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## Helping first-year undergraduates engage in language research

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### Abstract

Adopting an 'exploratory action research' design and drawing primarily on a reflective journal and interviews, this study recounts the process of supporting first-year Applied Languages students (learning French, German and Spanish) as they started to engage in language research. Certain challenges they faced in engaging with the inquiry-based learning were apparent at the outset, while others emerged; these were addressed in the spirit of 'exploratory practice'. Our narrative account is structured around key themes. These are subsequently the focus of our discussion, which highlights the process-oriented actions that arose from our developing understandings and the future actions still required. Conclusions focus on the benefits gained by learners and teachers.

### Key words

Exploratory action research, exploratory practice, language research, inquiry-based learning.

### Introduction

Our school of languages and area studies offers undergraduate courses in French, German, Spanish and combinations of these and others provided under the title: 'Applied Languages' (AL). We also offer English Language (EL) courses, with English combined too with Literature and Journalism. A core first-year unit for students doing EL-based courses and AL is 'Starting Language Research' (SLR); this runs through the second semester, following on from: 'Studying at University' (SAU).

According to the student handbook, the SLR unit aims:

1. To enable students to consider how ideas about language use could be investigated.
2. To enable students (working in groups) to carry out a small-scale investigation of an aspect of contemporary spoken English or another language if appropriate.
3. To enable students to reflect on the process of carrying out the research.
4. To enable students to report on what they have found and evaluate the data with reference to existing research.

In the broader context of the AL programme, SLR has a role in making research seem a more accessible activity (ahead of subsequent dissertation work), in stimulating curiosity about language (which complements not just language study but also work in other units on the socio-cultural contexts in which languages are spoken), and in developing intellectual research tools that facilitate more autonomous learning (in a safe collaborative environment). This then is a rationale for language students still new to university doing SLR.

When I joined the SLR teaching team, the unit co-ordinator shared a mix of evaluative comments offered by previous students. Some were very positive in response to a question about what was best, e.g.:

- “The research; not only does it allow students to look into a specific area of language, it also aids study skills such as learning to correctly reference, looking at literature reviews and exploring articles and journals.”
- “Working as a group on a presentation and having the freedom to choose your own topic; this made it a lot more interesting.”

However, asked to identify areas for improvement, some AL students had responded as follows (the unit had originally been designed for EL students):

- “The unit is easier for EL students, and more interesting/useful for them, but for AL students, we really struggle!”
- “It is too early to do it in the first year if it is meant to help with our dissertations – a lot of us are on 4-year courses, so we aren’t likely to remember what we learned then.”
- “The content, I feel, is suited for EL students more. Doing AL, it would maybe be nicer to be in a class with just students doing languages so you could have the chance to do more relevant topics.”

Concerned by this feedback, the SLR unit co-ordinator had then highlighted issues to be addressed (in an email to the team):

- **not interesting:** we will need to work on this
- **too early to be looking at research;** this would appear to be something we need to counter early in the unit
- **more difficult for AL students:** we will need to think about that and see whether the AL students should be taught separately. I am wondering about having a meeting/focus group with a few AL students to tease this issue out

but will talk about this first with (colleague). It is frustrating because they have the option to focus on their MFL (Modern Foreign Language): in the last class, I did ask the students why they didn't do this and they said it would be too difficult (personal correspondence).

This was a 'puzzle' I wished to explore with an SLR class composed of 19 AL students (who would thus be taught separately). Intrigued by the challenge of making their SLR experience relevant and motivating, I discussed these issues with the second researcher, who was both the personal tutor of 12 of these students and their SAU teacher. Together, we agreed on an 'exploratory action research' design (Smith, Connelly & Rebolledo, 2014).

### **Our exploratory action research**

The term 'action research' for teachers, a concept originally developed by Lewin (1946), implies a focus on collaboratively deepening understandings of learning/teaching practices with a view to initiating change that will improve life experiences (Burns, 1999). Unfortunately, however, for some researchers, e.g. Allwright (2005), the term carries unwanted baggage from insensitive use; some action research has focused technically on problems that must be solved, with an impetus to act, perhaps before the problems are properly understood. In response to this concern, Allwright developed the 'exploratory practice' approach, based on the following key principles and suggestions:

- put 'quality of life' first
- work primarily to understand language classroom life
- involve everybody
- work to bring people together
- work also for mutual development
- make the work a continuous enterprise
- minimize the extra effort of all sorts for all concerned
- integrate the 'work for understanding' into the existing working life of the classroom (Allwright 2005, p. 360).

