

## Toward A New Paradigm: Practitioner Research

### Yeni Bir Paradigmaya Doğru: Uygulayıcı Araştırması

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#### *Abstract*

This article argues for the use of qualitative research methods. In particular, it focuses on practitioner research. By making use of this method, teachers can work in their own contexts and try to find out what works and what does not. In this way, they can decide what needs to change. Such a reflection of reality can enable a better flow in the system that we are working in.

*Key words:* Practitioner research, qualitative research, teacher research

#### *Öz*

Bu makale, nitel araştırma yönteminin kullanılmasını önermektedir. Özellikle "practitioner research" yöntemine yoğunlaşmaktadır. Bu yöntemle öğretmenler kendi ortamlarında kendi problemleri üzerine odaklanarak nelerin işlediğini, nelerin ise değişmesi gerektiğine karar verebilirler. Gerçeğin böyle bir yansıması, içinde bulunduğumuz sistemin iyileştirilmesine yol açacaktır.

*Anahtar sözcükler:* Practitioner research, nitel araştırma, öğretmen araştırması.

#### Introduction

This paper argues that by engaging in practitioner research, we can create our own legitimate knowledge in order to find tailored solutions that will help to solve our problems in our particular contexts. The paper will first discuss briefly the most salient characteristics of the two major educational research paradigms in order to make a case for the practitioner research paradigm. The origins of practitioner research will then be reviewed, followed by a discussion of the orientation of methods of data collection and analysis in practitioner research. Next, the challenges that practitioners engaged in English Language Teaching (ELT) need to meet in undertaking such research endeavors will be addressed and the final part will conclude the paper.

#### Creating Legitimate Knowledge: Two Major Research Paradigms

The two major educational research paradigms that have been so far used in education and social sciences

are commonly referred to as quantitative and qualitative research. The quantitative approach can come under different names such as 'scientific', 'logical- positivistic', 'positivistic', and 'rationalistic' research. Qualitative research is an umbrella term implying various philosophical orientations including 'interpretive', 'phenomenological', 'ethnographic', 'naturalistic' and 'humanistic'. It is interesting to note that qualitative research, which was seen only as a preliminary, exploratory effort to quantitative research in the past, is considered to be a research endeavor in its own right today. Despite the fact that each of these research paradigms aims at acquiring knowledge, they do this in radically different ways (Best and Kahn, 1998; Brown and Rodgers, 2002; Cohen and Manion, 1990; Kidder, 1981; Glesne and Peshkin, 1992; Guba and Lincoln, 1982; Miles and Huberman, 1994).

In quantitative research however, the aim is to explore cause-effect relationships in ways analogous to laboratory experiments where researchers or scientists attempt to find answers to 'why' questions, or 'what determines x' questions (Best and Kahn, 1998). Proponents of the scientific paradigm claim that "science provides man with the clearest possible ideal of knowledge" (Cohen and Manion, 1990, p.12).

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In qualitative research, the aim is not to explore causal relationships. The central endeavor is to understand the subjective world of human experience which necessitates understanding from within. Such an understanding means that ‘the perceptions of local actors’ are important and sought (Miles and Huberman, 1994, p.6).

The following table lays out the most common features of both kinds of research.

In terms of the research agenda, quantitative researchers work with *subjects*, while qualitative researchers use the term *respondents* or *participants* to indicate the intended population of a research study. The very fact that the term *subjects* is used in the quantitative approach implies that the researcher does not interact with those that she studies, the “subjects”. However, in the qualitative paradigm, the researcher and the respondents construe the social world together, thus creating an interactive relationship (Best and Kahn, 1998; Guba and Lincoln, 1982; Guba and Lincoln, 1996).

It is, in fact, this interactive relationship that enables the qualitative researcher to construe the social world together with the respondents. It can be argued that this is quite a contrast to quantitative research where the researcher acts as the authority and seems to know the best way to go about a certain way of experimenting in the scientific field (Best and Kahn, 1998; Glesne and Peshkin, 1992; Kidder, 1981).

