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*Becoming*  
**RESEARCH  
LITERATE**

Supporting Teacher  
Research in English  
Language Teaching

Edited by  
**Daniel Xerri**  
**Ceres Pioquinto**

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**RESEARCH  
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## Acknowledgments

This volume emerged from our shared interest in research literacy and language teaching and from our own experience as research practitioners in our respective fields.

The articles in this collection originally appeared as a Special Supplement in three issues of *ETAS Journal* and are now published in a book form to make them more readily accessible to the emerging community of ELT professionals and language teachers who are deeply interested in furthering their professional growth by becoming research literate.

Since this book grew out of our collaborative work on the publication of those three *ETAS Journal* Special Supplements on research literacy, it is a happy occasion for us to acknowledge our collaborators and colleagues who have had a valued role in developing these ideas and bringing this book into being. We thank the contributors for their generous permission to publish these outstanding articles here and their cooperation in assembling this anthology. Their valuable insights and perceptive engagement have both inspired and reshaped our understanding of research literacy.

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**Daniel Xerri and Ceres Pioquinto**

## Foreword

Now and again a book we've all been waiting for comes along, and this is one of those books. Having worked for almost 20 years with English language teachers on supporting them in carrying out investigations into their own contexts, I've long been an advocate of the immense value of practitioner research. However, I've also been realistic about the challenges that those who wish to undertake such research face – from the lack of resources to the lack of confidence, from the lack of support to the lack of time. This book addresses all of these issues and more.



A number of articles in the book note that practitioner research is gaining more visibility but question whether this is translated to increasing numbers of teachers involved in such activities. Whilst the answer is invariably that we do not really know for sure, the number of projects and resources that are woven throughout the chapters certainly gives cause for optimism. A number of authors also point out that research is something that teachers do anyway in that they are constantly asking questions and looking for answers to improve their own teaching and their learners' learning. Throughout the book, a variety of options is given as to how this questioning might become practitioner research, but always with an emphasis on finding the best way for each teacher or group of teachers in their own context(s). The book will surely, therefore, go a long way towards encouraging ever more practitioners to investigate their work, and those around them to support them in doing so.

For those who support teacher researchers, there is a clear overview of the challenges faced and the ways in which teachers can be supported. For aspiring teacher researchers, there are frank and honest accounts of the challenges, but always with a positive focus on possibilities and opportunities. For experienced teacher researchers, there are innovative ideas for research and for dissemination. For academics who remain unconvinced (should they still exist!), there is a myriad of reasons given as to why practitioner research deserves their respect and is, indeed, essential to our understanding of English language teaching and learning.

Bringing together an impressive number of well-known figures working in this area, from a range of geographical and educational contexts, the book presents their experiences, insights, and advice. The result is a highly informative collection of accessible, practical, and realistic chapters, and all thanks go to Daniel Xerri and Ceres Pioquinto for their work in putting together such a valuable collection and making such a major contribution to the field of teacher research.

**Sue Garton, PhD**  
Aston University



## Introduction

*Research is formalised curiosity. It is poking and prying with a purpose.*

– Zora Neale Hurston

The broad but undeniably relevant subject of research literacy and its link to professional development has given rise to a great range of ideas, concepts, and debates which have been addressed in a great range of articles, essays, plenaries, and books published and written worldwide. Joining the growing list of literature on the subject, this book brings together an extraordinary portfolio of writings originally published as a collection of articles and interviews in three Special Supplements of *ETAS Journal*.

Written by some of the most eminent writer-educators and passionate advocates of research literacy as a key to professional and personal growth, the articles in this volume offer varying perspectives on the topic, with a common focus on the importance of providing support for teacher research. The participation of teacher-educators, teacher-association leaders, academics, and teachers working in a wide range of international contexts ensures that the book acts as a showcase of influential views about the kind of support that teachers need for them to develop the necessary skills not only to engage in research but to share their findings in an effective manner. In underscoring the urgency of providing support for teacher research, the book supports the role of research in fostering teachers' professional development and enhancing language teaching and learning.



### Supporting teacher research

The book addresses some key issues, among others the definitions of teacher research as well as the different kinds of support that teachers require in order for them to become research literate, be able to engage in research, as well as share research. Resonating throughout this entire collection is Borg's (2013) definition of teacher research as research that classroom practitioners conduct in a systematic fashion in their own context, with the purpose of forming a better understanding of their practices. Echoing this view, Xerri (2017) adds that teacher research is acknowledged as a significant avenue for professional development, and a means of enhancing language learning and teaching.



However, Burns (2010) acknowledges that teachers might not always possess the necessary knowledge and skills to do good quality research. In that case, Borg (2003) stresses that the research literacy of English language teachers needs to be adequately developed so that they can capitalise on the knowledge, skills, and beliefs required to do research. In addition, in order for teachers to believe that research forms part of their professional identity, they might need to be encouraged to recognise some of the practices they regularly engage in as reifying a highly democratic view of research.

Research literacy does not only consist of the technical knowledge and skills required to engage *with* and *in* research. Besides knowing how to critically engage with published research, design research instruments, and conduct a study, teachers also need to develop attitudes and beliefs in relation to research that will enable them to position themselves as research-engaged professionals. To do this, teachers need various kinds of support, including one that goes beyond the traditional forms of teacher training popular in ELT. The main objective of this support is to empower teachers to see themselves as capable of finding answers to the questions they have about their context, their practices, their students, and their professional identity (Mercer & Xerri, 2018).

## Content overview

The book is divided into four parts, each framed by interviews with some of the leading figures in the field of teacher research. In varying ways, the authors advance the thinking that the critique and integration of appropriate research to inform and evolve effective teaching strategies and learning practices is an essential requirement in facilitating greater learning outcomes. Individually, they draw attention to a number of key considerations, such as the importance of locating research within teachers' everyday practice, supporting teachers' agency by nurturing research literacy, and ensuring the sustainability of research practices. Collectively, they underscore the value of teachers engaging in, and with, research in order to be able to use research discerningly to inform their own practice. Together, they highlight the notion that to be research literate one needs to develop the skills to draw on, critically scrutinise, and integrate different kinds of evidence. At the same time, they encourage the use of new approaches and different analytic perspectives, stressing the positive gains and new insights that push our own understanding of who we are and how we teach.

**Part One** focuses on some of the key issues in teacher research, such as teachers' views on research, the value of research literacy, the conditions for teacher research, and the research approaches that teachers may adopt. The section redefines not just the conventional concept of research but the roles of teachers as researchers. The authors provide not just a comprehensive definition of the notion of research literacy but also advance various views on teacher research and what it means, as well as its fundamental role in 'enhancing one's teaching and in achieving successful learning outcomes.

Importantly, this section raises awareness of the fact that while using and conducting research well means being informed by a range of perspectives and empirical traditions, just as vital is the cultivation of a set of attitudes and beliefs that allows one to see oneself as someone who is capable of doing research. Writing about the importance of teacher research to the classroom teacher, Gail Ritchie had this to say:

... I can truthfully say, Teacher Research is not an add-on; it is a way of being! When you look at your classroom from a stance of 'How can I make teaching/learning better?' you are taking a Teacher Researcher stance. Teacher Research is not something done TO us; it is something done BY us. The goal of Teacher Research is to put 'Best Practices' about teaching/learning into actual practice in your classroom. And the person who does that is you, the classroom teacher (<https://gse.gmu.edu/research/tr/tr-definition>).

Most of the book's contributors concur that the notion of research as applicable to classroom practitioners might need to be broader than the one used for academic research. For instance, Dudley Reynolds' interview suggests that given teachers' interest in having their questions answered, it would be important to help them develop their understanding of research.

David Nunan engages with the question of how to define the research conducted by teachers and what forms it may take. He considers the different kinds of data that teachers may gather and some of the approaches they may adopt, including action research.

Achilleas Kostoulas makes a case for why it might be better for teachers to hone their research literacy rather than dismiss 'research' as a purely academic endeavour that has no bearing on their professional lives and practices. He argues that research literacy enables teachers to engage with the academic literature and to conduct classroom-based inquiry.

In order for teacher research to contribute to teaching and learning as well as act as a form of professional development, a number of conditions need to be in place. According to Simon Borg, these consist of adequate time, appropriate beliefs, technical competence, and support for teachers. The latter can consist of mentoring and the support provided by one's school and colleagues.

Donald Freeman discusses four different approaches by means of which teachers can adopt a research-oriented perspective on their classroom practices. He argues that these approaches require teachers to combine both inside and outside perspectives on what is happening in the classroom.

In the interview at the end of Part One, Richard Smith warns that some teachers might be reluctant to associate themselves with research because their conceptions of what this entails might be influenced by definitions of academic research. He argues that some of the practices that teachers regularly engage in are a form of research. Thus, they might need to be encouraged to embrace this idea and – if interested – shown how to improve and share these practices.

**Part Two** is made up of a number of contributions that discuss how teachers' research engagement may be supported. They emphasise the importance of providing teachers with participant-driven and intensive opportunities to engage in inquiry and reflection about issues that matter to them in the course of their daily work. The notion of professional development presented here not just recognises the need for teachers to learn new skills and ideas, but also highlights the imperative for designing professional development opportunities that respect and build on the knowledge and expertise that teachers already have, while nurturing and supporting their intellectual leadership capacity.

The section opens with an interview in which Christine Coombe discusses some of the ways that teacher associations can support teacher-researchers to develop the knowledge and skills they require to do research and promote it amongst their peers.

Going beyond the parameters that typically define academic research, Mark Wyatt assesses how teacher-researchers can be mentored to produce good quality research through the reflection stimulated by three key questions.

Amol Padwad elaborates on his view that teachers require intellectual and affective support, which may be provided by a variety of mentors, such as professional researchers and experienced colleagues.

Similarly, Judith Hanks reinforces the idea that one of the best forms of support that teacher-researchers can receive is trust in their ability to do research and in the value of their research. If the field were to trust teacher research, then classroom practitioners would probably be more favourably disposed to doing research and sharing their findings.

Anne Burns discusses ten tips that are meant to guide educational managers in their efforts to support teacher research. Through these tips she highlights the important role that managers play in enabling teachers to embrace an approach like action research.

In addition to the above kinds of support, technical support is also significant and some teachers receive this via formal academic programmes. In fact, Colin Lankshear and Michele Knobel describe how they enable teachers enrolled on a Master's degree programme to develop an understanding of effective data collection and analysis design and processes so as to produce good quality research.

The final chapter in this section is a conversation between two educators, Willy A. Renandya and Flora D. Floris, discussing the different kinds of support that classroom practitioners require in order for them to engage with and conduct research. Both stress the importance not just of institutional support but of material support as well. Echoing the views of the other contributors to the book, Renandya and Floris acknowledge that the definition of research used with respect to classroom practitioners needs to transcend the one associated with academic research. They argue that misconceptions about research are bound to hinder classroom practitioners from seeing teacher research as a rewarding endeavour.

**Part Three** continues this profound conversation on research literacy, bringing together a number of contributions that focus on how research may be embedded into professional practice. Building on the arguments advanced by John Elliott's (1980) pioneering work on teacher research as a form of professional development, this section foregrounds authors delving into their individual teaching contexts and sharing some of the ways teacher research has transformed not just their classrooms but their own professional lives.

In the opening interview, Kathleen Graves posits that research literacy incorporates the beliefs that teachers have about research. If teachers have misconceptions about research, they are unlikely to see the role of a researcher as forming part of their professional identity. Hence, they might not harness the potential of research as a means of enhancing their teaching and sharing their teacher knowledge.

Some of the chapters in this section focus, among other issues, on one approach to teacher research known as action research. Collectively, they offer an understanding of action research that is firmly located in the realm of the practitioner and is tied to self-reflection. Despite their differing perspectives, these articles highlight some of the inevitable questions that teachers might ask when they begin to study, critique, and select research in terms of questions that emerge from their own teaching. As teachers ask such questions, they begin the kind of reflection that leads to the generation of their own research, and eventually turning themselves into teacher researchers.

Lynn Williams-Leppich provides an overview of action research and discusses how it can prove useful to teachers.

Jane Spiro's article demonstrates how teachers can be encouraged to position themselves as research writers. She describes a programme that enabled a group of teachers to move from alienation from the research culture, to social acculturation, and eventually ownership of that same culture.

Building on the latter notion, Bushra Ahmed Khurram and Steve Mann outline the steps that a teacher would need to follow in order to successfully plan and implement an action research project. Teacher research literacy can be fostered in a variety of ways, including through the support provided by teacher educators.

Darío Luis Banegas describes how pre-service teacher-education programmes can help promote research literacy despite the top-down nature of its implementation. Some of the benefits of such implementation are an added emphasis on collaboration and reflection. Teacher research can act as a springboard for further research-related activities.

Hanna Brookie and Cynthia White illustrate how reflection encouraged a teacher to engage in inquiry through a systematic research process. This inquiry was beneficial not only for the teacher-researcher but also for the research participants and the wider professional community.

Gary Barkhuizen discusses the value of narrative inquiry as a means of understanding teachers' and learners' experiences in the language classroom. Narrative inquiry enables teachers to reflect on and interpret their professional practices within a specific context, and this can lead to change.

Despite the fact that teacher research need not be shared in the traditional manner in which other kinds of research are typically disseminated, some teachers may choose to do so by means of an academic article. Susanne Oswald provides some advice on academic writing from her experience as a tutor of students following a Master's level qualification in TESOL and Applied Linguistics.

Postgraduate qualifications often serve as a means for teachers to hone their research knowledge and skills, enabling them to position themselves as professional researchers.

Writing about her doctoral journey, Patricia Daniels illustrates some of the steps that are usually followed once teachers decide to formalise their interest in research in this manner.

In the interview at the end of Part Three, Thomas S. C. Farrell suggests that as part of the effort to make teachers research-engaged professionals, providing them with training on evidence-based reflective practice would be beneficial.

Despite their varied perspectives on the forms of support for teacher research literacy, the contributors agree on the value of teacher research in fostering professional development.

**Part Four** is significant for the way it foregrounds the views of a number of teachers in response to Daniel Xerri's plenary at the ETAS Annual Conference and AGM in Switzerland in January 2018. It opens with the post-plenary interview of Xerri in which he argues for the democratisation of research and for the need to provide different forms of support to teachers wishing to do research. Xerri stresses that while such support enables teachers to engage in research, it does not solely consist of the knowledge and skills needed to do so.

Speaking in their own voices, these teachers respond to Xerri's views by underscoring and sharing their own classroom and professional experiences. Underpinning their responses is the belief in the importance of being provided with intellectual challenge and stimulation. Their individual engagement belies the popular images of teachers as wanting quick fixes, uninterested in or incapable of serious intellectual engagement with ideas, and concerned only about what to teach next Monday morning. In doing so, they validate the significance of becoming research literate not just for their respective classrooms but for their own professional growth.