In our view, a merit of Allwright's work (see Allwright & Hanks, 2009) is to highlight principles that should also be central to 'action research'. This is a term preferred by many, including Burns, who argued recently (during an April 2014 discussion at the IATEFL Research SIG in Harrogate) that it "*legitimizes*" teacher inquiry in a way that perhaps the expression 'exploratory practice' does not. Like Smith et al. (2014), we have opted for the term 'exploratory action research' in order to emphasize both our focus on discovery and 'self-reflective process-oriented stance' (p. 8). We resolved that any innovations introduced to the SLR unit would result from our developing understandings of the evolving situation combined with our prior knowledge and experience as teachers/researchers. Our research approach drew on methods described in Table 1.

**Table 1: Research methods**

	<i>Research method</i>	<i>Notes on use</i>	<i>Rationale</i>
1	Reflective journal (1 <sup>st</sup> researcher)	Included reflections on lessons taught (2 per week), tutorials given, observations of student presentations and regular meetings with second researcher, when data being collected and analysed, and the developing reflective journal, were discussed.	Provided a 'sustainable' (Allwright & Hanks, 2009) unfolding 'narrative' (Johnson & Golombek, 2011), which operated as a 'mediational tool', helping us organize our thoughts and facilitating our collaborative inquiry.
2	Interviews (2 <sup>nd</sup> researcher)	With a sample of six students (selected from volunteers according to criteria such as balance, variety and what we felt we could learn from them [Stake, 1995]). Probed the students' experiences of SLR. The first three interviews (of four) were short extensions of scheduled tutorials.	The first interview (for exploratory purposes) and the next two made use of 'natural' data-gathering opportunities (Dar, 2012); the fourth had pedagogical value, as it stimulated reflection. Gaining disclosure was facilitated by the second researcher's role, not a 'third party' (Allwright & Hanks, 2009) but nor as close an 'insider' as the first researcher, who taught SLR.
3	Observations (both researchers)	Of students' oral presentations, discussed subsequently together and recorded in the reflective journal. Our observations were supplemented by those of a colleague.	Drawing on 'regular' assessment activity (Dar, 2012), this method provided evidence of what the students had learned, and still needed to learn.
4	Analysis of reflective writing	Consulted students' written reflections on engaging in the research to compare with oral reflections:	To provide some 'limited' triangulation (Stake, 1995), limited since follow-up questions could not be asked.
5	Analysis of end of unit evaluations	Analysed qualitative comments from the whole cohort, focusing on responses from any students who self-identified as AL, checking for declared dissatisfaction.	To gain a more objective assessment of whether concerns of the previous cohort had been addressed.

Of the data sources used in creating the narrative below, the most important was the reflective journal. Far from being unfiltered primary data, this already drew upon 'a complex combination of description, explanation, analysis, interpretation' and positioning of the self in the sharing of experience, as is characteristic of narrative that operates as a mediational tool, 'influencing how one comes to understand what one is narrating about' (Johnson &

Golombek, 2011, p. 490). Interview and observational data fed into the reflective journal, shaping our evolving understandings and continuing actions. Other data referred to in Table 1 supported our later evaluation of the SLR unit. An approximate outline of the syllabus is below (Table 2):

*Table 2: An outline of SLR*

<i>Week</i>	<i>Curriculum activities</i>	<i>Assessment</i>
1	Introduction: understandings of research, considerations in choosing a topic, experience of practically analysing language (through looking at new words), brainstorming dimensions of researchable language, looking at past projects	
2	Realization of language research in practice, hands-on experience of impromptu data gathering and analysis, reading/ discussion of newspaper reports of research (on language varieties), preliminary group-formation	
3	Possible topics in language research, discussion of research methods and ethics, hands-on experience of data gathering and then initial data analysis, e.g. highlighting themes	
4	Analysing language against emergent themes and criteria from the literature, e.g. through exploring metaphors produced in self-generated text and found in the media	Research plans (formative)
5	Group tutorials (25 minutes per group) offering feedback on research plans and focusing on issues of research design, e.g. identifying researchable questions based on background reading, and logistical issues, e.g. identifying participants	
6	Informal group presentations highlighting progress, feedback on these, practice of transcribing data and using analytical techniques such as coding and clustering	
7	Practice in writing up extracts of data analysis, designing peer feedback forms for use with group presentations	
8	Group tutorials (25 minutes per group) focused on real world research experiences, structuring presentations, reflecting on learning	
9	Modelling of the reflective process, activity identifying flaws in research and addressing/acknowledging these, discussion of how to draw on peer feedback while reflecting	Group presentations
10	Organizing literature reviews	Group presentations
11	Structuring research reports	Group presentations
12	Focusing on different styles in academic writing	Reflections
14	-	Research reports

I describe the above as an 'approximate' outline since considerable flexibility around the fixed assessment points was possible. According to notes provided by the unit co-ordinator, students were to be told in the first session that they had to take responsibility for their own learning, which at first they might find "difficult". Teaching and content would be adapted to their needs, so it was possible to add/drop/modify activities, recap continually, and build in discussions with individuals and opportunities for self-study focused on their projects.

