approach and Reflective Practice and Action Research in particular. Gebhard, Gaitan, and Oprandy (1990) remind us of what was typical at that time. Teacher educators as respected authorities determined what was 'expected' for effective practice. Training teachers would listen and learn in an apprentice-master relationship.

The 'experts' seem to know what is best, but Gebhard et al. identifies 'several limitations to such a prescriptive approach to teacher preparation' (1990, p. 16). Among the potential obstacles, he mentions that experienced teachers do not want to be told how to teach and that research has failed to supply persuasive evidence that there is such thing as a single 'best method' that fits all situations. The very nature of a prescriptive approach keeps the responsibility, control, and decision making in the hands of the educators instead of preparing the practicing teachers to assume such duties for their classes. Earlier, Fanselow (1977, 1987) argued for multiple interpretations of the same event by different observers and a method of class observation through coding in an effort to put research and teaching in the hands of teachers.

We can go back much earlier to Dewey (1933, 1938) who described a similar situation in his days of the looming call for standardization and the inherent sacrifice of teacher autonomy. He responded to the situation with advocacy for teachers reflecting and taking action for their own professional development. Again, the solution argued early in the twentieth century by Dewey and later by Fanselow and Gebhard is for teachers to step forward and take control of their profession and future direction through doing research (granted the form may be different from what is done by scientists in the laboratory). According to Gebhard et al. (1990), what teachers need to take agency of their practice and development are: investigative skills including decision making in teaching a class, observation of teaching as it takes place, the ability to conduct an investigative study of teaching, and to be able to discuss what was learned with relevance to other contexts. The following sections describe and discuss three

approaches, Action Research, Reflective Practice, and Exploratory Practice from the perspective of how these ideas can help teachers teach.

### 3. Action Research (the early stage of development)

Nunan (1990) made an important declaration that defined the role of Action Research in teacher training.

Classroom teachers should be involved in curriculum research and development as these relate to their own classrooms and that a primary goal for in-service teacher education is to give teachers ways of exploring their own classrooms (p. 62).

When this statement is unpacked, three important insights emerge. First, teachers should participate in curriculum matters because they impact on what is done individually in teaching. Second, doing research is not just something that training teachers or student-teachers (i.e., pre-service) do, but it is also something that continues to be a relevant part of the ongoing job for experienced (in-service) teachers. Third, research by teachers is not something that automatically occurs. It takes time to learn. Perhaps teachers who say they are teachers, not researchers have a point. Without training (and commitment to it) researching one's classroom may appear to be unrelated to everyday teaching practice.

There are 'research' skills beyond pedagogic skills that need to be learned. Nunan (1990) explains, 'such involvement presupposes certain skills and knowledge in classroom observation and research' (p. 62). He proposes one way for encouraging and guiding teachers to get involved in Action Research. He cites Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) to point out the 'link' between 'action' and research'. This is the underlying concept which needs to be understood. Nunan persuasively uses Kemmis and McTaggart to appeal to teachers by highlighting three steps: (1) 'critical reflection on ideas', (2) 'informed application' of these ideas in actual practice, and (3) 'critical evaluation' of what happens by trying out the ideas in the classroom. Teachers are already doing such things, but possibly not systematically as steps in planned inquiry. Through pursuit of these 'ideas-in-actions' teachers can increase classroom teaching skills and knowledge of the bigger picture, the connection among curriculum, teaching,

and learning, and the even bigger picture of theory informing practice and vice versa. We will see a similar argument for bringing administrators, teachers, and learners together in making plans in Allwright and Bailey (1991) when Allwright explains Exploratory Practice.

One other important distinction which may help teachers understand the intentions of Action Research is provided by Cohen and Manion (1980) who discuss differences between ‘applied’ research and ‘action’ research. The word ‘research’ may conjure up images of technicians working in laboratories apart from learners and classrooms. ‘Applied’ signifies that such research (as is done in ‘applied’ linguistics as well) is designed to contribute to the understanding social situations and issues. It is important to realize that the rigors of the kind of research teachers do may not be clinical trials or heavy statistical calculations. Action Research may not be generalizable to the same degree as ‘Research with a capital R’ as the priority for practitioner research (research with a small ‘r’) is to help particular teachers and learners in a particular local context to solve their own problems. Wallace (1998) adds clarity to what we mean by research in hopes of encouraging more teachers to get involved. At the core of all research (including Action Research) is the basic process of collecting data and analyzing it. ‘Research’ does not have to be an intimidating prospect. Generalizability can come if other teachers share similar interests and find someone else’s account helpful. In doing so this type of ‘practitioner research’ is both ‘collaborative’ (in needing cooperation of multiple parties) and ‘self-evaluative’. So in Action Research, the practitioner is accountable to himself/herself as well as to the learners.