Furthermore, qualitative data are different from the data used in the scientific research method. Quantitative research makes use of numbers, whereas qualitative data are in the form of words (Best and Kahn, 1998; Miles and Huberman, 1994).

As regards data analysis, in quantitative research, statistical analyses are carried out whereas interpretation is required in the qualitative approach. The quantitative approach starts out with hypotheses and the aim is to prove or disprove them. Qualitative researchers, on the other hand, build theory and hypotheses from data (Glesne and Peshkin, 1992; Miles and Huberman, 1994).

Finally, in the quantitative approach, objectivity is important with a concern for validity and reliability. For qualitative research, it is subjectivity that is deemed important; since by definition the aim is to uncover how the social world works. Triangulation is one method that can be employed to ensure validity in qualitative research (See for example Guba and Lincoln, 1982, for a discussion of the criteria for validity). This means confirming the findings as a result of data gathered from one source with data gathered from other sources (Best and Kahn, 1998; Cohen and Manion, 1990; Glesne and Peshkin, 1992).

These, then, are the major differences between the two major research paradigms.

#### Practitioner Research: Origins

The origins of practitioner research are not new. In fact, practitioners have been doing “some form of systematic inquiry for as long as there have been schools”; however, it is only recently that practitioner research has begun “to be written about and studied” (Anderson, Herr, and Nihlen, 1994, p. xviii).

Practitioner research carries with it a history of various intellectual traditions, the origins of which can

Table 1.

QUANTITATIVE RESEARCH	QUALITATIVE RESEARCH
Subjects	respondents/participants
researcher has no interaction with subjects	researcher interacts with participants in order to understand their social constructions
researcher knows best	reality is perceived as socially constructed
data: numbers	data: words
analysis: statistical	analysis: interpretive
tests hypotheses	researcher builds theory and hypotheses from details
Objectivity	subjectivity

be traced back to the late 19th and early 20th century. We can broadly talk about four intellectual traditions of practitioner research, each of which has differing arguments about how such research ought to be undertaken (Anderson et al, 1994).

#### *Action Research Tradition*

The emergence of the action research tradition is usually traced back to Kurt Lewin, a social psychologist who worked on problem-solving in small-groups in the 1940s. In the field of education however, it is the Columbia Teachers College who promoted action research in the early 1950s. Interest in action research waned in the 1960s. The renewal of interest in action research in the late 1970s is usually attributed to the late British researcher Lawrence Stenhouse (Anderson et al, 1994; Kemmis, and McTaggart, 1990a; *ibid*, 1990b; Rudduck, 1990; Zuber-Skerritt, O. (1992).

#### *Teacher-as-Researcher Movement in Great Britain*

The teacher-as-researcher movement was initiated by Lawrence Stenhouse, who founded the Center for Applied Research in Education (CARE) at East Anglia University, in Great Britain. Further contributions came with the work of John Elliott and Clem Adelman of the Ford Teaching Project (Rudduck, 1990).

During the 1970s and 1980s, both teacher-as-researcher and action research traditions boomed. Many collaborative action research projects were initiated and funded by the government with teachers engaged in large-scale curriculum development projects.

At the same time, however, the theoretical underpinnings of these movements were being questioned. In particular, feminist researchers argued that action research was losing its emancipatory potential as it was turned into a recipe and was being controlled by state agencies. Australian researchers also challenged the notion that action research could be considered research if and only when it used quantitative research methodology (Anderson, 1994; Kemmis and McTaggart, 1990a; *ibid*, 1990b; Rudduck, 1990).

#### *Participatory Action Research*

In the 1970s, a different kind of action research was holding place. This movement was initiated by Paulo Freire, Brazilian literacy worker and author of

"Pedagogy of the Oppressed" (1970). During this time, Freirean-inspired participatory research projects were being implemented in Latin America and these projects were "viewed as some form of social action" (Anderson et al, 1994, p. 16).

Today, the Freirean type of action research is more commonly called participatory research. In this type of research, the researchers assume that the field that they are operating in is one of power relations and that their research will be met by resistance from the top.