My class was likely to be different from those of most others, since it was composed entirely of AL students. The narrative account below is centred on themes that emerged as we tried to make the unit relevant and motivating through exploratory action research. Data are presented as 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973), with a view to supporting 'vicarious understanding' (Borg, 1997). The six volunteer interviewees (who signed informed consent forms guaranteeing confidentiality, anonymity and the right to withdraw at any time, in accordance with the university's ethical guidelines) have been given the following pseudonyms: Alex, Bob, Carol, Mary, Ron and Ursula. Other students present in the reflective journal whose contributions have been drawn upon have been anonymized. After presenting emergent themes, we discuss them.

### **Putting our exploratory action research into practice**

#### *Starting with the students' beliefs and understandings*

Initial interviews suggested students knew little about research. For example, Mary said it was "completely new", while Carol reported she did "not know what to expect". Most seemed motivated, e.g. Mary, who said she was "curious". However, one student, Bob, was ambivalent; despite acknowledging little motivation, he indicated a willingness "to give [the SLR unit] a chance". The students were aware of having been helped by SAU. According to Ursula, learning about "structuring and writing essays, academic writing and referencing" were among the benefits.

An activity in the first SLR session involved the students brainstorming in groups what they understood by research while sharing previous research experiences. This activity, which led into a plenary discussion, seemed crucial, given from a Vygotskian perspective that to help students attain greater 'consciousness' awareness-raising is required that helps them engage more fully intellectually and emotionally (Van Lier, 1994).

In plenary, issues that might limit their engagement in research became evident. Several focused on the challenges of developing a literature review or the difficulties of finding appropriate online sources; Bob reported finding the latter frustrating. My impromptu response was to provide a quick demonstration of how to use Google Scholar, with the help of a volunteer student.

Another source of frustration, according to one student, was that “meeting the methodological requirements [was] difficult”. This was an objection I had anticipated. Borg’s (2013) extensive research into the cognitions of language teachers suggests many see research as objective hypothesis testing, involving statistical analysis and the controlling of variables, i.e. as a highly scientific endeavour; it is unlikely that language students would necessarily have very different views. I sought to counter this perception by explaining that research did not have to be quantitative, carried out by white-coated scientists, and elicited a benefit of qualitative research: “in-depth analysis”. I stressed that research could be fun, lead to discovery and involve collaboration and sharing. At least part of this message got through. “What did your friends tell you about this unit?” I asked a new student at the start of the second session. “Doing research is fun”, she said with a smile.

### *Trying to help make it relevant*

Reflecting on the previous year’s feedback, we puzzled why AL students had felt it would be “too difficult” to use the languages they were studying for SLR. Of the various factors, one was the reading list, which, we realized, was more geared towards EL students, including for example Clark (2007) and Sealey (2010) as well as Wray and Bloomer (2012), resources which contained excellent ideas that might nevertheless need adapting for AL students. Secondly, while the unit coordinator was now developing extra support for AL students, e.g. by videoing lecturers discussing their MFL research and making these videos electronically available, the curriculum materials contained primarily samples of English to analyse, so that they were accessible to all, while examples of past projects were also in English.

Finally, there were issues relating to primary data collection. AL students might need to seek out participants whose mother tongue was French, German or Spanish, which, despite the presence of international students at the university, might still be harder than sampling English mother tongue speakers. Then, while working in small groups, they would need MFL competence in designing data collection instruments, perhaps conducting interviews, listening to, analysing, transcribing and probably translating authentic speech.

### *Focusing on research ideas*

Possible research ideas were mooted from the first session. For example, one student suggested looking at the politeness of the Spanish they were taught, wondering whether it was excessively polite so that it would sound unnatural to a native speaker in a context where requests occur naturally (e.g. a Spanish café). We discussed how this could be investigated, perhaps by creating scenarios using picture and word prompts, using as participants students learning Spanish and native speaker assessors.

Or, I suggested, students might look at adjective choice used to describe some kind of visual/aural/tactile or gustatory stimulus, e.g. pictures, songs, hidden objects with different textures, biscuits. For an example of such a design, we then watched a research participant (from a previous year) listening to short clips of songs and giving opinions in English. To trigger practical research ideas, I explained they could do something similar with other languages, elicited socio-cultural factors (e.g. gender, age, language, national culture) that they felt might influence the results and why, and invited the students to consider which linguistic features, besides adjectives, could be examined, e.g. length of utterance, the presence of non-fluency features.

In the next week, we watched a clip from an Italian talk show, which showed six speakers all battling to speak simultaneously, and I asked how such a clip could be analysed, eliciting ideas such as volume, tone, pitch, gestures and facial expressions. Ursula mentioned cultural issues, wondering if Northern Europeans would behave in the same way. However, none mentioned turn-taking explicitly and I surmised that perhaps this concept had not yet featured on their degree course. I then played them a clip from a UK talk show, which featured heated discussion but turn-taking conventions followed scrupulously. This led into a discussion of strategies that might be employed by those relinquishing, accepting, retaining and forcefully taking turns (Cook, 1989), terms introduced during this discussion, and I referenced a developing research tradition examining such behaviour (e.g. Harris, 2001). Possible project applications I highlighted included analysing televised debates or the interactions of groups of students from different nationalities invited to debate contestable issues.

