Teachers as Researchers:
Exploratory Practice in Tunisian EFL Classrooms

ZhaoHong Han   Ashley Beccia   Sarah Creider   Vivian Lindhardsen   Donna M. Brinton
Teachers College, Columbia University

This Special Issue is dedicated to teachers' exploratory practice research (Allwright, 2005; Allwright & Hanks, 2009). It showcases nine studies conducted by Tunisian EFL teachers in their own classrooms.

In the publishing world of TESOL and applied linguistics, despite a proliferation of journals and edited volumes in recent decades, there remains hardly any space for practitioner research. Book publishers and journal editors, driven in part by concerns about profit margins, tend to reject this type of research (unabashedly) citing, as pretexts, the lack of geographical reach or lack of name recognition among contributors. Against this backdrop, this Special Issue counters the commercial mindset and helps fill a longstanding void in TESOL and applied linguistics literature. It illustrates how exploratory practice research can be done and illuminates the potential of practitioner research and the largely untapped ingenuity of practitioners.

As an introduction to this Special Issue, we will, briefly, discuss the research-practice divide phenomenon and describe the genre of exploratory practice (EP). After, we present a synopsis of nine EP studies. We conclude by emphasizing the unique role of EP in advancing foreign language instruction and suggesting ways to substantiate it.

THE RESEARCH-PRACTICE DIVIDE

The research-practice divide has long existed in educational research including in applied linguistics (see, e.g., Allwright, 1983; Clarke, 1994; Crookes, 1997; Ellis, 1997; Lightbown, 2003; Ortega, 2005; Sato & Loewen, 2022; Spada, 2015). To minimize it, mainstream thinking suggests that researchers and practitioners work together, and strategies are offered to achieve this. In a recently published Special Issue on this topic, Sato and Loewen (2022), for instance, argue for "a bidirectional dialogue," stating that "a dialogue between researchers and practitioners can be bidirectional, effective, and beneficial for the two professional communities" (p. 509). According to them, there are four ways to facilitate dialogue. First, both researchers and practitioners have a collaborative mindset. Second, both researchers and practitioners work together on practice-based research. Third, researchers and practitioners meet at professional development venues such as teacher-training programs and professional development workshops to explore collaborations. Fourth, institutions provide incentives for collaborative dialogues. In a similar vein, Spada and Lightbown (2022), drawing on their extensive experience in practice-based research, highlight the cycle of observation, correlation, and experimentation (Rosenshine & Furst, 1973) as crucial for researcher-teacher collaborations and strengthening the research-

pedagogy link. This involves researchers observing classes, linking observed phenomena to potential causal variables, and then designing interventions for teachers to implement. Furthermore, Spada and Lightbown propose three principles for researchers and teachers to follow: building trust and long-term relationships; building and sharing knowledge; and following up and providing feedback.

Dialogic approaches can indeed be productive, as demonstrated in the studies published in the Special Issue edited by Sato and Loewen (2022). Among other things, the studies show that collaboration can take a variety of forms and occur in diverse settings, ranging from curriculum development for a university language program (Leow et al, 2022) to community-engaged action research (De Costa et al, 2022) and to research-inspired lesson plans and implementation in primary and secondary schools (Spada & Lightbown, 2022). Researchers and teachers reportedly enjoy the collaborative process. Spada and Lightbown (2022) observe:

> [E]ven though there is evidence that a gap exists between the perceived interests of researchers and teachers, both groups share the goal of making classroom teaching and learning as successful as possible. Furthermore, researchers and teachers can and do learn from each other, and this reciprocity has had positive effects on classroom learning and teaching. (p. 636)

Researcher-teacher collaboration, however, can be an ideal more than a reality for a variety of reasons, not least its accessibility to teachers. In countries where professional development resources are scarce, teachers hardly have the opportunity to interact with research and researchers, let alone participate in collaborative projects.

