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**Why do my adult students  
have difficulties with listening  
activities? – An Exploratory  
Case Study**

Monografia apresentada ao  
Programa de Pós Graduação em  
Letras da PUC-Rio como requisito  
parcial para obtenção do título de  
Especialista em Língua Inglesa

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Rio de Janeiro  
Julho de 2015



DEPARTAMENTO DE LETRAS  
Curso de Especialização em Língua Inglesa

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*Exploratory Practice is an indefinitely sustainable way for classroom language teachers and learners, while getting on with their learning and teaching, to develop their own understandings of life in the language classroom. – Dick Allwright (Turkey, June 2014)*

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

First of all, I thank God, my Lord and Savior, for all that he has done for me.

I am very grateful to my parents, José and Ruth, for all their love and support, always. It is a real privilege to be your daughter!

Thanks to my dear husband Lyndon and my lovely daughters Ludmilla, Mariana and Beatriz. You are my joy!

A special thanks to Professor Inés Miller, my advisor, for her support, encouragement and precious help.

I also thank Professor Maria Isabel Cunha for accepting the invitation to be my examiner. I have learned a lot with you.

I cannot forget to mention my classmates. Thank you for sharing such a good time with me on our Tuesday and Thursday meetings.

Finally, I would like to thank my students who made this work possible. Being your teacher was a gift for me!

## **ABSTRACT**

Santos, Márcia Regina F. B; Miller, Inés K. (Advisor). **Why do my adult students have problems with listening activities? – An exploratory case study**. Rio de Janeiro, 2015, 36p. Monograph – Departamento de Letras, Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio de Janeiro.

This study deals with my experience with a group of adult learners who complained about their difficulties with listening activities. I decided to investigate what was happening instead of just accepting the common sense answers. To do so, I studied about developing listening skills (Rost, 1990 and Brown, 1990, 1998) and the concept of andragogy developed by Knowles (1984). I use the Exploratory Practice framework, its principles and propositions about learners, to legitimize the importance of involving all practitioners – myself as a teacher as well as my learners – in the research process. This study presents a Potentially Exploitable Pedagogic Activity (PEPA) and the understandings that we all reached in this investigation.

**Key words:** Listening skills, Andragogy, Exploratory Practice.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Much has been said and studied about adult language learning.<sup>1</sup> Approaches have been developed and courses have been designed to meet the needs of such a large group of learners all over the world.<sup>2</sup> However, there is still a lot to understand in this area, especially if we consider listening skills.

I started to observe the difficulties that my basic and pre-intermediate adult students had in listening activities quite a while ago. In heterogeneous classes, adults had to struggle to understand the different kinds of materials played during lessons while teens could usually do it well. In individual classes, students taking business English basic and pre-intermediate classes also presented the same difficulties and complained about that.

I always thought I knew the reasons why developing listening skills was difficult for them and I had always been looking for solutions, trying to find ways to help my students overcome these difficulties. I had read about adult learning and its processes, but after learning about Exploratory Practice, I realized that I had to stop taking things for granted and start trying to understand things.

When I started this research, I was teaching a group of nine adults, who were taking a pre-intermediate course. They presented the same difficulties in listening that I had observed before and they also used to complain about them. So I decided to investigate the following puzzle: Why do my adult students have difficulties with listening activities?

At first, when I thought about my puzzle, I was thinking about a way to help my students develop listening skills. I wanted to know what I had to do, what my role as a teacher was. However, learning that *understanding a situation* should come instead of, or, at least, before *changing it* was something amazing!

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<sup>1</sup> Regarding adult education, it is worthwhile reading Malcolm Knowles's work on Andragogy.

<sup>2</sup> A good example is Larsen-Freeman (2000) in her book *Techniques and Principles in Language Teaching*.

An important principle of Exploratory Practice is to “put understanding before problem solving” (ALLWRIGHT, 2001). It is necessary to understand what is behind the problem and to turn our “how to” questions into “why” questions. This search for understanding should, ideally, include not only the teacher, but the learners as well. This is the aim of Exploratory Practice, to integrate research and language learning so that understanding and learning can develop at the same time. Investigation means searching for understanding. It is not just developing a research project.

Since I was eager to be able to adopt the framework of Exploratory Practice, I decided to share my puzzle with my group of students so that together we could search for understandings as a group. Therefore, the objective of this monograph is to present the activities that we – teacher and learners – developed in this process and the understandings that we reached. I wish to share the idea that working for understanding can be enough if we consider that we reached *an understanding* – an agreement or a compromise.

With this aim in mind, I have used three major themes as my theoretical background, (1) listening skills, (2) adult learners, and (3) Exploratory Practice. I will present them first. Then, I will talk about the experience my students and I shared in our search for understanding. Finally, I will present some final thoughts regarding this study, bearing in mind that the understandings we reached are situated, that is, only lived by us. Hopefully, however, other teachers and learners will be inspired by them.



## **2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

### **2.1. Listening Skills**

Learning a language implies the need to develop oral and written abilities (listening, speaking, reading and writing) so that we can communicate. However, it is important to say that communication involves much more than just sending and receiving a message. It is necessary to consider who is sending it, who is receiving it, as well as the context, the means, the code. All these variables influence the message.

