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The Learner Development Journal Issue 8:

### Exploring Grassroots, Innovative, and Creative Approaches to Language Learning Materials Development Through Inclusive Practitioner-Research

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This article is part of a collection of practitioner research on the theme of “Exploring Grassroots, Innovative, and Creative Approaches to Language Learning Materials Development Through Inclusive Practitioner-Research” for Issue 8 of the Learner Development Journal (LDJ8), edited by Anna Costantino, Assia Slimani-Rolls, and Nour El Houda Bouacha. Published once a year, each issue of the Learner Development Journal follows a Community of Practices approach over a period of approximately 18 months in which contributors work together, under the guidance of the editors, to share, respond to, and develop their research and writing.

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# Dialogic Commentary About Grassroots, Innovative, and Creative Approaches to Language Learning Materials Development Through Inclusive Practitioner-Research

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with Anna Costantino, Assia Slimani-Rolls, and Nour El Houda Bouacha

**Anna, Assia, and Houda:** Thank you so much, Brian and Hitomi, for agreeing to do the commentary for LDJ8. We know you are incredibly busy and we really appreciate the fact that you have taken time to share your thoughts about LDJ8 with us.

Before passing the baton over to you, we would like to briefly highlight key features of each contribution in LDJ8, so that you and readers of this commentary can hold this body of work in view as you respond to issues that we have raised in the Introduction.

Here's a quick snapshot of the exploratory inquiries and practice-related reviews that make up LDJ8, ordered by key themes that we see interconnecting them.

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In *“Designing Social Media Tasks in a University CLIL Course: An Action Research Inquiry,”* Amanda Kira investigates the integration of multimodal tasks into an EFL CLIL course at a university in Japan. Concerned about the authenticity of her students' presentations, Amanda designed and implemented projects that encouraged the creative and communicative production of social media posts (Kira, 2024).

In *“Reshaping the Secondary ESL Classroom: Using Exploratory Practice to Promote Student Participation at an All-Girls' School in Japan,”* Annie Minami explores Teacher-Initiated Exploratory Practice (TEP) to enhance the engagement of the students she teaches. Annie aimed to boost their confidence and participation in speaking activities through translanguaging, flipped classrooms, and student-led initiatives. Her inquiry offers practical insights into fostering a more inclusive and learner-centred classroom environment (Minami, 2024).

A focus on developing materials for communicative use is similarly evident in Melanie Mello's practice-related review, *Creativity and Innovations in ELT Materials Development: Looking Beyond the Current Design* (Dat Bao, 2018). Melanie draws on her extensive experience as a German language teacher, highlighting how using process drama, ICT, and literature has influenced the development of cutting-edge published materials (Mello, 2024).

In reviewing *Exploratory Practice for Continuing Professional Development* (Slimani-Rolls & Kiely, 2019), Erzsébet Békés looks into parallels between materials development and her role as a review-writing mentor. She views the mentoring process as a form of materials

development, where reviews are considered learning materials and mentorship serves as a means to develop communicative mastery in the genre of review writing (Békés, 2024).

Collaborative and critical learner development is a key theme in the work of *"Visions of a Game"* by Palmyra Baroni Nunes, Maria Isabel Azevedo Cunha, & Inés Kayon de Miller, who, with their students, take their textbook as a starting point to explore various areas of Rio de Janeiro. While examining a map, the students realize that Guaratiba—the neighborhood where they live and where their school is located—is missing. This leads them to pose the thought-provoking *puzzle*: "Why aren't we on the map?" In their quest to answer this question, the students critically reflect on the possible reasons behind Guaratiba's exclusion, including the prejudice they perceive toward their part of the city. As part of this exploration, they create *exploratory posters* showcasing the area's flora and fauna, which they document during a field trip. Their exploratory posters "may differ from pedagogical projects generally focused on language practice and uncritical thinking as they value participants' outbursts of ideas, feelings, and posters focused on social claims, such as equity, ethics, and citizenship" (Nunes et al., 2024, p. 62).