Where collaborative work is feasible, studies investigating researchers' and teachers' views on the research-practice divide have revealed that researchers and practitioners alike face obstacles to 'crossing the bridge,' some of which are conceptual and some practical. In applied linguistics, studies have explored both the perspective of teachers (e.g., Borg, 2009; Borg & Liu, 2013; Marsden & Kasprowicz, 2017; McGann et al, 2020; Sato & Loewen, 2019) and the perspective of researchers (see, e.g., Sato et al, 2021; Sato & Loewen, 2022). Among the obstacles for teachers are the lack of time to engage in research and the inability to read and comprehend academic literature.

For researchers, contributing factors are the lack of time to conduct practice-oriented research, the lack of institutional recognition of, and reward for, efforts to link theory with practice, and a mismatch in interest (i.e., basic research versus applied research), to name but a few. Nonetheless, some researchers have made concerted efforts to conduct applied research, such as teaming up with school teachers (Lyster, 2019). Such attempts have surely made substantial inroads into bridging the research-practice divide, but they have palpable limitations. For one, studies are typically top-down, directed by university academics, with teachers playing a subordinate role. Consequently, research can remain detached from classroom reality (Erlam, 2008; Plonsky, 2013), which is far more complex than can be improved through a single type of treatment, much less one-off intervention.

Thus, bottom-up, teacher-initiated research remains desirable and even necessary, not just to narrow the gap between research and practice but, more importantly, to generate first-hand understandings of, and situated solutions to, the problems teachers and students have been facing (see also Hanks, 2017; Uştuk & Çomoğlu, 2021).

EXPLORATORY PRACTICE

Exploratory practice (EP), as conceptualized by Allwright (2005), involves teachers conducting research in their own classrooms to better understand their own teaching practices. Teachers formulate the research questions. They collect data in their own classrooms and analyze and interpret the results in context, based on their intimate knowledge of and experience with their own students and the institutional environment. Therefore, the entire EP process is bottom-up, local, and in-situ. EP does not follow, nor is it judged by, academic research orthodoxy or technicist criteria as are academic research and action research. Rather, it is valued for its real-world relevance, immediacy, and ecological validity. The ultimate goal of EP is to improve the efficacy of local instructional practices.

EP was originally borne out of an ethical concern about teachers' wellbeing. Teachers, due to workplace demands, reportedly suffered from burnout (Grosse, 1985). As a result, they did not have the time to learn about a technicist approach to research. By and large, however, there was a general reckoning that not only was a technicist approach to research unrealistic for teachers; it did not yield usable findings. As Allwright (2005) notes, "research about practice could perhaps be most sensibly conducted by practitioners themselves working to understand their own practices" (p. 357).

EP is not a research method, as Allwright (2005) stresses. It nevertheless bears several hallmarks. First of all, it is about the teacher's own experiences. Second, it is a first-person plural notion, meaning teachers research their own practices, with their students, and in their own classrooms. As such, "it requires a relationship of collegiality and mutuality" (Allwright, 2005, p. 357). In addition, EP is primarily about understanding, which sets EP apart from Action Research (Allwright, 2001). EP's epistemological contribution lies in its potential to provide a deep understanding of a given problem, which may eventually lead to problem-solving solutions.[2]

To be sure, what exactly is EP? According to Allwright (2005):

> Exploratory Practice offers an epistemologically and ethically motivated framework for conducting practitioner research in the field of language education. It does not offer a technical framework in itself, but it does make practical suggestions. (p. 361)

Echoing this conception of EP, in the present Special Issue, EP is operationalized as the process of teachers identifying a puzzle as the first step, followed then by in-situ data collection, analysis and interpretation, and concluded by contemplations of implications. A synopsis follows of the EP studies included in this volume.

NINE EP STUDIES

---

[2] The need to prioritize understanding over improvement is woefully neglected in educational research, including research on ISLA, an issue beyond the scope of this article. Suffice it to say here that a CDST (Complex Dynamic Systems Theory)-inspired approach (see, e.g., Larsen-Freeman, 2017) would welcome the inclusion of EP in an otherwise technicist approach to educational research.