In communicative language learning and teaching, teachers and learners focus on developing the four skills mentioned before, using topics based on real life situations. From my experience as a teacher, developing listening skills has been a real challenge for students in EFL learning environments. In fact, listening presents challenges even in our own languages because it involves mutual understanding. The connection between the speaker and the listener is built by both of them.

Rost (1990) mentions Sperber and Wilson (1986) when they say that in Relevance Theory, there are two layers of information “locution”, the act itself, and “illocution”, the intention, so “understanding the ostensive act is an inferential process of finding a relevant link between the two layers of information” (1990, p.4). The listener plays an important role in the construction of this link, and he usually faces challenges related to the ambiguity of the language (denotative and connotative functions).

According to Brown (1990, p.10), communication is a “risky business”. However, the author adds that, although we know that our utterances are not usually completely successful and we should not expect to fully understand the language addressed to us, “we manage our everyday lives in the expectation of sufficient mutual comprehension, a tolerable level of understanding.”

If it is true in general communication, imagine what happens when we are communicating in a foreign language! Developing listening abilities in a foreign language environment involves much more than understanding a code.

It is necessary to understand the message behind it, but our students need to be aware that it is possible to reach general understanding even when we cannot grasp the meaning of all the sounds that we hear.

Therefore, the learning-teaching process of listening skills has to take a lot of things into consideration, such as the cognitive aspects of the learner, the context, the speed of speaking and so on.

The notion of speed often enters discussions of listening abilities, as when second-language learners feel discouraged that they cannot keep-up with the language when it is spoken at its normal speed. Many second-language learners report that they simply cannot think fast enough to participate in normal conversations. (ROST, 1990, p. 35)

Students usually ask for more time to think so that they can understand what is spoken. In class, they need to listen at least twice in order to be able to know what to do to complete the tasks. This leads us to the notion that it is necessary to develop strategies in order to develop listening skills, and according to Rost (1990, p.156), the learner needs to have initiative and make commitments to be able to interact through oral communication. It is the learner's task!

The author also discusses the use of course books and the kinds of questions and layouts that they present. Do they help students learn and develop listening strategies, or are the activities only to test rather than teach?

This question also came to my mind during the development of my research, when a student complained about the book because of some pictures, which were supposed to help students understand the context, but which confused and did not help him answer the questions proposed in the listening exercise.

According to Brown (1998, p. 175), "we must suppose that it is the interaction of language and context which is of interest, not just the sum of language plus context". When this interaction is considered, learners can activate their thoughts and broaden their view to observe other features that involve what they are listening to and this may lead to the general comprehension of the message.

One idea that was raised during the first steps of this research, while I was taking the course Phonology & Spoken Discourse with Inés Miller at PUC-Rio, was the use of teaching pronunciation and phonetics to teach listening comprehension. Brown (1990) indicates that both the teaching of pronunciation and the teaching of listening comprehension are affected by the training in phonetics. The author, who specializes in listening skills, says,

... one of the problems of listening to a foreign language, though, as I shall make clear, by no means the only one, is that you are listening to the sounds of a foreign language and that they are not organized in the same way as the sounds of your own familiar language. (BROWN, 1990, p.1)

It is also possible to consider the aspect of “classroom English” in this discussion. By this term I mean the unnatural speed of spoken language used by teachers to make it easier for students to understand what is said. Brown (1990, p.2) says, “Indeed many teachers of foreign languages develop particularly slow, clear styles of speech when speaking the foreign language to learners”. As a consequence, students usually complain that they can understand what the teacher says, but they cannot understand the classroom audio resources, the dialogs on TV programs, or even real life conversations when “they enter a context in which native speakers are talking to each other” (1990, p.6).

It is clear that we are not passive listeners, as Brown (1990, p. 11) reminds us, “... humans are active searchers for meaning”. When we listen, we make use of our background knowledge – what we know about the context, the information we have about the speaker, our knowledge of the topic and so on. Therefore, when teaching listening, it is necessary to help students develop ways to activate all the senses so that they can develop listening skills.

It is also important to discuss ways of assessing this development. If on one hand we need to help our students not to look at every task as if it were a test, on the other hand we need tools to check if they are improving. One way to check this improvement could be by observing learners’ reactions and their comments. However, it is my intention to work more on this topic in future research.

## 2.2. Adult learners

As the classroom experience I want to share in this monograph involves a group of adult learners, it is important to consider briefly some unique features of this segment of language learners.

Adult education has been an important field of study in many countries. In the United States, Malcolm Shepherd Knowles (1984) developed important concepts in this area and we can use some of his concepts to talk about adult language learners. According to Smith (2002, p.2), who reviews Knowles's contributions, he "was convinced that adults learned differently to children" and that is why he developed this field of study using the notion of andragogy, which can be defined as the art and science of teaching adults. Smith also talks about some of Knowles's ideas on how adults see themselves as learners and how they behave in a learning environment. To illustrate that, Smith summarizes some "assumptions developed by Knowles about the characteristics of adult learners that are different from the assumptions about child learners" (2002, p.3):

1. Self concept – adult learners are more independent when compared to younger ones, and they need to know the reason why they need to learn.
2. Experience – their life experiences and everything they have learned before are resources that can be used for learning something new. Sharing this experience can benefit everyone involved in the learning process.
3. Readiness to learn – adult learners are aware of their social roles and understand the importance of learning.
4. Orientation to learning – adults are ready to learn what they need to learn. They usually focus on immediate application of knowledge.
5. Motivation to learn – adults' motivation to learn is usually internal.