Ben Hoyt outlines some of the reasons why teachers might want to do research in the classroom, the main one being their refusal to simply being passive receivers of knowledge. In a more personal way, he considers himself now more proactive than before in dealing with difficult situations that arise in his teaching, pointing to a greater confidence in his ability as a teacher to influence the circumstances in which he teaches and a greater sense of control over his work.

Similarly, Lynn Williams-Leppich sees teacher research as one of the enablers of teacher transformation. She argues that through research engagement teachers can re-evaluate their teaching and grow as professionals. Reflecting on her own experiences, she shares how engaging in research caused her to look at her teaching in a more analytic, focused, and in-depth way.

Susanne Oswald affirms that when teachers share their research they are helping to build on the long years of experience that they gradually accumulate in the classroom. She points out that the critical skills and self-reflection teachers learn during their engagement in research enable them to step back and examine what they have been doing using the tools and skills they have acquired. As teachers begin to understand the impact of research engagement on their teaching and become more concerned with the need to gather data, they start realising the importance of sharing their work and providing relevant information about teaching and learning in actual classrooms.

Rachael Harris illustrates how empowering teacher research can be by sharing her experience of engaging in a collaborative research project with colleagues at her school. She reports how this collaborative project has made them more enthusiastic about talking with each other about their teaching. Being part of a teacher research group has convinced them not just of the importance of collaborative work with other teachers, but also of the positive difference it makes on their classroom practice.

Finally, given the importance of reflection for research-engaged professionals, Gemma Lunn describes how she and her colleagues formed an Academic Reading Group in order to discuss

the academic articles they read and the teaching journals they compile as a means of systematically reflecting on their classroom practices, consequently improving the lives of their students by always seeking to discover better, more effective ways of implementing teaching/learning.

It is hoped that by reading the book's varied contributions, readers can appreciate the value of supporting teacher-researchers through the development of research literacy. Classroom practitioners might want to seek ways of nurturing their capacity to do research in their own contexts, while teacher educators might want to evaluate what gaps they can bridge in order for teachers to position themselves as teacher-researchers. School leaders might want to evaluate whether their institutions' professional culture and the working conditions that teachers are subjected to encourage such positioning or otherwise. Teacher associations might want to take stock of the crucial role they can play in enabling teachers to develop a satisfactory level of research literacy, engage in good quality research, and disseminate the findings of their research.

**Daniel Xerri and Ceres Pioquinto**

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*This book is our gift to  
the ETAS Journal Publications Team,  
the English Teachers Association Switzerland,  
the English Language Teaching community worldwide,  
and to all teaching professionals and research practitioners everywhere,  
who believe in the transformative impact of teacher research.*

*Keeping a journal of the context and discoveries of my teaching days has helped me to learn from my experiences and observations. Looking at teaching as research has made me more of a professional by making me more of a student. And, paradoxically, I am convinced that the model of a student that I provide for my students to observe will help them to become better students themselves.*

– Mohr, M. (1980). The teacher as researcher. *The Quarterly*, 3(1).  
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# 1

## PART ONE:

# Teacher research in language teaching: Key issues

*The way of teaching demands a long journey that does not have any easily identifiable destination ... It is a journey that I believe must include a backward step into the self and it is a journey that is its own destination.*

Tremmel, R. (1993). Zen and the art of reflective practice in teacher education. *Harvard Educational Review*, 63(4), 456.



## “Teachers want to know answers to questions”: **Dudley Reynolds on teacher research**



*The value of teacher research as a source of professional development and change within the classroom has grown in importance in the past few years. In this interview, Dudley Reynolds, the 51st President of TESOL International Association, shares his views about the benefits of teachers engaging in research, the challenges they face when seeking to do so, and how teacher associations can provide them with support.*

### **Growing popularity of teacher research**

***Over the past few years, the topic of teacher research has been given increased attention in the literature and at international ELT conferences. How do you explain this rise in popularity?***

I see it as an attempt to give it relevance. As a field we are very much focused on improving the learning of languages. It's a practice-oriented field and yet if the research that is being done is located only within university settings and large-scale projects, there's a real disconnect or the potential for a disconnect between the theories that are being built and the realities of how languages are learned in instructional settings around the world. I am increasingly hearing people talk about things such as researcher-practitioner collaborations, which are collaborations between equals and that go in both directions. It's not about researchers coming in and making the teacher a research assistant on their project. It's really about a dialogue back and forth. Researchers need to be listening to the issues that need solving. So I think that's attempted relevance, making what we're doing and learning more relevant.

***Recently, some prominent ELT figures published articles saying that research is not relevant for teachers and that teachers don't have time for research. They argue that teachers shouldn't be encouraged to engage with research, let alone engage in it. How do you respond to that kind of argument?***

First of all, you have to define what you mean by research. If your definition is based on what a product of research looks like, the detail of the methodology, or if you are expecting teachers to do something that in a sense replicates what a university-based academic does with grant funding, graduate student assistants, and a limited teaching schedule, then you are asking too much of teachers. If, however, you define research as more of a heuristic, as

a way of problem solving that is systematic, measured, analytic, that is grounded in the notion that it has to be relevant to a larger context, that it has to be connected, and that it is a process which has to give back, then you are talking about something which is within any teacher's capacity to undertake. I definitely understand the argument that teachers have limited time and resources, but I don't think of them as people who are uninterested in questions. Teachers want to know answers to questions.

***Does the fact that more academics and professional researchers are giving attention to the value of teacher research imply that more teachers are engaging in it in their own classrooms?***

I think there are more teachers talking about it. You definitely see more teachers talking about things like action research. But it's hard to quantify. I'm not sure we have the baseline data to actually quantify whether there are more teachers doing research. However, because of the kinds of questions that I get asked, I do think there are two things going on. One is that some people are feeling more pressured to do research, possibly from their institutions so as to improve their status or ranking in league tables. But there's also an increased understanding, which is a more positive understanding, of research as part of being a professional, a component of professionalism. Again, this is in line with my view that research is primarily a heuristic. It is something within anybody's reach to do. I hope that this more positive understanding of research is something that is catching on and people are thinking more about.

## **Obstacles and challenges**

***You mentioned that all teachers have questions and want to know the answers to their questions. If you were talking to a group of teachers, how would you try to convince them of the value of doing research?***

I would start by trying to get at either the questions they might have, or something that they've observed in their classrooms and they're not sure whether it's a pattern or not. Maybe while hearing them talk they would state an assumption that I could build on. So, by using their own context and their own frame of reference as a starting point, I would begin to turn an assumption into a question. I would ask them to think about how to get an answer to that question. It's a dialogic process. It's about helping them to see that the questions they have are really the beginning of the research process. The next stage is to empower them to take it a step further. Many pre-service teacher-education programmes do not prepare teachers to think of themselves as researchers and do not necessarily provide protocols or a structure for answering classroom questions. Unfortunately, what these programmes communicate is that research is not a process but something that you're supposed to know. What that really means is that you're supposed to know all the latest findings that are being published in all the journals you don't have time to read. It's a very disempowering understanding of research.

***Here you seem to be indicating some serious obstacles to teacher research. In your experience of meeting teachers from around the world, what would you say are the main challenges to teacher research?***

The traditional obstacles that are typically cited are that teachers don't have time for research because they're often teaching five or six classes a day. All their time and energy is sucked into planning lessons, evaluating students, and handling the bureaucratic tasks that go along with that. But I think the main obstacle is simply the understanding of what

research is. It's an understanding that can disempower the teacher; it makes them feel deficient and dependent on the outside expert. So, the first step is really to begin to change that understanding of what research is and how it fits into practice.

## **Fostering research literacy**

***We're doing this interview at the TESOL Arabia Conference, at which you took part in a pre-conference event on research literacy. What kind of support do teachers require in order for them to develop the necessary skills to engage in research?***

The event was framed by the idea of research literacy because just as with any other course focusing on a specialised field, whether it's EAP or Business English, there are specialised literacies that are involved in doing research. So, there's an introduction to the process, the components, and the terminology. One level of support is providing teachers with access to the specialised literacy of doing research. But I think the bigger task is providing teachers with an on-going support network for research. This is where as a field we haven't developed the mechanisms that really support and enable robust teacher research. What I'm thinking about here is, for example, involving teachers in communities of practice where research is a central component, or setting up a research project at a school.

Professional associations, especially at the national level around the world, can play a huge role in supporting teacher research networks. That may involve collaboration between people who have more experience doing research and people who have more immediate access to the questions that need to be answered. I've done research that was an individual research project and I've done co-authored research. I enjoy the co-authored work much more because it's about shared responsibilities and shared opportunities. It's when I begin talking to somebody and the dialogue that occurs allows me to begin to see things in a whole new way.

I think this is something that professional associations could actually scaffold, set up, and invite people to sign up for. There's a paradigm for educational research called educational design research, which typically involves someone who is university-based working with a teacher, a school, or a group of teachers in a location. The university researcher doesn't come in with a hypothesis that they need help investigating. Instead, together with the teachers, they negotiate what the question is that needs to be answered. They look at what's happening in that environment that might provide answers to that question. If there's a need to collect additional information, together they design how they might do that in a way that is ecologically viable. They also share in the interpretation. While there may be theoretical applications that have broader relevance, the goal of this paradigm for doing research is to solve something that's meaningful to that specific context.

***Do you think that this kind of partnership between a professional researcher and a teacher-researcher can enable us to challenge those preconceptions that teachers might have about what constitutes research?***

Absolutely! It is not until you are involved in the process, the on-going cyclical nature of collaborative discussions, that your perceptions and attitudes start to change. We know that one of the limitations of most professional development programmes worldwide is that there's this perception that if the expert stands up and asks the audience to do something then they will go on to do it. That's not how people learn. Our students don't learn the difference between countable and uncountable nouns because we put a list on the board. We can give people the information, but that's not how they learn it. They learn it by trying it out, by making mistakes; they learn it by speaking it and writing it. Developing teacher knowledge

and understanding requires a similar on-going process. If we're establishing the awareness of research as a heuristic, as a learning goal for our profession, then we have to set up processes that we know actually promote learning.

## **Role of teacher associations**

### ***Is the TESOL International Association Convention being used as a platform for the dissemination of teacher research?***

The Association is divided into Interest Sections and many of them have very practical foci, directly related to what people teach. We also have groups that focus on particular segments of education. This taxonomy of interests is how our conference program is organized. Anybody can submit a proposal but one of the things we ask is whether the session is more research-focused or whether it's about the application of a practical idea. For research sessions, we don't insist on the requirement that it has to be about something that can be published in a journal. We cast a wide net in terms of what is viewed as research. When you look at the conference program, you'll find that many of the research projects consist of teachers presenting on questions they have about their particular context and the ways that they have investigated them.

In addition, as an association we're looking at a number of ways to support teacher research. It is not only about creating dissemination opportunities, but it's also about fostering the necessary research literacy. We have now issued three different research agendas. The most recent one was in 2014 (<https://www.tesol.org/advance-the-field/research>). An agenda is typically about what needs to be done. When you find examples of research agendas that various groups put out, it's often about the hot topics that need to be researched.

However, in part because our field is so diverse and complex, we didn't want to necessarily presume that this is everything that needs to be done. So, what we've tried to do with the research agendas is to begin to craft the message that research needs to be on everyone's agenda. No matter how you fit into the field, you need to think about how research connects with what you do. I'm talking about programme directors, publishers, and classroom teachers. All of these are roles that, in a sense, you practise. Well, what is the role of research within your practice, however you fit into the field? By saying that that's what we need to be thinking about, we also realised that we needed to define research; we needed to provide a sense of scope for research and the many varied ways that research is done and the questions that it addresses; we needed to scaffold the process a little bit by reminding people of the ethics involved in doing research; and we also needed to indicate the steps in the process of identifying topics.

So, we provide examples of questions that could be investigated, as well as a framework for locating a question. We also talk about the current change drivers. The ones identified in the research agenda are: evolving understandings of what language is; the way technology is revolutionizing teaching; and the role that teachers' understanding of themselves plays in effective language learning.

### ***I can understand why TESOL International considers this document to be very important, but is it enough? There might be people who feel that providing teachers with a document is not the same as providing them with the kind of support that they expect when they join a teachers' association.***

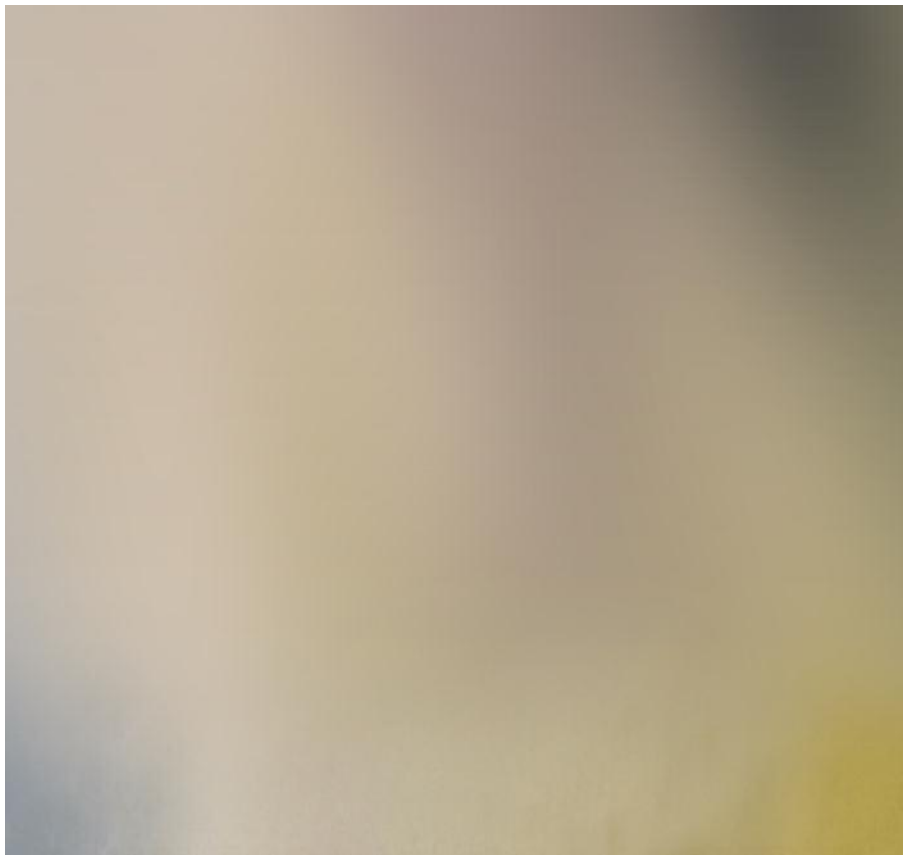
It's absolutely not enough. It's a starting point. In TESOL's current strategic plan we have five goals. These relate to making sure that our own house is in order in the way we govern the Association, promoting quality professional development, developing the best standards for

the field, being good advocates for the field, and promoting research within and for the field. So, research is one of our strategic goals. We have a Professional Council specifically focused on supporting research within the field. They organize sessions at the convention on the development of research literacy skills and on how to bridge research and practice. They administer a small grant to support research projects, and they are also looking at developing webinars or other on-going professional development in the area of research.