The nine EP studies were all conducted in Tunisia. Contributors are university faculty members involved with training pre-service teachers of English as a foreign language for young learners, who in 2021 or 2022 participated in a yearlong transnational teacher education project called "Building Capacity for English Language Educators of Young Learners."[3] Participants, in one of the training modules themed "Teaching as a Science," were introduced to a top-down approach and a bottom-up approach to integrating research with practice. The top-down approach involves learning about and understanding extant research, with teachers essentially functioning as consumers of research. This holds especially true for research on Instructed Second Language Acquisition (ISLA), a body of research into the effects of instruction on foreign language learning, which has yielded pedagogical strategies that have been proven to be effective. Participants were also introduced to a bottom-up approach which entails teachers themselves conducting research in their own classrooms, in particular, exploratory practice research.

Study 1

Salah and Houichi explored pre-service teachers' experiences with extracurricular activities in Gafsa, an area in Tunisia that offered few opportunities for practicing English outside the classroom. Results from questionnaires and online video recordings showed that experiences with extracurricular activities, such as clubs and associations, were overwhelmingly positive. Such activities afforded pre-service teachers valuable opportunities to interact with each other in stress-free contexts. The pre-service teachers reported that the immersive language experiences improved their language proficiency, especially in pronunciation and vocabulary.

Study 2

Mabrouk, having observed students' passiveness and disengagement in Oral Proficiency assessments in his classroom, attempted to make assessments more learning oriented. He explored EFL students' perceptions of the type of assessment he had used in his classroom. Through questionnaires (Likert scale combined with open-ended questions), he found that the more student-centered form of assessment enhanced students' speaking skills and self-confidence, and it also led to greater self-reflection. In addition, the students appreciated very detailed teacher feedback, though they considered peer assessment less effective.

Study 3

In order to gain a better understanding of why pre-service teachers tended to make recurrent mechanical errors in their writing, El Houche invited his students to think about the underlying causes of their errors. The reasons given fell into three categories: personal, instructional, and L1 transfer. Students' own lack of motivation was the most frequently cited reason for the lack of attention to mechanical errors, but instructional reasons such as the lack of

---

[3] The project, funded by the U.S. Department of State, was spearheaded by Columbia University's Teachers College, in collaboration with the U.S. Embassy in Tunisia, the Tunisian Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research, and the Columbia University Global Center in Tunis.

emphasis on mechanics in the syllabus and how the teacher addressed errors were also frequently mentioned. The study raised students' awareness of their own errors.

Study 4

Belgacem and Deymi's study sought to understand and find a solution to pre-service teachers' anxiety in summative writing assessments. Through engaging in task-based language teaching (TBLT), the teachers gained insight into the challenges pre-service teachers were facing with grammar and vocabulary and learned about their feelings of frustration and self-doubt. TBLT increased the pre-service teachers' enthusiasm, motivation, and self-confidence and improved the quality of their writing.

Study 5

In another EP study on TBLT, Jabi and Fadlaoui, based on their observations of pre-service teachers' weak language productive skills, anxiety, and a lack of authenticity in the language input provided in the classroom, explored TBLT as a potential solution. Data, drawn from classroom observations, checklists, focus group interviews, and scoring rubrics, showed that TBLT fostered pre-service teachers' functional competence in English. In particular, it enabled pre-service teachers to process and understand input, negotiate for meaning, and turn input into meaningful output. In addition, TBLT helped pre-service teachers overcome fears of public speaking and lower their anxiety in general, while increasing their motivation.

Study 6

Chakhar's EP study explored the impact of Problem-Based Learning (PBL) on his students. After observing low student engagement and poor performance on teacher preparation exams, Chakhar changed his lecture-based instructional style to a more learner-centered, collaborative PBL approach. Discussions with his pre-service teachers revealed that both the instructor and the students found PBL effective and engaging. Among other things, it contributed to the development of students' critical thinking, team-building skills, and self-directed learning. This was particularly true for struggling students, who benefitted from working with more proficient students.