While practitioners both in language teaching and other fields have found Action Research useful, there could be a tendency to promote and address such a form of research to primarily pre-service teachers. Possibly one reason is that students in a teacher education program in university would be able to concentrate on research more than full-time teachers (i.e., students have time to study). I argue that practitioners (i.e., teachers in charge of their own classroom) doing research has more immediate purpose, value, impact, and application because they are already involved and engaged with students on a regular basis.

In support, Nunan (1990) observed that making Action Research an in-service project was effective because 'the very act of selecting a particular incident or event revealed something of their own attitudes towards and beliefs about language learning and teaching' (p. 65). The power of practitioners doing research is in what is 'revealed'. Awareness is heightened of what goes on during teaching. Noticing becomes essential for building skills of classroom observation. Possibly more importantly, Action Research (as well as other forms of systematic self-inquiry) empowers teachers to take responsibility and initiative for seeking information and solutions to improve their own contexts.

As for practical application, Nunan (1990, p. 65) identifies five basic stages that teacher-researchers would go through (based on a model developed in Australia by the National Centre for English Language Teaching and Research along with other state professional development units): (1) Observing classrooms part 1: theory and practice. (2) Observing classrooms part 2: methods and techniques. (3) Issues for investigation. (4) Investigating one's own classroom. (5) Developing an action research proposal. These steps imply not only the need for teachers to become researchers of their own classroom, but also that research helps define what teachers will do.

While a broad picture is described above, Nunan (1989) refers to Kemmis and McTaggart's well-known (1988) flow chart diagram that illustrates more clearly what is termed 'the individual aspect in action research' (p. 13). Here teachers have a simple and doable four step scheme on how to get started on their own: (1) Develop a plan of action. (2) Act to implement it. (3) Observe the effects of the action. (4) Reflect on these effects (Nunan, 1989, p. 12). Actually, the Kemmis and McTaggart model appeared earlier in 1985 (though the usual citation in the literature is 1988) in what Nunan describes as 'an excellent little booklet designed to introduce teachers to action research' (p. 12). However, most teachers around the world (including myself) became aware the diagram as a useful illustration of how to do Action Research through Nunan (1989, 1990).

Another point to be made at this stage is Action Research is a cyclical step by step process that does not end with the fourth step, reflection. To maximize effectiveness, the reflection should lead back to a revised plan of action that can be taken through the cycle again. Unfortunately, as Rod Ellis remarked at a JALT conference workshop on



Action Research some years ago, teachers by and large do not seem to complete all the steps of the cycle let alone do another cycle. Besides the ongoing ‘spiral’ design and hope to do multiple cycles of reflection and action, teachers should remember that such research is carried out by the people who know the classroom the best, not the experts, but the everyday teachers. In this way, the involvement, engagement, and motivation are immediately contextually relevant. Finally, Action Research assumes that improvement is brought about by change that is teacher determined and research informed.

#### 4. Reflective Practice (the early stage of development)

Even though Bailey’s (1990) paper on diary studies (or journals as I will use both terms interchangeably) does not mention Reflective Practice by name, she is better known among teachers that those educators like Leo Bartlett (1990, in the same book) who clearly link diary studies to becoming reflective. Bailey is appreciated by many teachers (including myself) for providing a concrete example of doing self-inquiry. In those days, there were fewer chances than now to collaborate with others (no e-mail or Internet) or to join a teacher training program. Also the Japanese ministry connected to education increasingly encourages teachers to do professional development.

Like Nunan’s early contribution to Action Research, Bailey has been influential through her work on diary studies although the connection with Reflective Practice is less direct in terminology used. I include her in this section because her work clearly helped many teachers (in the very early days of self-professional development) become reflective practitioners. To this day, journaling or writing accounts of reflection continues to be the prevailing form of Reflective Practice in professional training in various fields as we will see later in Jennifer Moon’s publications on learning by journaling (2004, 2006). For this paper, I have emphasized the practical application of Reflective Practice through journaling more than the philosophy which has been covered in detail by Zeichner and Liston (1996) and Farrell (2013, 2015) among others.

Bailey (1990) argues that the real benefit of diary writing comes not necessarily from the process of writing, but from analyzing the record afterward. Thus, having experience teaching can help make sense of the data. This is not unlike where the true benefit from Action Research comes from reflection (after the plan of action is carried

out). In comparison, Allwright makes a point to distinguish 'observational data' from diary studies with observational data being (more clearly) systematic in the sense of recording and classifying events for later discussion. He emphasizes description rather than interpretation. Reflection through writing (in a diary/journal) aims to capture a deep experience while reflection in a research sense requires a record of the data (based on a certain degree of objectivity) that is not only analyzable by one's self, but by others. Therefore, reflection should be 'evidence-based' as is the current trend in Reflective Practice. See Mann and Walsh (2013) and Walsh and Mann (2015) for informative and persuasive accounts.