But even with all that, I feel we're not doing enough. I would still like to see the Association do more in terms of developing collaborative research networks. I think that's a harder task for TESOL International than it might be for a national teachers' association, which does operate more immediately at a local level. Those kinds of collaborative networks function best at local levels. That's something that I hope we can encourage through TESOL affiliates around the world.

**DANIEL XERRI**

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# Teacher research in second language education

DAVID NUNAN



## Abstract

This article explores some fundamental questions about teacher research, an aspect of professional practice that is undergoing something of a renaissance as exemplified, for instance, by The International Festival of Teacher-Research in ELT (<https://trfestival.wordpress.com/>). Questions dealt with in this article include: *What is teacher research? In what sense does it count as 'research' and how does it articulate with other types of research? What are the similarities and differences between teacher research, classroom research, and action research? How can teacher research be carried out?*

## Teacher research

The term teacher research is ambiguous. It can refer to research carried out *on* teachers by academic researchers, or to research carried out *by* teachers. Edited collections of studies involving teacher research often include both types of research (see, for example, Bailey & Nunan, 1996). The second sense is the more usual one, and is the one to which I will adhere in this article. Teacher research can be carried out by individual teachers investigating teaching and learning in their own context, or it can be collaborative with groups of teachers studying aspects of pedagogy across a number of contexts and classrooms. Although teacher research tends to focus on the classroom, teachers can also investigate issues that transcend the classroom. Language learning beyond the classroom (Benson & Reinders, 2011; Nunan & Richards, 2015), teacher identity (Barkhuizen, 2017) and parent-school partnerships (Linse, 2005) are all examples of issues that have been investigated by teachers (and academic researchers, of course) where the research is carried out beyond the classroom.

## Conducting research

Before proceeding directly to teacher research, I need to define what I mean by 'research'. In a (much) earlier publication, I suggested that research was a systematic process of inquiry involving formulating a question or questions, the collecting of data that have relevant bearing on the question(s), the analysis and interpretation of the data, and the publication of the outcome (Nunan, 1992). 'Publishing' means making the process public. There are many ways that this can be done. It could be relatively formal, such as publishing an account in a teachers' journal, or relatively informal such as posting a blog account, or telling colleagues about the experience.

Let me expand on the key issues of formulating questions and collecting, analysing, and interpreting data. In order to do so, I am going to distinguish between two traditions in research: the psychometric and the naturalistic. In psychometric research, questions come first: they're the pivot on which the entire research enterprise revolves. When I was doing my doctorate – a classically conceived formal experiment – my supervisor would not allow me to even think about collecting data until I had formulated my questions to a degree of precision that satisfied him. This took me six frustrating months. In naturalistic research, the questions

may remain a vague prospect, often emerging with any clarity towards the end of the project: and they may interact with the data, morphing out of all recognition in the course of the research process. (It is sometimes said that psychometric research involves questions in search of data, while naturalistic research involves data in search of a question.)

Gregory Bateson (1972), the anthropologist and linguist, described data as records of objects or events. He warns against confusing the record with the thing being recorded:

“data” are not events or objects but always records or descriptions or memories of events or objects. Always there is a transformation or recoding of the raw event which intervenes between the scientist and the object (Bateson, 1972, p. 4).

Records of events only become data when they are used for the purpose of research, that is, when they are subjected to analysis and interpretation and linked in to the existing literature on the subject at hand. Recently, with a colleague, Julie Choi, I was observing classes in an elementary school in Vietnam as part of the evaluation of an innovated blended-learning program in that country. During the lesson, the teacher scribbled notes on the board. Julie and I took little notice of the notes at the time. However, later, when viewing videotapes and still photos of the lesson, Julie pointed out the potential significance of the notes as records of the translanguaging practices (Garcia & Wei, 2014) that were a significant feature of classroom language use in the school. It was only at that point that the notes scribbled on the board became potential data in the research.

### **Different kinds of data**

Data come in many different forms. In teacher research, they can include numerical data such as student test scores, frequency counts (an example of which is provided below), audio- and videotaped lessons or lesson fragments, transcripts of lessons, teacher-student and student-student interactions, teacher and student journals, interview and questionnaire responses, samples of student talk or written work, photographs, lesson plans, seating chart observation records – the list is almost endless. (For a detailed description of these and other types of data, see Nunan & Bailey, 2009, p. 16).

Earlier in this piece, I used the adjectives ‘psychometric and ‘naturalistic’ to distinguish between the two research traditions or paradigms about which much has been written. The more commonly used terms for the traditions are ‘quantitative’ and ‘qualitative’. However, strictly speaking, these terms refer to types of data, so it is better, when talking about traditions, to use the terms ‘psychometric/experimental’ and ‘naturalistic’ to avoid ambiguity. Quantitative data are numerical and convey meaning indirectly, while qualitative data convey meaning directly through texts and visuals such as photos, moving images, diagrams and so on.

I am not going to say much more about the psychometric tradition as I don’t believe that it is useful for teacher research. Setting up a formal experiment and guarding against threats to reliability and validity is a complex undertaking and all too often the results have little to say about the realities of the intact classrooms in which teachers work. In the rest of this piece, I will therefore restrict my focus to naturalistic inquiry and the collection, analysis and interpretation of qualitative data.

*“Teacher research can be carried out by individual teachers investigating teaching and learning in their own context, or it can be collaborative with groups of teachers studying aspects of pedagogy across a number of contexts and classrooms. Although teacher research tends to focus on the classroom, teachers can also investigate issues that transcend the classroom.”*

## Naturalistic inquiry

Naturalistic inquiry has a number of characteristics that contrast it with psychometric research. While the latter involves the selection and assignment of subjects to control and experimental groups which are subjected to different interventions, naturalistic teacher research is conducted with groups that come together for the purposes of instruction. The teacher-researcher strives to be non-interventionist, and relies primarily on observation rather than measurement. (An exception is action research, which I will discuss later in the article.) Methods include case studies, journal studies, ethnography, and conversation analysis, and the data are primarily qualitative.

In fact, most qualitative data can be quantified. The following table, for example, is taken from a piece of collaborative teacher research in which the four teachers involved in the research were exploring the effect of different classroom question types (in this case, display versus referential questions) on the quality of students' responses. Having audio recorded their lessons, they made a summary of the number of referential, display and pseudo-referential questions. (These terms are glossed in the following coding key.)

D = display questions: the teacher knows the answer to the question, and poses it, not to obtain information, but to get students to display their content knowledge or mastery of a linguistic form.

R = referential questions: the teacher does not know the answer to the question.

PR = pseudo-referential question: the question looks as though it's a request for information, but the teacher actually has a predetermined answer in mind.

Teacher	D	R	PD
1	12	5	10
2	20	0	0
3	18	0	8
4	15	2	5

## Analysis and interpretation

Once the data are collected, the researcher has to make sense of them through analysis and interpretation: terms that are sometimes mentioned in the same breath as though they are more or less synonymous. In some kinds of research, they do tend to blend together, and in others, in the reporting of the research, they can be woven together.

Analysis is the process of identifying patterns and regularities in data. The common practice of identifying instances of a particular kind of behavior and recording these as frequency counts in tables such as the one above is a typical example of a piece of analysis. This data condensation has a number of advantages: it reduces the sheer volume of the material you have to work with, and it facilitates the process of identifying patterns in the data, in addition to suggesting possible relationships between the variables being coded – in the above case question types, and the quality of student responses. McCarthy and Walsh (2003) and Walsh (2006), for example, have suggested that increasing the number of referential questions prompts learners to give more complex responses, and engage in interactions that are more typical of authentic interactions outside the classroom.



In contrast with analysis, interpretation has to do with determining what the data mean. This necessarily involves going beyond the data and even entering the realms of the speculative, the imaginative, even the poetic. The researcher is probing for significance (in a non-statistical sense).

### Why do teacher research?

Adding a research dimension to our teaching can be extremely hard work. So why should we bother? There are many subtle and not-so-subtle answers to this question, but most come down to two: "I really need to know what's going on here in order to satisfy my curiosity and deepen my understanding of my classroom", and "I really need to know what's going on here so that I can make the world a better place (or, less loftily) solve problems in my classroom, teach more effectively, and achieve better outcomes for my students." Wanting to understand and wanting to help are not mutually exclusive, and in most cases needing to understand is a necessary precursor to wanting to help.

### Action research

In the rest of this article, I want to describe an approach that has been very popular (and also controversial) in teacher research. This is action research. (For an excellent introduction to collaborative action research for language teachers, see Burns, 1999.) Before describing and exemplifying the approach, let me clarify three terms that are often used interchangeably: classroom research, teacher research, and action research. 'Classroom research' identifies where the research takes place, and it can be carried out by teachers or others. 'Teacher research' identifies who does the research. As already mentioned, it can be carried out inside or outside the classroom. 'Action research' refers to a procedure or method of inquiry, and in educational contexts, it can be carried out by teachers or other professionals, such as school counselors or educational psychologists interested in investigating aspects of their own practice.

*“The research begins with a question, problem, or puzzle. It is initiated by a teacher who is interested in improving an aspect of (in this instance) his own practice. The teacher, not an outside researcher, controls the process.”*

In order to exemplify the nature of action research and what's involved in doing it, here is a narrative adapted from my teaching diary of an action research study that I carried out in one of my classrooms shortly after I started teaching undergraduate students at a university in Hong Kong.

*It was my second semester at my new school, and I realised that things weren't working out the way I wanted. It was a speaking skills class, but my students just wouldn't open their mouths. The first semester had been the same. At that time I had thought it was just a matter of my adjusting to a new teaching context. Now I knew it was something more serious. I decided to audiotape my classes over several days. The recording confirmed my initial impression. The tape was filled with the sound of my voice, punctuated by prolonged silences and the occasional monosyllabic student response. I consulted colleagues who said that it was a "cultural thing".*

*"So why have they enrolled in the class?" I asked.*

*"Well, they have no choice. Anyway, it isn't as if they don't want to be able to speak – it's a cultural thing. They want the magic language pill," said one colleague.*

*"Hmm – don't we all?" I thought.*

*So there was my challenge – and my dilemma: how to get my Cantonese-speaking Hong Kong students to speak English. After further thought and discussion, I decided to change the dynamics of the classroom, focusing more overtly on group work, and encouraging students to speak through split information tasks [information gap tasks] in which the students had to speak English if the task was to be completed successfully. [They were free to use their L1 when negotiating the task, clarifying vocabulary etc., but the task outcome had to be presented in English.]*

*I also tried to encourage students to redefine their own concept of what a classroom was (heretofore a place where the students sat silently while the teacher talked) by encouraging them to “break the rules”. On one desperate occasion, I asked a group of reluctant speakers to stand up and move about the classroom as they completed their task. Amazingly, once they had been liberated from their seats, they began to talk.*

*I made audio and video recordings of my class which I reviewed from time to time and was gratified to find a dramatic increase in the amount of student speech. However, I also noticed that the distribution of turns was uneven. Not all students were taking advantage of the opportunity to talk.*

*The new awareness led me into a second investigative cycle, focusing this time on the reluctant speakers in the class. I decided that these students were having difficulty redefining their roles and concluded that if I added a learning strategy dimension with a focus on learning roles and responsibilities, it might help sensitize them to this very different type of classroom (Nunan, in Bailey, Curtis, & Nunan, 2001, p. 134).*

This vignette illustrates several key characteristics of action research. The research begins with a question, problem, or puzzle. It is initiated by a teacher who is interested in improving an aspect of (in this instance) his own practice. The teacher, not an outside researcher, controls the process. While this example doesn't involve the collaboration of other teachers, it does involve collaboration with and involvement by the learners. It is relatively small scale, and 'doable' within a context in which teaching and learning are the primary foci. The procedure shares some characteristics of both psychometric and naturalistic research. As with psychometric research, the teacher pre-specifies the focus of the research (student reluctance to speak in the target language) and plans an intervention (changing the dynamics of the classroom). Unlike psychometric research, but consistent with naturalistic research, the teacher is working with a group of students who have come together for instructional rather than research purposes. While partially successful, on reflection, the teacher decides on a second intervention (adding learner strategy training), and implements a second round of research.

The steps in the action research process are as follows:

1. Identify a problem or puzzle.
2. Think of a possible solution.
3. Decide on an intervention.
4. Collect some data so you have a baseline for comparison.
5. Implement the intervention.
6. Collect post-intervention data and compare it with the baseline data.
7. Reflect on the process and decide on whether to implement a second round of research.
8. Share your experience with others. Publishing, i.e., 'going public', opens up your research to scrutiny and comment by others, and fulfills one of the defining criteria for research. It is this final step that differentiates action research from reflective teaching.

## Concluding thoughts

Action research is not the only procedure for doing teacher research. However, space precludes me from providing detailed examples of other types. Action research provides a clearly articulated procedure for improving practice. This has the advantage of giving guidance to teachers new to the research process. However, this can also be constraining. A more open-ended and speculative approach would be to ask not “How can I improve learning outcomes in my classroom?” but “What’s going on in my classroom?” or “What are my learners’ experiences in my classroom?” These questions could be explored through teacher and student reflective journals kept over a semester or a term. Once you, the teacher, have decided that you would like to add a research dimension to your practice, it is up to you to decide how to proceed. (For a range of other examples and models, I recommend the excellent collection of articles edited by Crandall & Christison, 2016).

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# Developing teacher research competence: Simpler than you think, more necessary than you realise

ACHILLEAS KOSTOULAS



## Abstract

In a recent article, entitled “The (Ir)relevance of Academic Research for the Language Teacher”, Péter Medgyes (2017) decries the unwarranted eagerness of academics to provide assistance to teaching professionals, which he likens to a situation where an overzealous young man forcibly helps a senior gentleman across a street, despite the latter’s protests that he does not want to cross it. My intention in this article is to problematise this line of thinking, and to explore what alternatives are available to teachers who wish to make sense of their professional experience, if the incursions of academic researchers are unhelpful or unwanted.