Study 7

In her EP study, Kortas explored film adaptation with students majoring in English language, literature, and civilization. The study was motivated by her observation that many students in her literature class suffered high levels of anxiety when reading canonical literary works. Data from interviews and retrospective questionnaires showed that film adaptation assisted students in overcoming the linguistic challenges of understanding the archaic and figurative language of the texts. It boosted their motivation and engagement and enabled them to discuss plot, characters and themes in depth. The study also found that while film adaptation improved their mastery of content, students still struggled with linguistic expression.

Study 8

Inspired by the TC-Tunisia Project, especially the notion of teaching as a science, Bouziri's EP study involved designing a new course for pre-service teachers and exploring its impact on their knowledge and attitudes towards Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL). Data collected from a variety of sources indicated that pre-service teachers' knowledge of key TEYL concepts (e.g., incidental versus intentional learning, scaffolding, teaching as a science) improved, but that their limited English proficiency prevented them from taking full advantage of the course.

Study 9

Prompted by her observations of pre-service teachers' lack of progress in micro-teaching skills, Fki developed an innovative feedback strategy and explored its efficacy. The strategy employed an elaborate scoring rubric, coupled with feedback from a variety of sources including self-reflections. Comparing pre-service teachers' performance in two microteaching sessions, one towards the beginning of the semester and another towards the end, Fki found significant progress in almost all aspects of microteaching. Retrospective interviews revealed that student teachers not only made progress in microteaching, but became increasingly aware of the importance of feedback and self-reflection, as well.

LOOKING AHEAD

The nine studies presented in this Special Issue addressed a miscellany of puzzles arising from: microteaching, course design, assessment of oral performance, ability to use language, accuracy of learner language, extra-curricular activities, learner writing, teaching of literature, and project-based teaching. Driven by an intense interest in seeking a deeper understanding of their puzzles and a desire to improve teaching, the teachers engaged in data collection at various scales, in contextual data interpretation, and in reflections on the practical implications of their findings, some translated into concrete actions for the immediate or near future.

Of note, in this collection of studies, the formulation of the puzzles was, to a varying extent, sparked by the professional development training the teachers had just undergone (Han, 2023). As a result, through engaging in the exploratory practice research, the teachers had an immediate opportunity to tie new ideas they received from the training experience to their own teaching realities. For us, this is a remarkable step in integrating research into practice, a step that will sooner or later result in positive changes in their practices. And the changes are likely to be effective, because of the nature of the empirical basis created in the first place which involved local stakeholders, students, and in some cases, colleagues as well.

As some of the teacher authors have recognized, EP does not and should not stop at this stage. Rather, EP should be iterative, or even become a habit of mind and practice. As a matter of fact, teachers should consider carrying out long-term EP research to deepen their understanding of the issues of concern to them, and to continually improve upon the efficacy of their instruction as their students' learning needs dynamically evolve.

Equally important, teachers should not fear taking on more complex puzzles the solution of which would require collaboration across sections of a class within the same department,

across departments within the same institution, or across institutions within the same country. The potential is infinite, and so is the impact of such collaboration.

When EP is projected in this light, it is essential that teachers continue their interaction with researchers/academics, when possible, in various ways including through institutional and personal outreach. Thus, rather than EP taking on a life of its own or leaving EP to its own devices, EP can be enriched by new perspectives and insights, and so can the solutions to the in-situ puzzles (Denos et al., 2009; Lyster et al., 2009).

Both researchers and practitioners agree that foreign language instruction is a complex undertaking with high stakes, unprecedented in today's world. As Spada and Lightbown (2022) aptly point out, "research in different contexts will have different constraints and challenges, and there are multiple ways of conceptualizing and designing research" (p. 636). Consequently, the epistemology of foreign language instruction does not need to come solely from researchers/academics. Teachers and students can be equal partners in knowledge generation (Allwright, 2005). Classrooms provide an unparalleled site for it, with teachers uniquely positioned to find solutions in collaboration with their students.

This Special Issue spotlights the aspiring role of teachers as researchers. Its theme is significant as the field of foreign language instruction moves toward viewing teaching as a science and practicing evidence-based teaching.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

REFERENCES

Allwright, D. (1983). Classroom-centered research on language teaching and learning: A brief historical overview. *TESOL Quarterly, 17*(2), 191-204.