There were thus various dimensions to the support provided, with students introduced to a range of possible topics and ways of collecting data they might find stimulating. Meanwhile, scaffolding continued to focus on helping them relate initial research ideas to relevant literature and the languages they were studying. For example, after using two short newspaper articles on attitudes towards English accents and dialects in the UK for a jigsaw reading, and then eliciting if there was anything they had read that could spark original research for themselves, I realized ideas remained fairly close to the content of the newspaper articles. So I highlighted further possibilities that might enable them to draw upon their languages and interests in considering accents/dialects/varieties. For example, Franglais is prejudicially regarded in France, where 'mythological' concepts of language and policy have some force (Schiffman, 2006). "What are the practices of Franglais, though", I asked, "and the attitudes towards it of French international students?" Such a question, I suggested, exploring the cognitions and practices of French native-speakers, could be addressed by recording a group (studying at the university) talking naturally on a topic which might stimulate Franglais use, followed by a discussion focused on their feelings about it. I pointed out there



was a developing research tradition in comparing cognitions with practices, amongst teachers as well as students, e.g. Wyatt and Borg (2011).

Personalizing research ideas in the context of a small-scale project was a theme throughout the next few weeks. In the fifth session, for example, I brought in journal article abstracts on areas of interest and used these for a jigsaw reading, eliciting how they could be adapted and localized, e.g. in the case of one, perhaps using final year AL students as informants.

### *Encouraging group formation*

Besides the need to help the students develop researchable ideas, another concern was to help them get into facilitative groups to avoid the scenario of students feeling yoked together with whoever they were sitting next to, perhaps unable to develop their ideas or use their own languages. Various discussion tasks for interchanging groups helped them get to know each other, e.g. while brainstorming considerations in choosing a topic, discussing preliminary research ideas or 'speed dating' to discuss what they would like to research while looking for others with similar ideas, an activity which led into tentative group formation.

However, while some groups formed quickly and cohesively, the process was hampered by inconsistent attendance. After the fifth session, I noted in my journal: "It's difficult to get someone like Ron involved (today was only the second time he's come) if others without a group who he could join up with are absent". Others needed encouragement to do the research in their MFL, but eventually 15 students (5 groups) did this. The four (2 pairs) who did not included Ron and a student with very poor attendance he needed to work very hard to engage with; they used English as the 'easier' option.

### *Scaffolding practical research activities*

To help the students carry out their research, we felt they needed practice in collecting and analysing data. So, in an early session, for example, the students did a practical research activity in threes, with two completing a task (which involved clarifying with each other the assessment requirements of the unit) and a third (the researcher) observing and making notes. Before commencing the main activity, the volunteer 'observer-researchers' had (in a separate group) brainstormed together the linguistic features they might find in the discourse (e.g. modals of obligation like 'should') and designed simple observation tools. After conducting the research, they compared notes. While this worked well, I reflected in my journal on an opportunity missed; the students had done the activity in English, but could have used other languages.

I addressed this issue the following day, grouping students according to the language they felt most comfortable with; all but one of those present (Ursula,

a German speaker who I gave another task) chose Spanish or French. Their groups of three then chose observer-researchers.

I wanted to keep the research design straightforward to build confidence. The topic would relate to colours; I gave the observer-researchers a slide of six bright colours they could use to elicit from in the MFL. The observer-researchers were given time to plan. They would need to introduce the research, get informed consent, develop appropriate questions (e.g. eliciting feelings triggered by the colours) and then record (using their phones). I did not specify a linguistic focus, as I wanted them to listen to the recordings afterwards and identify patterns that could be explored.

The students engaged, for the most part enthusiastically, while Ursula monitored, focusing on body language. Recordings were listened to and swapped, and feedback elicited in plenary. Alex commented on the linguistic expressions used to introduce personal opinions in Spanish, Mary on the hesitations noted as respondents struggled to express perhaps subliminal feelings about colours in French, Ursula on differences in group dynamics and how one Spanish-speaking group seemed to use more positive body language than another. "Might this be in any way due to gender or cultural affinity?", Ursula asked. I suggested such questions could lead back to the literature, and then highlighted a finding from Wray and Bloomer (2012) relating adjective use in the description of colours to gender. A gender focus, I indicated, could be one of many possible directions.

Feedback on this session, elicited during the second round of interviews, was positive. Ursula reported both enjoyment and satisfaction with her performance; Mary felt the different activities were stimulating and entertaining; even Bob, though he still had doubts about the unit and about doing research in general, said the session was interesting.