## In defence of the empirical

The underlying premise of this article is that, while teachers are (only) “paid to get students to learn” rather than to engage in academic knowledge construction (Freeman, 1988, p. 14), effective teaching cannot dispense with empirically based knowledge. To do so would amount to accepting (legitimising even!) the fossilisation of the profession in conservative practices, derived from our collective experience, reproduced through the ‘apprenticeship of observation’ (Lortie, 1975), and never questioned.

It is, of course, hard to dismiss the frustration, of at least some teachers, over research findings that seem trivial or irrelevant to day-to-day teaching. It is even harder to argue against with the scepticism about research findings that have “frequently been touted as underlying truths, which would be reliable if only applied properly, or if only one could learn to iron out unfortunate human idiosyncrasies” (Edge, 2011, p. 80).

But rather than entirely dismiss the empirical as a source of professional knowledge, I think we need to consider whether these criticisms are directed towards the *wrong* kind of research. In the most straightforward sense, this relates to the quality of some published literature. The pressure on academics to publish, coupled with the increasing ease of publication, has meant that the scholarly record is saturated with lots of questionable studies, and these are of very little value to language teaching and learning. But the proliferation of mediocre research does not detract from the quality of the better studies.

In a different sense, there may be issues connected to the scope of research that is used to inform the profession. Academic research in linguistics, second language acquisition, and educational psychology aims to make general claims about language and language learning, not to produce guidance for specific classrooms. For instance, a considerable corpus of studies has demonstrated that extensive reading is helpful in fostering language learning (Paran, 2017). However, for this insight to become useful to teachers, one needs to answer questions like, “*How much extensive reading is required, under what condition, and with what kind of scaffolding?*”, and more. Such questions are too situation-specific, and can best be answered

*“Research literacy refers to the teachers’ ability to use the scholarly record in sensible ways.*

*It involves the ability to locate relevant information, the ability to subject this evidence to critical scrutiny, and the ability to synthesise it into a useful working theory.”*

with small-scale narrowly focused inquiry, which is rarely deemed publication worthy.

The answer to both problems, I argue, involves developing the teachers’ research competence. I define this as consisting of two components, drawing on Borg (2009). The first is research literacy, which involves the ability to locate relevant research, appraise it in relation to one’s specific teaching needs and to judiciously apply it to one’s professional context. The second component is research experience, which I define as engagement with classroom-based inquiry. Together, they constitute an important aspect of teachers’ overall competence (alongside subject knowledge and pedagogical competence), because they allow teachers to develop an understanding of best practice that is both empirically grounded and personally relevant.

### **Developing research literacy**

Research literacy refers to the teachers’ ability to use the scholarly record in sensible ways. It involves the ability to locate relevant information, the ability to subject this evidence to critical scrutiny, and the ability to synthesise it into a useful working theory. Put differently, it involves “a willingness to engage with research in order to assess its utility and ripeness for adaptation to context” (Waring & Evans, 2015, p. 18).

### **Locating information**

Finding potentially useful research is a deceptively straightforward task, made easier by the functionality and power of internet search engines. However, a word of caution is necessary: not all sources of information are equal, and the most readily accessible information is not always the most authoritative. One particular source of concern is the prevalence of predatory journals, which contaminate the scholarly record by publishing poor research in exchange for publication fees. Distinguishing between legitimate and predatory publications is not always easy. One step might involve consulting lists such as the Directory of Open Access Journals ([www.doaj.org](http://www.doaj.org)), which lists journals known to pass certain quality criteria, or cached versions of the now-defunct Beall’s list (<http://beallslist.weebly.com>), a directory of known predatory publishers. Research repository services, such as [academia.edu](http://academia.edu) and [ResearchGate](https://www.researchgate.net/) (<https://www.researchgate.net/>), can also be valuable sources of information, as long as one carefully distinguishes between copies of published research and ‘grey literature’, such as drafts, working papers, and research that did not make the cut.

Another potential problem, which teachers interested in research should be aware of, relates to the use of ‘proxy’ sources. The amount of information online has made it relatively easy to find multiple references to seminal work, which is useful if the original is physically or linguistically inaccessible. However, when using such secondary sources, one risks forming a distorted view of the original source. To name just one example, Carol Dweck has pointed out that the distinction she helped to establish between ‘fixed’ and ‘growth’ mindsets (Dweck, 2006) is often misinterpreted by researchers who conflate a growth mindset and effort, or perpetuate a misguided self-esteem perspective (Dweck, 2015). Consulting the original sources may not always be easy to justify in terms of efficiency; however, it is usually a sensible thing to do, especially when confronted with surprising recommendations that claim to be research based.

## Thinking critically

The second aspect of research literacy is the ability to critically evaluate the claims put forward in research publications. This does not only mean being alert for factual inaccuracies or calculation errors (of which, some readers may be shocked to learn, there are a few in the literature), but also being cautious about how findings are interpreted.

A starting point for such a critical appraisal is to reflect on the transparency and trustworthiness of any study, bearing in mind the adage that *extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence*. In quantitative educational research, most studies make claims on the strength of findings that pass the five percent threshold of statistical significance, which roughly means that we can have 95% confidence in the findings. When reading such studies, it is important to remember that this is rather weak evidence (Wasserstein & Lazar, 2016), and in fact a disconcertingly high proportion of published research has tended to resist replication, suggesting that they may report on false positives. In qualitative research, one also needs to be alert for instances where researchers neglect to explain how they selected their case(s) or the quotations they report, which could potentially suggest selective presentation of data.

In practical terms, teachers looking for guidance in research need to consider questions like the following: Was the data collection process sensible? Has every step of the research process been explained clearly enough? Are there any inconsistencies between the questions that are being addressed and the process that was used to answer them? The limitations of the study, which are usually described at the end of research reports, should also be taken into account. Perhaps most importantly, any study should be treated with caution, unless the findings overlap with what other studies have already established, because *a single study proves nothing*, however spectacular its findings.

## Connecting research evidence with practice

A final aspect of research literacy involves the ability to relate research findings to one's professional life. In the previous paragraph, I mentioned the need to critically examine whether any particular finding is plausible. What I am describing here is taking this process one step further by interrogating *what difference does it make to my teaching if this finding is true?*

To illustrate by means of an example: in a recent plenary at the IATEFL Conference, Sarah Mercer (2017) cited Hattie (2008), who claimed that relationships are more important than motivation in predicting learning effect. This is certainly useful to know, but if we want to be more than passive recipients of Hattie's findings, the claim should trigger questions like: *"if this is true, what kind of relationships might it mean?"*, *"How can such relationships be fostered?"*, *"To what extent is it our responsibility to build and sustain these relationships, and to what extent is it up to the students?"*, and so on.

Not least, we need to be conscious of the political implications of the research findings, especially when they seem to shift the onus for success from the school system to individual teachers and learners. These are questions that academics do not generally concern themselves with, because research is about expanding the horizon of what is known, not dictating courses of action. But if, as educators, we are serious about retaining control of our professional lives, examining the implications of each possibility must remain the prerogative of the teacher.

*"... if, as educators, we are serious about retaining control of our professional lives, examining the implications of each possibility must remain the prerogative of the teacher."*

## Developing research experience

The second component of research competence is experience of doing research. By this, I primarily mean classroom-based inquiry, examples of which could include Action Research (Burns, 2005), Exploratory Practice (Allwright, 2003), and Lesson Study (Lewis, Perry, & Murata, 2006). Setting aside particularities associated with each approach, the characteristics of classroom-based inquiry are (a) systematic engagement with the realities of school life, which (b) aims to question established ways of doing things, (c) with a view to improving outcomes for teachers and learners.

## Why bother with classroom-based inquiry?

Although developing the ability to research one's professional context seems to lie outside the sphere of responsibilities traditionally associated with teaching, there are at least two compelling arguments to do so, one practical and one political.

First of all, the types of insights that are reported in the professional and academic literatures are usually presented at a level of abstraction that makes them generalizable enough to appeal to a wide audience. However, this can only happen at the expense of specificity and practicality. In the preceding paragraphs, I mentioned two examples of insights derived from academic research, which could potentially be useful in informing teaching: the value of extensive reading, and the importance of relationships. In both cases, I noted that applying these insights to teaching practice presupposes answering a range of practical questions. I am now taking this line of thinking one step further: the answers to these questions can be derived empirically, by investigating what works best in specific classrooms.

A second argument for developing researcher competence connects to the limitations of teacher training. In many teacher education programmes, professional knowledge is usually disseminated by "knowledge-brokers", who "choose, summarize, and convey research findings to teachers" (Anwaruddin, 2015, p. 6). This creates a risk of disempowering the teaching professionals, who are relegated to a role of passive consumers of information. Developing the teachers' ability to actively participate in knowledge construction therefore seems imperative in order to counteract this danger.

## But can it be done?

For many academics, and perhaps a few teachers as well, research is an activity best left to experts, and this belief may discourage classroom-based inquiry. Because of this, it seems useful to dispel a number of misconceptions about the kind of research activity that I am describing. One such unhelpful assumption is that the kind of knowledge generated by classroom-based inquiry is too trivial to be of value. This is a false assumption for two reasons. Firstly, classroom-based research projects produce the kind of specific information that is particular to a teaching and learning situation, and is not always available in the literature (e.g., What type of activities does a specific student enjoy? How effective is a certain research method for a specific group of learners?). Secondly, classroom-based research produces findings with a high degree of pedagogical utility. Unlike academic research, which primarily aspires to improving understanding, classroom-based research mainly aims at improving practice.

*“... rather than dismiss research entirely, it may be more beneficial for teachers to engage with it in purposeful ways, by developing their researcher competence.”*

A second unhelpful assumption is that teachers do not have the knowledge or expertise that is necessary to produce quality research. It is true that some research reports can appear daunting if they are heavily annotated with references to unfamiliar literature. But what is important to remember is that teachers already have the kind of contextual knowledge that is invaluable to informing a classroom-based research project: familiarity with the students, awareness of formal rules and unspoken conventions of their class and school, insider perspectives on the micro-cultures in which they are embedded, and more. This kind of situated knowledge is more relevant to classroom-based inquiry in that it helps to produce findings that are firmly grounded in the reality of the context where they were produced.

The last unhelpful assumption about classroom-based research is that it places unrealistic demands on the teachers' limited time and on the schools' dwindling resources. This would certainly be true if research were conducted as an add-on to the teachers' responsibilities. However, this need not be the case, since most of the activities associated with classroom-based research can be integrated with existing teaching routines. For instance, a teacher interested in finding out about their learners' preferred learning strategies need not conduct a questionnaire-based survey: one might ask them to write a list of learning tips as part of classwork, and use their output as data. Similarly, the 'data analysis' overlaps with the kind of 'reflection-on-action' (Schön, 1987) with which teachers regularly engage, and while it may be a somewhat more structured process, it is not necessarily a more time-intensive one.

### **Concluding remarks**

The starting point of this article was that the relevance of research to teaching practice is not always immediately obvious. However, rather than dismiss research entirely, it may be more beneficial for teachers to engage with it in purposeful ways, by developing their researcher competence. This, I argued, involves developing research literacy skills, which are helpful in locating, appraising, and using insights from the academic literature, as well as developing research experience, which involves engaging in classroom-based inquiries. I also argued that developing such competence is much more feasible than is sometimes thought.

But ultimately, the question that needs to be answered is: "Will research competence make us better teachers?" I firmly believe that it can: firstly, because it can help to judiciously drive the profession forward, and secondly because it allows us to view the constant turnover of fashionable fads with principled scepticism. Even if this did not lead to improved practice, developing as teacher-researcher is still important as it unsettles the unhelpful perception of teachers as reluctant consumers of academic knowledge that is handed to them top-down. This kind of empowerment is requisite for a humanistic, democratic education.

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# Improving the feasibility of teacher research

SIMON BORG



## Abstract

The profile of teacher research in language teaching has increased substantially in recent years and in this article I discuss some key conditions that support this form of professional development. In particular I focus on the need for adequate time, appropriate beliefs, technical competence, and support for teachers.

## Conditions for teacher research

This article is about teacher research, a professional development activity which

- **teachers do**
- **through systematic inquiry**
- **into their own work**
- **in order to enhance teaching and learning.**

Teacher research is an umbrella term which includes various ‘flavours’ of inquiry such as action research (Altrichter, Feldman, Posch, & Somekh, 2008), exploratory practice (Hanks, 2017), self-study (Lassonde, Galman, & Kosnik, 2009), and exploratory action research (Rebolledo, Smith, & Bullock, 2016). Much has been written about the way that teacher research can support teacher professional development (see Borg, 2017 for a brief summary) and numerous published examples document teachers’ positive experiences of the process (see, for example, various issues of the journal *Research Notes* which have been dedicated to action research). The transformative potential of teacher research is thus well-established. But it is also well known that the fulfilment of this potential is dependent on a number of conditions.

I will return to teacher research shortly, but an analogy will help frame the discussion that follows. Exercise is good for you. Despite this fact, it does not mean that the same kind of exercise is good for everyone. Similarly, it does not mean that every person is equally suited (mentally and physically) or responsive to certain types of exercise. I am a keen runner but cycling or swimming just does not work for me. Additionally, many people do not exercise (enough) even though they are aware of the benefits of doing so.

In my case, although I am regularly reminded by my physiotherapist that stretching daily is the key to staying injury-free and I believe that, I do not do stretching exercises very often. Technically, I find some of the positions and movements I have been prescribed hard to achieve; motivationally, I am deterred by the fact that I have to do these exercises alone. Knowing that I should be doing these exercises every day but am failing to do so somehow adds to the generally negative feeling I have about stretching.

To return to the focus of this article, professional development is undeniably good for teachers. But different

“Teacher research requires time and an extended period of activity – it is not the kind of professional development that can be completed in a few days or in a week or two of continuous intensive work. The decision to do or promote teacher research, then, must be based on an awareness of the time teachers will need to commit and on a realistic understanding of where that time will come from.”

kinds of professional development will be more or less suitable for particular individuals or groups of teachers. Teacher research is one option and, while I am a keen supporter of it, I am also aware that it will not be the right choice for all teachers. Just as my motivation to stretch is being thwarted by technical and social factors, so too the extent to which teachers engage in and benefit from teacher research will be shaped by a range of factors (Borg, 2013). In the space available here I am going to focus on four such factors: time, beliefs, technical competence, and support.

Throughout the discussion, I am treating teacher research as an activity that teachers are carrying out primarily to enhance their understanding of their work. Teacher research can also be conducted for academic purposes (for example, as part of a Master's degree) but in such contexts a different set of motivations come into play that I will not address here. I also assume (and I know that, for various reasons, this is not always the case) that teachers are willing to engage in professional development; where that is not the case, promoting teacher research will be premature and should be preceded by an analysis of teachers' attitudes and defining a strategy for making professional development a more attractive activity.

