THE ELT PRACTITIONER AS RESEARCHER

Maybe this is a silly statement. After all what is teaching if it isn't researching in and on practice? There would hardly be a classroom after all in which teachers were not all the time making choices about content and methodologies, reflecting on actions, their own and their students', monitoring their own and their students' responses, identifying puzzles in practice and seeking to tease out their sources and their consequences. In short, the classroom is always both an observatory and a laboratory, a place to look for interesting data, and from which to explore new worlds, and a place to test out our ideas and our hypotheses about language and about learning and teaching. Maybe we just don’t see it that way in the welter of pressures that continually impact on practice.

But if we are going to work on those puzzles and those moments of high interest in the classroom in a systematic way, to exploit the metaphors of observatory and laboratory, then there comes a time when a more principled and organised approach to teaching and learning as discovery is going to be necessary. In a way we need to see reflection on practice as the first step towards being reflexive about practice, and in doing so to go beyond asking what happens to why something happens and why it is that it happens that way at all. In short, to try out more systematically and more critically all those alternative ways in which we can collaborate with our learners to be more productive in exploring and explaining teaching and learning.

How could we make our research-in-practice more principled, more systematic, more explanatory?

Well, we could begin by doing some background research ourselves, what I would call ‘mapping the field’. Where we seek to find out what research can tell us about the issues which engage our interest, what the research doesn’t tell us, and from our own personal perspective, what it should tell us about the field. In short: to ask: What is the geography? How is the field mapped and landscaped? What do we know about the territory?

Armed with that knowledge we can then go on to ask how the research into these issues of interest and concern, these puzzles if you like, has been carried out and applied. Who has been doing what and where? What interesting possibilities for research in practice have emerged? What are the issues that we can explore and explain from the perspective of our own classroom?

From that position of some awareness we can now look back at our classroom practice in a more experimental light – we can turn the
puzzles inside out, if you like, and see if we can’t so structure and organise our teaching so that it focuses on inquiring and exploring, not now in a casual and adventitious way, but in a program of classroom-based research. Now in that way teaching and learning becomes an opportunity for our own research with its own agenda, its own questions and hypotheses, its own data and its own results and outcomes. In short, it becomes our research, and that of our learners, and is turned into practical action of relevance.

Such an undertaking is not going to be easy: time is short, resources are not always easy to come by, information even in the internet world not always ready to hand. We need to know where the information is located that we need and how it can be accessed. As resourceful practitioners we all need resourcing!

It was just such a set of motivating questions that provided the stimulus for the initiation of the successful *Applied Linguistics in Action* series and largely conditioned how its books were to be designed. The underlying principle is straightforward enough: from practice to research and back to practice – but with a twist – that cycle, while very appealing, is not as effective we think as when practice and research and research and practice are articulated together in the classroom. Where the classroom becomes both a practice space and a research space, blending two worlds and two discourses into principled and creative, and above all successful and effective action.

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