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## Exploratory Practice (A response to David Nunan)

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In his piece on "Teaching Portfolios for Teacher Development" (*ELT News and Views*, Supplement 4.1: Teacher Development, March 1997, pp 4-7) David Nunan was kind enough to include an extended paragraph on 'exploratory teaching', based on the final chapter of the Allwright and Bailey 1991 book: "Focus on the Language Classroom" (Cambridge University Press). Unfortunately, taking this particular text as the source meant that considerable developments in the notion since 1991 were not covered. I hope this response will not be taken as criticism of Nunan's article, but simply as a record of the ground that has been covered over the last six years.

Firstly, we ('we' means all those people centrally involved in developing the ideas, most of whom are located in Rio de Janeiro - see Allwright and Lenzuen, 1997) are now using the term 'exploratory practice' instead of 'exploratory teaching'. This is to reflect our concern that the ideas should be seen to apply to classroom practitioners in general, and we wish to include learners alongside their teacher's perspective, because most often we find ourselves working for teacher development, not learner development. We prefer to see that as an accident of history, however, not as something desirable in itself, and certainly not something that is built into exploratory practice as a concept.

Nunan's article refers to 'exploratory teaching' as "a philosophical stance or attitude of mind towards one's classroom practice". This now sounds rather 'grand' to me, but I have often found myself referring to the desirability of introducing a 'research perspective' into language teaching and learning. I would now wish to exchange this terminology from the philosophy of science for the more commonplace term *understanding*, and to argue that exploratory practice involves a central concern for developing *understandings* of what happens in language classrooms. Nunan goes on to introduce the importance of *understanding* in this conception, but he adds 'increasing effectiveness' as an aim.

It may be perverse of me, but I believe that it is important to try to argue that 'increasing effectiveness', however obviously desirable in general terms, is not a proper aim for exploratory practice, not, at least, if it is allowed to become the primary driving force for any work done to develop understandings. I believe we need to put *understanding* itself as our primary purpose, leaving 'increasing effectiveness' as an often desirable side-effect, but not the only thing that could possibly make the whole enterprise worthwhile. I see a parallel here with one of my objections to some representations of action research - that they put the primary aim as 'problem-solving'. It seems to me to be self-evidently true that *understanding* is the logical prerequisite to any intelligent problem-solving, and that focusing on trying to solve a problem before it is properly understood is a recipe for expensive mistakes. It also seems to me to be self-evidently true that trying to *understand* a problem may even in some cases result in it no longer appearing to constitute the problem we originally thought it was (see Naidu et al, 1992, for whom practical 'problem' of knowing how to deal with large classes turned into a concern for how

to respect individual differences - something that could no longer be seen simply as a practical 'problem'). In a similar way, putting too much emphasis on 'increasing effectiveness' could encourage an unhelpful extension of the short-termism that afflicts so many parts of our lives these days. I would like to understand better, without feeling that they were under some sort of professional injection to tie their exploratory work into any immediate prospect of 'increasing effectiveness'.

Nunan goes on, very reasonably, to treat exploratory practice as a form of 'reflective practice'. I would simply add here, however, that although we see exploratory practice as *less* action-oriented than reflective practice, and as having practical suggestions to make about how investigations for understanding can be actively conducted in the language classroom, it is part of normal language teaching and learning.

Two underlying assumptions of exploratory practice are then set out by Nunan, and both of them deserve comment here, in the light of our development work since 1991. The first is the assumption that the teacher is "the key variable in the language teaching equation". I would not wish to try to defend that assumption here. It certainly does not represent my current position, which is that the participants collectively are co-constructors of whatever happens in the language classroom, and that is therefore too simplistic to isolate the teacher as *the* key variable, although he or she is obviously more likely to be *one of* the key ones in a classroom situation. The second assumption attributed to exploratory practice by Nunan is that "becoming more effective as a teacher is a lifelong, spiralling process". I would not wish to quarrel with that assumption, but neither would I wish to associate it particularly with exploratory practice. I would prefer rather to focus on the point that if a "research perspective" is to be integrated fully into a practitioner's working life (as teacher or as learner), then it cannot usefully be on a one-off temporary basis. Exploratory practice has therefore been specifically developed to offer the prospect of an integration of research and pedagogy that is indefinitely sustainable, within a normal professional life.