*“...it is useful early in the process of teacher research for teachers to reflect on their beliefs about what teacher research is and its purposes and, with guidance, to adjust these accordingly.”*

### **Time**

Teacher research requires time and an extended period of activity – it is not the kind of professional development that can be completed in a few days or in a week or two of continuous intensive work. The decision to do or promote teacher research, then, must be based on an awareness of the time teachers will need to commit and on a realistic understanding of where that time will come from. Teachers' conditions in this respect vary enormously around the world. In some contexts, an official workload allocation for professional development exists; in others, teachers may be given a reduced teaching load to support participation in professional development; in many, though, such provisions are absent. This does not mean that teacher research is not possible, because I am also aware of contexts where teachers are willing to do professional development in their own time.

But, overall, expecting teachers to commit to teacher research when no time has been allocated for it is not likely to be very productive. One way of addressing time constraints in teacher research is to ensure that the project teachers commit to is commensurate with the time available; where time is limited, this will call for modest projects, but a good quality modest project will always be preferable to plans which are unfeasibly ambitious. Collaborative teacher research, where the workload is shared, can also reduce the demands made on individual teachers' time. A third strategy that allows time to be used more efficiently is for teachers to integrate teacher research as far as possible into what they normally do.

*The scope of teacher research must be commensurate with the time available for it. If sufficient time is not available for even modest teacher research projects, alternative professional development approaches should be considered.*

### **Beliefs**

Teachers will approach teacher research with varying beliefs about its nature and purpose. Their previous experiences of research may have been academic, complex, and of little perceived practical value and teachers may assume that teacher research is no different. Where necessary, then, helping teachers understand the ways in which teacher research is different from academic research is an important preliminary task. Another common belief teachers bring to teacher research is that its purpose is to prove something (something, very often that teachers think they already know).

But teacher research is not about proof; even very rigorous large-scale academic research must be cautious when talking about proof. For teacher research, the goal is understanding that can inform improved educational practice. An initial outcome of teacher research may even be uncertainty, as teachers acquire a deeper awareness of teaching and learning and realise that issues which they previously thought were simple are in fact much more complex. Once again, then, it is useful early in the process of teacher research for teachers to reflect on their beliefs about what teacher research is and its purposes and, with guidance, to adjust these accordingly.

More broadly, teachers will also have beliefs about the nature of professional development. For example, in many contexts practising teachers receive support through centralised in-service training. Teacher autonomy in such circumstances is minimal and teachers are not required to contribute in any substantial way to decisions about the content and structure of their training. In such contexts, transitioning to teacher research calls for a significant shift not just in practice but also in beliefs about professional development, the forms it may take, and teachers' roles in the process (for a discussion of different beliefs about professional development, see Lieberman & Miller, 2014).

Teacher research is based on the belief that the classroom is a legitimate site for professional inquiry and that (with appropriate support) teachers should take charge of their professional learning (see Lieberman, Campbell, & Yashkina, 2017 for an example of how such beliefs about professional learning have been applied to an educational system).

*Effective teacher research must be grounded in appropriate beliefs (by teachers and organisations) about its nature and purposes and about teacher-led and situated forms of professional development more generally.*

### **Technical competence**

As noted earlier, teacher research comes in different flavours and proponents of these have different opinions about how 'rigorous' teachers' inquiries should be. There is, of course, no one correct answer here, but because the intention is to use the results of teacher research to inform (even very loosely) subsequent instructional decisions, it is essential that these results are trustworthy. This means that teacher research needs to be designed and conducted with some attention to rigour; for example, if the teacher is giving their students a questionnaire, this must be well-designed and analysed appropriately. Or if the teacher wants to do a group interview with students, it is important that the discussion enables everyone to participate and that an accurate record of what they say is captured.

What we are talking about here, then, is the technical side of teacher research – what is referred to in research methods books as research design, data collection, and data analysis. It is important to note, though, that teacher research is much more than a technical activity (Groundwater-Smith, 2012). As I have already noted, teachers' beliefs impinge significantly on the process and, because teacher research is inward-looking and has a subjective dimension, it can also evoke powerful emotions in teachers. The social dimension of teacher research (e.g., teachers' relationships with colleagues and students) is also powerful.

In promoting teacher research, it is a mistake, then, to over-emphasise its technical side. Teachers *do*, of course, need a basic set of technical competences for teacher research, and will benefit from an understanding of, among others, how to design and administer simple questionnaires, conduct individual and group interviews with students, collect evidence through self-observation, use reflective journals to keep a record of their classroom experiences, and use student work to evaluate the impact of their teaching (for some ideas on the last of these, see Easton, 2009). Such matters are typically well covered in the

many texts that exist to support teacher research (for example, Burns, 2010; Campbell, McNamara, & Gilroy, 2004; Hopkins, 2008).

*Technical competence is an important dimension of teacher research, but it should not be emphasised to the extent that teacher research becomes a technical activity.*

## Support

I am sure I would find it much easier to do my regular stretching exercises if I had more support: the presence of a trainer (though totally unfeasible) would make a big difference; instructional videos I could refer to would help too; a training partner who was also doing the exercises would be another source of support. In the absence of such elements, I have failed to follow my physiotherapist's recommendations.

There are clear parallels with teacher research here and support for teachers is a key element in effective teacher research programmes (Borg, 2015). Mentoring is one form of support. For example, on the English Australia-Cambridge Assessment action research scheme (Burns & Edwards, 2014), teachers receive ongoing support from a mentor while in the Champion Teachers project in Chile (Smith, Connelly, & Rebolledo, 2014) local mentors play a key role in the process. The support mentors provide can take many forms, such as advice on technical matters, questions that force teachers to rethink their beliefs (about teacher research or aspects of their teaching), or moral support and encouragement at times of difficulty.

Support can come from other sources too: the institution itself, where the leadership is positively disposed, can make a big difference to teachers (e.g., by providing material resources or timetabling classes in a way that facilitates teachers' projects). Colleagues are another form of support; they can (e.g., at staff meetings) provide an audience with whom teachers can discuss their projects; colleagues can also work together on collaborative teacher research projects (Burns, 1999).

This has many advantages, including the sharing of workloads and the added sense of responsibility that working in a group provides. It is also recognised today that when professional development is a social activity it is more beneficial not just for individuals but also in terms of creating a collaborative culture in schools. And there is increasing evidence that collaboration among teachers is a feature of effective schools generally (Darling-Hammond, 2013).

*Support for teachers is a vital component of teacher research. It can be provided by mentors, school leaders, and colleagues, and makes it less likely that teachers will feel isolated or overwhelmed during their projects.*

## Conclusion

When the right conditions exist, teacher research is undoubtedly a powerful, transformative experience for teachers. It can give them new understandings of their work, boost their motivation and commitment, and enhance their sense of autonomy and professional competence. Where key conditions are absent, though, teacher research may be less effective and even a negative experience for teachers. It is important, then, for teachers and for those responsible for promoting teacher research, to assess the prevailing conditions in any given context (Borg, 2013 provides a set of questions that can be used for this purpose) and to make informed decisions about whether teacher research is a feasible professional development option and, if it is, how to make it work.

*“When the right conditions exist, teacher research is undoubtedly a powerful, transformative experience for teachers. It can give them new understandings of their work, boost their motivation and commitment, and enhance their sense of autonomy and professional competence.”*

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# Research as meaning-making: Four approaches to teachers studying their own classrooms

DONALD FREEMAN



## Abstract

Most studies of classroom teaching assume an outside-in perspective. The *etic/emic* distinction (researching the classroom from the outside [*etic*] versus from the inside [*emic*]) is often proposed to address this problem. The distinction underscores how phenomena look – and in fact are – different depending the position taken to study them. This article argues that combining the perspectives is crucial to fully understand what is meaningful in classroom situations. Four approaches – *action research*, *classroom research*, *teacher research*, and *exploratory practice* – through which teachers take on research-related perspectives on their

classroom practice are examined. Each approach calls for suspending the purely teacher role in order to step back and examine why things in the classroom are happening as they do.

## The *etic/emic* distinction as a starting point

Teaching, and the teachers who do it, are usually studied from the outside in, by researchers who want to understand what happens in language classrooms. They focus, in Earl Stevick's well-known phrase, on "what goes on both within and between the people in the room" (Arnold & Murphey, 2013, p. 73), on both students as they are learning and teachers as they are teaching languages. This orientation is an *etic* one, meaning that it researches the classroom from the outside in. It contrasts with an *emic* orientation by which teachers inquire into their own classrooms, and the life in them, from the perspective of the insider, the person who is doing the work.

The *etic/emic* distinction can be misleading for a couple of reasons, however. First, the distinction is neither fixed nor absolute; it depends on the position an individual has (or takes) within an activity. As a teacher, you are an insider to your classroom *as compared with* the researcher who comes to interview and to collect data from you and your students about what is happening. In this case, the researcher assumes an *etic* view of what's happening in the classroom, while you have an *emic* one. But if you want to understand your students' experiences of the class or of a certain activity, your view will be *etic* to theirs; the students' views would be *emic*.

Far from being mushy or ill-defined, this distinction simply reminds us that things look different depending on the role you play in them. This leads to a second point: that to be fully complete, classroom research usually needs to adopt or combine both perspectives. This is why, for example, test results only provide one view on what students may have learned or know. To have a full sense, it is as important to find out from students their perspectives on what they have learned. When you ask them, a student may tell you they know or have learned something, yet not be able to produce it for the test. Or they may be able to recall the information on a test but not be able or confident in using it.

There is a third point about the *etic/emic* distinction that is arguably the most critical one. I have said that the distinction depends on how you are positioned in the activity (the first point), and therefore that a full research account of an activity needs to bring together both *etic* and *emic* perspectives (the second point). This raises the question: Why is combining these perspectives useful and important to do? My short answer is because the distinction is about meaning, more precisely it is about what participants find meaningful in a situation. A colleague tells the true story of being invited to visit a class in another country, which illustrates this last point.

### **A case in point – What is really happening here? I**

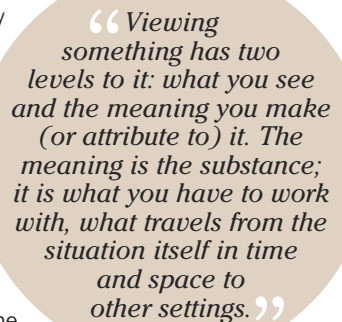
As part of a professional development program, my colleague and several local associates were invited to observe a secondary math lesson. As they settled in, the teacher arrived in the classroom and immediately began to teach. Coming in from the outside, he never removed his dark glasses, and continued to wear them throughout the lesson. He started the lesson by calling a student up to the board to work out a math problem. Although her first attempts were unsuccessful, he continued to keep the student at the front of the room until she had finally solved the problem. All the while, he spoke in a very loud voice, almost shouting to the class about what the student was doing wrong.

As the observers left at the end of the class, my colleague thought to herself how authoritarian the teacher had been, wearing his dark glasses and shouting at the class; how he had badgered the one student throughout the lesson and would not let her go. Therefore, as she saw it, the lesson was ineffective.

Once outside the classroom however, her local colleagues could not stop praising what they had seen in the lesson: how the teacher, who had a serious eye problem, had been able to manage the class and to focus everyone’s attention so clearly; how he had worked so intensively with the one student so that she would not fail and would ultimately be successful; how he had explained so clearly to the rest of the class what the student was doing incorrectly as they went along so everyone could follow and learn from what was happening. Their comments left my colleague wondering what had actually taken place. Had they all observed the same lesson?

Clearly they had all been in the same room and had witnessed the same activities, but the meanings they made of what they had seen were very different. Part of the difference lay in their relative perspectives. My colleague had an *etic* view as compared to her fellow observers who were local, who had an *emic* one. They knew, for example, about that teacher’s eye problems, that he was wearing dark glasses to protect his vision. But more fundamentally, the discrepancy in views lay not in what each had observed, but in how they interpreted it – in the meaning that they made of what they had seen.

Viewing something has two levels to it: what you see and the meaning you make (or attribute to) it. The meaning is the substance; it is what you have to work with, what travels from the situation itself in time and space to other settings. So when my colleague and her fellow observers discussed what they had seen, they were working with the meanings each had taken from what had gone on in the class. Because research in classrooms works with meanings, it is crucial to blend *etic* and *emic* perspectives in order to get a fuller picture.



“Viewing something has two levels to it: what you see and the meaning you make (or attribute to) it. The meaning is the substance; it is what you have to work with, what travels from the situation itself in time and space to other settings.”



This point is ignored when teachers are left out of research in classrooms, and it is often complicated when they are cast as participants in such studies.

## Meaning-making in researching classroom language teaching: A typology

When teachers want to do research, they are generally told to ‘become researchers’, in other words to take on an etic, outsider’s, perspective on what they are doing. The premise is that as a teacher, they have a fundamentally emic view on what is happening; so to step away and to become ‘objective’, they have to take on the researcher’s viewpoint. Teachers often live by this premise as they approach researching their classrooms. Their voice concerns such as—“*But my research will not be objective*”, “*What I find won’t be valid*”, “*My findings won’t be generalizable to other classrooms*” – each of which conveys an underlying notion that only an etic perspective produces worthwhile insights into what happens in classrooms.

But ‘objectivity’, ‘validity’, and ‘generalizability’ are socially held ideas; they are agreements among certain communities who do research about what the work these groups do (see Freeman, 1998; or for a fuller discussion Polkinghorne, 1983). In accepting these ideas as they stand, teachers are then expected to adhere to specific research practices. Herein lies the basic dilemma of research for teachers: Do you take on the conventional views and definitions of other research communities or do you develop your own? What is gained by working within these existing definitions, and what is forfeited or lost?

Three forms of research – *classroom research*, *action research*, and *teacher research* – propose procedural ways for importing or blending conventional research values with the work of teaching. There is a lot written about each of these approaches (see **Table 1**), describing how teachers can reorient themselves to take on a different perspective on their work and their students’ learning. These three approaches are guided by the notion that teaching and researching are basically different – though potentially complementary and allied – endeavours. The core difference is that teaching focuses on actions, on making things happen in the classroom from which students may learn, while researching concentrates on studying and understanding what is happening there. In other words, when teachers teach, they actively engage with, and participate in, the very stuff they are studying. Conventional researchers, in contrast, try to contain their involvement on what they are studying. They try to minimize how their presence is part of the classroom activities they are studying.ii

This distinction is useful in one sense. It is true that the aim of teaching is to instill or support the learning of students, and the knowledge that teachers generate in the process helps to improve what they (and others) do in the classroom. For researchers, however, the aim is to develop understandings of specific aspects of the teaching-learning process. Their goal is to generate knowledge about that aspect. This way of describing roles can lead to a polarization however – that researchers generate knowledge, while teachers use it in teaching – which I would argue can ‘colonise’ teachers by putting them in the role of users, rather than producers, of knowledge about learning and teaching.