Knowles also states that learning to live co-operatively is an essential ingredient in a classroom. In general, adults should understand their own needs, motivations, interests, capacities and goals.

When we consider the language classroom, Turula (2002) highlights two hallmarks – motivation and anxiety. To develop these ideas, it is important to talk about affect in language learning.

### **2.2.1. Affect**

It is very difficult to define affect, but, following Arnold and Brown's (1999, p.1) suggestion, "in the present context, affect will be considered broadly as aspects of emotion, feeling, mood or attitude which condition behavior." According to the authors, the affective side of learning is as important as the cognitive side, and "when both are used together, the learning process can be constructed on a firmer foundation." (1999, p.1)

Since affect involves positive and negative factors, I believe it is necessary to consider the different ways in which these factors can influence language learning. From this point of view, "*being* is just as important as *doing*" (ARNOLD; BROWN, 1999, p.4). This is true for both the learners and the teachers. There are internal as well as external factors that can promote or prevent learners' development. So, due to the scope of this monograph, I decided to talk about those that I consider more relevant in the case of adult learners.

Very much in alignment with Knowles, Arnold and Brown (1999, p.7) believe that for adults, "learning is most effective when it is personally relevant and when information is presented through different sensory modes."

Motivation is essential when someone wants to learn a foreign language. Adults can be very motivated because they know why they are learning it and thus they are more determined to persevere, when compared to young learners. Getting a promotion, being able to communicate with foreigners, traveling abroad are examples of reasons to study a language that can be very motivating. But external motivation is also necessary and the teacher's role is very important. Arnold and Brown (1999, p.16) state that teachers "who themselves are motivated by the pleasure of participating in the learning experience, are highly motivating models for learners."

However, adults can suffer from language anxiety for a number of reasons. First of all, Turula (2002, p.29) mentions “a number of prejudices about foreign language acquisition, including common belief in the disadvantage of a late start” or the need of a “special predisposition for learning languages”. Secondly, adults usually have less time to study, and they have more things to worry about, their families, jobs, bills, and so on. These things occupy their thoughts leaving less space for new information. For whatever reasons, adults as well as young learners have problems to learn when they are anxious or stressed.

Anxiety can be part of someone’s personal traits, but it can also be situational. Turula (2002, p.29) shares Hadfield’s (1992) ideas related to situational anxiety. It can be described as the circumstances involved in the classroom dynamics, “everything that happens in and between the participants”. In this sense, adult learners are usually concerned about three things: being accepted, being able to understand the class, and being able to learn what they have come to learn.

Therefore, the creation of a safe atmosphere is essential to promote a reduction in learning anxiety, especially when the method used focuses on communication for Arnold and Brown (1999, p.9) also say that “there is a great deal of vulnerability involved in trying to express oneself before others in a shaky linguistic vehicle.” It is usually the teacher’s role to promote this friendly environment.

Another factor that can disturb the learning process is inhibition. When we think about adult learners, this is usually related to the way in which errors are dealt with.

A closely-related area of concern is the question of errors. Mistakes can be viewed as both internal and external threats to our ego. Internally, our critical self and our performing self can be in conflict: when as learners we perform something ‘wrong’, we become critical of our own mistakes. Externally, we perceive others exercising their critical selves, even judging us as persons when we make an error in a second language. Therefore, language teachers should not ignore affective factors when establishing the most appropriate policy of error correction for their particular situation. (ARNOLD; BROWN, 1999, p.11)

We can conclude that when dealing with adult learners, a teacher should use learners' experiences, focus on life application, encourage learners' autonomy and try to keep learners' inner motivation so that learning can develop better.

Therefore, the classroom dynamics, the environment, the interaction among participants, the teacher's feedback (including the way the teacher deals with error-correction), even the room (and the way it is displayed) are important factors that should be considered by teachers of adult language learners.

At this point, it is important to make a link to the third and most important theme I have based my research on, Exploratory Practice, whose list of principles include the importance of paying attention to "quality of life in the classroom" (ALLWRIGH; HANKS, 2009, p. 149)

We may think that only children want to share their feelings or interests; however, adults like to do it, too. So they should be encouraged to share their knowledge and preferences. According to Turula (2002), this can be a way to create a more relaxed environment. Some fun can also be a good ingredient to relax and keep motivation high.

Finally, as learner's autonomy is a target as well, to reach that,

adult learners need to know – and it is the task of the teacher to tell them – how particular activities and exercises help them achieve their overall learning aims and therefore, why they need to do them (TURULA, 2002, p. 32).

However, in the experience described in this monograph, we could conclude that it is even better when this awareness is achieved by teachers and learners together, using the principles of Exploratory Practice. Therefore, I now turn to the central ideas of Exploratory Practice.

