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Supporting language teachers as they engage in research

ETAS Journal Special Issue

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1. Introduction

Language teachers around the world are increasingly engaging in research. In this article, I examine notions of practitioner research in language learning/teaching contexts, and consider the skills and support needed. I review a range of innovative ways for teachers to share their findings effectively, and I argue that the field as a whole should respect the work of practitioner-researchers as they investigate language learning/teaching practices. I conclude that trust is needed for practitioners to effectively engage in researching their language learning/teaching practices.

2. Research as social practice

Research, like learning and teaching, is a form of social practice. There are norms and expectations for how to do it, and there are accepted genres for reporting it. Yet, as Cochran-Smith & Lytle (2009) note, to imply that research is static, or that these norms and genres are monolithic, unchanging, would be a mistake. There are many exciting and original ways to conduct investigations, and to disseminate the findings of such scholarly work (see, for example, the teachers’ accounts in Allwright & Hanks, 2009; Bullock & Smith, 2015; Hanks, 2017a).

However, when teachers (and other practitioners) do engage in research, their work is often criticised as somehow not up to an acceptable standard. Such criticisms, usually emanating from those with vested interests in retaining their privileged positions as arbiters of what ‘counts’ as research (as Breen, 2006 points out), need to be taken seriously, despite their partisan origins. Zeichner & Noffke (2001) note a common criticism that teachers are not trained in the skills needed to conduct research, and Borg (2013) summarises a range of barriers which include limitations in teachers’ awareness of different approaches to research, and paucity of resources (time, finances, materials).

Arguably, though, most teachers (and other practitioners) are resourceful people, who are curious about their work inside and outside language classrooms. It is not impossible, therefore, to imagine conditions for us to engage in researching our practices and sharing our insights in meaningful and accessible ways. Teachers can, and should, select research methods and approaches that are most appropriate to our own contexts, and these go far beyond the traditional hypothesis-test-results stereotype. In choosing investigative tools that help, not hinder, the main job of learning and teaching (Allwright, 2005), teachers may take their rightful places as members of a Community of Practice in which we “act as resources to each other, exchanging information, making sense of situations” (Wenger, 1998, p47).
3. Providing support

So what support might be needed in order for practitioners to conduct research? In answer to this question, commentators have typically suggested that institutions should set in place mechanisms such as incorporating research (or scholarship) into teachers’ contracts, giving time off from teaching, providing research methods training, and the like. But as research and scholarship are added to the contractual obligations of language teachers around the world, a number of conundrums emerge.

At worst, such moves lead to further demands on stretched teachers; adding traditional-style research to already-heavy workloads, and then criticising the results as ‘not generalizable’ or ‘lacking in rigour’. A more cynical view suggests that this provides the institution with another weapon with which to beat teachers. If research is enshrined in the contract, the argument goes, then teachers are obliged to do it, and can be chastised if they fail to conduct such projects. This situation is exacerbated when ‘research’ is defined in very traditional terms (eg large-scale, quantitative studies, which aim at broad-brush generalizations). It can eventually contribute to teacher burn-out.

A more positive outlook assumes benevolent intentions from institutions, but even so, a reduced teaching timetable, institutional funding for research projects or a series of professional development workshops, are fragile measures, subject to economic or managerial changes. At best, the provision of time/money for research can position teachers as the recipients of kindnesses from the powerful – a sort of patronage. Instead, the whole discourse around research needs to be critically questioned. Why assume that teachers must emulate traditional (and rather unoriginal) forms of research?

The first consideration for support, then, must be to demand (from the field) a healthy respect for the insights and scholarship of practitioners. This acknowledgement of the “already present acumen” (Iedema et al., 2013, p172) of practitioners is becoming established in the field of healthcare, and similar potential exists in language education. It is crucial to engender an atmosphere of Trust (see Allwright & Hanks, 2009; Candlin & Crichton, 2013; Hanks, 2017a), in which we trust teachers to undertake serious, insightful investigations, on their own terms, in their own timescales. One form of practitioner research, Exploratory Practice, suggests that we also trust learners to work as co-researchers (Allwright, 2003; Hanks, 2015a, 2015b) in serious investigative enterprises to explore the world of language learning/teaching.

In sum, support needs to go beyond the commonplaces of providing time, money and space for teachers (welcome though these are); it needs also to include the agenda, and purposes, of the research. Research which (at its best) goes beyond mere solutions. As van Manen puts it: “... the preferred method for human science involves description, interpretation, and self-reflective or critical analysis. We explain nature, but human life we must understand” (1990, p4). So 'support' actually means:
respect and encouragement from others, and enough autonomy and empowerment for teachers to undertake research which is deeply relevant to learning and teaching.

4. Developing the necessary skills

Arguably, teachers already possess the necessary skills to do research. We routinely engage in critical thinking as we question the course books, the curriculum, and the institutional assumptions of our workplaces. We are systematic when we observe, analyse, record and interpret the progress of our students. We are used to fine-grained observation and analysis, we need to be able to plan effectively, and to be flexible and responsive as we carry out our work. What, perhaps, needs development, is the confidence to utilise these skills in the less-familiar arena of research.

A helpful starting point is to begin by puzzling about practice (see Hanks, 2017a). This questioning of the status quo, problematizing (Freire, 1970) rather than problem-solving, opens up the research agenda, and provides teachers with agency. To take some examples from teachers around the world:

- Why do I give so much homework?
- Why do so many students fail to follow advice about learning outside class?
- Why are some learners not interested in learning?
- Why are my students motivated? And why are they demotivated?
- Why do my students want lectures while I want discussion?
- Why don’t we integrate theory and practice in pedagogy?
- Why do I ask my students to reflect on their learning?