### *Helping the students develop skills in working with data*

In class, we practised analysing data and relating this analysis to the literature, e.g. through using a 'weather report' activity that centred on video clips from two different UK television programmes. Before watching, the students predicted what they might find; then, while watching, they noted down expressions they found interesting. Next, after eliciting that the language was "far more informal" than they had expected and contained "flowery language" and "colloquial expressions", I highlighted on the 'visualizer' (a kind of projector) features of weather reports that Crystal (2003), listening to radio broadcasts, has found, e.g. fuzzy language, scientific expressions, genre-specific terms, as well as features the students had identified after listening. I asked them to listen again, analysing the data in more detail, before sharing their findings, in pairs and larger groups, to learn from each other. Then, trying to demonstrate the relevance of this activity to AL projects, I asked if they could do something similar with another language

and the weather reports of another country, inviting them to consider if the features would likely be similar or different and why.

Another activity to stimulate analytical skills drew on data produced by the students. On postcards (in week 4), they were asked to complete a sentence that started "Language is..." An aim of this was to elicit metaphors produced naturally; there were several: "language is... a gateway to the soul/ deep and intriguing/like an ocean/a key/oxygen/beautiful". After discussing the metaphorical qualities of these, I asked them to produce metaphors deliberately (on the other side of the card) on another topic, which some found much harder: "teaching is..." One suggested, though: "teaching is like being at a restaurant. The teacher dishes out information and the students digest it". These data were collected, copied and used two weeks later for an activity that involved the students in practising grouping, clustering and counting data to find patterns and trends. We started with metaphors on teaching they (and other groups) had provided: e.g. teacher as waiter/farmer/mountaineer. This led into comparisons with the findings of Cortazzi and Jin (1999), researchers who, focused on metaphors as 'bridges' 'to the "reality" of the professional or technical world' (p. 149), had used a similar task with trainee teachers that had inspired ours. I pointed out that metaphors from different languages produced in authentic speech could be analysed in the students' research.

In my journal, I noted that much of the analytical work was enjoyable, e.g. when using a light-hearted article on teachers' apologetic text messages (Wyatt, 2014) and the raw data it was based on, or in a session on transcribing conventions, when students practised with spoken data they downloaded to their phones. Alex's group, for example, transcribed an amusing YouTube clip of an irate football manager.

### *Trying to help them 'do' research*

Once the students had formed groups (from week 2), most found progress slow, though ideas were circulating. An important issue to deal with was relatively over-ambitious research designs, particularly given the short time-frame. One group initially, for example, wanted to collect data from school students of different ages beginning to learn Spanish. "Which schools?", I asked, "where?", and enquired how they were going to gain access and whether they had considered ethical issues of doing research with children. It might be more practical, I suggested, to research beginners of Spanish at the university.

Other early ideas sounded promising, but later proved to have less mileage. Bob's group, for example, was interested in analysing television chat shows, looking at the way people expressed emotions. At first, they wanted to use English (since group members were studying different languages), but I suggested they could compare, finding (with the help of their language

teachers) chat shows in French and Spanish too. Subsequently, the focus was refined to how people interrupt each other when they are very upset. So Bob watched six episodes of a Spanish chat show, but found a lack of interrupting. Even protagonists who seemed shocked and unhappy appeared to follow turn-taking rules politely. This seemed interesting in itself and I suggested they analyse cross-cultural differences, but Bob's group opted for a completely new idea.

Some groups really needed the tutorials to help them refine their research designs. That of Carol's group, for example, was initially unnecessarily complex, involving more methods than were needed, with questionnaires as well as interviews. Earlier this group had planned to conduct their research in English, until I asked why and one had replied: "We could do the interviews in French, I suppose". Subsequently, though, they seemed well-organized, after settling for interviewing French Erasmus (European exchange) students and university teachers, focusing on their reactions towards and understanding of a range of British regional accents they would play to them on tape. Soon after the week 5 tutorial, they emailed French students through the Erasmus programme administrator asking for participants, and gained a positive response (six willing volunteers); they were also quick in booking a university classroom where they could conduct the research.

Other students found the process of locating research participants harder and seemed slower to act. During the tutorials, I realized my suggestion they speak informally to Erasmus students in the cafeteria had not been taken up. Besides the Erasmus administrator, I suggested they contact the Erasmus tutor, who offered to post a message on Facebook, and I emailed teachers whose classes I knew contained Erasmus students.

In my next journal entry, I recorded: "My big concern over the weekend has been: Have they contacted Erasmus students looking for volunteers?" I had emailed students on the Friday, after getting invitations to attend their classes at specific times from four colleagues with Erasmus students. Only Mary had responded and I had directed her to a colleague's Monday morning class, as this contained French students. However, this experience was not a success, Mary reported at the start of the next lesson; she had visited the class and found the French students "hesitant". Given her fraught report of this encounter, though, I worried she may have conveyed anxiety to the potential participants.

