Exploratory Practice as Practitioner Research: A Review of Exploratory Practice for Continuing Professional Development: An Innovative Approach for Language Teachers

Moses G.R. Pandin M.Si. M.Phil
Universitas Airlangga, moses.glorino@fib.unair.ac.id

Elih Sutisna Yanto
Universitas Singaperbangsa Karawang, elih.sutisna@fkip.unsika.ac.id

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Abstract

In the book, *Exploratory Practice for Continuing Professional Development* (2018), the authors, Assia Slimani-Rolls and Richard Kiely, offer a comprehensive description of Exploratory Practice (EP) as a tool for the Continuing Professional Development (CPD) of language teachers. Through different parts of the diversity and complexity of language teaching in the last few decades, the authors show how teachers in different types of classrooms can grow professionally by working with their students to understand classroom life and explore their classrooms, where teachers are the most important thing to focus on to improve learning processes and outcomes rather than materials, techniques, technologies, and tests. This well-referenced book is a valuable resource for the continuing professional development of language teachers in a world burdened with methodological complexity and contradictions. Providing teachers and students a voice is an example of how exploratory practice (EP) can assist teachers and others involved in language education in better understanding what is going on in their classrooms and modifying classroom practice appropriately, and it is highly recommended. This book will give readers a clear and easy-to-understand introduction to exploratory practice as a sustainable way for language teachers to keep improving their skills by combining research and practice to solve problems and puzzles in the classroom.

Keywords

classroom life, continuing professional development, exploratory practice, puzzle

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Exploratory Practice as Practitioner Research:
A Review of *Exploratory Practice for Continuing Professional Development: An Innovative Approach for Language Teachers*

Moses Glorino Rumambo Pandin[1] and Elih Sutisna Yanto[2]
[1]Faculty of Humanities, Airlangga University, Surabaya, Indonesia
[2]Faculty of Teacher Training and Education at Universitas Singaperbangsa Karawang, Indonesia

In the book, *Exploratory Practice for Continuing Professional Development* (2018), the authors, Assia Slimani-Rolls and Richard Kiely, offer a comprehensive description of Exploratory Practice (EP) as a tool for the Continuing Professional Development (CPD) of language teachers. Through different parts of the diversity and complexity of language teaching in the last few decades, the authors show how teachers in different types of classrooms can grow professionally by working with their students to understand classroom life and explore their classrooms, where teachers are the most important thing to focus on to improve learning processes and outcomes rather than materials, techniques, technologies, and tests. This well-referenced book is a valuable resource for the continuing professional development of language teachers in a world burdened with methodological complexity and contradictions. Providing teachers and students a voice is an example of how exploratory practice (EP) can assist teachers and others involved in language education in better understanding what is going on in their classrooms and modifying classroom practice appropriately, and it is highly recommended. This book will give readers a clear and easy-to-understand introduction to exploratory practice as a sustainable way for language teachers to keep improving their skills by combining research and practice to solve problems and puzzles in the classroom.

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As teachers who have taught various levels of students for over 30 years, we find it difficult to integrate research with classroom teaching. Even though it can be overwhelming to learn research skills and knowledge for teachers for the first time, we believe that having inquiry and research skills for teachers is invaluable. Language teachers must respond to educational changes and curriculum renewals in many contexts, which complicate teaching. As a result, educators are overburdened (e.g., in administration, teaching, and public service). As language teacher educators, we have always been interested in long-term approaches to helping teachers improve their pedagogical skills. Exploratory practice is one way for language teachers to improve their skills and comes from the work of Dick Allwright (Allwright, 2003) and his colleagues, such as Judith Hanks (2017a).

On our path to becoming true practitioner researchers, this is one of the books we hope to read in order to satisfy our thirst for knowledge and advance our careers as professional teachers. We discovered in this book that research might be of some immediate benefit in a specific context rather than attempting to develop generalizable findings.

