Exploring the complexity of primary research with lower level pre-sessional students

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A brief context ...

- PEAP 2 – 10 week course, part of year round pre-sessional:

| PEAP 1 | PEAP 2 | PEAP 3 | PEAP 4 |

- Students typically IELTS 5.0, various disciplines, mainly progressing to PG(T) or PG(R) → all likely to do primary research

Encourage students to explore their identity/ies within the context of the ‘new’ communities (general, academic, CELE/international) they are joining …

→ largely task-based course - carry out a piece of small scale primary research and produce a research report based on this and their findings
Our session today …

- Brief rationale for using primary research in PEAP 2
- Outline key tasks students work towards over the course
- Workshop - opportunity for you to look at/analyse some student task outcomes relating to primary research – we want you to evaluate for yourselves how successful this kind of approach might be (preparation for primary research/language)…
- Draw some of the analysis together, accept suggestions for improvement …
- Open out - how might this help contribute to the ‘content’ of EAP?
Why primary research?

‘The focus of EAP courses ... will be on a range of types of knowledge, including social, cognitive and linguistic knowledge, …’ (Bruce 2011:7)

‘… acknowledging that within each of these areas there will be considerable variation across particular subject disciplines.’ (ibid)

Pre-sessional courses: ‘... transferable procedural knowledge, rather than topic-connected, discipline-specific knowledge …’ (ibid:8)

Why actually carry it out?

Kolb (1984:38) - learning seen as ‘process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience’
Primary research – ‘transferable procedural knowledge’

- A distinction between ‘science’ v ‘social sciences’ research
- Unpacking a research focus
- Formulating research questions
- Concept of ‘research design’ and mapping possible research tools onto the research question(s)
- Understanding ethical issues/practicalities of informed participation
- Ability to show data visually in appropriate ways
- Integrate qualitative and quantitative data
- Identify and interpret findings (e.g. pinpoint evidence for findings, explore possible (non-) correlations, foreground claims when communicating findings, articulate possible implications, draw relevant conclusions etc.)
- Critically question their investigation and significance or applicability of findings (concepts of validity, reliability, replicability)
- A distinction between ‘science’ v ‘social sciences’ research

(Bryman 2004; Dörnyei 2007; O’Leary 2017)
PEAP 2 takes students through the primary research process and shares their work with others in a research report.

- Decide on a Research Area & Aim
  - Choose a topic related to discipline that can be practically researched in the field
- Research Ethics
  - Introduce key concepts e.g. participant consent, right to withdraw, anonymity etc.
- Introduce Research Design
  - Research tools including questionnaire, focus groups, observation, introduce concepts of validity, reliability & replicability
- Produce a Research Proposal

The CELE PEAP 2 Research Process
Analysing task outcomes - Task A

Using evidence from the initial student research proposals, briefly discuss:

- which areas of primary research the students appear to be grappling with
- how 'authentic' this is from your own experience of carrying out primary research
Key student tasks – outline (2)
Analysing task outcomes - Task B

Using evidence from the student drafts of the discussion section and then the final research report, briefly discuss:

- which areas of ‘primary research procedural knowledge’ students appear to have taken on board

- the extent to which language use has developed to become more appropriate for communicating the content and ideas associated with primary research

- how ‘authentic’ this is based on your own experiences
Key student tasks – outline (3)
Using evidence from extracts of the 2 students’ viva and their joint final poster presentation, briefly discuss:

- which areas of ‘primary research procedural knowledge’ students appear to have taken on board

- the extent to which language use has developed to become more appropriate for communicating the content and ideas associated with primary research

- how ‘authentic’ this is based on your own experiences
Opening out the issues

- To what extent does a module like this, with a focus on the carrying out of primary research, serve the purposes of EAP?
- Can (should?!) the processes, practices and concepts of primary research serve as ‘content’ knowledge for EAP? Why/not?
- What opportunities does a module like this provide students with, for e.g. creativity, problem-solving, ownership of what is learnt, independent learning (taking, justifying and reflecting on decisions; time management etc.)
- What (realistically and practically!) could be added to this module to provide a more discipline-specific awareness of primary research practices?
Conclusions
References


O’Leary, Z. Doing your research project. London: Sage