#### *Teacher Researcher Movement In North America*

Despite the fact that the teacher-as-researcher movement in North America was inspired by the movement in Great Britain and the Freirean-inspired participatory research in Latin America, it grew in quite a different direction.

From the 1960s onward, researchers tried to make ethnographic research legitimate in order to enable practitioners to study their own practice using more systematic qualitative approaches. Furthermore, with the publication of the book "the Reflective Practitioner" by Donald Schon (1983), the notion of reflective practice was born. Yet another major contribution was the step toward university-school partnerships. Currently, it is the school restructuring movement that proposes the restructuring of schools "to create conditions that nurture teacher inquiry and reflection" (Anderson et al, 1994, p.22).

Today, there is sufficient evidence to assume that practitioner research is in progress. (Gul-Peker, 1997). As Carr and Kemmis (1991) note, "School-based curriculum development, research based in-service education and professional self-evaluation projects are just some of the signs that the 'teacher-as-researcher' movement is well under way" (p.1).

### Practitioner Research Paradigm

#### *A Working Definition*

Despite the fact that practitioner research has different philosophical orientations or traditions, it is possible to formulate some common working assumptions.

First of all, practitioner research can be defined as *insider research*. In other words, it is research done by

teachers or practitioners working at their own sites. Secondly, the *focus of investigation is the classroom and the school*. A working definition of practitioner research is offered by Anderson et al (1994) as “insider research done by practitioners using their own site (classroom; institution, school district, community) as the focus of their study” (p.2). Another working assumption related to the aim of research is *to understand practice and to improve it*. A final working assumption concerns methods of data collection and analysis. Practitioner research borrows from qualitative research techniques; however, researchers are not forced to follow strict rules of any research paradigm, hence *no blind allegiance to any method of data collection and analysis*.

#### *Suggested Techniques for Data Collection and Analysis*

Given the wide variety of the philosophical research traditions that practitioner research draws on, one can argue that different techniques of data collection and analysis can be advocated. This paper argues for the use of three data collection techniques namely, in-depth interviewing, direct observation, and document analysis. As for data analysis, coding is suggested.

*In-depth Interviewing (Ethnographic Interviewing)* is radically different from standardized interviewing which makes use of predetermined questions and a fixed response format. Interviewers do not usually decide on the questions to be asked in advance; however, they will have “a list of issues to be covered” (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1992, p.105).

The interviewer does not have to restrict herself to one particular mode of questioning. The approach may be non-directive or directive, depending on the function that the questioning is intended to serve. Non-directive questions are relatively open ended, and do not require the interviewee to provide a specific piece of information or to reply, ‘yes’ or ‘no’.

The role of the interviewer seems passive. And yet, the interviewer must be an active listener as this is of crucial importance in eliciting insider accounts (Best and Kahn, 1998; Glesne and Peshkin, 1992; Kidder, 1981; Kvale, 1996).

While doing in-depth interviewing, one may wish the keep in mind the following hints:

1. Introduce the context with a briefing.
2. Use opening or introducing questions.
3. Follow-up on points that are stated to be important by respondents.
4. Pursue answers, probing their content.
5. Get more precise answers by specifying questions.
6. Ask indirect questions if necessary.
7. Indicate when a theme has been exhausted.
8. Allow pauses in conversation.
9. Attempt to clarify answers.
10. Follow-up by a debriefing after the interview.

(adapted from Kvale, 1996)

*Direct observation* is a technique that can be used to triangulate interview data. In fact, what people say in interviews can lead us to see things differently in observation. What is meant by direct observation is participant observation and in simple words it means being there. It is most commonly known as ethnographic interviewing (Best and Kahn, 1998; Glesne and Peshkin, 1992; Hammersley and Atkinson, 1992).

*Document review* entails reviewing the documentary materials available in one’s own site. Such documents can range from the most official to the least informal. Some examples of documents that can be surveyed are: records, reports or policy statements; letters, memos or official correspondence; booklets, bulletins or catalogues; manuals; syllabus or curriculum documents; archival data and journals and diaries (Best and Kahn, 1998; Hammersley and Atkinson, 1992; Taylor and Bogdan, 1984).