In the foreward of *Exploratory Practice for Continuing Professional Development*, Slimmany-Rolls and Kiely give a big picture of this book. Here is what they say:

> ...*Exploratory Practice* is a practitioner research method that recognizes learners as developing practitioners who can benefit from working with their teachers to understand their classroom lives. It also recognizes that the process of working for understanding is valuable, for the liveable understanding it brings, and does not need to produce generalizable knowledge. (p. x)

This book analyzes language educators' use of exploratory practice (EP) as a tool for continuing professional development (CPD), and it is a response to the growing need for teachers to get involved in research. In this book, Slimmany-Rolls and Kiely present the outcomes of a one-of-a-kind, two-year longitudinal study that investigated how English and modern foreign language teachers utilized EP in their classrooms. Through the use of these case studies, the authors give a critical study of EP as a type of practitioner research that bridges the gap between theory and practice. It shows how important it is for both teachers and students to learn in setting up language education programs, and it gives teachers a chance to say what they think about how EP is used in the classroom.

The term "Exploratory Practice" in this book reminds us of Allwright and Hanks's (2009) insight that describes how it is a type of practitioner research that combines research and pedagogy. So, both students and teachers are encouraged to look at how they learn and teach while also using the target language.

Hanks (2017a) asserts that EP was developed by Dick Allwright (2003) of Lancaster University and language teachers and teacher educators in Rio de Janeiro in the early 1990s. They started by looking into language, teaching, and social relationships both inside and outside of the classroom, using language features from the syllabus. In other words, they integrated research with teaching and learning languages. EP has been growing internationally in a lot of different ways because one of its key tenets is that there is no one best way to learn or teach a language. When both teachers and students take responsibility for their language learning in the classroom, they are in the best position to do research and write about their own experiences.

Slimmany-Rolls and Kiely, in this book, focus on the teacher, the ways in which teachers grow professionally by working with students to understand classroom life, and how teachers may improve the learning processes and outcomes by engaging with their students. Slimmany-Rolls and Kiely (2018) suggest that the teacher is more valuable than materials, techniques, technologies, and tests.

The writers position pedagogical practice within the context of teacher education. They examine method and post-method language teaching traditions that impact teacher education and development. The authors then argue for EP as a teaching method and a form of practitioner research that can enable educators to expand their pedagogical strategies by engaging with students to change the classroom's social space. As Hanks (2017b, p. 39) suggests, "the *Exploratory Practice* framework emphasizes small-scale, locally relevant research, which is integrated into the pedagogy, and is conducted by and for practitioners themselves" (p. 39).

In addition, they address CPD as a critical resource for enhancing language teaching by developing teachers' knowledge and skills. As they remarked,

> We use the Kennedy framework of models for CPD to understand the wider context of organized teacher learning and to place EP in the different frameworks and methods that have arisen in recent decades. We explore the

context of language teaching in Higher Education (HE) and focus on how the guiding principles of EP—prioritizing quality of life, understanding, collegiality, inclusivity, sustainability, and the use of normal classroom activities as investigative tools—can be used to develop teachers' understanding of their practice. (2018, p. 2)

In a context where English has become the international lingua franca, Slimmany-Rolls and Kiely (2018) examine Modern Foreign Languages (MFL) education. First, they examine the influence of the growth of English in educational environments (schools and universities) in Europe and Asia on language teaching communities, specifically the decline in MFL students and structural changes to departments and programs. These factors have diminished CPD expenditures and classroom innovation. Second, they study the expanding heterogeneities and the ever-increasing variance in language learning and instruction in the context of globalization and the different aspirations of higher education institutions, such as internationalization. Lastly, they give EP to MFL teachers as a way for them to interact with their work and learn how it fits into the globalized classroom.

The authors contribute to the expanding body of work on EP. A 2003 special issue of the journal *Language Teacher Research* examines the EP theoretical framework and demonstrates how the principles are implemented in the classroom. The core of the book is the learning experiences of six language teachers, three of whom teach modern foreign languages (MFLs) and three of whom teach English as a second language.

Slimmany-Rolls and Kiely (2018) propose EP as a mode of action for teachers that supports learning and CPD. Six teachers' portfolios show the teaching and research practices that improve their classrooms and increase understanding and teacher learning. These reports highlight puzzling, researching, understanding, and transforming in their classrooms and generate insights that are not so much ideal solutions to problems as achievements in teacher learning; insights into their practice that teachers can bring to new classes, programs, and student groups.

Slimmany-Rolls and Kiely explain a CPD project within the context of an EP framework. They examine the origins and scope of the Language Teacher Research Project (LTRP), emphasizing the contributions of leadership, collaborative workshops, and private space. This shows how teachers can be helped to understand how EP can change their practice and to write a case study about their own experiences.