Later in the session, in plenary, we talked about presenting research to potential participants in such a way that acceptance is more likely. I advised them to emphasize the benefits of taking part, both social (through meeting other home and international students) and academic (learning about research processes in an intrinsically enjoyable way, contributing to the understanding of an issue worth researching). I also advised them to stress

the ethical dimensions, and discussed practical issues, e.g. taking phone numbers to facilitate subsequent contact.

Still worried about them finding participants, the following day I showed them a brochure for the 'Global café' (a social gathering organized by learning support tutors to bring together students of different nationalities), which, that week, had a 'Southern Europe' theme. Some students said they might attend, including one who described herself in class as "shy". To overcome nerves, I advised them to go along together, and reminded them they could seek out Erasmus students in the cafeteria at other times. "What if we think they're Spanish, but they turn out to be English?", another student asked, obviously worried primarily about potential embarrassment. I was surprised, as these were two of the most obviously outgoing members of the class. I reflected in my journal later that to help such teenagers meet Erasmus students, it might be necessary to organize a focused social gathering early in the academic year.

The students did find research participants eventually, though plans had to be modified. Mary and Ursula, for example, had ambitiously planned three short focus group discussions (for six German-speaking and French-speaking students respectively, followed by a mixed German/French group, with this last discussion probably conducted in English). Their design, though, was later reduced to just one discussion with four students (two English, two Spanish) who they already knew; it was conducted in English. Mary had reported in her third interview that trying to find participants had been very stressful.

Another group was quite resourceful in gaining participant involvement, even though they were rather haphazard in their approach. One student (the one earlier anxious about speaking to Spanish-looking students who were English!) found himself translating instructions into German (a language he was only just starting to learn) at the last moment when a German student turned up unexpectedly (together with French and Spanish students) to their data-gathering event, and they did not want to lose the opportunity to collect more data. There were then some comic moments, he reported, due to a harmless mistranslation, so it was at least a memorable and enjoyable experience for them all.

#### *Trying to help them benefit from their language teachers' guidance*

It was emphasized from the beginning that if students needed additional help, their French/German/Spanish teachers would be very willing to provide this. Such help could take various forms, e.g. directing them to resources such as MFL television programmes, explaining linguistic features, translating words or even participating in the research by being interviewed. As well as being available through office hours and by appointment through

email, the language teachers in rotation staff a 'language corner' in our learning resources centre, offering advice upon request.

Some students availed themselves of these opportunities. Bob, for example, sought out his Spanish teacher for advice on chat shows in Spain. Alex, in contrast, did not get the help he needed, producing a transcript of authentic spoken Spanish which contained errors and gaps a teacher would have been happy to advise on, as my colleague, the second researcher, confirmed.

Two groups involved teachers as research participants. The French speakers participating in Carol's study reported enjoying themselves listening to the accents, particularly a Scottish one. For the teacher-participants of another study, though, taking part was unfortunately less enjoyable. The study focused on reactions to music, which involved Spanish teachers in listening to songs representing different but contemporary musical genres. Unfortunately, though, prearranged meeting times were not always kept, some of the music grated, and whole songs were played rather than snippets, which meant that interviews, which were a little inflexible in structure, were also over-long. While this was part of the learning experience, I was also concerned. In class, I had emphasised that research participants should always be treated with the utmost respect, but it is possible that not every dimension of this message had been grasped by all, particularly those students whose attendance had been uneven. I noted in my journal that advice about conducting research in a deeply ethical, participant-sensitive way needed to be underlined.

### *Evaluating their research*

In mid-late March, the students gave oral presentations. One of the best was on code-switching, which was defined and contextualized with the help of the literature, e.g. Holmes (2013), posing the following questions: "Why do people switch from their native language, e.g. Spanish or French, into English during a conversation? Does it relate to the topic or their sense of identity? Is it for affective reasons?" To explore these issues, the students presented a series of pictures they felt might induce code-switching to international students, who were asked to describe them. They then analysed when code-switching occurred, speculating why and referring briefly back to the literature.

Overall, this was an interesting, well-structured small-scale investigation, although it could have been improved in several respects. For example, while the stimuli were largely well-chosen, including pictures that might draw out cultural associations (fish and chips, the Queen) or stimulate feelings (a beach with palm trees, a plane crash), there was no technology picture, as I had suggested. A more significant issue was that the literature could have been more fully drawn upon in the discussion, which, amongst the presentations, was a common problem. In fact, some students hardly used the literature at all, even though I had helped every group identify a few appropriate sources

to get them started. This issue was highlighted in my feedback, which was formative, as presentations needed to be developed into research reports. I noted in my journal that working with the literature needs greater emphasis next year.