### **2.3. Exploratory Practice**

It is difficult to describe Exploratory Practice, but according to Bezerra and Miller (2006), we can understand it as a way of teaching, learning and understanding classroom life. One important aspect of Exploratory Practice,

according to Allwright and Hanks (2009, p.1), is to see learners as “key developing practitioners”. It is common to see the teacher as a practitioner in a language classroom. However, the learner also performs this role. As Allwright and Hanks (2009, p.2) explain, “teachers are officially in charge of the practice of language teaching in the classroom, but they have to leave the actual practice of the language learning to the learners.” Therefore, learners are as important practitioners as teachers.

Besides being a practitioner, the learner is in constant development. Once more, the authors insist on this aspect because the focus on language teaching is usually on the teacher, but language learning should be focused on the learner. Allwright and Hanks (2009, p.2) also include the word *key* in their definition because they want to reinforce the idea that the learners “are the only people who can do their own learning”.

It is also interesting to consider the idea of the learners as listeners, as human beings who are exposed to the language in different contexts and who can be aware of their own development when they are focused on it. Being a listener involves much more than developing an ability in foreign language learning. When we take the initiative to listen, we decide to be open to what is happening around us and this is what makes us learners.

Based on their thoughts and the inspiration provided by the learners they have worked with, Allwright and Hanks developed a list of propositions about learners, which can provide a framework for our understanding of what Exploratory Practice is, what classroom language learning is, and what our role as a teacher is, so that we can help learners develop their understanding as well. The objective is to create an environment where “teachers and learners are co-practitioners, and where learners investigate their own puzzles about their own learning lives.” (2009, p.5)

Five propositions about learners (ALLWRIGHT; HANKS, 2009, p. 5-7):

1. Learners are unique individuals who learn and develop best in their own idiosyncratic ways.



2. Learners are social beings who learn and develop best in a mutually supportive environment.
3. Learners are capable of taking learning seriously.
4. Learners are capable of independent decision-making.
5. Learners are capable of developing as practitioners of learning.

Although learners in a classroom group may have a lot in common, each of them has their own characteristics and different ways to learn. The teacher should be aware of that to be able to help learners in their different needs. However, learners are also social beings, who share experiences and support each other in a way that learning can be more productive when developed in groups rather than individually.

If we see learners as practitioners, it is important to consider that they can be serious about their learning. This should be the teacher's attitude toward all the learners, even the ones who do not seem to take learning seriously. When we consider adult language learning, we may take for granted the fact that the learners are serious about their learning. However, the teacher's attitude may be essential to ensure that, to help them become aware of their own processes and their own development.

Another important attitude is to help students to develop learning autonomy. They are capable of making decisions, so teachers should really let students decide on important things, no matter how difficult it can be sometimes. Learners can be active and responsible for their own learning if teachers help them be aware of the learning process which involves "sharing understandings, ideas and experiences" (ALLWRIGHT; HANKS, 2009, p. 6)

As practitioners, teacher and learners work towards reaching understandings of language learning processes and the classroom environment. However, sometimes it is difficult to express understandings in words. According to the authors, it is necessary to develop a form of research to help people do it. So, they share:

Our proposal for a form of research that will meet all our requirements is Exploratory Practice (EP), an inclusive form of practitioner research which has been developed over the last 15–

20 years. EP will take us beyond the third-party model methodologically, will not marginalise learners, will prioritise learner understandings and will even have room for attempts to articulate understandings that are ultimately ‘too deep for words’. By treating learners as practitioner researchers in their own right, EP brings to life our Five Propositions about learners, and so directly addresses our purpose of actually assisting learners to develop as practitioners of learning. (ALLWRIGHT; HANKS, 2009, p. 149)

Allwright and Hanks also present some principles that will help and guide practitioner-researchers. These principles emerged after years of discussion about learners’ development based on the propositions mentioned before.

*Principle 1:* ‘Quality of life’ for language teachers and learners is the most appropriate central concern for practitioner research in our field.

*Principle 2:* Working primarily to *understand* the ‘quality of life’, as it is experienced by language learners and teachers, is more important than, and logically prior to, seeking in any way to improve it.

*Principle 3:* Everybody needs to be involved in the work for understanding.

*Principle 4:* The work needs to serve to bring people together.

*Principle 5:* The work needs to be conducted in a spirit of mutual development.

*Principle 6:* Working for understanding is necessarily a continuous Enterprise

*Principle 7:* Integrating the work for understanding fully into existing curricular practices is a way of minimising the burden and maximizing sustainability. (ALLWRIGHT; HANKS, 2009, p. 149-154)

The EP principles and the propositions about learners are connected because searching for quality of life and for understanding is only possible if all practitioners – learners and teacher – are involved. Thus, the teacher should see the learner as an individual who develops better in a social environment, and who is able to make decisions and be responsible for his own development. “The principles of EP provide a way of bringing our propositions to life.” (ALLWRIGHT; HANKS, 2009, p. 158)

Gieve and Miller (2006) discuss the notion of ‘quality of classroom life’ based on the idea that we cannot separate our work lives from our personal

lives. Besides that, it is not possible to measure *quality* in “terms of efficiency”, but that has to be experienced. As the focus here is the classroom, it is important to define classroom life relating it to teachers and learners. The authors quote Wenger when he says that “communities of practice are an integral part of our daily lives.” (2006, p.19) As humans, we are complex beings who perform different roles that are integrated and this complexity cannot be ignored in educational contexts. Thus, to understand and pay attention to quality of classroom life is also to reinforce the integration between life and school, or life and work.