In the final section of their book, the authors present six teacher-practitioner research case studies informed by EP. These are teachers' experiences of how they used EP in their work, revealing how EP changed classroom practice and research. Rather than problem solutions, the emphasis is on how understanding classroom puzzles changes teachers' beliefs and perspectives.

The first case study was conducted by Michelle Rawson. She looks at the reasons why her students use L1 in her university French class. The EP helps her and her students understand how complicated her students' reasons and reasoning are, and it makes her "less dogmatic" about what she expects from her students and how she evaluates learning opportunities in the classroom.

The next case study was conducted by Esther Lecumberri. She talks about a process for figuring out how to use mobile phones in the classroom. This experience with EP changed the classroom. The students had a new "sense of engagement," and they interacted with the teacher and learning activities in a different way. The main effect was on the teacher. The way students use their phones in class and how they feel about it will stay the same with each new group of students, but the teacher's way of dealing with it will change forever.

In the third case study, Anna Costantino talks to her students about how they respond to comments on their writing. Anna's view of her students changed because she paid more attention to how they used language. Before, she thought of them as participants who did in the teacher's language lessons. Working with these new identities gives her a chance to improve her own way of thinking and teaching.

Then, in Chris Banister's case study, he tries to figure out how students in a business English program deal with and use course evaluation questionnaires. The process changes the way students interact with the evaluation process, from just checking boxes to giving more thoughtful explanations. It also changed the way teachers learned, from focusing on "how" to asking "why" questions.

In his fifth case study, John Houghton looks at how students learn the language points he gives them. He finds out that the connection between teaching and learning is not always direct and is always complicated. Through this exploration with his students, he gets a better idea of where he wants his CPD to go and why.

In the last case study, Marianna Goral talks about how she worked with students to help them choose teaching materials and give presentations to their peers. The effect changed the way Marianna thought about how her choices as a teacher affected her students and the ways in which they could get involved.

The study cases discussed in this book enabled practitioner researchers to reconstruct the significant processes they went through to develop and then solve their puzzles. The following headings emerged, which led to a template that assisted them in constructing their experiences and producing case studies (Slimmany-Rolls and Kiely, 2018). The headings were also used as a guide to help practitioners write case studies and write more about their experiences.

- Introduction
- Search for Understanding
- Puzzle Identification
- Investigative Methods
- Data Collection
- Data Analysis
- Understanding and Discussion
- Reflections and Insight into the EP Processes and the Way Forward (p. 188)

In this book, Slimmany-Rolls and Kiely promote EP as a platform for language teacher learning and development. This scenario is based on the comprehensive feature of EP: all classroom participants (and beyond, in programs and institutions) contribute to making the classroom a venue for learning and improving learning capacity. The teacher will always manage these practices. This function is not really about applying prescribed methodologies or research-based innovations. It is all about expressing the classroom issue as one of inclusion, not just in terms of active involvement in pedagogical activities but also in comprehension. EP is characterized by active, engaged students, and the teacher's responsibility is to provide a process that creates insights about how the classroom operates and how to improve it. In this way, EP can contribute to the field as a whole.

As evidenced by our review/essay, we highly recommend this book. Three EP features are included in Slimmany-Rolls and Kiely's book. First, consider "quality of life" in the classroom. Teachers must build classrooms that are safe, enjoyable, and engaging. Second, in order to turn activities into learning opportunities, students need to understand how the classroom works and develop both an individual point of view and a group culture.

Third, research looks into the factors that shape practice. Lessons and programs might benefit from classroom activities.

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Author Note

Elih Sutisna Yanto is a reviewer for the *Journal of Applied Research in Higher Education*, published by EMERALD and *Cogent Arts & Humanities,* published by Taylor & Francis. Elih is a board member of the Exploratory Practice Indonesian Community (EPiC) and faculty member of teacher training and education at Universitas Singaperbangsa Karawang, Indonesia. He can be contacted through e-mail at elih.sutisna@fkip.unsika.ac.id.

Moses Glorino Rumambo Pandin has served as a lecturer and researcher at Department of English Literature Faculty of Humanities and Master in Disaster Management Postgraduate School, Universitas Airlangga. His research interest included educational psychology, humor, and philosophy of science. He is a psychologist and member of the Indonesian Psychological Association, the Indonesian Forensic Psychology Association, and the Indonesian Literature Association. He served as reviewer for several international journals and member of several research groups. He can be contacted via email at moses.glorino@fib.unair.ac.id.

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