Reflection through writing about experience can be systematic and generalizable to the degree that others can learn from another teacher's diary/journal. Unfortunately, it seems some teachers even if they do continue to keep a diary/journal do not get further than writing about the event (which can be a big task in itself) without adequate time to unpack the text. Bailey advises looking for patterns or reoccurring trends. This advice begs the question: How does one begin to look for patterns? The actual method of getting into the data is not explained. What am I looking for?

It may turn out that borrowing a data analytical method from applied linguistics can be helpful to clarify exactly what to do. See Nakamura (2006, 2008, and 2010) who takes up McCarthy's (1991) call for language teachers to study discourse analysis. In a series of studies on his talk with students, Nakamura applied Conversation Analysis in order to answer such questions. Conversation Analysis can help practitioners 'enter the data' and systematically and explicitly notice patterns and reoccurring themes in classroom-oriented talk-in-interactions with students. Allwright (2008) explains how this method of analyzing the spoken discourse between teacher and student is a form of practitioner research. Much earlier, Allwright (1980) did transcript analysis of students taking turns in a classroom interaction. For those interested in such data and analysis, Wong and Waring (2010) give an informative introduction to Conversation Analysis with pedagogic application.

Researchers in university are given time to do research, but teachers in secondary and primary schools often are not. This is probably why Bailey (1990) states early on, 'my concern here, however, is not so much with diary studies as a mode of research but rather as potential tools for teacher preparation' (p. 215). Teaching experience helps in

making the next plan. Learning through written reflection can deepen the process. Thus, analysis of data from diaries/journals has immediate pedagogic usefulness as well as a long term benefit of raising issues for further thought.

At this stage, a brief definition of ‘diary studies’ may clarify what kind of writing and analysis are involved. Bailey (1990) explains that diaries used in research can include learner diaries, observations of learners by researchers, and teacher diaries about their actions and feelings, their students’ actions, or both. Teachers write about various aspects of their personal and professional experiences as related to teaching in a classroom. The process of writing requires thinking and feeling beyond course content and should be open-ended (i.e., reflective). The writers should be honest and write from the heart as well as from observations. It does require discipline and consistency to keep the process going to produce records for future analysis. She is also concerned that keeping a diary or writing about the experience may not be something that everyone is interested in or is comfortable doing. It should be an option among other ways to reflect on one’s teaching. We will see later that this concern continues in Moon (2004).

On the other hand, there are clear benefits. They can include gaining self-confidence, finding insights not available any other way, clarifying thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and ways of handling situations, and defining issues for further study. The diary study steps (Bailey, 1990, p. 219) are: (1) Write an account of one’s language teaching history. (2) Write to record (systematically) events, details, and feelings about a current language experience. (3) Revise the entries into a version to share with others by clarifying meaning. (4) Look for patterns and significant events. Colleagues can help analyze as well. (5) Interpret and discuss in a final diary version the factors that have been identified as important to the experience. At this stage, ideas from the literature can be added. Again, as with the brief review of Action Research through early contributions by David Nunan, we see here in the early contributions to diary or journal studies and reflection by Kathleen Bailey, that taking the final step of the process is critical to take full advantage of systematic inquiry. Ultimately, the goal is taking informed action.

The historical and lasting impact of John Dewey’s philosophy of education and the application of his legacy by Donald Schön have provided much of the structure and shape of not only Reflective Practice, but also the fundamental concept of teachers taking social, professional, and personal responsibility of their development as

practitioners. While Schön's seminal book, 'Reflective practitioner: How professionals think in action' (1983) introduced Reflective Practice to many teachers including this author, the description and discussion are primarily theoretical. Schön's background is not in language education, but in philosophy. He is also known for his work in organizational learning and professional effectiveness at M.I.T. Two important concepts have become part of language teachers' working vocabulary for Reflective Practice in describing when to observe and reflect: reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action. Now teachers have a two component model that explains how to observe and note details of interactions with students and also how to follow up with post-reflection after the lesson and pre-class reflection before teaching the next class. More discussion and overview of how these ideas and other key concepts fit into the evolution of Reflective Practice and other approaches can be found in the first cycle of reviewing the literature for historical development of practitioner research in Nakamura (2014b).

What immensely helped teachers to understand how to take action on reflections was an excellent introduction to reflective teaching by Zeichner and Liston (1996). Here the essential philosophical views on education and individual professional development are explained and illustrated in concrete terms. The key concepts in the literature particularly by John Dewey and Donald Schön, both of whom can make for difficult reading with dense text and abstract thinking, are made more accessible. Of course, we should also read the original texts to gain a fuller appreciation. To this end, see Rodgers (2002), a scholar of Dewey, who preserves the unique language and character of Dewey's philosophical views on education and its role in society while rephrasing the key concepts to make his work more understandable to a wider audience of teachers.

