Co-production and multimodality: learners as co-researchers exploring practice

Introduction

For several decades, notions of teachers working as teacher-researchers, either independently or in collaboration with academic researchers, have been established. The ideas of practitioner research are familiar, especially as encapsulated in Action Research (AR) and Reflective Practice (RP). These approaches have been eagerly adopted in many parts of the world, and in many different educational institutions. But the learners' perspective is missing. Exploratory Practice (EP) is unique in proposing that not only teachers, but also learners (and others) can, and should, be involved in researching practice. However, to date, scant attention has been paid to learners' potential as co-investigators in practitioner research. I propose that in/through EP, learners are potent agenda-setters, investigators and theorisers in language education and applied linguistics. The contribution of this paper is to examine EP's subtly radical suggestion of activating learners' potential to co-produce practitioner research, using multimodal methods to explore their puzzles and 'sticky objects', in the form of posters, to disseminate their work.

I begin by delineating the 'family tree' of practitioner research, showing how RP, AR and EP are related, and I discuss the notion of 'co-production' in research. Focussing on Exploratory Practice (Allwright and Hanks, 2009; Hanks, 2017a), I review literature on teachers and learners co-producing research from initial stages through data collection/generation and analysis, to presentation and dissemination, and onward to a sustainable continuation. I examine examples of practitioners as they engage in EP in different educational contexts, in the Global South (Miller et al., 2008; Miller, Côrtes, Oliveira and Braga, 2015; Miller and Cunha, 2017), East (Chu, 2007; Dikilitaş and Hanks, 2018; Kato and Dalsky, 2019) as well as

the West and North (Banister, 2018; Best et al., 2015; Costantino, 2019; Vaattovaara, 2017). This spans EP work in state schools as well as higher education institutions, with learners engaging in EP alongside teachers, teacher educators, curriculum designers and educational psychologists.

I then draw on my own work with learners (and teachers) on English for Academic Purposes (EAP) pre-sessional courses preparing students for study at a UK university. Pre-sessional courses are provided (at a cost) by universities for students with the aim of improving study skills, orienting newcomers to the host academic environment (which may have different expectations) and developing language skills to accommodate the academic genres of the host environment. As described below, learners from China, Indonesia, Iran, and elsewhere, collaborated with their teachers to identify their own puzzles (research questions) and collect/generate/collate data. I analyse the multimodal (Kress and van Leeuwen, 1997) ways in which the learners investigated, then disseminated their developing understandings via posters. To do so, I analyse a set of three posters in depth. Powerful emotions 'stick' to these artefacts, and resonate with their audiences (initially classmates and their teachers; later, practitioner researchers in different settings). These posters were 'sticky objects' (Ahmed, 2014); created by EAP learners, using colours, shapes and images to convey their ideas as they tried EP for the first time. Although EP was generally positively received, it is not without challenges. I end by discussing the ethical intricacies involved in the co-production of fully inclusive (i.e. with learners) practitioner research. To my knowledge, this is the first time that such an analysis of this multimodal, co-produced work has been attempted.

Three forms of practitioner research

There are many different forms of practitioner research. The main branches may be seen as a form of 'family tree' (see Figure 1) as suggested in Hanks (2017a, 2019a). Much attention has been given to AR and RP, with some writers mistakenly subsuming EP under AR. For example, citing Allwright's trenchant critique of traditional classroom research, Kubanyiova (2008) misaligns EP with AR. In fact, Allwright criticises AR, and presents Exploratory Practice as an *alternative* approach:

> … neither academic research nor Action Research offered satisfactory ways forward for these teachers. Nor did they seem to offer a satisfactory view of learners as practitioners in their own right (Allwright, 2005: 356)

Kubanyiova is not alone: RP, AR and EP are commonly conflated and this can create a muddled picture. It is therefore worth spending time to identify what links and what separates the three 'siblings' in this 'family' (see Figure 1).
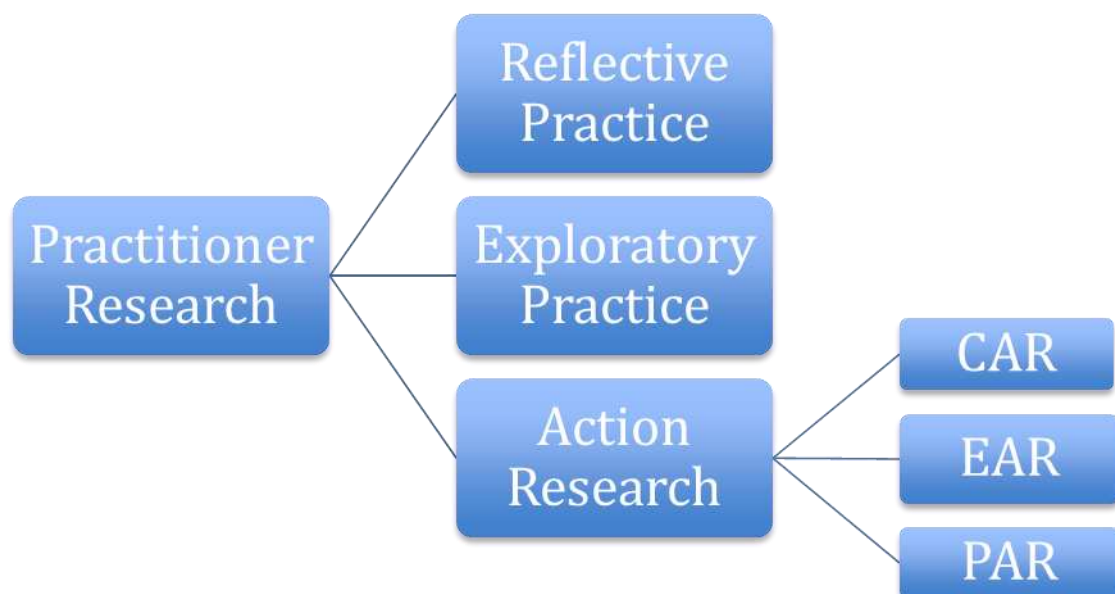
[Insert Figure 1 about here]

Figure 1: Practitioner research as family tree (adapted from Hanks, 2017a, 2019a)

Scholarly writers/researchers need to accurately and fully reference the histories, influences, and confluences of currents of thought as they have developed the field. Simply subsuming them all under one label, will not do – careful thought and attention are due. To clarify this, Allwright (2001) and Hanks (2017a, 2019a) have teased out similarities and differences between the three, with Hanks (2019a) arguing that if writers claim to be scientific, they need to be precise in their terminology: a lynx is related to, but different from, say, a lion, or a leopard; likewise RP, AR, EP. I therefore briefly reprise the defining characteristics of first RP, then AR, finally EP.