A second interesting presentation was carried out by Bob's group, on the topic: celebrities talking about fame. This was an analysis of YouTube clips featuring British/ American, French and Spanish celebrities who had specifically been asked how they felt about being famous; for the students, identifying relevant clips to analyse involved extensive targeted searching in different languages. Analysis focused on the use of positive/negative adjectives and metaphors, expressions of disbelief and self-effacement. Comparisons were made across languages and within national groups, with sub-categories developed, such as 'more/less famous' based on various criteria including Twitter followers by number.

In many ways, this was a sophisticated study, reflecting and stimulating intellectual curiosity. The emergence of 'self-effacement', for example, in their analysis of the data, led to these students then searching the literature for definitions and discussion of this. Furthermore, although there were many variables in their small-scale study, these students' conclusions were sensible, which suggested methodological awareness. Indeed, a colleague moderating the presentations commented that the third speaker in the group (whose remit this was) demonstrated a better understanding of methodological limitations than some of her final year undergraduate dissertation tutees.

I reflected in my journal later that some students, particularly those who attended regularly, did have a sound methodological awareness. Much earlier in the semester, I had been very pleased with their engagement during a groupwork activity exploring the strengths and weaknesses of different research methods. I had monitored, feeding in ideas, e.g. relating to the 'social desirability response bias' (Collins, Shattell & Thomas 2005), and then elicited short presentations from each group. At that point, I felt they had a good theoretical basis, but needed more practical experience.

### *Examining their reflections*

In the last session, when asked informally how they felt about the unit, students' responses were positive, with the social desirability response bias no doubt having some effect. I was curious as to what they would tell the second researcher, who was less an insider.

There were some criticisms in the final interviews. Regarding content and structure, Bob felt some sessions towards the end that focused on academic writing were less enjoyable, while Ursula highlighted "perhaps too much repetition", alluding to a certain amount of recycling that took place, e.g. the 'Language is...' metaphor activity introduced in week 4 and returned to in

week 6. The content, which Alex considered “very interesting” throughout, was intentionally front-loaded, with input introduced early recycled to deepen understanding, and Ursula did appreciate this, saying she found the cyclical structure useful for clarifying her thoughts.

Views were mixed regarding support in developing a research focus. Bob would have preferred a list of suggested topics as his group “wasted too much time” in decision-making, though in our view his group came up with two very interesting ideas that might not have featured on a teacher-generated list. Ursula, in contrast, really appreciated the freedom to choose, but would have liked more time to develop the initial concept, while Alex, too, would have preferred to finalize the research design later.

Their experiences of working with others were also mixed. While most students enjoyed the groupwork, Alex did not; his group had different ideas, lacked clear leadership and were in fact disorganized; disorganization was also a problem with Ron’s group. Ursula felt the worst thing about the project was finding participants; this was also an ordeal for Mary, who did indicate, though, that an important lesson she had learned was how to convey a more positive message when presenting information to others she needed to persuade.

Regarding lessons learned, Ron highlighted that the most important for him was about time management, while Alex regretted not checking his transcript with a teacher due to pressure of time.

All interviewees commented gratefully on supportive peer feedback from their classmates after presentations, which not all had enjoyed; Bob, for example, was conscious of having spoken very fast. Carol conceded she was very nervous at the start, but afterwards felt fine, more confident now about making presentations in the future.

Several students reported feeling more confident about doing research in general, e.g. Alex, who also said he now had a deeper understanding of the process. Ursula highlighted she had learned about the different stages involved and was highly motivated to research in future.

As to other beneficial aspects of the unit, Carol reported finding the tutorials very helpful, while Bob had enjoyed using Spanish, even though he was not at all interested in doing research beyond his dissertation, for which he felt the unit was useful preparation. There were positive comments about the teaching, which was supportive and very enthusiastic, but this could be the social desirability response bias (Collins et al., 2005) again.



To triangulate these reactions, there were also positive overall comments in the reflective assignments of classmates, though again these need to be interpreted cautiously, as they may possibly have been produced to ‘please’:

“Overall, it was a great experience. I really enjoyed the whole project and I am looking forward to doing something similar next year”

“I enjoyed the process very much. It has changed my point of view towards research in a positive way”.

Furthermore, in the end of unit evaluation (completed anonymously by students from all 5 classes), there were no negative comments from self-identifying AL students, unlike previously. This may have been partly because the AL students had been placed in separate classes, facilitating MFL use.

## Discussion

We now discuss themes that emerged through this ‘exploratory action research’ narrative to highlight how we dealt with issues from our ‘self-reflective process-oriented stance’ (Smith et al., 2014). We also consider future actions that can stem from this engagement (Table 3, below).