Allwright, D. (2001). Three major processes of teacher development and the appropriate design criteria for developing and using them. In B. Johnston & S. Irujo (Eds.), *Research and practice in language teacher education: Voices from the field* (pp. 115-133). Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition.

Allwright, D. (2005). Developing principles for practitioner research: The case of exploratory practice. *The Modern Language Journal, 89*, 353-366. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4781.2005.00310.x

Allwright, D., & Hanks, J. (2009). *The developing language learner: An introduction to exploratory practice*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Borg, S. (2009). English language teachers' conceptions of research. *Applied Linguistics, 30*(3), 358-388. https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/amp007

Borg, S., & Liu, Y. (2013). Chinese college English teachers' research engagement. *TESOL Quarterly, 47*(2), 270-299. https://doi.org/10.1002/tesq.56

Clarke, M. (1994). The dysfunctions of the theory/practice discourse. *TESOL Quarterly, 28*(1), 9-26. https://doi.org/10.2307/3587196

Crookes, G. (1997). SLA and language pedagogy: A socio-educational perspective. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition, 19*, 93-116.

De Costa, P. I., Gajasinghe, K., Ojha, L. P., & Rabie-Ahmed, A. (2022). Bridging the researcher-practitioner divide through community-engaged action research: A collaborative autoethnographic exploration. *The Modern Language Journal, 106*(3), 547-563. https://doi.org/10.1111/modl.12796

Denos, C., Toohey, K., Neilson, K., & Waterstone, B. (2009). *Collaborative research in multilingual classrooms*. Multilingual Matters.

Ellis, R. (1997). SLA and language pedagogy: An educational perspective. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition, 19*(1), 69-92.

Erlam, R. (2008). What do you researchers know about language teaching? Bridging the gap between SLA research and language pedagogy. *Innovation in Language Learning and Teaching, 2*(3), 253-267. https://doi.org/10.1080/17501220802158958

Grosse, C. (1985). Burnout in teachers of second languages. In *Selected articles from the TESOL Newsletter, 1966-83* (pp. 87-89). TESOL.

Han, Z-H. (2023). In English Medium Instruction you *can* walk and chew gum. *Frontiers in Psychology, 14*, Article 1134982. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1134982

Hanks, J. (2017). *Exploratory practice in language teaching: Puzzling about principles and practices.* Palgrave Macmillan UK.

Larsen-Freeman, D. (2017). Complexity Theory: The lessons continue. In L. Ortega & Z.-H. Han (Eds.), *Complexity Theory and language development: In celebration of Diane Larsen-Freeman* (pp. 11-50). John Benjamins.

Leow, R., Thinglum, A., Havenne, M., & Tseng, R. (2022). Bridge the gap between researchers and teachers: A curricular perspective. *The Modern Language Journal, 106*(3), 565-582. https://doi.org/10.1111/modl.12799

Lightbown, P. (2003). SLA in the classroom/SLA research for the classroom. *Language Learning Journal, 28*, 4-13. https://doi.org/10.1080/09571730385200151

Lyster, R. (2019). Making research on ISLA relevant for teachers through professional development. *Language Teaching Research (Special issue on instructed SLA), 23*(4), 494-513. https://doi.org/10.1177/1362168818776667

Lyster, R., Collins, L., & Ballinger, S. (2009). Linking languages through a bilingual read-aloud project. *Language Awareness, 18*(3-4), 366-383. https://doi.org/10.1080/09658410903197322

Marsden, E., & Kasprowicz, R. (2017). Foreign language educators' exposure to research: Reported experiences, exposure via citations, and a proposal for action. *The Modern Language Journal, 101*(4), 613-642. https://doi.org/10.1111/modl.12426

McGann, M., Ryan, M., McMahon, J., & Hall, T. (2020). T-REX: The teachers' research exchange. Overcoming the research-practice gap in education. *TechTrends*, *64*, 470-483. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11528-020-00486-4

Ortega, L. (2005). For what and for whom is our research? The ethical as transformative lens in instructed SLA. *The Modern Language Journal, 89*(3), 427-443. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4781.2005.00315.x

Plonsky, L. (2013). Study quality in SLA: An assessment of designs, analyses, and reporting practices in quantitative L2 research. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition, 35*(4), 655-687. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0272263113000399

Rosenshine, B., & Furst, N. (1973). The use of direct observation to study teaching. In R. Travers (Ed.), *Second handbook of research on teaching* (pp. 122–183). Rand McNally.