In the literature, we can find Reflective Practice being used in a wider sense (for professionals in various fields like business and engineering, not only language teachers) as in Donald Schön's (1983) ideas on 'reflective teaching' which addresses professional training and development (updated in 1988). Reflection is at the center of social consciousness and personal development. The focus of Zeichner and Liston (1996) is on making a case for bringing together teachers' theories and practices through self-inquiry. Zeichner and Liston (1996) do not mince words when they write:

If a teacher never questions the goals and the values that guide his or her work, the context in which he or she teaches, or never examines his or her assumptions, then it is our belief that this individual is not engaged in reflective teaching. This view is based on a distinction between teaching that is reflective and teaching that is technically focused (p. 1).

Asking critical questions of one's self is an essential part of reflective teaching. There is an assumption that 'teachers can both pose and solve problems related to their educational practice' (p. 4).

### 5. Exploratory Practice (the early stage of development)

Unlike Action Research and Reflective Practice, one name in particular, Dick Allwright, is associated with Exploratory Practice, both the early establishment of this approach and the current advocacy of the practice that is now referred to by its practitioners as simply 'EP'. In this section, I will discuss the foundation of Exploratory Practice through three early publications aimed at classroom teachers. Earliest notice comes in Allwright (1988), where the focus of understanding classroom teaching comes from using observation as a research skill. Observation accompanied with feedback is an essential tool for teacher training. It felt quite revolutionary at that time to imagine teachers observing their own classrooms and ways of teaching without institutional supervision.

The foundation of Exploratory Practice would later emerge in the spirit of 'collegiality' and cooperation among three parties of participants: learners, teachers, and researchers. There are additional players with interest and stake in what goes on in the classroom: administrators, sponsors, etc. But ultimately, the 'quality of life' in the classroom comes from the emerging understanding and identity of the teacher-researcher. This matters because it is the teacher who can address pedagogic and social concerns.

The goal is to revitalize ways of teaching through insights gained in cooperation among the participants: learners, teachers, researchers, and administrators. While much of what is described is common sense (though not always put into practice), the ideas at that time were fresh and a timely reminder of how the field has progressed. Allwright (1988) recalls:

Difficult as it is now for us to believe, twenty years or so ago it was radically innovative to suggest that people seriously interested in classroom language teaching and learning should actually look systematically at what happened in the classroom itself. At that time it was more 'normal' to introduce a new method as an experiment and then wait for achievement test results to tell the story (xv).

Then in the mid-seventies with the rise of humanistic methods came two important developments: the realization that we could learn something important by asking 'the learners themselves to tell us what they were doing' (xv) and a change of the relationship between training teachers and researchers in how to do classroom observation, who would do it, and for what purpose. Research should not be limited to the field of second language acquisition theory (SLA) and the interests of research specialists.

His warning to practitioners in line with earlier concerns expressed by his department colleague, Michael Breen (1985) for protecting teacher autonomy is to be 'very wary' of letting SLA procedures and concepts decide what teachers research. Teachers should ultimately determine what is helpful for them. So join the 'research enterprise' and even learn from established research, but be open to what is helpful for learners. Allwright (1988) places the role of research for teachers into proper perspective: 'Good research can be good pedagogy, and good pedagogy can itself be good research' (p. 258).

A couple of years later, in the last section of Allwright and Bailey (1991) 'Towards exploratory teaching' (the epilogue) early indication of Allwright's evolving ideas for Exploratory Practice are introduced in hopes of 'making exploratory teaching a reality' (the title of the last chapter). What is being stressed is the collaborative nature and benefit of working with other parties instead of against them or separately. In this early version of what would be more fully developed into Exploratory Practice as we know it today, the three parties or points of a collaborative triangle are teachers, researchers, and students. The idea is 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). By recognizing the importance of each part to the whole picture of language education, teachers can gain 'a renewed sense of purpose and direction' (p. 200). Any

enterprise should benefit learners as well. Research ideally should be not done *on* learners, but rather *with* them and ultimately *for* them (emphasis by Allwright, p. 200).

Exploration and reflection then are not simply recollections of the past, but a systematic collection of data in a similar way described by both Bailey and Nunan. A further connection with Action Research is the suggestion to ask colleagues to join in a collaborative study. Allwright is always quick to acknowledge that teachers are so busy that any kind of professional study outside of what they are already doing is not going to be easy to do. Interestingly, Burns (2010) in updating Action Research cites Allwright on this very point. The prevailing issue here and for the other two approaches is whether teachers themselves see benefit or not and whether there is a willingness to take action or not. No doubt it is an extra investment and commitment.

The relationship between teacher and researcher is not yet clearly defined here (in 1991) as on one hand teachers ‘could turn’ to experts (i.e., university researchers) for ‘advice’ on topics related to understanding learners. This advice seems dangerously close to the concern that the traditional relationship will perpetuate where researchers set up projects that teachers help gather data for by opening their classrooms to researchers. What should be and will be advocated later is that teachers will benefit the most by also being the researcher and joining a community of like-minded teachers such as the group that attended the Kobe conference. We will see how this vision is increasingly shared by all three approaches in the following sections that update the literature for each approach. Inevitably, with reflection at the heart of all methods of practitioner practice, contemporary reviews of the literature of Action Research will overlap and be informed by other approaches as we will see clearly in Burns (2010).