The forms of research mentioned above try to bridge this divide, and do so to varying degrees. The procedures of action research, or classroom research, or teacher research encourage teachers to adopt a different perspective on what they do, to in effect assume a researcher’s orientation to understanding what is happening in their classrooms, while foregoing – at least temporarily –the immediate need to act in the lesson. A fourth view, *exploratory practice* (EP), addresses this dichotomy between teaching and researching in a contrasting way (Hanks, 2017). Dick Allwright (2005), who originally proposed EP, argues that

asking teachers to adjust their roles in order to take on the conventional stance of researchers leaves them with only 'technocist' possibilities for understanding classroom life.

EP practitioners contrast this view with their aim, which is to involve all participants – students and teacher – in collectively understanding and developing the 'quality of life' in the classroom they share. Exploratory practice thus collapses the dichotomy or tension between teaching and researching into this shared goal of collective understanding.

These four approaches differ in subtle but important ways, which are outlined in **Table 1** below.

**Table 1: Four approaches to studying the classroom**

	<b>Classroom Research</b>	<b>Action Research<sup>iii</sup></b>	<b>Teacher Research</b>	<b>Exploratory Practice</b>
<b>Focuses on</b>	what is happening in the <b>classroom</b> , usually related to student learning	how to <b>understand and improve specific aspects of teaching</b> and/or to <b>influence student learning</b>	using what is done in teaching to <b>better understand and improve students' learning</b>	<b>'the quality of life'</b> among language classroom participants (students and teacher)
<b>Aims to</b>	document and understand classroom phenomena	improve conditions and outcomes of teaching / teacher's work for better student learning	generate knowledge about teaching / learning from the teacher's perspective	involve all participants in understanding and developing that quality of life
<b>Participants are</b>	students, the teacher, usually with the help of an outside researcher	students and teacher	students and teacher	students and teacher (and sometimes others in the school community)
<b>The time frame is</b>	determined by the study	iterative, with cycles of study driven by the teacher's circumstances	determined by the teacher within the circumstances of work	an ongoing collective practice, time determined by participants
<b>Key reference</b>	Nunan & Bailey, 2009	Burns, 2010	Freeman, 1998	Allwright, 2005; Hanks, 2017

*Adapted from Woodward, Graves, & Freeman (2018)*

These four approaches have procedural differences; more importantly though, they each make distinct assumptions about participation and meaning-making. These assumptions frame the etic/emic distinction discussed earlier differently. Perhaps better put, the four approaches differ in how each defines the primary meaning-maker(s) in the research process.

### **A continuum of meaning-making**

On the left of this continuum, *classroom research* frames meaning-making from the point of view of the researcher. This may include teachers' perspectives, though as data and not as independent interpretation. The over-arching interpretation, then, is the researcher's, which is etic to what is happening between teacher and students in the classroom. On right of the

continuum, *exploratory practice* rejects the importance of external interpretations in understanding and improving the life of the classroom. EP practitioners would make the emic argument that the participants' meaning-making is what matters in the process of probing and understanding the 'quality of classroom life'. In their view, the over-arching interpretation must be that of the participants.

**Table 2: The four approaches as a continuum of meaning-making**

	<b>Classroom Research</b>	<b>Action Research iii</b>	<b>Teacher Research</b>	<b>Exploratory Practice</b>
<b>Sources of meaning</b>	Researcher's and participants' stances generate meaning which is portrayed from the researcher's point of view	Participants' involvement, usually through changes in activity, generate meaning which is portrayed by the teacher	Participants' involvement generate meaning which is portrayed by the teacher	Meaning is generated and portrayed by participants (teacher and students)
<b>Stance</b>	<b>Primarily etic</b> but sometimes drawing on emic (teacher and student) insights as part of the data	<b>Etic &gt; Emic</b> etic to the activity being rethought or changed, but resulting in emic change	<b>Emic &gt; Etic</b> Emic to what is happening in the classroom; using methods to step back and take an etic view	<b>Entirely emic</b> from participants' points of view

Between these two extremes, *action research* and *teacher research* connect etic and emic interpretations, but do so in different ways. *Action research* focuses on rethinking, and thus changing, aspects of classroom activity. By trying out various iterations of activity over time, teacher and students develop a new shared meaning of what they are doing. When these accounts are presented publicly, the writers may wrestle with how to make them accessible to readers outside their own contexts (see, for example, Burns & Khalifa, 2017).

The accounts will often contrast versions of what happened to make clear how the process of trying things out had clarified their understanding of what they were doing. In this particular way of using time – to work through versions of an activity, contrasting what happens – action research uses an etic framework (drawing contrasts over time) to make meaning of participants' emic experiences.

In *teacher-research*, the overall approach uses conventional research techniques and procedures to make meaning from participants' experiences. Starting with what is happening in the classroom, the teacher-researcher works at balancing and blending the activities of teaching with the expectations of researching discussed above (Freeman, 1998). Living these twin imperatives of acting as teacher and understanding as researcher defines the core of teacher research as “working at the hyphen” between the two worlds (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993, 2009).

### **Closing: Rethinking what you know; getting at what you assume**



In this sense then, when a teacher engages (either with a companion researcher or by themselves) in the procedures of any of these four approaches, they are suspending the purely teacher role in favor of one that asks them to step back, to question, and to wonder about why things in their classroom are happening as they are. Like my colleague observing the math lesson, the process can put you off balance. In fact, that is part of its purpose. As a teacher, you know what you are doing (or you act as if you do).

When you take on the researcher's stance, you question what you think is going on. In that questioning, like my colleague, you may realise that what you think is actually based on assumption. It is a process of unmaking up your mind in order to discover a new or different meaning.

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- i** My thanks to Dr. Marti Anderson for this wonderful account of differing points of view.
- ii** There is a relatively recent strand of educational research, a loose collection of approaches that we call 'heuristic research' (see Freeman & Cameratti, forthcoming), that takes a different tack, by engaging in what is happening in the classroom to better understand and improve.
- iii** I would actually include action research as an example of the heuristic approaches mentioned in Note **ii**.
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## “Research *by* teachers *for* teachers”: **Richard Smith on teacher research**



*Academic conceptions of research are sometimes foisted on teachers and might serve to alienate them from a process that can have a significant impact on teaching and learning. In this interview, Richard Smith argues that research can empower teachers if they are given the freedom and the support to engage in teacher-initiated forms of research.*

### **Popularity of teacher research**

***Over the past few years, there seems to have been a rise in the number of publications and presentations at international conferences about teacher research. What do you think are the reasons?***

I'd like to think it's because more and more teachers are understanding that answers to problems and questions can be found in their own classrooms, in their own practice, more than in books and articles written by outside 'experts'. However, there's a paradox, isn't there? These publications and presentations you talk about – are they being done by practitioners themselves or by academics doing research *about* teacher research and, in a way, talking to teachers about what they 'should' be doing? If it's too much the latter, that could negate the value and point of teacher research!

The presentations I've most enjoyed organising at recent teacher-research conferences have been those where teacher-researchers themselves give a joint plenary (instead of inviting an external speaker to give a keynote talk) – or where local teacher research mentors do the same. A particularly good example was when student teacher-researchers took centre-stage at the last IATEFL Research SIG conference in Istanbul, to share how they'd been inspired by their own research and their experiences at the conference.

Teacher research is subversive in this way – it can turn the ELT world on its head! It's a bottom-up replacement for following the latest academic or commercial fashion, an alternative to the failures of top-down research to address issues faced by teachers, and an alternative to the inappropriateness of commercial solutions. It's a way to help teachers resist what they're being sold by academics and publishers, or at least become more critical as consumers. But for the same reasons there's a danger of it being co-opted, academised, commercialised, reduced and essentialised, and 'sold-out'!

## Value of teacher research

### *In what ways can teacher research actually help teachers and learners?*

Applied linguistic research hasn't been involving teachers much, particularly in recent years. There's a dysfunctional theory/practice gap in our field. With a few notable exceptions, applied linguists seem to have been talking to one another in a bubble, without, it seems, taking much interest in teachers' own puzzles and problems. In the meantime, teachers seem to have become victims of increasingly heavy restrictions and their expertise is becoming more and more devalued in different parts of the world.

I don't think the alternative is to reject research-based expertise as some have been advocating recently – that just casts teachers adrift and makes them even more victims of fashion and imposition, whatever they're sold or told to do. A constructive alternative is to say that teachers are experts of their own classrooms and to support them in developing insights further through reflection and research – as well as to encourage teacher associations and university-based teacher educators and researchers to get involved in supporting this.

Asking how can teacher research help teachers and learners is exactly the right question, as that helps us avoid the idea that teacher research has to contribute to wider knowledge in some way, in other words be based on academic norms. It's something different – it's research *by* teachers *for* teachers (and their learners) in a particular context. The goals are developing appropriate methodology for the teacher's classroom and professional development for the teacher concerned, not contributing to 'the literature' by filling some generally applicable research gap. That might happen in fact, but it's not the goal.

This gives rise to plenty of important implications – you don't have to start with a literature review, for example – the research questions come from a problem or puzzle in your practice, and they've got their own validity for that reason, with no need for justification from the literature. And you don't need to write an article. It's your choice how you share your findings – it could be just with your students, or with a group of colleagues, for instance. So, some of the apparent barriers to doing teacher research disappear – it doesn't have to be done in an 'academic' way!

How does it help? It can empower teachers and make classrooms better places for learning. Some words that stay in my mind from teachers in the Champion Teachers scheme I've been involved with in Chile are Mauro's, who said something like, "action research can light the way in the darkness of the system," or Leyla's, who said, "I heard my students, I saw myself". Exploratory action research brought about a big change to a more positive mindset for them – it *empowered* them.

## Teachers' engagement in research

### *Do you think that more teachers are actually engaging in teacher research nowadays?*

It's very difficult to tell. Teacher research is definitely starting to get higher visibility, partly in the ways you referred to in your first question – in other words, it's attracting more academic interest. But, as I implied in my answer, it's important for us all to 'walk the talk' – i.e., not just talk about it but actually engage in practices to encourage teachers to do teacher research and support them better once they decide to do so. The choice needs to be theirs, of course – forcing teachers to do teacher research, or even implying there's a kind of professional responsibility to do research seems to me antithetical to the idea of *teacher-initiated* research or '*research by teachers for teachers*', as I've been calling it.

One factor in the rise in the general visibility of teacher research has been IATEFL Research SIG's efforts over the last five or so years. We've been seeing it as part of our mission to introduce teachers to teacher research – not just members of the SIG but English teachers worldwide more generally – via video-recordings, other resources, and social networking related to the workshops and conferences that we've organized or supported in Turkey, Latin America and India. We've also published innovative books of teacher research reports, starting with *Teachers Research!* in 2015, making these freely available and publicising them widely (<http://resig.weebly.com/publications.html>).

In parallel, there's been the development of an international exploratory practice network under the leadership of Judith Hanks in particular, and efforts led by Kenan Dikilitaş in Turkey and Amol Padwad in India. Anne Burns and Simon Borg have been continuing to promote action research, especially via Cambridge-sponsored schemes for language school teachers in Australia and England, respectively. And there's been a growth in British Council schemes – particularly in Latin America, India and Nepal – I've personally been involved with these. I also keep hearing of schemes elsewhere too, for example, work that Rama Mathew has been doing for the English in Action programme in Bangladesh.

One particularly noteworthy development, I think, is the way teacher research is being talked about and *done* not just in universities or language schools but in relation to secondary school and even primary school English teaching (there's another recent project I need to mention in this connection, one led by my colleague Annamaria Pinter involving children as co-researchers in Indian primary schools).

Also, something I've been particularly keen to promote myself is the idea – well, more than that of course, the *reality* – that teacher research can be appropriate in difficult circumstances in schools in developing countries (see <https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/al/research/groups/lta/research/trdc>): it's not just a luxury for privileged settings. Anyway, I think all of this activity clearly disproves statements like Zoltan Dörnyei's about teacher research being all very well in theory but not actually done in practice, or Simon Borg's about the lack of teacher research outside formal degree programmes. Teacher research is happening nowadays on a voluntary basis, being better publicised, and is occurring in a wider range of contexts than previously seems to have been the case.

### **How do you reply to the claim that not many teachers are engaging in teacher research?**

Well, how do we know teachers don't already do research? If you ask them via a questionnaire, without probing further, of course many will say they don't do research, because they associate it with academic ways of doing things. But many teachers nevertheless ask themselves questions about their practice. In other words wonder why things are as they are, or why something does or doesn't seem to be working, and I think there are a lot of good teachers who both do this *and* go beyond reflection into research, trying to answer their questions with data like student homework, chats with students, parents or other teachers, reflections they ask students to write, and so on.

These teachers don't necessarily view what they're doing as 'research' but it *is* a kind of research – it involves questions, data, and analysis. And I think denying to this the label 'research' and calling it 'inquiry' or something like that is doing the opposite of democratising or opening the doors of research – it is maintaining the false idea that only professional researchers can come up with 'expert' findings about classroom teaching.

Teachers don't have to judge what they do according to academic norms or feel embarrassed about a 'lack of quality' – after all, the data they gather and the analyses they carry out in teacher research are for them and their students, not for an academic gaze.

So, teachers need to be encouraged to see what they already do as research and shown how they can build on their existing practice to improve and share it. Teachers who reflect and ask themselves questions but don't gather data can be shown how doing so could help them answer the questions they have. And those who aren't used to self-questioning can be encouraged to do so via dialogues with mentors as a first step in a research process.

In all these cases, a mentor or other forms of guidance (for instance, via reader-friendly guidance materials) can be helpful. I also think that teacher associations have a major role to play in promoting and supporting teacher research, as do university-school partnerships.

This is the opposite of saying teachers 'must' do research, or must do research in a certain way. I think it's partly over-academic models which make research seem off-putting to teachers – another paradox to be avoided when academics do get involved in promoting teacher research!

## **Supporting teacher research**

### ***What kinds of support do teachers require in order for them to develop better skills to engage in research?***

From my experience both doing and mentoring teacher research, I think there are four main areas which are difficult and where teachers can benefit from support:

- changing a problem, puzzle or success into research questions
- considering what kind(s) of data – and how much or how little – will be appropriate to answer different questions
- analysing data to answer the questions
- knowing where and how to share findings.

As we learned from the Chile project, teachers benefit most from mentoring by a more experienced teacher-researcher or other kind of mentor who knows the context and can understand the problems they are facing. Often, it seems to be 'near-peers' (teachers who have gone through the same experiences as beginning teacher-researchers) who can offer the best guidance.