Aiming to move beyond restrictive monolingual practices, in *"Think Outside the German Box: Plurilingual Awareness Strategies for the English Language Classroom in Berlin,"* Philipp Rost, a novice teacher, reflects on the dynamics of his secondary school classroom during his practicum. He reports his observations to his mentor and supervisor, Zeynep Mine Derince, which leads them into a collaboratively autoethnographic exploration of how and why plurilingual strategies can foster more inclusive, engaging, and culturally sensitive English language classrooms in multilingual Berlin (Derince & Rost, 2024).

This brings us to the final contribution *"The Sound Behind the Mask: Translanguaging Performance Poetry for Learner Development,"* in which Yaya Yao engages her student, Mohan, with arts-based materials such as poems and drawings to explore creative translanguaging processes. This inquiry helps him reflect deeply on his language use over time and find original transformative ways to express his multilingual identity (Yao, 2024).

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Brian and Hitomi, keeping this snapshot in view, may we invite you to respond to some of the issues that this work raises for you and that we highlighted in the Introduction?

**Brian Tomlinson and Hitomi Masuhara:** Thank you, Anna, Assia, and Houda. As long-time advocates of practitioner research and as practitioner researchers ourselves, we are delighted to see that LDJ8 has given such prominence to practitioner research and to a collaborative Community of Practices approach, and in particular to their potential for contributing positively to the development of materials for language learning and of practitioner growth.

## The Value of Practitioner Research (PR)

As editors, you quite rightly stress the value of PR as a means of empowering the professional growth of its participants in terms of increased awareness, confidence, self-esteem and capability and also as a means of increasing the likelihood of materials facilitating the development of communicative ability. Interestingly you also stress the value of PR as a means of raising teacher awareness of and engagement with "their specific contexts of practice" (Costantino et al., 2024, p. 3). This is something which academic researchers rarely have the opportunity to develop.

You also draw attention to the value of PR in helping its participants to identify aspects of their conduct “marring” their practice and “the methodologies “they” see fit to enable them to stimulate their students and make better sense of their practice” (Costantino et al., 2024, p. 4). We also think it is vital for practitioners to make use of their research to reflect on their own practice and to revise and develop it accordingly.

PR can also, as you say, inform academic research by stressing the importance of inclusivity and the need for materials to be relevant to the local context of learning and meaningful to the learners using them.

## The Participants in Practitioner Research

We definitely agree with you that practitioner research should be inclusive in the sense that it is designed, carried out, reported, evaluated and applied by all the agents of language learning and not just by academics remote from the contextual realities of the learning process. In relation to materials development, we would include as practitioner researchers not only teachers and learners but also materials developers, publishers, examiners, administrators, and even parents in such countries as China, Singapore, and South Korea. The more such agents are included in practitioner research projects the better, provided they operate as a cohesive and collaborative team aware of the practical realities of language teaching and learning in the context of study as well as the current thinking on “best practice” in the design and use of language learning materials.

We were especially pleased that you and the authors stress the inclusion of learners in practitioner research. We have found that learners can be usefully involved in three ways. They can be given research tasks which involve them in searching for and investigating language in communicative use - for example, students searching for samples of the imperative in use in Singapore, photographing them and then in class working out the communicative functions of the imperatives they have found or in “*Visions of a Game*” by Palmyra Baroni Nunes, Maria Isabel Azevedo Cunha, and Inés Kayon de Miller, who, with their students, take their textbook as a starting point to explore various areas of Rio de Janeiro (Baroni Nunes et al., 2024). They can be informed of the rationale, aims, and procedures of the research their teacher is conducting with them and can even be given interim reports on the progress of the project. And they can even be instigators, conductors, and reporters, as in an activity in which Brian gave university freshers in Japan to do which involved them investigating the use of “some” and “any” in authentic materials and then comparing what they discovered to what their coursebooks say.