## 6. Updating ideas of Exploratory Practice

Exploratory practice more than the other two approaches expresses concern for the delicate balance or fine line that runs between on one hand, stating guidelines, supplying frameworks (for taking action), and giving an overall prescriptiveness of what teacher should do and on the other hand, becoming and remaining open-minded, flexible, and ‘exploratory’ in the sense that each and every practitioner needs space and time to discover for themselves what works for them. Exploration takes time (as historical records and accounts of explorers and inventors can testify). Maintaining

focus and effort is a life-long commitment. Allwright and Hanks (2009) cite Kenny and Savage (1997, p. 283) for 'five notable characteristics' of what sustainable development by a practitioner consists of:

- (1) Change-oriented
- (2) Experiential
- (3) Pro-autonomy
- (4) Collaborative
- (5) Communicative

As we can see, the above features make good sense and probably can be agreed upon by everyone regardless of position or stance on theory and practice. What I believe to be the major contribution of Exploratory Practice is the focus on the learners and asking a community of teachers to investigate what learners do.

The most recent and comprehensive documented application of EP as it is called by these practitioners comes from a group of language teachers in Rio de Janeiro. The steps taken by these teachers illustrate the practice and illuminate the keys to successful transfer of theory into practice. While the order of development can be flexible, certain features seem essential to build a foundation through an ongoing commitment to 'collegiality' and never losing sight of the overarching goal of 'sustainability'.

According to accounts given in Allwright and Hanks (2009) by the leaders of the Rio EP Group, Inés Kayon Miller and Maria Isabel Azevedo Cunha, the factors that 'enabled' them to sustain their work as a group on exploration and reflection are: bringing people together, experiencing built-in flexibility, harnessing curiosity and courage, prioritizing quality of life, building trust and collegiality, 'doing being' EP practitioners, and sustaining mutual development. It is no coincidence that their list starts with bringing people together or put another way, building from the beginning a sense of collegiality and continuing with 'sustaining' the process and learning. What seemed to help them overcome obstacles were their perseverance, personal commitment (to the idea), and sharing experiences, thoughts, and feelings, 'puzzles, pains, and pleasures'.



## 7. Updating ideas of Reflective Practice

While a teacher training program is considered essential for gaining knowledge and theories of the profession, what makes Reflective Practice special is the expectation that self-inquiry is continuous professional development, not a degree with a deadline. We do not stop reflecting or inquiring simply because we complete a set of courses. 'Formal programs of teacher education represent only an initial, though essential, first phase in teacher development' (Richards and Lockhart, 1994, p. 202).

The question now is: What can teachers do on their own when they are away from a formal program? How can Reflective Practice play a role in the professional development of full-time teachers once they have graduated? Farrell (2015) serves as an important bridge between his earlier work (Richards and Farrell, 2011) in reflective teaching and what new teachers need now. Two contemporary features of Reflective Practice represent barriers to having more teachers involved. First there is so much information about Reflective Practice that it is difficult to know where to turn to. Also in efforts to maintain the principles that go back to Dewey, ideas for practical application should not be too specific in what to do since the nature of reflection and action is self-discovery.

Farrell (2015) has synthesized the vast body of work on theory and application over the years into a 'framework for reflecting on practice' to address such issues. His reflection on Reflective Practice is designed for any and every teacher (e.g., novice, experienced, native English speakers, and other language speakers). It is his personal culmination of reading, writing, and working with teachers for 35 years. His recent work joins the similarly minded project of Zeichner and Liston (1996) to survey the literature of Reflective Practice, particularly Dewey and Schön, to help teachers new to the field to gain appreciation and basis understanding of the theory that has shaped practice.

Later, I will discuss Burns' (2010) recent work on Action Research as accomplishing the same for novice practitioners in that approach. It should be mentioned at least briefly that there is a risk that some teachers will come away with an oversimplified overview of the theory and philosophy of these approaches. Researchers should always refer back to the original sources and thinkers to more fully appreciate and catch the

nuance and implications of such influential ideas which continue to impact and shape teacher development.

Farrell's (2015) framework lists five stages/levels of reflection to guide practitioners: philosophy (teacher-as-a-person), principles (unquestioned assumptions), theory (theory-in-use), practice (observable actions), and beyond practice (critical reflection of the moral, political, and social issues). While each step can be discussed and practiced separately, Farrell is quick to point out (in the spirit of Dewey) that 'all stages must be considered as a whole to give us a holistic reflective practice experience' (2015, p. 22). One valuable feature of this framework is how each level addresses teachers' concerns with both theory and practice. One way to do 'reflection' is described in concrete terms: examine and challenge one's deeply held assumptions and beliefs which in turn will stimulate reflection. Each practitioner must decide on his/her own what to investigate and even which stage to enter first.