Reflective Practice

Reflective Practice (Schön, 1983) is well-established, with Farrell arguing that RP 'starts with the internal rather than the external and the real centre of the process is teaching itself, and it uses the teacher's actual teaching experiences as a basis for reflection' (2007: 5). Typically in RP the focus is on teachers identifying problems, and solving them.

Valli (1992) provides a set of chapters written by teachers engaging in RP and suggests that 'teachers must be prepared to solve complex educational problems, make wise decisions, reflect in and on action' (1992: xiv). Despite Valli's work, Mann and Walsh (2017) claim that there is little evidence in the literature of teachers actually doing RP. They call for 'concrete and data-led accounts' (2017: 17). Their book answers this call, but the focus remains on teachers, with learners positioned as data-sources.

In sum, although there is nothing to prevent learners actively engaging in RP, there is little evidence of them doing so. It is not that learners do not engage in RP, but rather that the attention is on teachers.

Action Research

Writers such as Carr and Kemmis (1986) took a strongly political stance to promote the potential of Action Research for teachers wishing to engage in research for social justice. In a less overtly political approach, Burns (1999), suggested 'Collaborative Action Research' (CAR), in which teachers and academics work together to investigate/solve problems identified in practice. AR has continued to expand, with various sub-varieties developing over time. In addition to CAR, there is also Participatory Action Research, or PAR (Kemmis and McTaggert, 2003), and latterly Exploratory Action Research, or EAR (Smith and Rebolledo, 2018). It is likely that more varieties are gestating, and this indicates a flourishing area. Banegas and Consoli (Forthcoming) have characterised AR as a methodology which encompasses complexity, and which is defined by its focus on *action for change*. This contrasts with EP's focus on *action for understanding*. Banegas and Consoli conclude that AR can encourage communities of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) to develop.

Taking a more critical view, difficulties have emerged. For example, working with teachers in Australia, Edwards and Ellis (2019) have noted that as it becomes more mainstream in institutions, AR is associated with gaining power and/or status. Edwards and Ellis argue that although it is important for teachers' work to be adequately recognised and recompensed (e.g. by gaining job security, permanent contracts or promotions within the institution), AR is frequently flawed, because entangled in an unhealthily competitive environment, dominated

by institutional desires for profit over social justice. Such considerations have also impacted on professional development and teacher education elsewhere.

In his interesting doctoral work with school teachers in Indonesia, Mukrim (2018) explains that AR is incorporated into institutional structures across the country. Here, AR is adopted by the Ministry of Education as a way to encourage teachers to engage with research. AR is linked to promotions criteria, with teachers having to provide reports of their AR projects as part of their applications portfolio. This well-meaning approach may have backfired: Mukrim reports that teachers, particularly those who are distant from well-resourced urban areas, are frequently alienated by AR which is (in their view) imposed yet unsupported. Evidence suggests that teachers begin AR projects, only to give up, or, in desperation, pay someone else to write up a publication, in order to fulfil the requirements for promotion. Mukrim's study of teachers based in under-resourced state schools suggests that AR works better if a university-based collaborator, well-versed in concepts, theory and practicalities of teacher education is closely involved, as in CAR. He argues that without such a figure to provide guidance and enthusiasm for participants, AR risks further demotivating teachers struggling with heavy workloads. The findings indicate that teachers *are* keen to engage in small-scale research which is directly relevant to their pedagogy, but, as Mukrim notes, only if pedagogy is prioritised. Mukrim's focus on pedagogy echoes Allwright's (1993) early iteration of Exploratory Practice, which notes the importance of pedagogy to practitioners and links to Hanks' (2017a) reconceptualisation of the EP principles, placing *relevance* as central for practitioner research.

Neither AR nor RP have included learners as co-researchers. Thus, although there are elements of co-production, a vital component (active involvement of learners) is missing.

Exploratory Practice

The third member of the 'family' is Exploratory Practice (EP). EP is unusual in that it prioritises the need for understanding over problem-solving (e.g. Allwright, 2005; Hanks, 2017a). Based on a set of principles (see Allwright and Hanks, 2009) rather than activities or methodological steps, EP differs from AR and RP in a number of significant areas. Crucially, EP argues persuasively for the inclusion of *learners* in practitioner research.

Acknowledging the heavy workloads of both learners and teachers, EP's first principle emphasises Quality of Life as the main issue for would-be and existing practitioner researchers to consider. The second principle posits that the driving force for investigations is not problem-solving, but rather *working for understanding*. Learners and teachers in EP are encouraged to investigate what puzzles them about their learning/teaching, using 'Potentially Exploitable Pedagogic Activities' (PEPAs) as investigative tools. As Hanks (1999, 2009, 2017a, 2019a) has argued, these emphases on puzzlement as a starting point, and developing understanding(s) rather than problem-solving, are distinguishing features of EP. Interestingly, puzzlement has recently been adopted by EAR (see Smith and Rebolledo, 2018), suggesting that EP principles are influencing developments in AR.

