Chapter #14

UNDERSTANDING WHY SOME FUTURE TEACHERS FIND IT SO DIFFICULT TO FOLLOW WRITTEN INSTRUCTIONS

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ABSTRACT
A difficulty in following simple written instructions has been identified amongst university students of teacher education in Brazil. This Exploratory Practice (EP) study, conducted as part of a TEFL Practicum course at the State University of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, aimed to understand what lies behind this difficulty. The research project was divided into two phases: an online questionnaire, answered by 16 students, and an EP activity, involving another 14 learners, all aged between 20 and 35. This specific "work of understanding" was important for them because their success at university depended partly on their ability to follow instructions. Moreover, as the learners in question were teachers-to-be, their ability to give their own students clear instructions was also a consideration. The study was initially designed as a participatory action research project with the main focus on finding solutions to the problem at hand, but it was subsequently transformed into an EP project with the main aim of simply understanding the situation and familiarizing the participating learners with the principles of EP. The participants' and respondents' difficulties in following instructions were found to be related to the learners themselves (e.g., lack of attention) the teachers (e.g., unclear instructions), and other factors.

Keywords: exploratory practice, understanding, written instructions, teacher education, practitioner research.

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, there has been a perceptible change in the profile of Brazilian university students. One of these changes is that learners seem to be encountering much more difficulty in following instructions. At first, I believed that this difficulty had to do with a lack of concentration, making it harder for them to read long instructions, but I have since noticed a similar difficulty dealing with very short exercises or exam rubrics. Moreover, as in our case we are working with teacher education, it is even more important to understand what is behind this phenomenon, because education in the future will be affected by these future teachers' own capacity in this regard.

The study initially focused on how to solve the perceived problem, and was therefore designed as a participatory action research project (Brandão & Streck, 2006; Thiollent, 2006, 2011). However, an Exploratory Practice (Allwright 2002, 2003, 2008, 2009; Gieve & Miller, 2008; Hanks, 2009, 2014, 2017; Kuschnir & Machado, 2003; Mateus, Miller, & Cardoso, 2019; Miller, 2009) framework was subsequently adopted, as it was felt that it would be better able to shed light on what was going on in the classroom without necessarily seeking a solution. From the outset, the aim was to include the learners not only as subjects of the research, but also as participants, and to familiarize them with the concept of teacher research and learners as researchers. The initial study question was: *Why do some future teachers find it so difficult to follow written instructions?*

2. EXPLORATORY PRACTICE: WORKING WITH UNDERSTANDING

Exploratory Practice (EP) is the integration of research, teaching, and learning. Besides language development, it focuses on enhancing the quality of life in the classroom. Teachers and learners are encouraged to investigate questions that puzzle them. In this respect, it differs from many other kinds of teacher research: "Exploratory Practice (EP) recommends commencing with puzzlement, and encourages the practitioners themselves to investigate, rather than relying on external researchers, as a way of developing understandings" (Hanks, 2017, p. 107).

The main aim is not directly to solve problems or find the best methodology for language learning, but to formulate questions based on learners' and teachers' puzzlement. Therefore, how-to questions (designed to identify methods or solutions) are substituted by why questions (in order to develop understanding). Some examples of EP questions that I have dealt with in my career (either puzzling me or my students) are:

- *Why are some learners so demotivated?*
- *Why was this class a good one (even without following the lesson plan)?*
- *Why didn't this particular activity work?*
- *Why do learners find it so difficult to listen to recorded materials?*
- *Why do some students learn faster than others?*
- *Why are strategies considered so important in different contexts, but are rarely worked with in the educational context?*
- *Why can't we help those learners who need more help than others?*

The idea is to encourage learners to discuss some of their teachers' and colleagues' questions and to create questions of their own and think of ways of answering them in groups (collaboratively). Therefore, EP considers "teachers and learners as co-researchers investigating their learning and teaching lives" (Hanks, 2014, p. 117). These discussions are usually developed in the target language and integrated into the syllabus. In some cases, they may even become the whole syllabus (Mateus, Miller, & Cardoso, 2019; Miller, 2009).

The kind of research generated by EP is participatory, as it is not just the teacher who engages in the research, but the learners, too. Teacher and learners act as practitioners. It is common to see to see learners as practitioners of learning and teachers as practitioners of teaching, but with EP they both take on many different roles: each practitioner is a learner and teacher (Freire's view), and both also become researchers of their own *puzzlement*.