### ***So, finally, if they're interested, how can teachers get involved in teacher research and be supported to do it?***

I personally think it's good to start by looking at examples, not just hear or read about teacher research in the abstract. For example, one could look at the website of the International Festival of Teacher Research in ELT (<https://trfestival.wordpress.com>), or join and scroll down in the Teachers Research! Facebook page, where various teachers have posted videos of poster presentations (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/teachersresearch>). I'm sure IATEFL Research SIG will carry on promoting and supporting teacher research and their website is another place to look, including in the open access books available there (<http://resig.weebly.com/books.html>).

One could also look at the *Champion Teachers: Stories of Exploratory Action Research* book, which I edited with Paula Rebolledo and Deborah Bullock ([bit.ly/champion-teachers](http://bit.ly/champion-teachers)). Paula and I have also written a *Handbook for Exploratory Action Research* for the British Council ([bit.ly/handbook-EAR](http://bit.ly/handbook-EAR)).

To actually get involved, it's always good to try to find someone who can mentor you, and my strong hope is that those who've done teacher research themselves will continue to offer



mentoring support to others, for example, via IATEFL Research SIG, or in university-school partnerships (university-based teacher educators need to wake up to their responsibilities to the profession by establishing more of these, it seems to me!).

For the last three years in January and February, the TESOL CALL-IS Electronic Village Online has been organising a five-week session on Classroom-based Research for Professional Development where volunteer mentors have been generously offering support to anyone who wanted to join in (<http://classroombasedresearch.weebly.com>). Teachers could also form a self-help group to give one another support, for example, inside their teacher association. That's what teachers in AINET – the All-India Network of English Teachers – did a few years ago, which later grew into a full-scale mentoring scheme!

The most important message, though, is “take a look, and – if you want to – do it and share it!” That's how you'll learn more about teacher research – from the inside!

**DANIEL XERRI**

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# 2

## PART TWO:

# Supporting teacher research engagement

*A concluding lesson from this analysis is that school systems need to acknowledge and support the individual teacher inquirer so that she does not end up being ignored and perhaps ostracized by her fellow teachers. Further, the administration, or teacher leader, or other facilitator should attempt to help teachers work toward a norm that redefines the role of teaching to include reflection, inquiry, and attitudes of continual change.*

Richardson, V. (n.d.). Teacher inquiry as professional staff development. *NSSE*, 93(1), 199

## “Breaking boulders into pebbles”: Christine Coombe on teacher research



*Teacher research is deemed to be an important way for practitioners to develop professionally and learn more about their classroom and students. However, there exist a number of challenges that hinder teachers from engaging in research. In this interview, Christine Coombe, Past President of TESOL Arabia and TESOL International Association, discusses what role teacher associations can play in supporting teachers to do and disseminate research.*

### Popularity of teacher research

***Over the past few years, the topic of teacher research has been given considerable attention in the literature and at international ELT conferences. How do you explain this rise in popularity?***

At tertiary level institutions in my own context, which is in the Gulf region, research – or more specifically applied research – is on all the mission statements. So, because teachers are evaluated based on the mission statement and the goals pertaining to that statement, I think research is gaining importance here amongst teachers. Now, this is not actually the way I'd like to see teachers becoming interested in research. I'd rather it come just from the value of doing research, but at the end of the day I'll take what I can get. I truly feel that once they have engaged in a certain number of research projects and benefited from the many advantages that often come with that, teachers will buy more into doing research in order to inform their classes.

### Definitions of research

***One of the criticisms levelled at academics interested in teacher research is that they are imposing their definition of research on teachers and expecting them to do the kind of research that they want them to do.***

That's true. For me, research is basically finding out something that I either have an interest in and I didn't know about before or just learning something new about my students. So, I start from that kind of capacity. I feel that if you try to impose whatever research paradigm on teachers, they will be turned off. In my own classes, where I teach undergraduate students about research, we obviously talk about the three methodological frameworks – qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods – but one of the things I feel strongly about is that you

can't impose a research topic on a student. Topics have to evolve from their own interests and their own curiosity.

My policy in my research classes is that students can choose whichever methodology they want to use and they can choose whichever topic they want to research. The same holds true for teachers. It is very important that the topics evolve from their own interests with regard to teaching and learning, and from their own classes if they're going down the road of action research.

***There are some people who complain that we are restricting the definition of what research is all about or what research teachers should be doing. They suggest that we should democratise and broaden the conception of research. What do you think about that?***

I'm all for that because I think you don't want to pigeonhole people into one very narrow definition. There are lots of statistics showing that the typical research produced by academics is not read by many people. The latest journal article I read basically says that the average paper in an academic journal is read between seven to 15 times in its entirety. When you think about the amount of time an author spends getting their article up to the standard of top tier journals, that's not a lot of bang for your buck. I would much prefer to see a definition of research evolve through the teachers that do it and through more frequently accessed publication avenues, like teacher magazines, newsletters, and conference proceedings. I'm very proud of the number of publications that TESOL Arabia has produced, most of them of very high quality. People are citing our publications much more readily these days. Many more people read the average TESOL Arabia book than an article in a top tier journal.

## **Value and challenges of doing research**

***In your experience of working with teachers, what would you say is the value of teachers engaging in research?***

Everything I do in the classroom is based on research. I think that's the value of having a doctorate or a degree from a programme that places an emphasis on research. You have an overall grounding in lots of things within your field. I feel that knowing the reason why we do something in the classroom and why it's beneficial should always be informed by research. I think teachers would much better understand their students and the various teaching methodologies that they might utilise if they were familiar with the research grounding of that particular methodology or particular approach to instruction.

***At the same time though there are a number of challenges that inhibit teachers from doing research. What would you say are the most significant ones?***

In my context, it's always time. It's like when we give our students a big project. Most of the time they psych themselves out. They think, "Oh I can't get started. I can't do this project because it's just so big." When teachers think about research, they don't think about the analogy of breaking boulders into pebbles. You don't have to do the whole thing in one day or one weekend. You can take 15 or 20 minutes or one hour a day and do a little bit of it. Some teachers think of research as if it's this huge project and it might very well turn out to be a huge project, but it doesn't have to be.

So, I think time is a big issue. Increasing workload demands also inhibits teachers from doing research because so much more is laid on the teacher. We're big in technology here in the UAE and although it has made our lives much easier, it has also increased the workload demand. Whereas in the past if you received a message on your phone or in your mailbox you had a day or so to respond, now if my supervisor sends me an email in the morning and

I haven't answered it within the hour, he's on the phone asking whether I've received it. So, technology has helped us a lot but it has also increased our workload tenfold.

## **Supporting teacher-researchers**

*We're doing this interview at the TESOL Arabia Conference, at which you coordinated a research literacy pre-conference event. What kind of support do teachers require in order for them to develop the necessary skills to engage in research?*

I think they need a step-by-step process. They need to know about some things beforehand to get them started, but they need a step-by-step process. For example, before I started working on my doctoral dissertation, I attended a two-month intensive course during the summer in which we went through all the steps, step-by-step, of how to come up with the first three chapters of a dissertation. By the end of that course, I had produced a final report consisting of three chapters of a dissertation. Making the process clear in order for teachers to know what they have to do when they do research is the first step.

*As an association, does TESOL Arabia provide that kind of support?*

We're trying to. In fact, one of the things that I'm looking into doing with a colleague is to produce a TESOL Arabia publication that will focus on how to do research. I think that's very much needed so that's currently our plan. I would have liked to see more uptake with the research literacy event, but I think part of the problem with that was that it was pre-conference. Nowadays some teachers aren't getting an extra day off to attend a pre-conference event. It's simply a question of not being able to be released from work.

## **Disseminating teacher research**

*Does the TESOL Arabia Conference act as a platform for the dissemination of teacher research?*

I think it does. If you look at the 500-plus presentations that are in the programme, many of them are research-based or they are at least couched in some kind of empirical rationale. That's not a pre-requisite for having one's proposal accepted, but many people submit a research-based proposal. So, yes I do think we help to disseminate research.

*When you say 'research-based', are you referring to the research conducted by academics or by classroom teachers?*

For me, they're both teachers. For example, at a positivity and mindfulness event that I organised some time ago, I spoke about happiness. After my talk, an Iranian teacher came up to me and asked me some questions about how she could judge the happiness of her students, who were young learners. I told her that we could work together over the course of a few months and put together a questionnaire and a series of tools that she could use to do research with her students, and then we'd deliver a joint presentation at the TESOL Arabia Conference.

And that's what we've just done. The presentation went well and there were a few things that we could have done better, but it was her first presentation and her first foray into research of any kind. She's now keen to go forward with more research because I took the time to help her along the way. I think lots of teachers just need a group or a mentor-type situation to get them going and to let them know that they're on the right track.

*Earlier we were talking about dissemination of teacher research. In what other ways can teachers share their research?*

TESOL Arabia has a lot of publications that focus on the dissemination of research. We have *Perspectives*, which is TESOL Arabia's official magazine, and we're going to have another journal soon. That's a new project that we're currently working on. I'm personally the editor of the 'Brief Reports' section of *The Journal of AsiaTEFL*. When I took over, I made it clear that I didn't want to just accept the native speakers who send in papers. I wanted to give non-native English-speaking teachers an avenue for dissemination of their research. So far, I've been able to do that. At TESOL Arabia, we also have a very good email list, which includes calls for papers and information about other publication opportunities in the UAE and other parts of the Gulf. You have to look for them, but they're there.

## **Promoting teacher research**

### ***What can teacher associations around the world do to promote teacher research even more broadly?***

A more traditional approach might be at the annual conference, which is usually the main event for most teacher associations. Just as there are TeachMeet events where people share their teaching ideas and materials, I'd like to see ResearchMeet events where teachers disseminate their research. They could do so by maybe bringing one-page descriptions of what they've done. Teachers could sit and share research that they've already conducted, or are presently working on, or maybe research that they want to do and which they'd like to get an idea about. Even though for the second year running we've had a research forum as part of our conference, I'm thinking of suggesting to next year's Conference Chair to have a ResearchMeet where teachers can disseminate, in a very informal way, their research results or plans.

I'm a co-author of TESOL International Association's *Research Agenda* [[http://www.tesol.org/docs/default-source/pdf/2014\\_tesol-research-agenda.pdf](http://www.tesol.org/docs/default-source/pdf/2014_tesol-research-agenda.pdf)]. That whole process was such an eye-opener and I think lots of people need to think about their own agenda. When teachers start doing research, they have all these different interests and it's often difficult for them to marry these interests. I personally feel that research is easier and more useful if teachers decide on one area and they exploit different aspects of that area. A couple of projects down the road, they would have developed some expertise and that'd be a springboard to other areas.

**DANIEL XERRI**

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# Helping language teachers to produce ‘quality’ research

MARK WYATT



## Abstract

It is widely accepted that teacher research does not need to be at all academic and indeed can be shared in non-academic ways. However, whether or not such research should nevertheless fulfil ‘quality’ criteria is a contentious issue. This article introduces the different arguments. It then takes three reflective questions that might be used constructively by teacher-research-mentors to stimulate quality research practices and explores with examples how they might be employed. The article concludes that sensitive mentoring encouraging quality research practices can lead to an empowering teacher research experience.

## Introduction

In our field, ‘quality’ can be a loaded term in discussions of teacher research, which has been defined by Borg (2010a) as:

systematic inquiry, qualitative and/or quantitative, conducted by teachers in their own professional contexts, individually or collaboratively (with other teachers and/or external collaborators), which aims to enhance teachers’ understandings of some aspect of their work, is made public, has the potential to contribute to better quality teaching and learning in individual classrooms, and which may also inform institutional improvement and educational policy more broadly (p. 395).

Borg (2010b) has also argued that the quality of teacher research can be enhanced if teacher-researchers ask themselves the following questions:

- Is the purpose of the research clear?
- Have research methods been appropriately chosen and justified?
- Have data been collected and analyzed in a technically competent manner?
- Does the work make some kind of contribution to knowledge, with potential implications for practice?
- Is the research ethical?
- Does the researcher adopt a critical stance?
- Is the research reported in a manner that is coherent? (p. 12)

Borg (2013) presents his ideas about teacher research, collected from different articles in book form. In his review of this volume, Smith (2015) complains of Borg seeking to maintain “the status quo (the primacy of outside expertise) by making the promotion of [teacher research] seem dependent on academic standards of rigour, quality, publication, and contribution to the field” (p. 208). In Smith’s (2015) view:

few things [are] more likely to discourage the majority of teachers from engaging in [teacher research] in a sustained fashion than the spread of...a misconception—that teachers’ existing views of research are ‘wrong’, that academic norms must apply to [teacher research], and that [teacher research] is only ‘research’ if judged to be so by outside, academic experts (p. 208).

“... sensitive mentoring encouraging quality research practices can lead to an empowering teacher research experience.”

This claim of misapplying academic standards is one Borg (2016) vigorously denies. Responding to Smith (2015), Borg (2016) emphasizes he agrees that for teacher research “to be a productive activity it needs to be localised, feasible, and meaningful... and that a model of teacher research that mirrors academic research is not appropriate” (pp. 119–120). However, he also defends his position that quality is important by arguing that if we are “to call an activity ‘research’ it must retain some basic characteristics associated with this activity” (Borg, 2016, p. 120).

The challenge therefore, from his perspective, is to help would-be teacher-researchers to develop ‘quality’ research practices.

In this brief article, I consider how Borg’s (2010b) ‘quality’ criteria can be drawn upon by mentors of teacher research working with teacher-researchers in different contexts so that the research these teacher-researchers then produce is more likely to be “localised, feasible, and meaningful” and not necessarily “academic” (Borg, 2016). The next sections of the article are organised around the first three of the questions designed to stimulate reflection (Borg, 2010b, p. 12) introduced above. In making points about supporting ‘quality’ teacher research, I refer to anonymized examples from my own experiences of mentoring teacher-researchers. I then offer a brief conclusion, which relates to the sharing of teacher research, an issue on which Smith (2015) and Borg (2016) are in some agreement.

## Is the purpose of the research clear?

*“I have a research question”, the teacher planning teacher research told me with a smile: “What is the best way for children to learn English?”*

Research starts with a question, ideally a “clear, specific, answerable” one, which is worth investigating (Borg, 2010b, p. 9). If the initial question is too large, teacher-researchers are likely to need help in narrowing it down. In response to the sample question above, for example, I (the mentor) may have asked:

*Which children are we talking about?*

*How old are they?*

*What have you noticed about their learning?*

*What kinds of activities do you think they benefit from?*

*Why do you think they benefit from such activities?*

I may thus have been inviting the teacher to reflect on prior classroom observation and puzzle about the learners’ learning in their context. The teacher’s responses, together with my own beliefs, knowledge and experience, would then have shaped what happened next.