There are other important contributions that Farrell makes. Reflective Practice is explained by linking its roots with current interests and concerns of teachers around the world. For example, Farrell (2015) interprets and explains Dewey's (1933) concept of 'reflective inquiry' in a way that teachers can readily understand. While researchers always refer to the original author of theory in a literature review, easier to understand explanations of the ideas will make knowledge available to more practitioners. According to Farrell, what Dewey had in mind, when teachers engage in Reflective Practice, is to 'slow down the interval between thought and action' (p. 14). Do not jump to conclusion, but rather start by examining the issues and problems that have arisen.

What has been added in recent years to Reflective Practice by Mann and Walsh (2013) and Walsh and Mann (2015) along with Farrell (2015) is to emphasize 'evidence-based' inquiry. Practitioner research studies by Nakamura (2014a, 2015) are examples of a teacher using recorded spoken data (not written data in journals) of his talk with students and Conversation Analysis of the transcript to identify features of talk to reflect upon. In support, Allwright and Bailey (1991) write: 'While transcription is a time-consuming process, it provides a detailed account of the linguistic interaction in classrooms' (p. 12). Nakamura concludes that reflection is deeper and at the same time more practically applicable to future teaching when reflection is based on the

systematic analysis of ‘naturally occurring’ data. Evidence-based (i.e., data-driven) inquiry connects theory and practice. This method ties in with the argument made by Mann and Walsh (2013) and Walsh and Mann (2015) for reinvigorating Reflection Practice by paying more attention to spoken data.

Farrell (2015) is helpful in introducing a new generation of interested practitioners to Dewey by drawing attention to Zeichner and Liston (1996) where Dewey’s ideas were made accessible to an earlier generation. Dewey (1933), Zeichner and Liston, and now Farrell make a distinction between ‘routine’ action and ‘reflective’ action. Routine actions come from habit or authority whereas reflective actions are based on active questioning and probing of assumptions.

Farrell (2015) is also valuable for drawing attention to related ideas and practices outside the main three approaches. For example, he mentions ‘contemplation’ and probes how this is different from ‘reflection’. Contemplation like Mindfulness (Note: See Carroll, 2007, for an introduction to Mindfulness. This was the assigned reading for a course I took on Reflective Practice. It comes from Buddhist thought of being ‘present’ in the here and now. The goal is to raise awareness of one’s surroundings without control, intervention, or judgment. What could be gained is greater sensitivity to details of our surrounding and even wonder and appreciation. What could make this different from ‘reflection’ is the emphasis on openness to what is present around us. The focus is no longer on us. ‘Whereas both lead to more self-awareness, when contemplating there is no distinction between the thinker and the subject ... because they are one (Farrell, 2015, p. 8). For philosophically-inclined teachers, these ideas may be inspiring and enlightening.

Moon (2004, 2006) who specializes in reflective journaling represents a common approach taken in graduate programs and professions particularly in the UK where Reflective Practice is used to retrospectively document the work professionals do with students, clients, etc. We can see a connection back to Bailey’s (1990) earlier noted work on diary studies. What Moon (2004) updates is a discussion on ‘the quality of reflective writing’. Admittedly there will be a wide range of quality (not necessarily in a language proficiency sense), but in depth of thinking from superficial descriptions to profound insights. Moon’s works are not limited to language teachers, but address

professional development across fields such as counseling. The level of thinking and writing should fit (be 'pitched') to the stated purpose and task at hand. In any case, reflective writing should consist of more than 'straightforward' description. Incorporating descriptions and interpretations enhances meaningfulness for the writer and hopefully for the readers. A deeply personal account that moves between objective and subjective is the power of reflecting on one's experience. This very strength, however, can be also problematic as 'research'. The issue of what constitutes 'data' and the degree of subjectivity that is acceptable in research are still debatable.

To appreciate Moon's contribution to Reflective Practice, it is important to first see diary studies and reflective journals by the term she uses, 'learning journals'. In her 2004 book, she explores reflective and experiential learning to address the trend to use reflective learning in higher education. There are features that need to be acknowledged and dealt with by experts in educational practice. For example, assessed writing about experience is often reflective. So how do we differentiate between 'common-sense reflection' which may have no structure or anticipated outcome and is most likely based on what we already know and 'reflective learning' in which reflection may be guided by a given framework? Without at least a working definition of what teachers hope to accomplish, providing students with a clear and doable structured task would be difficult. A description of reflection in an educational situation would inevitably be narrowly defined as in the following.

Reflection/reflective learning or reflective writing in the academic context, is also likely to involve a conscious and stated purpose for the reflection, with an outcome specified in terms of learning, action, or clarification (Moon, 2004, p. 83).