The three middle principles, 'Involve *everybody* as practitioners developing their own understandings; Work to bring people *together* in a common enterprise; Work cooperatively for *mutual* development' (Allwright and Hanks, 2009: 260 original emphases), highlight co-production of practitioner research with learners included alongside teachers (and others). Allwright explains:

Since life in the language classroom is necessarily social, then the conduct of any

practitioner researcher carried out there will also be a social matter. So, for example,

learners will be involved *not as objects of research but as fellow participants, and*

therefore as co-researchers. (2003: 129 emphases added)

The desire to involve everyone, bring people together in a common enterprise, and work

cooperatively for mutual development, is directly linked to notions of co-production.

Co-production in research in language education

In suggesting that researchers might collaborate with practitioners when conducting their

investigations, leading proponents of Teacher Research (Lortie, 1975), Teachers-as-

Researchers (Stenhouse, 1975), Reflective Practice (Schön, 1983), and Action Research (Carr

and Kemmis, 1986) laid the groundwork for the current interest in co-production. Freire's

(1972) seminal work established the notion of learner agency through critical pedagogy.

Realising that learners often know far more than researchers allow, Freire promoted a radical

agenda of enabling learners to set their own agendas, persuasively arguing: 'No one,

however, can unveil the world *for* another' (Freire, 1972: 136-7 original emphasis). This

recognition of the agency potential of learners is a central tenet for co-production in

practitioner research, as Gieve and Miller (2006) and Pinter and Zandian (2014) have pointed

out.

More recently, the work of the N8 Research Partnership in the UK, has promoted co-

production across disciplines. Echoing Allwright (2003), the N8 argue that in co-production

'research is undertaken *with* people rather than *on* people' (N8 Research Partnership, 2016:

12, original emphases). Meanwhile, working with artists, architects, educators, historians,

sociologists and museum curators (academics and practitioners alike) to develop a strong community approach to research, Banks et al. (2019) maintain:

> Co-production of research entails people from different settings and backgrounds doing research together. […] As the prefix 'co-' implies, there is usually an active process of working together with some degree of collaboration and cooperation.
>
> (Banks, Hart, Pahl, and Ward, 2019: 5)

This has significant commonalities with approaches in Exploratory Practice. For example, like Dar (in Allwright et al., 2013), Pahl has brought learners to share her platform presenting at a conference. Like the EP work described below, Chiles, Ritchie and Pahl (2019) have worked together as co-investigators and published jointly.

Miller and her colleagues in Rio de Janeiro, ensure that learners, teachers, student/novice teachers, and teacher educators set their own research agendas (puzzles), and investigate collaboratively, using PEPAs (such as adapting a coursebook activity on the language of likes/dislikes, or creating a group poster about cheating) as ways of both practising language and researching puzzles. Chapter 12 of Allwright and Hanks (2009), is a co-written text by Miller, Cunha, and fourteen colleagues: '*The "Web of Life" of the Rio de Janeiro Exploratory Practice Group'*. Moreover, an article by Miller et al. (2008) brings together seven EP practitioners: learners, teachers, teacher educators, novice teachers and a psychoanalyst, to discuss the challenges of initial teacher education, while Miller, Côrtes, Oliveira and Braga (2015) co-produced their chapter eloquently describing research involving PEPAs with learners and teachers in state secondary schools.

Over twenty years, EP practitioners have foregrounded the capacity of learners as co-researchers, with Banister (2018), Dar (2015), Hanks (1999, 2015a), Kato and Dalsky (2019), Miller et al. (2008), Stewart, Croker and Hanks (2014) explicitly exploring the possibilities of including learners as co-researchers.

Learners as co-researchers

Although there is evidence of learners actively setting research questions (puzzles), collecting and analysing data, and presenting their findings in multimodal ways, this work is often dismissed by more traditional researchers as 'not really research'. The notion of learners actively setting their own research questions (driven by puzzlement) and investigating for themselves, then presenting their findings, thus presents epistemological challenges, especially for those who cleave to older definitions of research.

It is therefore worth examining the contributions of learners researching their own practice. Most relevant here are the learners in Allwright and Hanks (2009). In state schools, young learners (6th grade, ie approximately 11-12 years old) puzzled about their language learning experiences. They asked questions such as '*Why do we have English classes only once a week?*' and '*Why don't English classes prepare us for the job market?*'. Their teacher, Walewska Braga (named by permission), invited them to investigate their questions:

> I was teaching them the days of the week and the school subjects, so I proposed they create the real schedule and the ideal schedule[1] […] They took it seriously and produced much more balanced schedules than the one they had (Braga, in Allwright and Hanks, 2009: 187).

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[1] This is an example of a PEPA.

The learners worked in groups to develop their understandings of the issues. They interviewed the principal of their school, and discovered the Ministry of Education rules which stipulated how many classes each subject should have. The power relations here are common to many countries, yet Walewska seems not to have needed significant preparatory work to develop a feeling of research agency in the learners. The learners were ordinary children, from under-privileged backgrounds in Rio de Janeiro, who, given the opportunity, asked extra-ordinary questions. All Walewska needed to do was enable them to ask their questions.

Still in state school contexts, Walewska worked with 15-year-old learners, who asked '*Why do we cheat?*'. The students narrated their work, and presented their group's findings at the Annual EP Event[2] in Rio de Janeiro. Carlos Magno (one of Walewska's students, named with permission) wrote:

> We noticed that a lot of people misbehave outside the school. There are a lot of wrong things happening and we may compare them to cheating in tests (Magno, in Allwright and Hanks, 2009: 210).

This was long before the current questions about interference in elections, yet remains a critical commentary from schoolchildren on societal attitudes towards cheating outside/beyond school.