Nunan then goes on to note that "the teacher is the researcher's link with learners, and also learners' link with research". Again I would not particularly wish to quarrel with this as a factual statement, and it is an entirely reasonable restatement of my 1991 position. I would however wish to challenge and rethink the implied dependency relation between teachers and learners on the one hand, and researchers on the other. This implication is reinforced by Nunan's statement: that "The teacher is contracted to help learners learn, but can do so better by knowing about previous research and by using the procedures of classroom research to understand better what is happening in his or her own classroom". I would now much more prefer to focus on my thinking very differently. Rather than start from the research end at all, I would prefer to start with the classroom itself, and with participants' own puzzles about what happens there. I would then move on to consider how the standard practices teachers have at their disposal to make sure they have some idea of what happens in a lesson, while it is happening (standard 'monitoring' procedures), might be harnessed as investigative, information-gathering tools to investigate participants' classroom puzzles. If such procedures do not suffice, then exploratory practice would suggest using language teaching and learning activi-

ties themselves as investigative, information-gathering tools (for example a whole class-discussion, after small-group work to establish articulated positions, might serve well to throw light on why it is that learners seem reluctant precisely to undertake small-group activities in the target language). At no time throughout the above process would I now advocate the procedures of classroom research as such. I now find them far too likely to induce burn-out in classroom practitioners because they require too much new learning and too much time to devise and administer effectively. I feel that they are therefore likely to militate strongly against the requirement for indefinite sustainability noted above. Even more contentiously perhaps, I would not even wish to advocate that teachers should see it as a major priority to know about the findings of academic research - certainly not if that is seen as an essential first step for any investigative work of their own. I find myself more in sympathy with Naidu et al again, who at the end of their investigative work note: "Confident of our perceptions we now feel ready to share with, to confront and dialogue with the insights of other researchers" (1992:262). For my own purposes I have coined the slogan: *I want to read what I read because of what I think, not think what I think because of what I read.*

Nunan notes that "In this way" (i.e. by using the procedures of classroom research) "the exploratory teacher will not only improve achievement but will also contribute to our general research knowledge about how language classrooms work". As I note above I would now wish to downplay the prospect of (or even the interest in) any immediate improvement of achievement, but I would still like to hold on to the notion of an eventual "contribution" might come, not from the application of standard classroom research techniques, but from whatever practitioners themselves find it practical to do in their own classrooms, whether through monitoring or through the investigative use of their standard repertoire of language teaching and learning activities. In this way, language teaching professionals might succeed in designing for themselves a research tradition that is genuinely professional, not driven by academic concerns but by professional ones. At this stage it is far too early to see at all clearly what this might mean, but it is significant, I think, that the whole idea is in line with the effort TESOL is making, as the major association of teachers of English to speakers of other languages and with a leading contribution from David Nunan to rethink TESOL's relationship to research, and in so doing to rethink what 'research' itself might mean, as a concept in our field.

Nunan's next step in his article is to state: "This is what we mean by 'exploratory teaching' - teaching that not only tries out new ideas, but also tries to learn as much as possible from doing so". I do agree with the thrust of the second part of this proposition, but I find the first part unfortunate in its emphasis on "new ideas". This brings it uncomfortably close to action research for me, whereas I see exploratory practice not as a matter of trying out new ideas at all (although work at the British Council Teachers Centre in Istanbul is pioneering using exploratory practice in the context of introducing classroom innovations - see Özdeniz, 1996). I see it instead as focusing on trying to understand, initially though normal processes of classroom monitoring, what is *already happening* in the classroom.

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Nunan's article ends its treatment of exploratory practice in a way that is helpfully supportive of the above point, by moving on from talking about 'new' ideas to talk about 'tried and tested' ones. He concludes by focusing on the

positive value of "trying to find out what makes the tried and tested ideas successful". This reinforces my own perception, central to the developing concept of exploratory practice, that teacher development is not about enabling poor teachers to become good ones, but about enabling all teachers to understand better what it means to be a teacher at all.

To conclude my own piece I would like first of all to thank David Nunan for treating exploratory practice in his article, and, by so doing, for prompting me to respond in this way. Lastly, as an appendix, I would like to set out in outline form what I now see as the defining characteristics of exploratory practice.

**Appendix:** *The defining characteristics of Exploratory Practice*

Exploratory Practice involves

A. Practitioners working to understand:

- a) what *they* want to understand, following their *own* agendas;
- b) not necessarily *in order* to bring about change;
- c) not primarily *by* changing;
- d) but *by using* normal pedagogic practices as investigative tools, so that working for understanding is part of the teaching and learning, not extra to it;
- e) in a way that does not lead to 'burn out', but that is indefinitely sustainable.

B. In order to contribute to:

- f) teaching and learning themselves;
- g) professional development, both individual and collective.

Note: the term 'practitioners' is intended to cover learners as well as teachers.

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