So a helpful and probing question to ask is how the mechanics of writing based on reflection are similar or different to ordinary 'common-sense' everyday reflections. Once reflection is applied according to theory and the literature, the writing moves toward certain designed outcomes. Is it the process or product that counts in the form of reflection and writing that we are engaged in? The dilemma raised by Exploratory Practice resonates here: Does specification hinder freedom, richness, spontaneity, and trust to reflect, write, and share?

Moon (2004, 2006) argues a common barrier to reflective writing may simply be not having a clear idea how to begin. Thus Moon supplies ‘activities to enhance learning from journals’ (2006 p. 141) in order to give a simple starting point. Included is a ‘generic’ framework (2004, pp. 214-216; 2006, pp. 161-163) that guides reflective writing through four levels of thought and action: (1) descriptive writing (there is little else beyond basic description of what happened); (2) descriptive account with some reflection (still mainly descriptive, but with some hint of reflection, questioning, and/or emotion); (3) reflective writing part 1 (with a particular feature to comment on reflectively); (4) and reflective writing part 2 (critical thinking where more than one perspective may be included, even those the writer may disagree with).

Emotional insights into past experiences may shape perspective, selection of topic, and willingness to elaborate. Students may need time to consider ‘their own style of reflective writing’. Reflective Practice possibly more than Action Research (which might be the most teacher-friendly approach of the three) and Exploratory Practice (with its sense of open-endedness and cooperation with learners) is potentially a complex mixture of theory and practice that is commonly done through a highly disciplined form of written self-inquiry and exploration. As Moon (2006) points out, ‘journal-writing tends to deal with situations that are not “straightforward”’ (p. 29). Asking writers to delve into the details of their lives is not always easy. Moon notes: ‘There are many reasons that learners may find for arguing against the task’ (p. 148). This concern was earlier expressed by Bailey (1990) as such writing is objective and subjective, professional and at times deeply personal. Teaching can easily be over-routinized over the years without pushing ourselves to try something new. The exploration of teaching and learning might well take us out of our comfort zone. Bailey’s initial diary study was about the anxiety she felt as a foreign language learner. Ironically, the very thing which is ‘scary’ (i.e., the unknown, the unfamiliar), may turn out to be the greatest stimulus for growth and new understanding.

## 8. Updating ideas of Action Research

Educators should be aware of how ‘time’ is one of the biggest problems in getting more teachers involved in research. From the time of the first popular ‘teacher-oriented’ model of Action Research by Kemmis and McTaggart (1988), the emphasis has been on illustrating the approach through a diagram, flow chart, or framework (depending on

one's preference of term) of logical steps to follow. To add to the thought process of implementing a plan, Burns (2010) points out that putting the words 'action' and 'research' into the same concept may seem odd as they would appear to insinuate very different attitudes and approaches. However, practitioner research tries to be inclusive of the shared interest of teachers and researchers to find new answers to classroom teaching and learning.

Hopefully, the inquiry is based on both knowledge (theory) and experience (practice). Teachers make numerous decisions and take action on them every day. What are the decisions based on? What are the outcomes of the actions taken? Research and teaching follow similar steps in carrying out a systematic procedure of plan, action, observation, and reflection.

We must remember 'daily' reflections can drift and wander at whim whereas 'reflection' in a research inquiry sense is disciplined and focused on events in a particular place and time. Like with any form of research, teachers need a focus or research question that identifies a problem and operationalizes what to do about it. Thus we make a 'plan' that is carried out. 'Action' is an experiment to see what happens when a proposed action is taken. We 'observe' the outcome in terms of change and improvement. We 'reflect' on how it went and what to do next. 'Action' is what pushes the study to the next step. Ideally each step is documented for further analysis and sharing with others.

Another area of consideration and discussion about how Action Research and 'Academic' Research are different is the issue of theory. In Action Research (as well as Exploratory Practice and Reflective Practice to some extent), teachers are encouraged to make their personal theories about what is going on in their local contexts. According to Burns (2010), this is different from reading the literature 'thoroughly 'of previous studies in order 'to provide a conceptual framework for the study' (p. 14). My idea of carefully and thoughtfully reading the literature is not (in the first instant) to follow what someone else has done, but to realize there are other ways of thinking and teaching.

Not only in Exploratory Practice, but also in Action Research, exploration is the key to searching and understanding one's teaching and situation. A key question at this stage is how theory and practice relate to each other. Burns (2010) succinctly reminds us (of what she wrote in 1996) on what a practitioner does: 'He is looking for a theory *for* practice rather than a theory *of* practice' (emphasis by author, p. 14). In this sense, I would suggest that Action Research views theory as a mixture of the research literature and personal hypothesis making. In contrast, I see Reflective Practice and Exploratory Practice making more direct reference to theory and philosophy from Dewey to SLA.