## The Interaction Between Theory and Practice

You quite rightly point out the danger of practice being overshadowed by theory when you say, “With the increasing academic interest demanding more empirical research and sophisticated methods (Guerrettaz et al., 2022) to evaluate materials’ effectiveness, we question whether it is possible to integrate theory and practice in a way that preserves the original practical impetus without allowing it to be overshadowed” (Costantino et al., 2024, p. 4). However, we believe that the gap between theory and practice can be reduced not only by integration but also by connecting practice to theory as well as theory to practice (see, for example, Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2021: *SLA Applied: Connecting Theory and Practice*).

Practitioner research can be different from academic research as you imply throughout your Introduction. It does not set out to prove anything but to solve something. It does not need hypotheses, comparison groups, the isolation of variables, or statistical data to

validate it. It just needs a puzzle to solve or an aspect to improve and it aims at demonstrating the likelihood of an approach, an intervention or an adaptation leading to an eventual improvement in the communicative ability of the target learners. It is indicative research not scientific research, and it can be reported informally by writing a narrative of the procedures followed and the consequences of them. However, this does not mean that it cannot be informed (rather than instructed) by theoretical research and by the academic literature which is becoming increasingly accessible and relevant to teaching and learning.

## Gaps in the Literature Versus Solving Puzzles

You stress that the prime aim of PR is not to fill gaps in the literature but for the practitioner researchers to solve puzzles in their context of study. You say that the contributors to LDJ8 “focus on writing about aspects that *“they”* have identified as marring their practice and the methodologies *“they”* see fit to enable them to stimulate their students and make better sense of their practice” (Costantino et al., 2024, p. 4). We completely agree and would go further and suggest that readers of LDJ8 should note down, as they read, aspects of the writers’ practice which have marred their own learners’ progress plus other aspects of their own practice which have had a marring effect. They could then focus on one aspect of their practice which is puzzling them and then go to the relevant literature by using recommended reading, asking colleagues and mentors, consulting their community of practice, or googling. There they need to select the literature which is potentially informative and stimulating regarding the puzzle they have identified in their context of learning. Then they could decide on a methodology which might help to solve the puzzle, introduce it to their learners and then follow it for long enough to decide in consultation with their learners whether it is likely to have a beneficial impact on their ability to communicate in the L2. That way they will avoid the danger of being swamped by the academic literature. Another way of avoiding this swamping is (as you suggest) to only go to the literature when their pedagogical procedures have been drafted or even when their methodology has been trialled.

## The Evaluation of Practitioner Research

How can we appreciate the process and product of Practitioner Research? Be it Academic Research or Practitioner Research, clear articulation of criteria helps to standardise and systematise our potentially subjective judgement during a research project evaluation.

You also have wisely made use of the LDJ guidelines that have been developed to scaffold the development of writing about Practitioner Research (see <https://ldjournal.ld-sig.org/guidelines-for-authors/> and <https://ldjournal.ld-sig.org/guidelines-for-reviewers/>). These guidelines emphasise reviewer criteria such as plausibility, transferability, trustworthiness, and authenticity for a particular research context in classrooms. These criteria are designed to address the more holistic, context specific nature of Practitioner Research i.e., a puzzle-solving empirical inquiry.

What we appreciate most is the fact that LDJ guidelines offer alternative evaluation criteria to those recommended by traditional research (e.g., validity, reliability, generalisability, replicability). Such traditional research criteria originated in the Behaviorism of the 60’s (e.g., the Positivist Paradigm which pursues objectivity and dismisses subjective interpretations and observations). In the Positivist Paradigm, elements of a complex phenomenon are dissected and the selected variable in focus is analysed with or without the use of statistics on the assumptions that rigorous scrutiny of a part and accumulated studies will reveal some universal truth of the whole phenomenon. Such an approach seems to be still

influential in applied linguistics research and in education research, but there seems to be a growing dissatisfaction with the traditional paradigm which seems to be failing to capture complex and dynamic phenomena (e.g., what happens in classrooms). It is reassuring to see that research methods and approaches have been evolving, and researchers are devising multi-method approaches to describe, capture, and tease out the complex and dynamic nature of learning. Motivation, for example, may manifest as classroom participations regardless of the context. Say, an engaging text may spark off intellectual and emotional impact among the learners so much so that turn-taking in groups could show an increase in turn initiation and competition, as well as longer units of utterance. Or project work may lead to longer and voluntarily engaged hours in teams outside the classroom. Is it not the case that such outcomes can be measured and recorded as an operationalised measure of motivation? These measurements can be compared across different contexts in discussion of motivation.