The term *puzzle* here is better used as a verb than as a noun. In EP, the aim is to understand what puzzles us, rather than to solve "problems" or "challenges." The term *problem* is always negative, but a puzzle can be seen as something intriguing, either positive or negative. One general question that essentially underpins all EP activities is: "What puzzles you about your language teaching/learning experiences?" (Hanks, 2017, p. 113). By asking this question, learners and teachers can generate their own puzzles.

The EP framework is based on seven principles for inclusive practitioner research (Allwright, 2009; Hanks, 2009, 2014, 2017):

The "what" issues:

1. Focus on *quality of life* as the fundamental issue. (quality of life)
2. Work to *understand* it before thinking about solving problems. (understanding)

The "who" issues:

3. Involve *everybody* as practitioners developing their own understanding. (inclusivity)
4. Work to bring people *together* in a common enterprise. (collegiality)
5. Work cooperatively for *mutual development*. (mutuality)

The "how" issues:

6. Make it a *continuous* enterprise. (continuity)
7. *Minimize the burden* by integrating the work for understanding into normal pedagogic practice. (integration)

These principles may be considered the backbone of EP activities for the integration of language learning, teaching, and researching in order to improve quality of life in the classroom. EP is more interested in understanding different issues that puzzle different practitioners (including teachers and learners), who work together for mutual development. The process is continuous: one puzzle may generate other puzzles. Finally, EP activities should be integrated into the syllabus and not be presented as extra work. As such, the target language is used in all the discussions, presentations, materials preparation, and other tasks.

3. OBJECTIVES

The main objective was to better understand the difficulties experienced by learners in following instructions. Additionally, it was hoped that the collaborative development of the study with other learners and teachers would give these teachers-to-be the chance to experience Exploratory Practice and become more critical, collaborative, and reflective teachers in the future.

4. METHODS

4.1. Research participants and questions

As stated before, the main objective of this Exploratory Practice (EP) project was to answer the following *puzzle*: *Why do some future teachers find it so difficult to follow written instructions?*

The first phase of this EP research took place in the first semester of 2019. About 100 learners were invited to answer an online questionnaire using Google Forms. The questionnaire contained the following questions:

(a) Why do you believe some university students find it so hard to follow written instructions?
(b) Have you ever faced this kind of problem as a teacher or student? If so, what happened?
(c) Could you mention a situation in which you got into trouble because you failed to follow some instructions? What kind of trouble was it? What did you do? Why didn't you follow the instructions?

As mentioned above, the learners were undergraduate and graduate students from a public university in Rio de Janeiro. Initially, the idea was just to use just the questionnaires, as approximately 50 responses were expected. However, only 16 were actually received. In order to improve the response rate, the respondents were not asked to identify themselves and were not required to answer all the questions, but they all did. As fewer responses were received than expected, the decision was made to introduce Exploratory Practice to the Practicum group. Also, as the focus of the research had changed (from solving problems to working on understanding), it was also decided that a more classroom-centered study would be appropriate, which was also more in line with the principles of EP.

The group chosen for the study was taking the TEFL Practicum course, which consists of lesson observation and discussion activities online or in class. There were 14 students involved in this second phase of the study. They had been observing classes for young adults, adults, and older people at the university language center for about two months.

First, they were introduced to the concept of Exploratory Practice and invited to join an EP project. The questions from the questionnaire were read out to them and then they split into three groups: two groups of four and one group of six students. While they were organizing themselves, the questions were written on the board. They had been asked to prepare posters later on, but the preparation of their lists in groups took so long that the poster stage was skipped, and the activity moved straight on to an open discussion based on the lists. In this stage, the three groups worked together and had access to the responses received from the online respondents of the questionnaire.

As the learners had been doing class observations for some time then, the discussion was very rich. Not only did they mention their own or their students' experiences, but they felt comfortable enough to mention other students and teachers as well.

It was generally agreed that following instructions is a complex task that depends not only on the people who give and receive the instructions, but also on the environment (e.g., acoustics) and the tasks to be performed. Finally, the reasons identified for difficulty in following instructions were collated into three groups: learners, teachers, and other reasons.

4.2. Research method

This qualitative study was initially conceived as a participatory action research project (Brandão & Streck, 2006; Thiollent, 2006, 2011), but was then adapted to become an EP project. These two research methodologies share the view that practitioners are the people who are most likely to conduct the most productive research in the field (Allwright, 2008, p.15). Their main difference is what they focus on.