Over time, there does seem to be a growing convergence of exploring, reflecting, and taking action. For example, Burns (2010) writes, 'Action is the driving force in the classroom. After all, teachers take actions to help students learn. Following Schön's reflection-on-action and reflection-in-action, Burns acknowledges that teachers who do Action Research also spend time reflecting both 'on their feet' in moments in class and 'meta-thinking' afterwards in the staffroom on what happened. She does caution teachers against jumping to the conclusion that thinking or talking automatically means they are doing reflective teaching. After all, we can think about our actions and students without being critical or questioning assumptions and routines. Thus technical teaching and reflective teaching can be different. In fact, Burns cites Zeichner and Liston (1996, p. 4) who are advocates of reflective teaching for social change, to emphasize the necessity of thinking (reflecting) about our teaching unlike technicians who simply carry out (pre-determined) orders. Reflection is empowering in getting teachers involved in their profession by articulation and expanding the knowledge base of what they know and do. Burns (2010) also credits Allwright for bringing up a realistic concern among teachers that research takes extra time. Allwright (1993) argues 'exploratory teaching is a more practical way of bringing the research perspective properly into the classroom, without adding significantly and unacceptably to teachers' workloads' (p. 131). What is implied is for teachers to make use of methods, activities, and materials that are already being used in the class. This idea fits in with doing Action Research on teacher-related concerns.

Burns (2010) provides a fitting summary and pre-conclusion to this paper on understanding practitioner research through a study and discussion of the three well-known approaches. She sees advantageous overlaps with Reflective Practice

which enhances Action Research. Through written reflections in journals or dialogues, 'we see AR as part of the general "reflective teacher" movement'. Furthermore, reflection-in action and reflection-on-action can create opportunities for 'a continuum of activities' (p. 17). She even uses a blended term across approaches 'reflective action researcher' to acknowledge how the important point is to make use of available resources, not making distinctions. Realistically, some teachers may choose not to go into a 'full-blown' AR process, but rather choose a mixture with other approaches.

So while the backgrounds of the three practitioner research approaches have unique features, the shared ground of research is that teaching involves noticing problems/puzzles/issues that need greater attention. New understanding is based upon gathering tangible evidence and making sense of it. In this way, it is possible for teachers to do research. Whether we are making theory for our classroom practice or adding to the theory of practice, specific steps are taken in the pursuit of new knowledge to better understand both theory and practice. In this way, 'Action Research could be considered part of a continuum of becoming a thinking and theorizing professional' (Burns, 2010, p. 19).

## 9. Conclusion

The primary interest and bulk of the discussion of forms of practitioner research available through publications (and related conference workshops and presentations) has focused on understanding what the three research-practice approaches have to offer to teachers who want to know more about teaching. The principles of each approach illustrate the history, concerns, beliefs, and hopes for making classroom learning meaningful and effective. The common belief is that teachers are capable of taking initiative and controlling their own continuous professional development. However, a gap between principles and action still remains for some teachers.

For practitioner research to thrive, teachers need to embrace rather than avoid or ignore the idea that teachers can also be researchers. Research in its most basic and mundane form simply means to 're-search' what we have done. As demonstrated in this paper, numerous educators over the years have contributed to the development of practitioner research so interested teachers can help themselves by becoming involved in self-inquiry and reflection of what they do. Supervisors, mentors, and experts cannot do



the work for us, but we can take advantage of the learning opportunities available. The purpose, meaning, and reward are ultimately ours for the taking.

This review and analysis of some of the literature of practitioner research has been a personal and professional project to gain deeper understanding of what I do as a teacher. It is hoped that one teacher-researcher's personal account may be instructive to others. Upon completion of this paper, I feel to some degree the satisfaction expressed by Stevick (1980) in writing his classic book, 'Teaching languages: A way and ways'. Through having many references and notes, he felt: 'I had taken into account the work of many other people, and that I had checked my own thinking against theirs' (p. 3). On a much smaller scale, I would like to make a related claim that making a habit of studying and reading has not only increased my knowledge and confidence as a teacher-researcher, but also my satisfaction in working with forms of practitioner research. Reflective Practice provides guidance, Action Research supplies the 'action' plan to implement, and Exploratory Practice ensures contextualizing the work of practitioner research to address the immediate and future needs of the teacher and his/her students.

Professional development at its finest is not just about individual accomplishment, but also about co-accomplishment with others. Even though we may feel that we cannot be as outstanding as our teachers, advisors, or mentors, we must try to contribute (i.e., give back) to the larger community of practitioners. The key is to engage others in discussion on a range of ideas, some similar and other different from our own. Initiating an ongoing dialogue with a shared purpose was glimpsed at during the Reflective Practice Conference in Kobe 2014. What we need now is a way to sustain that interest and goodwill. We cannot depend on others to act for us. We all need to make an effort. Forming study groups, reading circles, data sessions, rotating presentations, and observing each other's classes are a few of the ways to keep the dream and vision alive of professional development based on reflection and joining theory and practice.

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