Moving to tertiary education, Chu (2007) working in Taiwan, included her learners in making decisions about their learning in study skills courses at college, and found that this heightened their engagement in EAP learning. In Japan, Stewart, invited her university undergraduate

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[2] The EP Event is unique in that it is a learner-centred conference, where learners themselves present their research alongside (novice and experienced) teachers who are presenting (separately) their research.

students to investigate their puzzles concurrently as she probed her own thinking about the principle of 'Quality of Life' (see Stewart et al. 2014). The learners investigated their own puzzles about their language learning over an extended period (2 years), and presented their findings at intervals via poster presentations. Their own understandings developed concurrently with their teacher's. Similarly, Kato and Dalsky (2019) reported collaboration between EAP learners and teachers, where the boundaries between the different roles melted away, allowing teachers to learn from learners and vice versa.

In the UK, Hanks (2012, 2015a, 2015b, 2017a, 2017b) has established learners' involvement as co-researchers in EAP, documenting their commentaries on their experiences. Specifically, Hanks (2015a) foregrounded learner puzzles (eg '*Why do we learn bad words more easily?*'; '*Why can't I speak English like I think?*'), providing excerpts from interviews with learners as they conducted investigations. Their analysis complements her critical probing of the principles of EP, and their work provides insights into the processes of co-production in learning, teaching and research. Hanks concludes that including learners as co-researchers not only activates learner and teacher motivation but enhances Quality of Life. However, due to space constraints, commentary on the posters in that article was limited.

Still in EAP in the UK, Dawson, Ihara and Zhang (2017) co-produced their research in their IELTS exam preparation class. Dawson frames their chapter from the viewpoint of the teacher, while learners Ihara and Zhang provide critical accounts of their respective puzzles, group investigations, and the challenges and opportunities they encountered. More recently, Banister (2018) actively involved his EAP/Business learners in puzzling about, and then investigating, their language learning experiences. He concluded that despite challenges (eg some learners' resistance to setting their own research agendas) the learners built useful links

with their wider life-experiences and study. However, he does not include examples of student posters.

In each of the above cases, the writers are clear about the inclusive nature of the work for understanding, with teachers and learners developing side-by-side as they co-produced their research. Some EP publications (eg Allwright and Hanks, 2009; Hanks, 2015a; Stewart et al, 2014) provide photographs of the posters created by the students. However, until now, there has been little or no analysis of the EP posters themselves as artefacts and representations of developing understandings. In order to gain a more complete, nuanced, picture of the learners' own development, it is time to examine these posters. I posit that learner puzzles range far beyond 'simple' questions about language, to include pedagogy, motivation, anxiety. The latter are key areas of research in applied linguistics and language education, but all-to-often learners' perspectives are absent from theorisers.

1. Methodology

A qualitative approach was taken, with learner interviews, my research journal, and photographs of posters, used to triangulate data collection/generation. The learners were international students, on 10-week EAP pre-sessional courses at a UK university, preparing for their Masters' degree studies. Their comments in interviews are discussed elsewhere (eg Hanks, 2012, 2017a) but space constraints precluded discussion of the posters there.

I argue that such posters are potent examples of PEPAs: they exemplify activities typical on EAP pre-sessionals including data-collection, analysis, critical thinking, and dissemination of preliminary findings via group or individual presentations. The posters also transcend language: the visuals are powerful evocations not merely decorations. They direct the

observer's gaze, and invoke feelings, ideas, concepts. Creative and visceral, they are 'sticky objects' (Ahmed, 2014), in that emotions 'stick' to the posters: anxiety, frustration, joy, calm, and resolution, emanate from the words and images on the paper. The posters produced by these learners were not an end-point, but were the best way to access their developing understandings of the puzzles they had identified. Examination of such 'punctuation points' in the learners' perspectives on their journeys of understanding is a much-needed contribution to the fields of applied linguistics, EAP and language education.

The posters are multimodal in the sense of data generation and dissemination activities drawing on a range of (linguistic, artistic, creative) resources in a variety of modes. They involved normal EAP pedagogic practices of: speaking (interviews, group discussions, presentations), reading (of published literature, of other practitioners' work, or texts available on the internet), listening (to each other, to others, to self), writing (individually or in groups, of questionnaires or interview prompts, and findings/conclusions). A large number of posters were generated, but for fine-grained analysis, a small number had to be selected. Selection criteria included: relevance of topic (puzzle) to themes current in applied linguistics/EAP/language education literature such as (i) anxiety, (ii) motivation, (iii) vocabulary learning; (iii) including a range of learner cultural backgrounds (Chinese, Indonesian, Iranian) reflecting the make-up of pre-sessionals at that period; (iv) capacity to exemplify the variety of themes across the cohort.

Ethical procedures were adhered to at all times. Participation was voluntary, only those who gave informed consent are included in the study, and participants had the right to withdraw at any time. Pseudonyms selected by participants are used throughout.

I used the analytical framework first established by Kress and van Leeuwen (1997). As with the collages analysed in Bradley et al. (2017), the analysis is both methodological (considering how the posters were produced) and theoretical (examining what meanings may be interpreted and analysed). Although I am treating the posters here as artefacts, produced by the learners at a particular point in time, I emphasise that posters are not 'products', but are rather a punctuation point in an ongoing and sustainable *process* of understanding.

Modality is explained as:

> a system of social deixis which 'addresses' a particular kind of viewer, or a particular social/cultural group, and provides through its system of modality markers an image of the cultural, conceptual and cognitive position of the addressee. […] it shows the transition across and between such groups, and in doing so, demonstrates the social aspect of modality. (Kress and van Leeuwen, 1997: 178)

I included the use of colour, placement, gaze, as markers of the learners' developing understandings (concepts and cognitions), as well as their conscious/unconscious representations of cultural assumptions of what research *is* (often shown in the use of numerical data) and how they presented (multimodally) what they were doing and their (interim) findings, as a social activity. In this work, learners were able to 'play with ideas rather than having to commit to and produce just one idea' (Parry, 2012: 10). Such encouragement can disrupt classroom norms, as Parry acknowledges, but engaging learners in telling *their* narratives provides a deeper understanding of their experiences.