According to Gieve and Miller, “teachers and learners are the people best placed to appreciate what constitutes the quality of their classroom lives” and their findings cannot be transferred to other classes or groups. The authors propose that it is the process that should be shared, not the outcome. And they complete, “We propose that the quality of classroom life is discursively constructed within the classroom as classroom practice is enacted.” (2006, p.40)

By working within the EP framework, when teacher and learners search for understandings together, it is possible to develop classroom awareness, which “can be understood as an appreciation of how the fact of being in a classroom both constrains and provides opportunities for various kinds [of understandings], including learning.” (GIEVE; MILLER, 2006, p.41) In my own experience, classroom awareness can help learners to become aware of themselves and understand their learning styles, their inner motivations, their strategies, and the importance of reaching learning autonomy. This is important at all age levels; however, this can be particularly useful when we think about adult learners.

The idea of continuity is also essential, because situations change, our attitudes also change. So, we cannot assume that the understandings we reach in a certain context will be valid for the rest of our lives. They are usually different in other contexts or environments. They are also different for different people, as Allwright (2014, p.9) says, “‘understandings’ means accepting the plurality of understanding.”

Practitioners should be constantly in a position of working for understanding because it is necessary if one wants to make decisions intelligently. According to Allwright (2003, p.5), it is an illusion to believe that teachers can control learners' learning. So, if planning is worth doing, we can apply "the notion of planning to a very different area – the area of developing an *understanding* of language teaching and learning."

### **2.3.1. Action for understanding**

When we consider EP as practitioner research, there are two processes involved: taking action for understanding and taking action for change. (ALLWRIGHT, 2001) While Action Research focuses on taking action for change, since it presupposes a problem that needs a solution, Exploratory Practice involves taking action for understanding. According to the EP framework, understanding a situation, not necessarily a problem, should come first. If practitioners decide that a change is necessary, it can be made, but understanding should always precede any change. That is the reason why a key term in EP is *puzzle*, not problem or topic. When something *puzzles* us, it is time to ask *why* before trying to find solutions. "For EP, the term 'puzzle' represents our concern for developing understandings in relation to issues of immediate interest, whether or not they are 'problematic' and whether or not we connect them to theory." (ALLWRIGHT; HANKS, 2009, p. 176)

These authors also explain that there are two types of activities involved in taking action for understanding: *thinking* and *doing*. The idea of *thinking* is related to *reflecting* and it may remind us of the concepts of reflective teaching and reflective learning. However, "what EP brings is an emphasis on inclusivity, mutuality and collaboration and therefore an action for understanding as an integral part of the working lives of learners as well as of teachers." (2009, p. 173) The idea of *doing* is related to the action of collecting data to help the thinking process. It involves the activities that are developed in order to reach understandings, as well as the observation, the monitoring done by all practitioners throughout the whole process.

Planning for understanding is essential because it is a way to find out the best ways of spending course time. It is a way of getting teaching and learning

done well. That is why the participants – teacher and learners – should all be involved so that they can make decisions that can really contribute to their development and to reach their objectives.

In the case of a foreign language classroom, to pursue this search for understanding during course time can be easily justified especially if it can be done using classroom activities in the target language<sup>3</sup>. This way, course time can be used wisely. As Allwright (2014, p.6) argues, “language teachers and learners are thus in a privileged position.” So, why not taking advantage of that?

Due to this last point, it is important to mention the seventh principle, which states that it is important to integrate the work for understanding into normal classroom practices as a way to “minimise the burden”. Familiar classroom activities are used as investigative tools because “the point of EP is not to get research done, but to get teaching done well, in a way that fosters the development of understanding in and among all the participants.” (ALLWRIGHT; HANKS, 2009, p. 154) The classroom activities used as investigative tools are called PEPAs – Potentially Exploitable Pedagogic Activities – and they can become an integral part of the practitioners’ work for understanding.

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<sup>3</sup> If the learners are beginners and they are not able to use the target language in the activities, the use of L1 (mother tongue) can be allowed and encouraged. However, it is worth mentioning that even in this case, the work for understanding is useful and desirable. In situations where time can be an issue and needs to be used wisely, the exploratory activities can be assigned as homework.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1. A Case Study

It is always a challenge to develop qualitative research. According to Richards (2003, p. 9-10), in the field of language teaching, qualitative inquiry (QI) is particularly appropriate because “it is above all a person-centred enterprise”. This kind of investigative approach “will seek to understand the patterns and purpose of our behavior and provide insights that will enrich our understanding”. It is also important to mention that in QI we study human actors in their own everyday contexts and the meaning and significance achieved come from the perspective of everybody involved in the actions.