As for the approach of Practitioner Research Collaboration, we appreciate the fact that you wanted to establish a “Community of Learning” environment in which all the participants aim to develop awareness, expertise, and confidence through collaborative exploration. Such an approach that encourages reflectivity in classroom practice, research, and in publication seems to be more educational, supportive, and enjoyable so much so that it is likely to spark off sustained engagement by practitioners.

Community of learning could become a place in which Practitioner Researchers can achieve a critical appreciation of research methods and approaches in order to solve a puzzle. Such exploration of research methods and innovative approaches may further enhance the plausibility, transferability, trustworthiness, and authenticity of Practitioner Research and perhaps influence Academic Researchers who may wish to make use of them in their research. Different research communities can stimulate each other and share innovation.

## The Sharing of Practitioner Research

We completely agree with your recommendation to teachers to share “puzzle elucidations that are helpful to them and that, at the same time, offer researchers insight into practitioners’ work” (Costantino et al., 2024, p. 4). This can be done with colleagues, at staff meetings, at face-to-face or virtual meetings of communities of practice, in blogs or in publications which focus on articles reporting practitioner research and application (e.g., *Learner Development Journal* (LDJ); the Materials Development Association’s journal *Folio* – [www.matsda.org](http://www.matsda.org)). It can also be done through presentations at international conferences which are increasingly including presentations by practitioner researchers (e.g., JALT, IATEFL, RELC, TESOL) and at conferences dedicated to the sharing of practitioner research, such as events run by different Special Interest Groups (SIGs), the annual conference run by the Beijing University of Foreign Studies on materials development research, and the annual conference of the Materials Development Association (MATSDA).

What we would recommend is the sharing of practitioner research not to prescribe or to urge replication but to inspire other practitioners to conduct and share research themselves. In our experience asking other practitioners to give feedback on a group’s practitioner research can not only improve that research but stimulate further research by the other practitioners who have been involved through their feedback. This multiplication can build up a body of work of great value to pre- and in-service teachers, providing insights into the realities of language teaching and learning. These insights could also help academic

researchers to ensure that their research is accessible and valuable to teachers and that the two communities work more closely together.

## Conclusion

This is the sort of stimulating publication which we have been advocating for years. It is not aimed at impressing the academic community and winning research points, but at sharing the solutions which have been found to puzzling situations in the hope that they will inform and inspire. It is very rare that we have been so much in agreement with the aims, content, and informed enthusiasm of the editors and contributors of an educational publication. Congratulations to you, all the contributors, and the whole of the LDJ8 group, on the pioneering work you are doing and on the stimulating way you are reporting it.

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## Author Bios

**Professor Brian Tomlinson** has worked as a language teacher, teacher trainer, curriculum developer, film extra, football coach, and university academic in Indonesia, Italy, Japan, Malaysia, Nigeria, Oman, Singapore, UK, Vanuatu, and Zambia, as well as giving invited presentations in over 70 countries. He is Founder and President of MATSDA (the international Materials Development Association), an Honorary Visiting Professor at the University of Liverpool, and a TESOL Professor at Anaheim University. With over 100 publications on materials development, language awareness, teacher development, and second language acquisition, Brian recently published *Materials Development for Language Teaching* (3rd edition) (Bloomsbury, 2023). He has also co-authored with Hitomi Masuhara *The Complete Guide to the Theory and Practice of Materials Development for Language Learning* (Wiley, 2018) and *SLA Applied: Connecting Theory and Practice* (Cambridge University Press, 2021). Brian is currently working on *Materials Development for L2 Communicative Ability* with Hitomi Masuhara and *Applied Linguistics and Materials Development* (2nd edition) with Freda Mishan. Both of these books will be published by Bloomsbury in 2025.