Each poster is not merely a piece of paper with words and pictures attached: it is an expression of the work that students undertook – behind the object lies a wealth of activity,

communication, thought and feeling. The first poster is a common puzzle about vocabulary learning/use (see Figure 2). Here, 'Eden', 'Sally', 'Yale' worked together, and their puzzle resonates with language learners and academic audiences alike. They first identified their own personal puzzles, then shared puzzles in a mingling activity in the class, finding like-minded learners who were puzzling about the same theme, to form groups.

However, group-work is not an inflexible requirement (see Hanks, 2017a; Wyatt, Burns and Hanks, 2016). It is possible to work on an individual puzzle, yet still be collaborative in co-producing research. The second and third posters make this point: the two learners ('Val' and 'Jay') wanted to investigate their own puzzles, which had deep personal significance for each of them. These are examples of highly individual work, which drew attention because of the challenging nature of the puzzles, and the affective nature of the posters. Val and Jay worked individually, but as they conducted their research they spoke to other learners, discussed with their teachers, and then presented their findings to their classmates, who expressed great interest in their work, listening attentively, and asking constructive, probing questions moving thinking forward, hence the research in total became a form of co-production.

The posters as multimodal 'sticky objects'

The three posters were created by learners investigating their puzzles in collaboration with their teachers. Jane (my co-teacher) was keen to try Exploratory Practice and she invited me to collaborate with her. In the first week, I gave a short presentation on EP, and showed some previous learner and teacher puzzles. The whole class was invited to think about 'what puzzles you about your language learning experiences?'; they wrote their puzzles privately on post-it notes. The next day they shared their puzzles with the rest of the class in a group mingling activity and formed groups according to shared interests (eg vocabulary learning).

Two students said they wished to work alone. In the following three weeks, all students worked with their teachers to investigate their puzzles in a variety of ways, including interviewing others (inside and outside their class), preparing and conducting questionnaire surveys, reading, and discussing together. In the fourth week, each group, and the two individuals, gave a poster presentation to the rest of the class.

The presentation itself was a moment of excitement, and sometimes anxiety (though they knew this work was not assessed) for the students. They dedicated time and effort to the content and display, and they engaged in a variety of multimodal approaches to collect, collate, and present information. Jane reported 'a buzz' of enthusiasm from the students. Students selected from a wide range of coloured poster-paper, and they used coloured pens, and attached other bits of paper to the poster, cutting and folding it up. Like the posters in Allwright and Hanks (2009) and Hanks (2015a) these are hand-made, not glossy digital productions. Care was taken in the choice of words and charts (indicating views about what research entails), and in the organisation of visuals, the placement of content and apparent decorations.

Eden, Sally, Yale's poster

The first poster is a group effort, produced by three Chinese students: Eden, Sally and Yale (see Figure 2). They selected dark purple paper for the background. The title (their puzzle) is written in larger-scale letters across the top in multi-coloured pen: '*Why does it always take me so long to use a new word, although I understand?*' Key words are highlighted: '*Why*' is in orange, '*always*', '*so*' and '*word*' are in red, drawing the reader's attention while '*take*' '*new*' and *understand*' are double-outlined in silver.

The students had conducted a small questionnaire survey, and they provided the question-prompts written in silver down the left-hand side of the poster. When presenting their work to their audience they summarised the questions orally, picking out particular points that had interested them as they conducted the survey. A table, a bar chart, a pie chart, and a set of written bullet points (written in black), convey their findings on the right-hand side. These elements may indicate the students' beliefs about what research is; how research findings must be conveyed. Such numerical data appears to add gravitas, conforming to international assumptions about research as a measuring activity. The writing in black in the bottom right corner conveys their conclusions, 'what we find', in five bullet points.
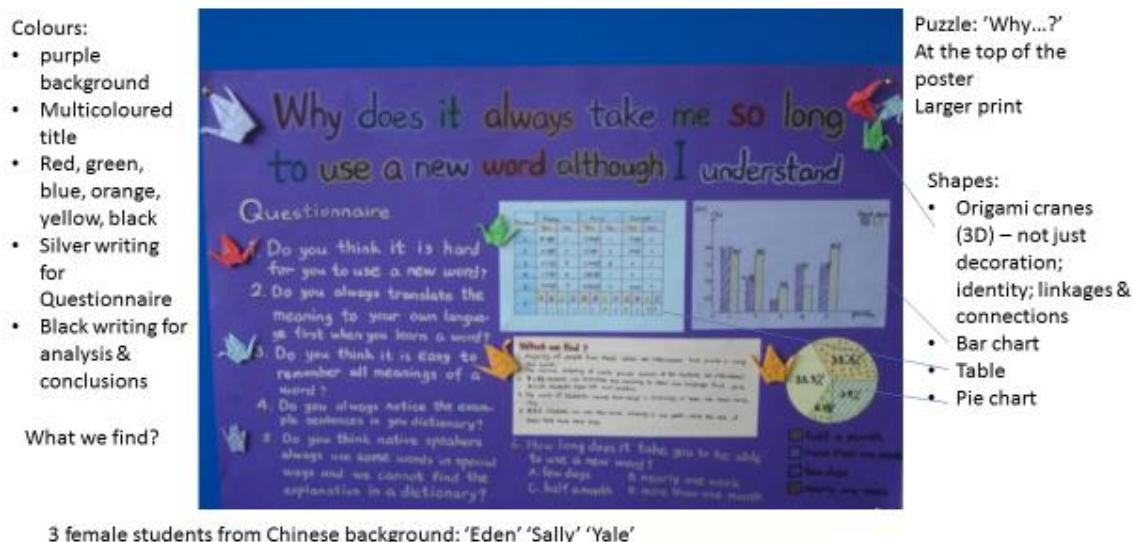

Figure 2: Eden, Sally, Yale's poster.