Miller (2012) considers that Exploratory Practice provides new meanings to classroom life as it involves learners and teacher as practitioners and, consequently, considers them as main actors of the whole process. However, developing an academic research in this context is not an easy task. The situation is new and hybrid because doing research is not the main focus. However, it can be a way of doing research, because, as Miller adds, it provides seeds for hybrid professional and pedagogical practices that are investigative, critical and reflective. Thus, it is a pedagogic practice that explores itself, without becoming an obstacle for itself. (ALLWRIGHT 1996, *apud* MILLER, 2012)

This is a Case Study, as described by Richards (2003), and it involved monitoring, taking notes, asking questions, engaging in conversations and in group activities.

#### 3.2. The context and the participants

The present exploratory research was developed *with* a group of nine pre-intermediate adult English students, who had two 90-minute evening classes per week at a language institute in Rio de Janeiro. A course book was adopted, but, as this institute gives some autonomy to the teacher, I was able to adapt some of the book activities and to use extra material if I felt necessary, provided that the focus was on communication.

The group was composed by eight female students and one male student. Two of the women were university students, two were lawyers, one was a secretary, another was a businesswoman and two were retired (a nutritionist and a public officer). The man was an engineer who worked for a multinational company. They had different backgrounds and different demands for learning a foreign language. Consequently, their inner motivations were different. However, they formed a unique group as they interacted very well. When the semester started, there were seven students. Six had studied together before and one student had just joined the group. Since the beginning I could notice that their relationship in class was good. Everybody wanted to participate in the activities even when they did not know exactly what to say and I could notice mutual encouragement among the students. The new student was immediately part of the group. The same thing happened to the other two students who joined the group in the following month. They were welcomed by everybody and the interaction among them was very good.

### **3.3. The puzzle**

As a graduate student at PUC-Rio in 2013, I had a module called Issues in Research Methodology I. Our professor was Maria Isabel A. Cunha. In this module, students had to think about their puzzles and try to understand them. It was when I started to reflect about the development of listening skills among adult students. I have taught heterogeneous classes (basic level groups with teens and adults in the same class). I have also had some business students in one-to-one classes. Listening was always an issue. Most adults who were basic or pre-intermediate students mentioned the difficulties they had in listening. I always tried to help them and used different strategies because I could notice their struggle. However, I had never stopped to think why this happened. In fact, I thought I knew the answers, common sense answers related to the difficulties adults usually have when they start to learn a second language.

When I started the classes in this module and learned something about Exploratory Practice, I realized that I had to stop taking things for granted and try to take action for understanding.

First I decided to observe one of my private students. He was a university professor who had studied English as a teenager for a couple of years and who had started and quit studying at a language course once. He was planning a trip and decided to take some private lessons. He could read well, but oral communication was a problem. He told me he was afraid of having conversations in English because, although he could speak a little, he was not able to understand what other people would say, so he'd rather be quiet. He told me he felt really bad about that.

I monitored<sup>4</sup> my student during some classes and then we had an Exploratory Talk, following some of the professor's directions. This talk was recorded with the student's permission. As he talked about his difficulties, he also mentioned things that helped him develop, and he got to the conclusion that he was improving in spite of his problems. In addition to having the opportunity to understand the puzzle, my student also felt really good when he listened to the recording and realized that he had developed a conversation in English. I observed that in fact my student could be responsible for his own learning. According to one of the EP propositions about learners, as a practitioner, the student could develop learning autonomy, and he was more confident when he became aware of that. Unfortunately, my student moved to another city and stopped taking classes with me.

Two months later, I started to teach the group with whom I chose to develop this research. In the first class, when we had some 'getting acquainted' activities, some students spontaneously mentioned their difficulties in listening. It was not a surprise. I was used to hearing adult language students complaining about their difficulties with listening activities. I thought it was a good opportunity to try to understand my puzzle by working with them.

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<sup>4</sup> When I say that I monitored my students, I mean that I paid more attention or observed them more intensely while they were participating in the activities in class, not to check mistakes, as I would normally do, but to try to understand their behavior and their reactions.



### 3.4. Data generation – the PEPA

According to the Exploratory Practice principles, a way to take action to understand a puzzle could start with monitoring (ALLWRIGHT, 2001). Therefore, I started to pay more attention to the students while they were performing listening tasks proposed by the course book. I observed their body language and took notes of some of their comments. Then I decided to ask my students if they wanted to have more listening practice and they agreed. They really wanted to get rid of their difficulties. At first, the idea of having a puzzle and trying to understand it was not clear for them.

I assigned some extra listening activities as homework, such as movie trailers, and the students had to talk about them in the following class. I started to keep some EP principles in mind. The students should be involved as practitioners, the research should not be an extra burden, so the activities should be part of the “normal pedagogic practices” and “quality of classroom life” became a clear goal (ALLWRIGHT & HANKS, 2009).

I spent two classes monitoring the students and taking notes of their comments and body language. In the third class, after the listening activity, I asked the students why they thought the listening exercises were difficult.

Here is a table with my notes:

STUDENTS' COMMENTS	STUDENTS' BODY LANGUAGE	STUDENTS' ANSWERS TO MY QUESTION
“I didn’t understand anything!” “Aren’t you playing it again?” “Play it again, please.” “They speak fast.” “I got only one answer.” “I understand some words.”	Frowning Nervous laughs Leaning forward	“I don’t know the vocabulary.” “They speak very fast.” “If I understand one word, I think about it and don’t listen to the rest of the sentence.”