In action research, the participants generally expect change to occur as a result of the study. However, in the case of EP, the present study included, the expected change is not in the behavior, but in the "understanding of the practitioners' own classroom" (Gieve & Miller, 2008, p. 2). The main aim of EP is not, therefore, to find "new methods," but to understand what is taking place in the educational environment. Bailey (2008) uses two metaphors, work and life, to explain the difference between EP and other kinds of classroom-based research. While in the latter, teaching/learning is seen as "work" and the researcher looks for "efficiency," in EP, the teaching/learning process is seen as "life" and the search is for a better quality of life in education.

Allwright (1983, cited in Bailey, 2008) mentions that classroom-centered research differs from other kinds of educational research because it does not concentrate on *inputs to* the classroom or *outputs from* the classroom.

> It simply tries to investigate what happens inside the classroom when learners and teachers are together. At its most narrow view, classroom-centered research is in fact research that treats the language classroom not just as the *setting for* investigation but, more importantly, as the *object of* investigation. Classroom processes become the central focus. (Allwright, 1983, cited in Bailey, 2008, p. XI)

As mentioned above, when it comes to EP, teachers and learners are seen as the *practitioners* of research. In the present study, getting the learners to ask and answer *Why* questions meant they had to think about their own reality. There was no right answer. Transformation may or may not occur, but some kind of awareness would take place.

5. RESULTS & DISCUSSION

The compilation, comparison, and analysis of the students' responses indicated that they attributed learners' difficulty in following instructions to three types of causes: lack of attention on the part of learners; unclear instructions given by teachers; and factors outside the activity itself, such as deficient primary and secondary education.

5.1. Discussing the questionnaire responses

An interesting fact is that although the learners were asked only about their (and others') difficulties, they tended not only to offer reasons for these difficulties, but also to make suggestions about how to address them. The online questionnaire consisted of three (blocks of) research questions (item 4.1). As there is no space in this chapter to present a full analysis of all the answers, a few have been chosen to present the main aspects observed.

5.1.1. First Question: *Why do you believe some university students find it so hard to follow written instructions*?

This question prompted not only some suggested reasons for the difficulties (in bold), but also (in 1 and 3) some suggested solutions (in italics). The examples show that learners sometimes feel the problem is the teachers' fault (1 and 3) and other times the learners' own fault (1 and 2).

1. Maybe both because **professors may take for granted that at a university level,** students will master instructions and neglect to facilitate instruction-giving by *breaking it into parts, checking understanding, modeling,* etc. It could also be that **students are ashamed of asking for clarification**.
2. Because maybe **they didn't understand the instructions and are afraid to ask**. Another possibility that I can think of is **distraction**. **Not paying attention** is something common as a student. It's not on purpose.
3. Sometimes **the way it's written is not clear**, and the student gets confused. *If the professor explains in class and then send written instructions, it works much better.*

Particularly intriguing was the fact that many responses were expressed quite tentatively, using modality in a variety of forms. In examples 1 and 2, the word *maybe* (underlined) is used; in example 3, the adverb *sometimes* could be interpreted as a form of modality, meaning "not always" or "not definitely." Therefore, one possible puzzle to investigate in the future is: *Why were some of the responses tentative?*

5.1.2. Second Question: *Have you ever faced this kind of problem as a teacher or student? If so, what happened*?

Only two learners reported never having had trouble following instructions, while two others gave only a partial response. The response given below, for example, first expresses a negative response but then immediately explains how any difficulty was circumvented. This person presents what could be considered a social strategy (asking for help) in anticipation of a possible problem.

> **No, I haven't**, and *when the instructions are not clear I check them with the person who gave it*.

Another one was more tentative, using the word *probably*, and adding that they did not remember.

4. Probably, but not that I would remember.

Many learners mentioned that they had faced the problem, and when they did, they used the social strategy of asking for help (5 and 6):

5. Yes, as a student. *I asked for the professor's help*.
6. Yes. I *asked my superior or colleagues what I was supposed to do*, as **it was not clear to me**.

Some learners who faced these difficulties as students (in bold) developed some teaching strategies (in italics) to avoid misunderstandings and help their learners (7):

7. As a student, I have had problems with following instructions due to **my lack of attention** or **misunderstanding** what has been asked. As a teacher facing students who had difficulties, *I had to read the instructions with them and explain several times.*

5.1.3. Third block of questions: *Could you mention a situation in which you got into trouble because you failed to follow some instructions? What kind of trouble was it? What did you do? Why didn't you follow the instructions*?