[Insert Figure 2 about here]

Of interest are the origami cranes stuck to the poster. At first they seemed like decorations, yet closer examination revealed multiple functions. The cranes serve also to link the questions in the questionnaire to the analysis and findings. They have directionality, moving the viewer's eyes from left-to-right to read the content and drawing attention to key points.

This poster is representative of the type of posters frequently produced by learners in an EAP context. The students worked in a small group; the poster is intriguing and attractive. There may be a performance of standard 'serious' research tropes in the use of numerical data, charts and figures, yet the playful elements (eg origami cranes, use of colour) add a creative sense of pleasure to the undertaking.

Val's Poster

The second poster is dramatically different. Val, from Iran, elected to work alone on her puzzle: '*Why do I feel anxiety about studying at a British university?*' (see Figure 3). Elsewhere, I have presented her story in her words (Hanks, 2017a). But the poster itself adds a vital dimension that is missing from a verbal account.

The background is in orange (a signal of alarm?) with the puzzle written in large capital letters across the top in black. Val writes an explanatory note on green paper at an angle to the puzzle, stating: 'in my experience I had an anxiety in IELTS exam, but now pre-sessional course made me feel more hopeful'. In the oral presentation, she explained to her listeners that her extreme anxiety (hindering her ability to speak) was caused by an upsetting set of exam results which had destroyed her confidence (see Hanks, 2017a, for Val's oral account). Her classmates listened sympathetically and respectfully, asking helpful questions, and providing a warm collaborative atmosphere for her to present her puzzle.

Figure 3: Val's poster

[Insert Figure 3 about here]

Graphic images convey extreme emotions. On the right is a painting of a face with the mouth wide open. Is it shouting or screaming? The eyes stare out at the viewer, demanding attention. In the centre of the poster is a drawing of a person covering their face with their hands. It seems emblematic of shyness, embarrassment, despair. Above it, is a photograph of a face in profile, frowning, with a hand pressed to the forehead. All convey a sense of anguish, pain is both external (the shouting face) and internal (the covered faces).

In a calmer mode, on the left, is a written technical definition of anxiety (taken from Val's reading) added on yellow paper. To the right, also on yellow paper, a definition of student anxiety from the literature amplifies this. In the bottom right-hand corner, written in blue on pale green paper, is a references list. Val presents a view of research which combines reviewing literature with synthesising key ideas.

Analytical comments are added, also on blue paper, along the bottom line of the poster. Perhaps the blue adds a sense of calm. Val wrote: 'teaching methods can contribute to anxiety' and 'providing students with positive reinforcement can creating a relaxed classroom environment'. Her understandings of some of the causes of anxiety and ways to deal with it begin to emerge. Val placed her conclusion centrally, on the bottom line of the poster, and in contrast with the rest of the poster, there is a hand-drawn decoration of flowers. The lines are multi-coloured:

> '*I have decided that* [in red]
>
> *consultations with my* [in green]
>
> *supervisor may help* [in purple]
>
> *reduce my anxiety levels* [in blue]*'*

Val did not comment on her choices of colour, but I speculate that the initial declaration is in red to draw attention to her renewed sense of agency, whereas the green, purple and blue sections convey a more restful sense of resolution as she suggests how she hopes to reduce her anxiety levels. As she presented the poster (after four weeks), her speech was noticeably more fluent, and she encouraged audience participation, even using humour to good effect.

Jay's Poster

The third poster is dramatic in an entirely different way (see Figure 4). Jay, from Indonesia, also chose to work alone. In contrast to Val, she appeared very confident, almost aggressive, and seemed unwilling to compromise. When she told her teachers (Jane and myself), with a lift of the chin, that her puzzle was *'Why do I never like writing class?'* there was a moment in which this challenging question could have disrupted the order of the class. The potential to offend colleagues (teachers of writing classes) was a risk that had to be carefully

negotiated. However, Jane and I decided that we needed to be true to our principles: we had asked 'what puzzles you?', and Jay had responded honestly. We could/would not then re-direct her into a less challenging avenue for research. Since Jay was scheduled for writing classes every day of the week, this was an important question for her to address, and our role was to facilitate her investigations, teaching her also how to conduct her research ethically and sensitively. This she managed very effectively, interviewing the writing class teacher without offending him, and other students without transmitting her disaffection.

Initially, her poster reflects that uncompromising stance: the black background is eye-catching (all the other posters were colourful: this was the only one in black). Jay said she had to work hard to create the white lettering and figures using white-out with a small paint-brush. In the top left-hand corner small white stick-figures represent the number (15) of students she interviewed; lower down similar figures represent the number (5) of teachers interviewed. Speech bubbles in orange, yellow and white convey excerpts from her data, and her analytical commentary. White arrows direct the viewer's eye to show directionality of information. For example, an arrow indicates suggestions gleaned from the student interviews, which are written in red on white paper: 'games'; 'brainstorming'; 'less word limit please'; 'free topic'.

She reports quotes from students ranging from positive ('fantastic, since we have to […] and I need to improve this') to the negative ('boring'; 'tired'; 'frustrated'). Teacher comments are summarised as: 'we know that writing classes make students bored since in academic writing students can't make any mistakes, too many rules, difficult, culture, limited topics'. Jay synthesises her findings in white, as follows:

'all these feelings are because of we have difficulty even in our 1st language but we need to be able to write academic writing. The problem is in <u>writing</u> not <u>English</u>.' (original emphases)