Sato, M., & Loewen, S. (2019). Do teachers care about research? The research-pedagogy dialogue. *ELT Journal*, *73*(1), 1-10. https://doi:10.1093/elt/ccy048

Sato, M., & Loewen, S. (2022). The research-practice dialog in second language learning and teaching: Past, present, and future. *The Modern Language Journal, 106*(3), 509-527. https://doi.org/10.1111/modl.12791

Sato, M., Loewen, S., & Pastushenkov, D. (2021). 'Who is my research for?': Researcher perceptions of the research-practice relationship. *Applied Linguistics, 43*(4), 1-26. https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/amab079

Spada, N. (2015). SLA research and L2 pedagogy: Misapplications and questions of relevance. *Language Teaching, 48*(1), 69-81. https://doi:10.1017/S026144481200050X

Spada, N., & Lightbown, P. (2022). In it together: Teachers, researchers and classroom SLA. *The Modern Language Journal, 106*(3), 635-650. https://doi.org/10.1111/modl.12792

Uştuk, Ö., & Çomoğlu, İ. (2021) Reflexive professional development in reflective practice: What lesson study can offer. *International Journal for Lesson & Learning Studies*, *10*(3), 260-273. https://doi.org/10.1108/IJLLS-12-2020-0092

ZhaoHong Han is Professor of Applied Linguistics at Teachers College, Columbia University. Professor Han is also the director of multiple foreign language education initiatives, including the TC-Tunisia Project, during which she taught two modules - "Teaching in the 21st Century" and "Teaching as a Science." Professor Han has numerous publications on a range of issues in applied linguistics, such as digital language learning, instructed second language acquisition and task-based language teaching. Correspondence should be sent to han@tc.columbia.edu.

Ashley Beccia is a Doctor of Education (EdD) Candidate of Applied Linguistics at Teachers College, Columbia University, specializing in second language acquisition. Her research interests include task-based language teaching for young learners and co-adaptation in dyadic interaction. Ashley is also an instructor and student-teacher supervisor at Teachers College, and formerly served as the Project Assistant of the TC-Tunisia Project. Correspondence should be sent to ajb2301@tc.columbia.edu.

Sarah Creider is a Lecturer in the Applied Linguistics and Teaching of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) program at Teachers College, Columbia University. Dr. Creider is an expert in conversation analysis, reflective teaching practices, and teaching English to young

learners. Dr. Creider was an instructor in the TC-Tunisia Project, co-teaching the module "Pedagogical Training" with Donna Brinton. Correspondence should be sent to creider@tc.columbia.edu.

Vivian Lindhardsen is a Senior Lecturer in the Applied Linguistics and TESOL program at Teachers College, Columbia University, and is also the director of this program. Dr. Lindhardsen's expertise is in second language assessment, with publications on topics such as raters' decision-making behaviors and perceptions. Dr. Lindhardsen was an instructor in the TC-Tunisia Project, teaching the module "Planning and Assessment." Correspondence should be sent to vl2266@tc.columbia.edu.

Donna M. Brinton is an educational consultant in TESOL/applied linguistics with decades of experience in the field. Ms. Brinton worked for 27 years at the University of California, Los Angeles, as Lecturer in the Department of TESL/Applied Linguistics and coordinator of the university's ESL program for matriculated students. She has conducted international teacher training in myriad countries and presented at many conferences worldwide. She also has numerous publications, with some of her most recent work focusing on content-based instruction. In the TC-Tunisia Project, Ms. Brinton co-taught the "Pedagogical Training" module with Dr. Creider. Correspondence should be sent to brinton@humnet.ucla.edu.