The aim of the third group of questions was to find out whether the learners had faced this kind of difficulty just at university or in other situations as well. These questions were designed to probe the respondents' personal experiences of difficulties, whereas the first and second questions could be answered by giving examples about other learners.

When narrating past experiences, only one learner did not mention having problems with instructions (8).

8. I wasn't in trouble, but I have been through a situation recently in which I believed I had some good ideas that could be better than the ones in the book. So, *I had some internal fight to decide whether I would follow the book's instructions or try to adapt them my way*.

When answering the third block of questions, the learners usually presented the problem (underlined words), the reason (in bold), and sometimes the solutions to the problem (in italics), although they were not asked to present any suggestions. Two of them (9 and 10) mention difficulties in filling out forms, although one of these (9) does not regard this as a serious issue.

9. Nothing serious, I filled out a form wrongly **because I hadn't read the rubrics properly**.

10. Once I filled a form wrongly because I made **a fast reading and actually misread what was asking**.

11. I don't remember going through such a situation at university, but I do remember seeing one of my old course book and the activity said "complete with to be" and I simply added "to be" in all the blanks. I guess **I just did what I'd been "asked"** and maybe *the instructions could have been clearer or provide a model.*

12. Yes, there was a situation once. I was taking a test and I did not turn the page and did not do the questions on that page. **I did not pay attention** and had only half the grade because of it. **I do not remember why, but I think I was in a hurry or too tired that day**.

13. Sometimes when I was in class I feel lost simply because **I lost focus on the moment**. However, I can't remember having problems due to it.

14. When I was making my first international trip, I could not understand the instructions for the baggage dispatch of the airline company that I was traveling on. As it was a flight with connections, I did not understand that there is no need to remove the luggage at the first connection, since the luggage is checked automatically. In my case **this confusion with the instructions was partly because I was doing something new, in a situation I was not used to**.

Again, many of the responses are expressed tentatively, using terms such as "I think" (12), "sometimes" (13), "I can't remember" (instead of "I did" or "I didn't") (13), and "partly" (14). It is also curious how many of them do not seem to care much about the problem. They disregard the importance of some of the situations, such as "completing the whole exercise with the word 'to be'" (11), "getting only half the grade" (12) or getting "lost" in class (13).

5.2. Exploratory practice activity

In preparation for the Exploratory Practice activity, the reasons given by the learners were organized into three groups, which largely corresponded to the reasons given by the online questionnaire respondents. The three groups were learner-related, teacher-related, and related to other factors. The reasons related to learners mentioned failing to pay attention, misunderstanding, more image-driven personality, distraction, and inefficient reading strategies. Some of them were also linked to their habits, such as greater familiarity with multiple-choice activities, a tendency to ignore instructions, not liking to read or not reading much, and lacking in patience. All these characteristics are typical of the connected generation (Cardoso 2013a, 2013b, 2015).

People from the connected generation are usually more kinesthetic and visual, which means they need visual stimuli and a lot of movement to learn. They value entertainment and games and use new technologies confidently; they read less and worse, mainly because they find it difficult to concentrate; they tend to multitask, which means they can perform many activities at the same time, are creative, and learn quickly; they are looking for a raison d'être and passion; they defend the environment and better living conditions; and they do not believe in hierarchical authority, but in shared leadership (Cardoso, 2013b).

Some of the learners blamed teachers for the difficulties students have following instructions. The reasons they gave included: unclear or confusing instructions; lack of models or examples, complexity of the activities; time gap between giving of oral instructions and answering of the questions; exclusive use of the target language (L2). A last problem mentioned by was that "sometimes professors take for granted that learners will master the instructions."

The other reasons the learners mentioned included classroom acoustics, biological factors, poor primary and secondary education, and even difficulty in prioritizing tasks. When multiple tasks are to be done, it is common to think more about the task than paying attention to what is supposed to be done. This is another characteristic of the connected generation (Cardoso, 2013a, 2013b, 2015)

As mentioned before, an interesting aspect of the research is that learners themselves presented some useful suggestions; effectively, learning strategies they believed to be effective. They also suggested some useful teaching strategies to avoid problems in understanding instructions (Table 1).

Table 1.
Learners' suggestions for improving understanding of instructions.

