



## Sustainability of Exploratory Practice (EP) in Rio de Janeiro: a case study of former ELT pre-service teachers

**Line of Research:** Improving English Language teaching and learning in the public school system at lower and upper secondary levels

**Brazilian Universities:** Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro (PUC-Rio, Brazil); Teacher Education College/State University of Rio de Janeiro (Faculdade de Formação de Professores - FFP/UERJ)

**British Institution:** Regent's University London

**The justification** for this study lies in the gap found in the research literature “in terms of the impact of learning on teacher training courses from the perspective of early career work” (Kiely & Askham, 2012, p. 497). Based on the belief that more work needs to be done to understand the connections between long-term teacher education practices and teachers’ lives on their jobs, this study presents the outcomes of a British Council funded research project (2018-2019), which was inspired in the theoretical amalgamation of the critical work of Freire (1970), Allwright (2003) and other contemporary contributors to the fields of Critical Applied Linguistics and Educational Research (Pennycook, 2006; Zeichner, 2008). Aligned with the agenda that research initiatives can be framed as places to engage in ‘pedagogies of hope’, the team researched *with* those involved, thus generating potential understanding opportunities for all participants – both in-service teachers and teacher educators. This

ethical, inclusive and collegial research design is oriented by the Exploratory Practice claim for a viable form of practitioner research (Hanks, 2017) that is focused on working for understanding rather than on problem-solving and that can be fully integrated into teachers' and learners' lives. Allwright (2006) believes that teachers can work to: understand the quality of their classroom lives, become knowledge-makers in the field and, along with learners, come to be considered as developing practitioners. Besides the innovative Exploratory Practice work developed since 1997 in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil (Allwright & Hanks, 2009), Exploratory Practice ideas have also been integrated into the in-service teacher education programs at the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro (PUC-Rio) and at the Teacher Education College/State University of Rio de Janeiro (Faculdade de Formação de Professores – FFP/UERJ). The theoretical motivation for introducing Exploratory Practice in our teacher education courses comes from the urgent need for pre-service language teachers to move towards criticality and reflexivity and pay attention to the “quality of classroom life” (Gieve & Miller, 2006), to the interactional construction of emotions in educational settings (Zembylas, 2005; Nóbrega, 2003) and to the social lives experienced inside/outside schools (Zeichner, 2008).

The international team was integrated by researchers who have had a long-term involvement with Exploratory Practice: in Brazilian teacher education, Inés K. Miller (PUC-Rio, Brazil), Isabel Cristina R. Moraes Bezerra (FFP/UERJ, Brazil), Maria Isabel A. Cunha (CAP/UFRJ), Adriana Nogueira Accioly Nóbrega (PUC-Rio), and Walewska Gomes Braga (Escola Municipal Santo Tomás de Aquino); in the UK, Assia Slimani-Rolls (Regent's University, London), who has devoted her recent work to continuing professional development (Slimani-Rolls & Kiely, 2018). Due to her intensive and vast research within the Exploratory Practice framework, Dr. Judith Hanks (University of Leeds, UK) was invited to participate as a collaborator and so was Dr. Richard Kiely (University of Southampton, UK), who has been supporting such practitioner research notions. Both academics agreed to act as *ad hoc* consultants according to needs and as *rapporteurs* in the dissemination events held in London and in Rio.

**The study's main objective** was to examine the delayed impact of the principles of Exploratory Practice that inspired part of the language teacher education curricula experienced by the 44 (forty-four) participating in-service bilingual teachers of Portuguese and English who graduated from PUC-Rio and FFP/UERJ between 2008 and 2018. The research team members jointly elaborated an online Google Form survey, in order to generate updated information about the participants' professional contexts and situated practices. The teachers answered three questions focused on the basic notions of Exploratory Practice (EP). As part of the survey, the teachers also shared some of their puzzles or intriguing questions as well as a narrative about a moment of their teaching practice that they could associate with EP. During the second stage, the research team organized and ran two events, conceived as teacher development *and* data-gathering opportunities, during which one-to-one semi-

structured recorded interviews were conducted. The researchers listened to the interviews and selected the most relevant excerpts for the purposes of better understanding the sustainability of the notions of EP in the participating teachers' professional lives. These relevant excerpts were transcribed by four research assistants who also translated the selected excerpts into English for the British academics to have direct access to the data. Working within a qualitative research paradigm (Denzin & Lincoln, 2006), a thematic analysis of selected stretches drawn from the recorded interviews and from the teachers' narratives was carried out, collaboratively seeking to identify emerging themes related to the main focus of the project. The data were analysed in alignment with narrative studies (Bruner, 1990; Cortazzi [1993]2002), especially Johnson and Golombek (2002).

**The findings** show that the humanistic non-technicist philosophy of EP has been the basis for the participating teachers' survival in regular public and private sector schools as well as in language courses in Rio de Janeiro. EP's reflective ethos has been helping professionals to strive to maintain a collaborative and friendly atmosphere in their classrooms, thus, involving their students to work for understanding the issues that may have positive or negative consequences to the lives they live in their educational contexts. Such reflective stand emphasized by EP leads to thinking about quality of life. In fact, the notion of quality of classroom life is seen as one of the greatest gifts one can get from EP, since it helps teachers and students understand that nothing is perfect, that they will not find a formula to solve the problems they have. The understandings generated, however, can help them find ways to face difficulties, to resist and to transform. The teachers' narratives highlight how, working within EP, students and teachers are partners and everyone's agencies are encouraged. Together, and by integrating a reflective attitude and the contents to be taught and learnt, students and teachers create classroom activities that allow them to discuss issues related to sexism, violence against women, bullying inside and outside the classroom, among many others. It becomes evident that the tactful and ethical ethos created by the EP framework in the classroom can inspire and involve people who hurt and who are being hurt to share sad stories that echo their own sad realities. Based on their personal and collective understandings, these practitioners can act to transform their interpersonal relationships and improve the group's quality of life.

The research team understood that professional survival can be a challenge for teachers in general and for EP teachers, in particular, when, due to tight course schedules and/or narrow syllabi, they do not have space or time to develop, with their students, a reflective attitude to life inside their classrooms and beyond. However, there are EP teachers who only survive professionally and emotionally due to EP's humanistic ethos, which entails affect, care for the other, and careful listening to students' issues. Some teachers expressed that they overcome professional frustrations caused by disrespect from current educational government or private policies, as they feel that they are not alone in their classrooms and that they feel comforted by the sense of belonging to the Rio de Janeiro EP group. Considering the

participants' answers altogether, it seems that EP offers a viable alternative to the current professional pressures especially in the Brazilian social, historical and educational scenario.

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