Table 1 – Monitoring notes

When I started my research, my purpose was to find a way to help students develop their listening skills. Only after knowing more about EP, I understood that I could not do much to help my students if they themselves were not

involved in their own development. So, I asked them if they wanted to try to understand why listening was difficult for them, and they agreed to be part of this research as practitioners. In fact, they were already, but that was when they became aware of that. They accepted the challenge.

Thus, I proposed an activity, a Potentially Exploitable Pedagogical Activity (PEPA), so that we could all participate actively as practitioners.

The activity was a listening task in which the students would listen to a song and write down every word or expression they could understand. Then, they received the lyrics and compared them to their own versions. Finally, they answered some questions in groups of three students and prepared posters<sup>5</sup> with the answers to share them with the whole group.

I decided to use a song. I could have used a dialog or a talk for the same purpose. However, at the end of every unit of the book there is a song to be used in class – it is a normal pedagogic activity. In addition to that, the students of this group always asked me to work with songs, so I saw there an excellent opportunity to expand this activity into a PEPA.

Before carrying out the activity with the students, I talked about it with my classmates and my professors at PUC during a class presentation. They asked me about the choice of the song and the activity. I chose the song “You’ve got a friend”, James Taylor, because of the theme. Besides that, most of the students knew the song and I would be able to propose something different from simply filling in the blanks. I asked the students to listen to the song and write everything they could understand. In terms of language learning they were expected to be able to identify words they knew by using strategies to get the main idea of the message, even if they could not understand everything. As it was a famous song, we played it just once. Then I gave them the lyrics and they had to compare their versions with it. Their reactions were very interesting. They laughed at their mistakes, they happily shared what they understood correctly and they also noticed that there were some words they wrote that were not in the song.

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<sup>5</sup> See the Appendix.

The next step was a group discussion preceded by some questions that I wrote on the board. The questions were:

- How did you like the listening activity?
- What factors helped you to understand the lyrics?
- What factors didn't help you to understand the lyrics?
- Why do you think listening is difficult for you?

The objective of using the questions was to help students take action to understand what happened to them when they had to listen to something in English. Each group wrote their answers in small posters. We called them posters because we posted them on the wall, so that everybody could read each other's answers and share their opinions, but in fact, the posters were cardboard papers on which the students wrote their answers and comments.

The poster presentation and the discussion took place in the following week. The groups commented on their answers, asked and answered questions, and finally reached some understandings which will be presented next. However, it is important to remember that according to the EP principles, "working for understanding is necessarily a continuous enterprise" (ALLWRIGHT; HANKS, 2009, p. 153), so even if the actual academic research needs to end, the Exploratory Practice work should go on. This is not the end of the process; it was just a part of it!

## 4. ANALYSIS

In this chapter, I first narrate the development of our PEPA, and then I establish some connections between our EP understandings and the theoretical notions that I associate with my EP work.

### 4.1. My exploratory narrative – the development of our PEPA

The presentation of the posters happened in the following week. Each group presented their answers and everybody participated in the discussion giving opinions, examples, and sharing personal experiences.

This table presents some of the students' answers and comments in class.

QUESTIONS	GROUP 1	GROUP 2	GROUP 3
<b>How did you like the listening activity?</b>	We liked it. We like to listen to music!	We liked it, but it is difficult for us.	We like the song, but the activity is difficult.
<b>What factors helped you to understand the lyrics?</b>	The vocabulary. We know the song. It's good to talk about the topic before the activity.	We know some words.	To know the song.
<b>What factors didn't help you to understand the lyrics?</b>	I feel confused with similar sounds.	It is fast!	We don't know the vocabulary. The song is fast! We have problems with pronunciation.
<b>Why do you think listening is difficult for you?</b>	We don't have much time to practice.	We need to practice more, but we don't have time.	It is difficult to concentrate. I'm afraid.

Table 2 – Students' answers

All the students mentioned that they liked the activity although it was difficult. They like the song, and they knew what it was about. It helped them understand the lyrics. However, they said that it was difficult to write what they heard, because there were many words they did not know. They also mentioned that it was fast. I asked them what they meant, exactly. Was it a fast song? One student said that native speakers speak fast and at this point there was a discussion among the students about what it means to speak fast. One student mentioned the problem of linking sounds and some students

contributed to the discussion giving examples. This was when I started to reflect about the use of phonetics to develop not only speaking skills, but also listening skills.

Then there was a discussion about pronunciation. A student said that it was funny to observe that she had written some words that were not in the song. The others mentioned the same situation and I could notice that they were aware of their pronunciation problems. They all agreed that to develop listening skills they needed more practice, but most of them complained about their lack of time to study.

They went on to suggest activities that they could do to practice more. Some of their ideas were watching movies in English and keeping the course CD in the car, to listen to it when driving. Then they asked me to suggest activities and assign some extra listening tasks for homework. But they insisted that they wanted me to send songs and movie trailers – “interesting things”!

Finally, I asked Group 3 about their last answer: “I’m afraid”. “Afraid of what?”, I asked. One student said that she was afraid because she knew in advance that she wouldn’t understand what she listened to, consequently she didn’t use to concentrate on the activity. At this point, something amazing happened. The other students started to agree with her and noticed that their biggest problem was lack of concentration for the same reason. Listening was difficult, so it was useless to spend so much energy trying to understand the dialogs and talks.