SUGGESTIONS	
FOR LEARNERS	FOR TEACHERS
• **Be patient.** • **Try to focus.** • **Read carefully.** • **Read other texts more often.** • **Pay attention to what is being said.** • **Ask the teacher or a colleague when in doubt.** • **During a test, don't worry about other problems.** • **Don't be too afraid or shy (ashamed) to ask for clarification about instructions.** • **Remember that other people may have the same difficulty.**	• Consider classroom acoustics. • Write clearer instructions. • Present models or examples. • Don't just follow the teacher's guide. • Use first language (L1) sometimes. • Explain in class and follow up with written instructions. • Try to speak more clearly (diction and pace). • In a test situation, read the instructions with the students. • Don't take students for granted. Check whether the learners understand the instructions.

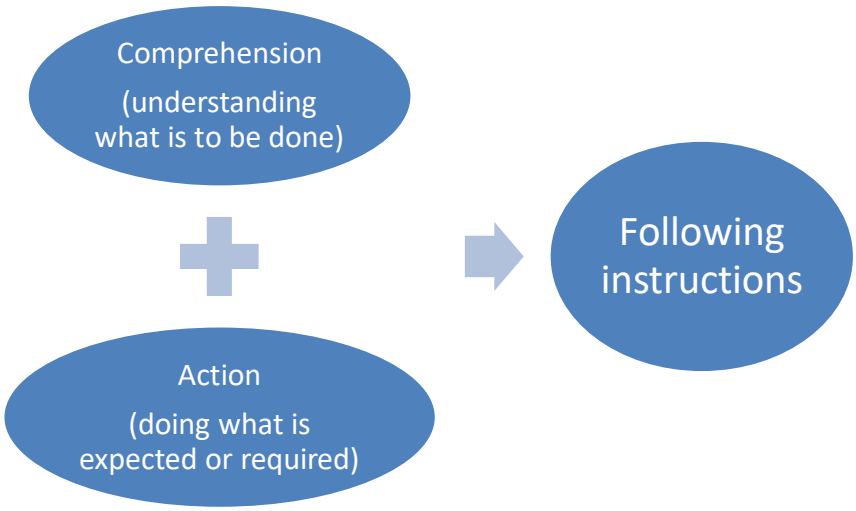
The learners were all very committed to the EP activity and mentioned that they would try to use it with their own students. Although the focus was on understanding, they also suggested some possible strategies. This suggests they are still very much linked to the *how-to* rather than the *why*. Maybe, part of the EP activity should have been a discussion

about this eagerness to rush for solutions instead of working on understanding before anything else, which itself could be transformed into a new puzzle for future study: *Why do we tend to rush for solutions without trying to understand the situation first?*

6. CONCLUSION

By the end of the EP activity, our puzzlement had changed. Our new question is: *Why is it so difficult to follow instructions?* To answer it, we searched for other studies on the same topic. Some interesting studies in the areas of speech therapy, psychology, cognition, and brain science were identified, which confirm that following instructions is a complex activity (Jaroslawska, Gahercole, Allen, & Holmes, 2016; Waterman et al., 2017). In fact, it is an activity that requires other faculties, such as perception (hearing/vision), understanding language, attention, concentration, and retention and recall of information (working memory and, in some cases, long-term memory). All these are elements of *comprehension* (Cardoso, 2016). However, the instruction-following process involves another stage, which is the action resulting from this comprehension (Figure 1).

Figure 1.
The Instruction-Following Process.



To understand what is supposed to be done, learners must be familiar with the genre (instructions/rubrics), be aware of the context (the importance), pay attention, and know the language. As for the other part of the process, learners must be able to do and want to do what is being asked of them. Most studies focus on short-term memory capacity (part of the comprehension process), but we believe motivation, attention, and concentration should also be investigated.

Many of the points discussed here are typical of the connected generation, such as not paying attention, rushing to do things without thinking first, and finding it hard to read about things that do not interest them. However, nowadays, it is not just a matter of age, as most adults are from the connected generation (born after the 1980s) or have so much contact with high technology that their lifestyle, including the way they study and teach, has changed

completely. Therefore, some study of what Santos (2016) calls *cyberculture* (*digital culture*) would also be worthwhile. In the case of teacher education, it is important to understand how changes in teachers' and learners' profiles will affect the educational process when these learners become the teachers.

This study contributes to this understanding. By engaging in the research, all the participants gained a better understanding of the comprehension process (both reading and listening). Although the idea was not to solve a problem, but to understand the situation, by simply taking part in the study, these learners and teachers (including the author) had the chance to rethink the way they deal with instructions. Moreover, these (future) teachers had the chance to experience Exploratory Practice as "a viable alternative to technicism" (Allwright, 2008, p. 143) and an alternative to more conventional research. Therefore, it is hoped that in the future these practitioners will also consider their learners' characteristics when giving instructions.

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