Brian Tomlinsonは、インドネシア、イタリア、日本、ナイジェリア、オマーン、シンガポール、イギリス、バヌアツ、ザンビアなどで言語教師、教員指導者、カリキュラム開発者、映画のエキストラ、サッカーコーチ、大学教員として活動し、また、70か国以上で招待講演を行っている。MATSDA (国際的な教材開発学会) の創設者であり会長を務め、リバプール大学の名誉客員教授、アナハイム大学のTESOL教授でもある。教材開発、言語意識、教師教育、第二言語習得に関する100以上の著作を持つ。最近では、2023年にBloomsbury社より『Materials Development for Language Teaching (第3版)』を出版した。また、Hitomi Masuhara氏と共に2018年にWiley社より『The Complete Guide to the Theory and Practice of Materials Development for Language Learning』や、2021年にCambridge University Press社より『SLA Applied: Connecting Theory and Practice』を刊行した。現在、Hitomi Masuhara氏と『Materials Development for L2 Communicative Ability』、Freda Mishan氏と『Applied Linguistics and Materials Development (第2版)』の執筆に取り組んでおり、これらの書籍は2025年にBloomsbury社から出版予定である。

**Dr Hitomi Masuhara** is an Honorary Research Fellow after her recent retirement from playing the roles of Director and a Lecturer of Applied Linguistics and TESOL in the Department of English in the University of Liverpool. Her various awards featured excellence in her research, innovation, and leadership at institutional and national level. She has given invited conference plenary/keynote presentations and workshops in collaboration with Ministries of Education in over 40 countries. She is also a founding member and Secretary of the Materials Development Association ([www.matsda.org](http://www.matsda.org)), whose mission is to integrate theory, research, and practice through collaboration between researchers, users (learners, teachers, administrators), and producers (materials developers, publishers). Her major research interests include the listening and reading processes in the brain; second language acquisition; syllabus design; teacher, curriculum, and materials development. Her recent publications include, co-authored with Brian Tomlinson, *SLA Applied: Connecting Theory and Practice* (2021, Cambridge University Press) and *The Complete Guide to the Theory and Practice of Materials Development for Language Learning* (2018, Wiley Blackwell), as well as chapters in *The Routledge Handbook of Materials Development for Language Teaching* (Bloomsbury, 2023) and *Developing Materials for Language Teaching* (Bloomsbury, 2023).

増原仁美は、リバプール大学英文学学科応用言語学・TESOL部門の学科長および講師の職を勤めた後、名誉研究員として活動している。数々の賞を受賞しており、大学や国家レベルでの研究、革新、リーダーシップにおいて優れた業績を挙げている。これまでに40カ国以上で教育省と協力し、招待講演や基調講演、ワークショップを行ってきた。また、研究者、利用者(学習者、教師、管理者)、制作者(教材開発者、出版社)と連携し、理論・研究・実践を統合することを目的とする教材開発協会([www.matsda.org](http://www.matsda.org))の創設メンバーであり、事務局長も務めている。主な研究関心は、脳における聴解・読解プロセス、第二言語習得、シラバス設計、そして教師、カリキュラム、教材のディ



ベロップメントなど多岐にわたる。最近の出版物には、Brian Tomlinson氏との共著『SLA Applied: Connecting Theory and Practice』(2021年、ケンブリッジ大学出版)、『The Complete Guide to the Theory and Practice of Materials Development for Language Learning』(2018年、Wiley Blackwell)がある。また、『The Routledge Handbook of Materials Development for Language Teaching』(2023年)および『Developing Materials for Language Teaching』(2023年、Bloomsbury)においても章を執筆している。

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