Such why-questions are rooted in practice, deeply relevant to the practitioners themselves. They exemplify the need to bring theory and practice together for meaningful research. A superficial reader might be dismissive, but a more thoughtful reader recognises that these puzzles point towards the key theoretical discussions in our field: motivation, cognition, identity, intercultural awareness, as well as methodology and pedagogy, and hence are relevant to the development of the field as a whole.

Just puzzling, reflecting deeply, activating a critical awareness, might be enough in itself to gain some understanding. But teachers can also choose to engage in systematic forms of inquiry – whether this takes the form of data collection and/or generation (via interviews, questionnaire surveys, classroom observations, writing narratives or journals) or by surveying the literature, joining discussion groups, professional development workshops and/or teacher associations.

In a radical move, Exploratory Practice (see Allwright, 2003, 2015; Hanks, 2016, 2017b) suggests uniting pedagogy and research to ensure that the research we conduct does not interrupt the learning/teaching. This means utilising our everyday pedagogic activities in order to investigate our puzzles.
This is exemplified by Miller, Cortes, de Oliveira, & Braga (2015). They provide an analytical account of the development of their question: ‘Why do some 7th grade students ‘disrespect’ long-term friends?’ (Miller et al., 2015, p66). Rather than trying to solve the problem (perceived bullying in class), they attempted to understand the issue via a Potentially Exploitable Pedagogic Activity (PEPA). They used their own, very familiar, pedagogic activities (pair work, group work, as well as writing stories, giving feedback) to investigate their puzzle. Working in very different contexts, Dar (2015), Dawson (2016), Crane (2015) Stewart, with Croker & Hanks (2014), and Zheng (2012) have also used PEPAs to explore their own classrooms in TESOL in the UK, EFL in the UK, EAP in Japan, and EFL in China, respectively. In each case, they adapted their normal classroom practices as ‘ways in’ to understanding what was puzzling them.

To sum up, for teachers wishing to engage in researching their classrooms, the skills that need to be developed include looking at ‘what we already do’ and considering ‘how might our everyday practices be utilised?’ in order to investigate issues that are relevant to us.

5. Sharing our understandings effectively

Issues that are relevant to one teacher are very likely to be relevant to another, and thence to the field in general. Many teachers express surprise when they discover that an issue is also puzzling others. So a crucial question is how to share what we have found out. In sharing our understandings, we also stand a good chance of developing our thinking, as all good research is (or should be) dialogic (Bakhtin, 1986). It is the interplay between face-to-face or virtual discussions, published work, and work-in-progress, that helps any field, and particularly that of language education, to develop.

Traditional formats of articles in academic journals (Applied Linguistics, ELTJ, Language Teacher Research, System) are, of course, one way of sharing findings. Some journals provide free access to some articles, such as the ELTJ “Editor’s Choice’ section on-line: https://academic.oup.com/eltj/pages/editors_choice_videos

While these are still highly valued, there are also many other formats. With the technological advances of the last twenty years, teachers are able to disseminate their work in a variety of ways.

The IATEFL Research Special Interest Group has a range of publications both for and by teachers with chapters available on-line:

http://resig.weebly.com/developing-insights-into-teacher-research.html
http://resig.weebly.com/developing-as-an-efl-researcher.html

and of course a regular newsletter:

http://resig.weebly.com/issue-32.html
Some teachers choose to write blog posts, such as this one by Bee Bond on Alex Ding’s ‘Teaching EAP’ site: [https://teachingeap.wordpress.com/tag/exploratory-practice/](https://teachingeap.wordpress.com/tag/exploratory-practice/) or this, by Yasmin Dar: [http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/article/international-festival-teacher-research-elt-2017-0](http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/article/international-festival-teacher-research-elt-2017-0) The latter site, the International Festival of Teacher Research in ELT, also features videos from teachers (and learners) around the world: [https://trfestival.wordpress.com](https://trfestival.wordpress.com)

Video logs (Vlogs) or YouTube posts are also a good way to share work. For example The Rio Exploratory Practice Group have a YouTube channel with videos from novice teachers talking about their engagement with research: [https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCc9aqv6OH2edRym2UJ19Iffg](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCc9aqv6OH2edRym2UJ19Iffg) Similarly, teachers have uploaded videos of themselves talking about their work in ELT Research: [https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC7zn1w6lieROMkKhHz-1cTg](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC7zn1w6lieROMkKhHz-1cTg)

Dissemination does not only have to take place using the spoken or written word. Following the inspirational work by Sousanis (2015), Darren Elliott has also used the comic-book format to great effect. His depiction of Exploring the possibilities of reporting teacher research through comics can be found in the Special Issue of the journal English Language Teacher Education and Development (ELTED), [http://www.elted.net/latest-issue.html](http://www.elted.net/latest-issue.html) edited by Smith and Banegas. Entitled: Innovative Writing in English Language Teacher Education and Development, the special issue seeks to break boundaries in disseminating teachers’ research.

6. Conclusions

Despite decades of research, we still understand little of how people learn and teach languages, little of language classroom practices, little of the individuals, groups and cultures involved in language pedagogy.

In conclusion, it is clear that teachers are full of innovative ideas for conducting and disseminating research in their classrooms. What they need is the emotional, psychological support to be able to dare to ask questions, and to share what they find out in creative ways. We need to trust (each other) and be trusted (by the field) to have worthwhile research agendas, to conduct our scholarship in the same professional way that we conduct our teaching, and to share the insights we have gained. The skills and support needed for teachers to undertake research include: critical awareness; the confidence to dare to ask questions; and the confidence to share publicly what we have been doing. All we need is Trust.

References


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