Jay adds her commentary in red letters on white paper: 'I realised 1000% [sic] that students are bored since nobody likes it, even an author, maybe just professor like it'. Gaining insights into the perspectives of others helped her to realise that she was not alone in her struggles with writing, that other students shared her difficulties, and that her teachers were sympathetic to her plight, but believed they needed to respond to student demands: 'Free topic or games but need to be careful since it doesn't reflect real academic writing and some students might complain (too many games)'.
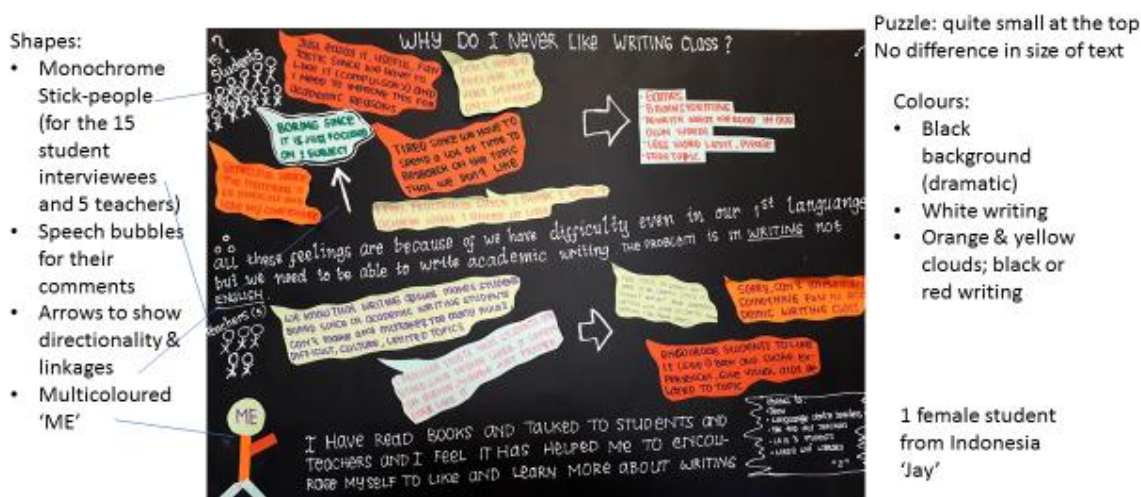

Figure 4: Jay's poster

[Insert Figure 4 about here]

In contrast with the white stick-figures for learners and teachers, Jay depicts herself in the bottom-left corner as a stick-figure in green, red and orange, helpfully labelled 'me'. This stick-figure announces her conclusions, also painstakingly written in white:

> 'I have read books and talked to teachers and students and I feel it has helped me to encourage myself to like and learn more about writing.'

The recognition that she needed to take responsibility for her own learning emerged from her EP activities. Jay conducted her research rigorously, sensitively and ethically, and her frustration (evident in the first week) seemed to have dissolved by the fourth week, as she realised a) that others struggled with writing, b) that teachers were sympathetic, c) that she wanted to learn more about writing. Her classmates, and her teachers, listened with attentive respect as she talked through her puzzle, her investigations, and her conclusions.

2. Discussion

The impact of these posters as a means of conveying the public representations of inner lives of learners in the process of developing their understandings cannot be underestimated. Puzzling, and refining puzzles did not seem to be difficult, perhaps because of the low-key (post-it notes) approach, and the open approach of the teachers. Jay's puzzle about disliking writing classes was potentially disruptive, but in taking her seriously, her teachers removed the aggressive 'sting', and enabled her to grapple with the issue. Preparing and presenting the poster was a driving force for the students, and clearly increased their motivation (they regularly stayed late after class to work on their posters). In each case, although problems were not solved (this is not the aim in EP), through puzzling, probing, sharing, co-producing, there was a sense of resolution.

The group investigating difficulties with using new vocabulary, began to understand that language learning is a process, which takes time and effort. Eden, Sally and Yale's explorations led them to realisations about vocabulary use which would stand them in good stead in future. Jay's frustration with academic writing dissolved as she found others (learners and teachers) also struggled with the same issues. Val's anxiety did not disappear, but instead of ignoring it, she faced it, thus finding reassurance that others had similar experiences. Their support enabled her to present with confidence on a difficult subject. Consequently, the extreme anxiety that was hindering her progress began to relent – through her collaborative research, she gained some understanding of the complexities of learner anxiety.

In each case, learners were interested in their own puzzle (their research question) *and also* interested in hearing from their classmates about their puzzles. The puzzles were dominating their experiences, and without EP creating the opportunity to air them, they could easily have remained unexplored.

When Jane and I asked the students what puzzled them, they quickly expressed an initial question. In the days that followed, the process of mingling, sharing, discussing together (with teachers as co-workers alongside learners) these puzzles were refined, with minimal intervention (other than providing class time to form groups and discuss) from the teachers. The puzzles were person/place specific (see Costantino, 2019, on 'space and time for understandings'), and likely changed as learners progressed through their academic journeys (e.g. I met Val several years later, and she had only a distant memory of her issues with anxiety). As learners shared, they learned; they and their teachers gained insights into these issues.

Notably, their puzzles represent common themes across cultures: vocabulary learning and use, anxiety, and struggles with academic writing. They connect to areas of productive research, but which have hitherto lacked learners' insider-perspectives. The poster presentations these learners created are multimodal means of conveying affect: powerful emotions 'stick' to the posters even years after they were produced, resonating with readers/viewers long after the learners have moved on.

There are, inevitably, limitations. For example, the analysis presented here is my own, and is therefore limited by my own background, culture and assumptions. I report the accounts given by the learners, but I only have the perspectives of those who produced the posters, and only snapshots of their thinking; it would have been helpful to collect the impressions of their audiences (fellow learners and teachers) at the time of presentation, and to probe the learners' intentions as they created the posters. In addition, my lenses are personal and culturally-bound: I may see orange as a colour signifying alarm, or black as a gloomy challenge, while another viewer may have a very different interpretation. In future work, gathering learners' interpretations and intentions as they produce the posters would be beneficial, and, ideally, including these in the analysis, co-writing the article with learners. More research is needed to examine these processes (practical and cerebral) of learners working multimodally to co-produce their explorations of practice.