As for data analysis, the most common technique used in the past was the narrative text. Today, data are coded and conclusions drawn. First of all, all data are transcribed or written. This means some sort of coherent organization of the data. The way that data is organized will naturally depend on the aims of the research and many other considerations such as the setting and the participants.

Once the researcher has a written text of all the data, she can then review and code this text. Coding means breaking the data into general units of meaning or themes. Finally, once the conclusions have been drawn, a report about the findings of the study needs to be written (Gul-Peker, 1997; Miles and Huberman, 1994).

## Practitioner Research: How to Meet the Challenge as Language Teachers

### *A Rich Pool of Alternatives*

There is a major challenge that needs to be met if we are to engage in practitioner research. Having to perform the roles of teacher and researcher at the same time may sound daunting and is a tall order. This means that we need to be doing "two full-time jobs simultaneously: that of being an educational practitioner and that of being an educational researcher" (Anderson et al, 1994, p.172). Is it possible then that these two roles can be performed?

Educators are providing some possible avenues for action. One cannot do justice to all of these possible avenues and yet there are options that stand out when one is to embark on practitioner research. The following section explores some of the educational avenues available for practitioner research.

### *Focusing on and Analyzing Issues for Investigation*

In general, the first and perhaps the most essential step is the decision to investigate a particular issue. Depending on the aim, one may opt to do the investigation by oneself, identifying an issue or issues of concern within the boundaries of the classroom. Alternatively, one may engage in collaborative research with colleagues and/or with students as co-investigators. Students are an extremely rich source of information and can enable the researcher to triangulate the data possibly collected from among colleagues (Brown and Rodgers, 2002).

Once a topic of concern has been decided on, it is possible to proceed with in-depth interviewing and/or direct observation. In-depth interviewing can be done in an informal conversational manner where the researcher has a chance to ask questions "in the natural order of things" since "there is no predetermination of question wording" (Best and Kahn, 1998).

If the researcher chooses to collect data through observational techniques, then she needs to set time to observe a teacher or students in the classroom. A teacher observing her own class would be a participant observer unlike a research assistant or a peer observing unobtrusively at the back of the classroom. Observations can range from a narrow focus (e.g. how students

respond to communicative activities in speaking classes) to a wide focus (e.g. the changes in the curriculum), depending on what the researcher has decided to investigate (See Adler and Adler for an excellent discussion of observational techniques).

One other source of data collection would be document review. On an informal level, the researcher can collect student assignments (on any given topic), or have students keep journals. Keeping a journal herself would also be an excellent source of data in the form of documents. Further suggestions include tape recording oneself or one's own class sessions and listening to these tapes. If one is aiming at a broader and more formal focus of investigation such as curriculum change or power relations in the institution, then one could view more formal documents such as policy statements, or reports.

### Conclusion

Practitioner research is a significant way of knowing about schools. In effect, it seems to be the research paradigm of the millenium. However, it should not be forgotten that there is not one 'right' way for practitioners to tackle the issue of investigating their own sites. In addition, one should remember that there are no easy solutions in carrying out practitioner report. Yet, with determination and persistence, there is much to be achieved.

The great power of practitioner research lies in its emancipatory nature. It may be argued that such research cannot solve all educational problems. And yet, with its thick description and explanatory insights into why teachers, students and organizations act the way they do, practitioner research can bring to the reader "a vividness otherwise unattainable." (Adler and Adler, 1996, p. 16). It is such vividness of reality that can help us to create our own legitimate knowledge and thus find tailored solutions. Such an endeavor gains more importance when one considers the fact that "enthusiasms for particular kinds of research wax and wane within the field of second language studies." (Brown and Rodgers, 2002). In other words, it is in our best interest first to understand the practice of ELT and then to improve it.

A final point that needs to be mentioned is that training in practitioner research methodology in pre-service teacher education can be an invaluable contribution to the sense of professionalism that we would like to see and foster in educational institutions of the future.

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Geliş	7 Ocak 2005
İnceleme	14 Haziran 2005
Kabul	6 Eylül 2005