For me, this was the answer to my puzzle, at least in this group. I noticed that it was the answer for the students, too. Understanding was our main goal, but the students also changed their attitude towards listening. They still think the activities are difficult, but they are more willing to try. Their comments changed. They continued to ask me to repeat or play again, but they asked each other to be quiet, they said: “Don’t answer yet, I want to understand!”

After that, I briefly talked to them about EP and one student said, “Márcia, it is therapy!” I said that she was right, but that it meant to be associated with

learning. So I told them about a poster presentation at PUC. I asked for permission to use their answers and invited them to come. They couldn't be there, but they were very happy to be part of it. The following week they asked me how the meeting was. I told them about the importance of involving the learners in the practice and how good it was for me to see not only my understanding but their understanding as well, and they congratulated me for the work! I told them that in fact I should congratulate them!

I have recently talked to one of these students and asked her about her development in listening skills. She told me that she is aware of her improvement, but she still freezes when she needs to talk to a foreigner. However, she said that as she now understands what happens to her, she is able to do other things to try to overcome this problem. She has planned some of the possible dialogs in advance so that she can, at least, have some conversations. She was very happy to share that she could participate a little bit more the last time she had a dinner with some foreigners. Besides that, she said that her husband was proud of her!

#### **4.2. My interpretative analysis**

According to Rost (1990), learners need to develop strategies and take initiative to be able to interact through oral communication. We could observe how this idea was present among the students of the group, since they were willing to participate in all activities. Besides that, as I mentioned before, the group had a particular characteristic that called my attention, they liked to involve all the participants in the activities, in the conversations. It was not the teacher who had to ask questions to be sure that everybody was speaking. The students asked questions to each other.

Another connection with the theory was the importance of background knowledge when performing listening tasks (Brown, 1990). When the students answered the questions that I proposed in the PEPA, they mentioned that knowing the song, the vocabulary and the topic of the listening excerpt helps them comprehend what they listen to.

We could also observe the characteristics of adult learners described by Knowles (1984). They are motivated to learn and they know what they want. However, they need to see that they are improving so that they can keep motivation high. Therefore, I understood that it is the teacher's role to help them assess their improvement. If expectations are too high, students can get anxious and, according to Arnold and Brown (1999), anxiety disturbs or even prevents learning.

Finally, it is important to mention learners' autonomy. When learners become aware that they are responsible of their learning they can develop much better. Reaching understandings is essential for that. In the case of this research, when the students understood what was happening to them, specially related to the lack of concentration, they started to change their behavior.

As some anecdotal 'evidence', I can share that a former student of this group recently got in touch with me to share her experience while at a formal dinner with English speaking guests. She used to feel very bad at these occasions, because she used to be quiet all the time and every time someone talked to her, she would freeze. However, she was very happy because she had prepared herself for this last dinner, and she was able to have some conversations in English. I think that her narrative helped her and me understand that she showed a high degree of autonomy in this preparation and that her sense of achievement was wonderful.

## 5. SOME FINAL THOUGHTS

The poster presentation in class and the discussion that followed were very useful for the students and for me. I understood my puzzle and the students reached some understandings, too. It is important to emphasize that understanding does not mean solving a problem. Listening is still difficult for them. However, there was a change in attitude on my own and on their part. I could notice more concentration, more willingness to perform the listening tasks. The students even asked for more listening activities with songs and videos, not only in class, but also as home assignments.

The semester ended and the group had another teacher the following term, but I still keep in touch with some of the students. The experience was really good for me. I learned a lot and I am starting to realize my real role as a teacher. I used to think that the teacher should have the answers. However, some years ago, I started to reflect on the learner's role and after taking this course at PUC-Rio I decided to work towards developing as an exploratory practitioner.

Another concern that I had when I started this monograph was how to be relevant. I found Richards (2003) very helpful. Studying about Qualitative Inquiry, its rigour, precision, systematicity, and “transformative potential for the researcher”, was very important to understand that this kind of research is appropriate in TESOL and that “the power of a particular case to resonate across cultures should not be underestimated” (2003, p.21).

It is also worth mentioning that I liked to do this research and to write about it. Knowing about Exploratory Practice was like finding a treasure. The experience with the students was amazing and I know it does not end here. The EP group who meet at PUC-Rio was also a gift in my life. It was wonderful to hear other participants' experiences and to share my experiences as well. My classmates at the Post-graduation course also helped me a lot with questions and suggestions while I was developing this research.

I had the opportunity to share this experience with some teachers at a language school in São Luís/ MA. They had not heard anything about



Exploratory Practice before, but some of them were happy to say that the EP principles matched their beliefs. The following week, one of the teachers told me that he had started monitoring his students and it made a big difference in his pedagogic practices.

It was important for me to realize that sometimes, we, as teachers, only see our own objectives, or the course objectives, and assess student's development through our lenses. This does not work. I now understand that we have to keep our eyes and minds open, ready to hear what the learners have to say with no prejudice or fear.

This academic research has come to an end, but my new life as an exploratory practitioner has just begun!

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## Appendix