As the N8 Partnership (2016) points out, co-production raises epistemological and ethical questions about who does what in research. Co-producing means that traditional roles of researchers need to be reconceptualised. For example, Kubanyiova (2008) provides an honest account of her struggles as a researcher examining practitioners reflecting on their teaching practice, and rightly identifies a number of ethical issues such as the tensions between

technical rigour and respecting participants; the unease created in participants by research probing; and the potential for researchers to (ab-)use positive relations with participants to ensure their continued participation. But stuck in the hierarchy of 'researcher' probing the perceptions of her participants, wishing to apply a 'treatment', she cannot escape feelings of anxiety/distress, which emerged in the comments, rebuttals, reflections and (in-)actions of the teachers on whom she was conducting the research. This contrasts with the experiences of Chu (2007), Hanks (1999), Miller et al. (2008), where participants are positioned as co-researchers. Consequently, I propose going beyond the standard institutional ethical requirements of 'gain informed consent, ensure the right to withdraw, and promise confidentiality and anonymity to participants'. This is a list that is all-too-often treated as a check-list for would-be researchers. But, as Homan (2001) and Pring (2001) argue, a truly ethical stance inquires more deeply into the dilemmas of research. Consequently, I propose an enhanced set of principles for ethical research, including the ethical notion of researching not '*on*' but '*with*' practitioners, including learners. If social justice is truly an aim for research in applied linguistics and language education, then there is an ethical imperative for learners as well as teachers to be included as full participants and co-investigators.

Conclusions

Co-production – in the sense of co-researching with learners and teachers – affords ethical, methodological, theoretical possibilities. Co-produced, multimodal research is a form of social activity, and Exploratory Practice provides opportunities to include learners as co-researchers investigating key issues in applied linguistics and language education. Learners have hitherto been overlooked in AR and RP; there is a need for greater understanding of what learners do/think when invited to participate as equals, setting the research agenda (puzzles), jointly investigating, and disseminating their findings to those who need it most

(their classmates and teachers). As Allwright and Hanks argue: 'If anyone needs to understand, then everyone needs to understand.' (2009: 151).

Challenging the old paradigm of third-party research, Exploratory Practice promotes a radical shift into a new paradigm, moving from *research-as-practice* to *practice-as-research* (Hanks, 2019a). Exploratory Practice foregrounds the need for understanding for and by participants themselves and this means that those who conduct research in academia must learn how to make space. They need to acknowledge and respect practitioner-researchers' serious intentions. I argue that there is an ethical imperative to ensure that learners, teachers, teacher educators, in fact all those involved, are included as potential researchers who have valuable insights to share. The responses of the learners in this study indicate that their research is as valuable (to them, to others) as any other research.

For the work to truly have impact, there is an urgent need for recognition of the innovative work done by learners, teachers, teacher educators around the world. It is not enough to claim innovation or impact; now is the time to acknowledge how such work draws upon the work of those who went before. Co-production, then, means reconceptualising research, and specifically practitioner research, as a means of understanding particular groups of learners (and teachers, etc) at particular times, in particular spaces. Exploratory Practice desires deep understanding, ephemeral and profound. It encourages practitioners to develop as collaborative theorisers and meaning-makers, whose explorations of learning and teaching make research directly relevant to practice, enabling practice to inform research in ever-more impactful ways.

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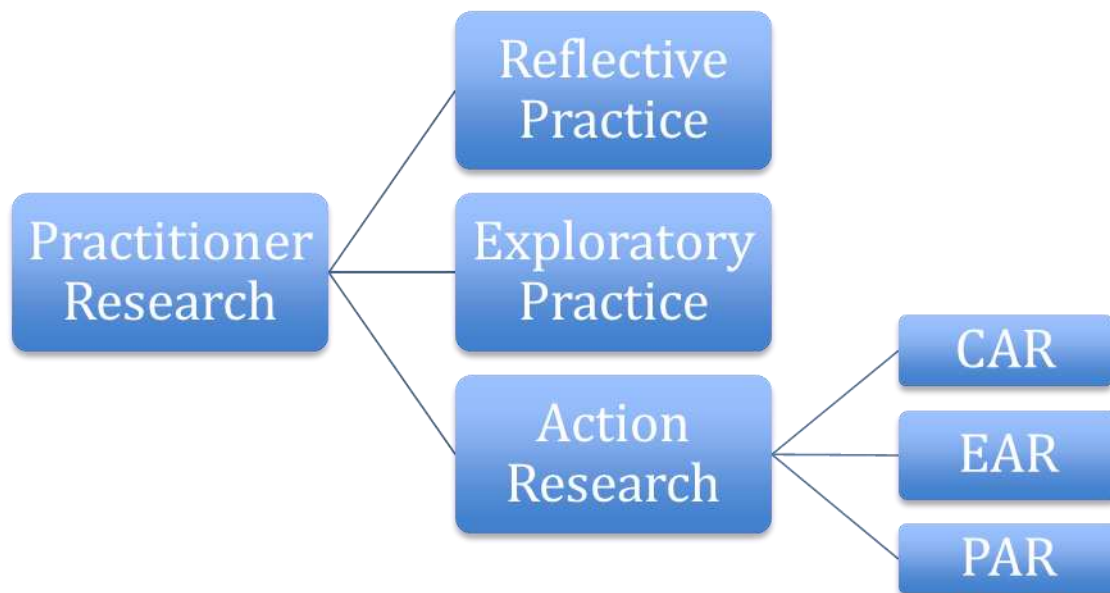Wyatt, M., A. Burns and J. Hanks (2016). Teacher/practitioner research: Reflections on an on-line discussion. *TESL-EJ. 20*(1), http://www.tesl-ej.org/wordpress/issues/volume20/ej77/ej77int/

Figure 1: Practitioner research as family tree (adapted from Hanks, 2017a, 2019a)

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Figure 2: Eden, Sally, Yale's poster.

Figure 3: Val's poster

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Figure 4: Jay's poster