*Table 3: Acting on understandings emerging from the exploratory action research*

No.	Theme	Process-oriented actions on developing understanding	Future actions required
1	Starting with the students’ beliefs and understandings	A tendency towards positivist notions of research was anticipated and addressed. An unanticipated frustration with finding academic sources was also addressed.	Understanding of alternative research paradigms needs to keep filtering down through the education system; this objective can be reflected in the literature we provide schools that send us first-year students. SAU needs to do more with Google Scholar.
2	Trying to help make it relevant	Relevant readings, e.g. journal article abstracts on MFL research, were added to the curriculum early in the semester. The benefits of using their MFL for research were constantly emphasized.	Examples of MFL projects conducted this year can (with the students’ permission) be made available to next year’s cohort. More MFL-related readings (perhaps identified with the help of MFL colleagues) need to be added to the reading list.
3	Focusing on research ideas	A focus throughout the first few weeks was on scaffolding and extending ideas. However, some students would have liked more	Perhaps more previewing of possible research ideas could be incorporated into SAU. The scaffolding that took

		time on this (difficult because of fixed assessment points) or more direction (contrary to unit aims emphasizing self-directed learning?).	place in SLR seemed valuable in itself, in developing intellectual research tools. Dissemination of this research will also spark ideas.
4	Encouraging group formation	Thoughtful support was provided through various activities over several weeks to avoid the scenario of mismatched students, but several groups nevertheless became fairly dysfunctional, despite our efforts.	Students next year might benefit from more specific input (besides that provided in the introduction to the unit and modelled through groupwork activities) on working together to improve learning experiences.
5	Scaffolding practical research activities	Adjustments were made to incorporate use of different languages in a practical classroom research activity. This was well-received by students.	This can be extended.
6	Helping the students develop skills in working with data	Scaffolding in analysing data and the encouragement of greater autonomy in practising transcribing were well-received.	Autonomy support can be extended. A wider range of practice material can be used to develop skills.
7	Trying to help them 'do' research	Continuous hands-on interactive mentoring was provided to help students get their research underway, with scaffolding tailored to needs, and challenges such as difficulties in finding research participants addressed.	To make finding research participants easier, there is a need to organize social events that bring together first-year AL students with Erasmus students they might learn from and do research with.
8	Trying to help them benefit from their language teachers' guidance	With encouragement, some students involved their MFL teachers in their research, although this could have been more extensive and, in one case, participant-sensitive. This was reflected in the advice given.	All SLR students could be asked to discuss their ongoing research in their regular personal tutorials with their MFL teachers next year.
9	Reflections on evaluating their research	Despite considerable support that included identifying several relevant 'starter' sources for each group, too little use was made of the literature, which was picked up in feedback.	Students could be asked to produce short annotated bibliographies of relevant sources next year.

As Table 3 highlights, 'puzzles' common to an exploratory practice focus (Allwright, 2005) were addressed throughout the teaching of the unit. We were fortunate in being able to capitalize on an SLR design strength, its flexibility, which facilitated scaffolding focused on learners' needs. Curriculum activities could be adapted and extended, and learners' responses to these activities reflected and acted upon. Feedback was continuous, not just through tutorials and on assessed work, but constantly on developing ideas; this feedback was generated in a supportive environment by peers as well as by the teacher for the benefit of everyone. The research was above all collaborative, involving two researchers sharing insights as they collected and analysed naturally-occurring data from different sources sustainably. Finally, the research was sincerely focused on improving life experiences, on making the SLR unit more motivating and relevant to AL students. And this, of course, led to successes, with interesting projects developed and students conscious of what they had learned about the processes of doing research.

Regarding actions initiated, some insights led to immediate adjustments in the course content, in line with our self-reflective process-oriented stance, while other insights will need to flow into efforts to improve the student experience next year. There are thus implications for the work of others, to be discussed collaboratively and openly, when the limitations of our study, e.g. relating to the possible effects of the social desirability response bias (Collins et al., 2005) and the need to be continually reflexive due to our 'insider' status, are also aired.

## **Conclusions**

We set out to explore the puzzle of AL students apparently finding the SLR unit less motivating and relevant than did EL students. We sought to gain a deeper understanding of the issues involved through a combination of research methods, before acting thoughtfully on our understandings to initiate change.

The benefits of such activity are various. Firstly, our evidence from this study suggests the students themselves gained from the exploratory action research which enhanced their inquiry-based learning experiences. Though there are issues highlighted in Table 3 still to resolve, the students appeared to develop intellectual research tools, practical understandings of how to do research as well as increased curiosity about language, all of which should stand them in good stead, given the aims and rationale of the SLR unit. Secondly, as practitioners, we ourselves benefited from the intrinsically motivating experience of helping others while addressing an intellectually stimulating puzzle. Thirdly, our institution has benefited and will continue to do so as our findings are disseminated, raising the awareness of colleagues working with us to improve the SLR unit. Teachers of other units can also benefit, perhaps inspired to adopt similar methods to address puzzles of their own.

This last point is important. Through sharing this narrative research in a sufficiently descriptive way to support 'vicarious understanding' (Borg, 1997), we hope to encourage others to engage in such activity. In our view, learners and teachers can benefit deeply when the impetus to engage in exploratory action research is encouraged and acted upon.

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