Let us suppose, for example, the teacher replied by saying: *“I think they learn best when they are feeling relaxed”* (a viewpoint I happen to share). This could have led into some discussion of the affective filter, of ways of helping learners feel relaxed, of ways of observing them to see if they appear relaxed and of ways of exploring whether a relaxed mindset appears to influence their learning behaviour in the classroom.

Alternatively, though, the teacher might have replied by saying: *“I think they learn best by reading aloud around the classroom”* (a viewpoint with which I have much less sympathy). I might have asked the teacher what evidence from classroom experience they had of this or whether this view was based on their own learning experience or on something they had heard or read.



In both cases, I might have recommended targeted background reading, though not necessarily the development of a full literature review. I would also have urged reflection and mind-mapping to help narrow down the precise research question. These are several of the most basic strategies available to support teachers in developing purposeful research.

### **Have research methods been appropriately chosen and justified?**

*“I plan to distribute 50 surveys and then conduct semi-structured interviews with these 50 participants”, a teacher planning research on an assessed course once told me, in all apparent seriousness.*

Unfortunately, as Borg (2010b) highlights, common misconceptions about research include the notion that it needs to be based on statistics and should therefore be large-scale. One consequence of this misconception is that case studies of a few individuals are too often little-regarded. Accordingly, researchers who have conducted such studies are sometimes then encouraged to adopt an apologetic tone when discussing their qualitative case study research methodology.

But big is not always beautiful. Carefully constructed questionnaire studies may well of course achieve greater statistical reliability with a larger sample size; the quantification may be more robust. However, the value of using semi-structured interviews lies mostly in their potential to provide in-depth insights. It is the *quality* of the knowledge co-constructed through the semi-structured interview that counts (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009), not necessarily the number of the interviews at all (although there can be advantages to interviewing the same respondent more than once). The selection of research methods needs to be based on clear research goals, therefore, and an understanding of how each proposed method may contribute or not to the study; they all have weaknesses as well as strengths.

*“The selection of research methods needs to be based on clear research goals, therefore, and an understanding of how each proposed method may contribute or not to the study; they all have weaknesses as well as strengths.”*

If the teacher above had wanted to elicit qualitative data from all participants who completed surveys, then an appropriate way in which to do this might have been to add an open-ended ‘why?’ question to the otherwise quantitative items.

Answers to this open-ended question could then perhaps have been subjected to content analysis. To call all participants back for an interview, though, as this teacher proposed doing, seemed difficult, time-consuming and likely to provide an unrealistically vast amount of data to analyse. A point of data saturation would soon be reached and I warned that the whole endeavour might be so time-consuming that all his fellows would have long since graduated by the time he was ready to submit his study to be graded. Before making a decision, I asked him to read about research methods and reflect further.

### **Have data been collected and analysed in a technically competent manner?**

*The questionnaire I had been sent by email for ‘a professional opinion’ was from a doctoral candidate in another country, an action researcher who described himself as ‘a big fan’ of my work; the questionnaire contained a lengthy introduction including many low frequency words explaining concepts; this was followed by 50 items all in exactly the same Likert scale format (statement: strongly disagree – strongly agree); it was aimed at second language teachers.*

Designing effective questionnaires requires technical competence, as Borg (2010b) reminds us. In the above case, the questionnaire seemed flawed by containing too much language too many of the intended respondents (teachers not university academics) might not have understood; it was also lengthy and apparently monotonous, which might have led to some respondents feeling fatigued while completing it and becoming careless. At least, though, it was just a draft. ‘Professional opinions’ were being sought, and these might have led to significant changes. And then, of course, before being used with the intended sample, it may have been piloted with a trusted few and then revised.

Teacher-researchers developing research instruments such as questionnaires can benefit greatly from guidance and peer support. There are many ways of eliciting quantitative data through questionnaires; for example, as Bell (2010) explains, ranking questions, Likert scale items, lists to select from, and grids that elicit answers to multiple questions are some of the devices that can be used. Care needs to be taken in how questions are framed, as Bell (2010) also explains. Unfortunately, questions that are ambiguous, lead the respondent towards a particular answer, are potentially offensive or hypothetical are all too common in first drafts. Explicit advice, piloting, and peer feedback (and this applies to the design of interview and observation protocols too) can all reduce the risk of the final product being technically incompetent (and therefore as likely to do harm as good).

Technical competence also relates to the process of data collection, not just the design of instruments. Quality criteria identified by Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) for the interview, for example, include “the extent of spontaneous, rich, specific, and relevant answers from the interviewee” (p. 164). Such discourse is more likely not only if the interviewer has established rapport and is well-prepared but is also able to skilfully ask thoughtful follow-up questions inviting the interviewee to offer clarification where required or build on their responses. Technical competence is also required in analysing the data, using whichever tools are most appropriate for this while continually questioning, probing, exploring relationships within the data. It is also required in writing up and in all the decisions that relate to making the research accessible, relevant and interesting to the intended audience. Accordingly, many teacher-researchers may require research skills development, through processes such as targeted workshops, mentoring and scaffolding.

Of course, much more than *technical* competence is required, though, for research to be considered competently produced, as Borg (2010b) also explains. Teacher research, like all research, needs to be deeply ethical, which implies an appropriate moral stance as well as competence in ensuring that safeguards designed to protect participants are in place. Also essential is a critical stance, which implies continual self-questioning, which is a process that can be supported by mentoring practices centred on modelling and the use of Socratic questioning techniques.

### **The sharing of teacher research**

Another of Borg’s (2010b, p. 10) ‘quality’ criteria is that “the work make some kind of contribution to knowledge, with potential implications for practice”, a criterion implying sharing that he explains can be met in various ways. While the teacher research in question could possibly be making a theoretical or methodological contribution, it is most likely to be contributing to our understanding of an issue that has been previously researched but in another context.

“Explicit advice, piloting, and peer feedback (and this applies to the design of interview and observation protocols too) can all reduce the risk of the final product being technically incompetent (and therefore as likely to do harm as good).”

*“Teacher research, like all research, needs to be deeply ethical, which implies an appropriate moral stance as well as competence in ensuring that safeguards designed to protect participants are in place. Also essential is a critical stance, which implies continual self-questioning, which is a process that can be supported by mentoring practices centred on modelling and the use of Socratic questioning techniques.”*

The hitherto under-researched context in which the teacher research is being conducted therefore needs to be described clearly, with the knowledge generated in such a case likely to be in the form of fresh insights regarding the issue or a confirmation of previous findings from elsewhere extended to the new context.

It is this nuanced understanding of the teacher-researcher’s contribution to knowledge that tends to be most under-appreciated by critics of teacher research, as Borg (2013) highlights. In the view of some academics, teacher research that does not make a strong theoretical or methodological contribution or does not approach an issue in a highly innovative way has limited value. However,

if local answers to local issues are being provided, then surely the research has value to the local educational community. And if engagement in the research is intrinsically empowering, then surely it has considerable value to the self, particularly given, as Smith (2015) highlights, that an important dimension to teacher research is that it can become an essential part of teaching and thus of a teacher’s identity. And if the research, once shared, is picked up by other researchers conducting meta-analyses for example (as argued in Wyatt, Burns, & Hanks, 2016), then it may have value to the academic world.

How teacher research is shared is also important. This does not mean through formal academic channels, as Borg (2016) emphasizes; indeed, he argues that “the kind of poster presentation events Smith has organized through IATEFL’s Research SIG are a good example of how the public sharing of teacher research can be achieved” (p. 120). Presenting research orally can be sufficient in itself. However, it can also be written up in non-academic and very accessible ways, as Bullock and Smith (2015), for example, highlight, in introducing an edited volume that provides a platform for teacher-researchers to report on poster presentations from an IATEFL Research SIG event. When teacher research is shared in print, it should not be imitating academic research, as Smith (2015) argues forcefully. One way in which this can be achieved is to request from teacher-researchers contributing to edited volumes such as Burns, Dikilitaş, Smith and Wyatt (2017) much more context description and much less literature review. As Smith (2015) suggests, this allows teachers’ expertise to come to the fore. It also provides the kind of rich description that facilitates understanding in other contexts.

## **Conclusions**

For good ‘quality’ teacher research to be produced and shared, reflective self-questioning is crucial (Borg, 2010b). So is mentoring, as is highlighted above. Indeed, Smith (2015) argues that “it takes time, taster experience on a teacher’s part, and patient scaffolding from, ideally, a near-peer mentor for [teachers] to understand that [teacher research] can be a particularly empowering form of professional development” (p. 207). Fortunately, with increasingly wider accessibility to teacher research online and in print, the benefits of such effort are becoming more evident.

*“...an important dimension to teacher research is that it can become an essential part of teaching and thus of a teacher’s identity.”*

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# Supporting teacher-researchers: Some issues

AMOL PADWAD



## Abstract

Teacher research is primarily aimed at addressing teachers' specific individual concerns and is a complex and demanding process. In this process teachers face internal challenges concerning their own beliefs and assumptions or lack of research knowledge and skills, besides external ones like lack of support and resources. Teacher-researchers seem to need material, intellectual, and affective support, which may effectively come from a combination of 'outsider' mentors, like trained researchers, and 'insider' supporters, like experienced peers. The key areas of difficulty for teacher-researchers seem to be those of

conceptualising the study, formulating research questions, and analysing and interpreting data.

## Introduction

The notion of practicing teachers turning into researchers and exploring their work from within has been around for quite some time now. It has been referred to by various terms, like practitioner research, classroom research, collaborative enquiry, critical enquiry, teacher research, and exploratory practice (Allwright, 2003; Bailey, 2001; Burns, 2005b, 2010; Roulston, Legette, Deloach, & Buckhalter Pittman, 2005), with the latest addition being exploratory action research (Rebolledo, Smith, & Bullock, 2016). However, each of these terms has more or less different connotations to it.

This kind of teacher research or exploration is contrasted with 'academic research', which is undertaken by trained researchers who may be outsiders in the context where they conduct the research. Academic research is usually conducted as part of a degree-awarding programme or project, and it follows established norms and procedures for research and dissemination. While education policy and planning have been typically informed by the latter kind of research, which enjoys greater recognition as 'acceptable' research, teacher research is now being increasingly acknowledged as another valid and useful form of research having immediate value and significance for teacher-researchers themselves (Burns, 2009; Smith, Connelly, & Rebolledo, 2014).

## Teacher research: Rationale

The rationale behind teacher research can be traced back to Schön's (1983) advocacy of "reflective rationality". Schön criticizes the dependence of educational change and innovation on the classical research-development-dissemination model coming from science and industry, in which researchers produce some theoretical framework or 'solutions' to solve a practical problem and they are then disseminated to teachers to be applied in their classrooms. Most political and administrative interventions in education seem to take this 'technical rationality' approach, which appears to be based on three basic assumptions:

1. There are general solutions to practical problems.
2. These solutions can be developed outside practical situations (in research or administrative centres).
3. The solutions can be translated into teachers' actions through publications, training, administrative orders, and so forth (Altrichter, Posch, & Somekh, 1993, p. 201).

The solutions usually take the form of new curriculums, coursebooks, methodologies, approaches, or combinations of them. However, because they are general and system-wide, they may not address the specific practical concerns or problems teachers face in their routine work. Teacher research can be a powerful way of addressing this gap. The reflective rationality approach underlying teacher research seems to proceed from quite different assumptions (Altrichter, Posch, & Somekh, 1993, p. 202). Firstly, teachers' problems or concerns are practical and specific, and need specific solutions. Secondly, these solutions can be developed only in the context where the problem arises and the practitioner-teacher is the key agent in developing them. Thirdly, since these solutions are specific and contextual, they cannot automatically apply in other contexts, but they do offer useful ideas and possibilities for others to build on.

### Stages of teacher research

The available literature on teacher research and action research (e.g., Burns, 2010; Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988; McIntyre, 2008; Norton, 2009; Sagor, 2000) seems to indicate consensus on the following key stages of teacher research:

- Identifying a puzzle or a concern
- Designing a plan to explore or address it
- Carrying out the plan
- Evaluating/reflecting on the outcomes and identifying lessons or insights
- Modifying practice in consequence.

A teacher research study thus involves the teacher identifying a puzzle, problem, or concern from their regular work. They then convert it into a 'research question' and devise plans of a systematic enquiry, working out what kind of information they may need, how they would collect it and from who/where, and how they would draw useful inferences from it. It is then logically expected that the lessons learnt and insights gained from such enquiry would inform the teacher's practice, though our understanding of how and to what extent this happens is very limited at present.

The actual study usually consists of the following stages:

- Formulating the research question (from the identified puzzle/concern/problem)
- Preparing tools for data collection
- Collecting the data
- Analysing the data and interpreting/drawing inferences from it
- Sharing/disseminating the findings of the study.

These stages look no different from those in 'academic' research. However, they are less strict in terms of the requirements for 'academic' rigour, adherence to the established norms of research, and emphasis on the generalizability of findings.

*“Teacher research studies are marked by teacher volunteerism. Teachers usually undertake this kind of research out of personal interest and because of practical concerns rather than for any external compulsion or extrinsic rewards. The initiative normally rests with teachers themselves.”*

Moreover, whereas in academic research the reporting and dissemination of the findings – following certain norms and standards too – is deemed crucial, it is not so in teacher research. If teacher research leads, as Altrichter, Posch, and Somekh (1993) suggest, to specific and contextual solutions based on specific and contextual concerns, reporting and disseminating findings may not be that important given that they may not be applicable in other contexts. However, Sagor (2000) and other sources strongly support reporting and dissemination of findings even in the case of teacher research, not only because it helps to alleviate the sense of isolation teacher-researchers might feel but also as a means of contributing to the general knowledge base.

## **Teacher research in practice**

The discussion in this section is based on the experiences and insights from some teacher research initiatives being carried out in different parts of the world. Since 2013 a teacher research project called Champion Teachers has been going on in Chile. In this project, several (mostly state sector) teachers have conducted small-scale research studies on issues of their interest and with the support of university academics acting as mentors. The participating teachers showed clear gains in terms of a deeper understanding of the issues under exploration, better skills of exploration, and remarkable changes in perceptions and attitudes; many of them adopted mentoring roles for later cohorts (Rebolledo, Smith, & Bullock, 2016; Smith, Connelly, & Rebolledo, 2014).

In a similar project in Turkey, university teachers have undertaken research studies for a number of years now. An internal trainer has led them and the classroom has acted as the research setting. These teachers have been provided with ongoing support and have been encouraged to write and disseminate their research via publications and conferences (Dikilitaş, Smith, & Trotman, 2015, p. 2). Starting with a small in-house initiative at one university, it has now become a nation-wide activity, culminating every year in a teacher research conference. In India, the All India Network of English Teachers (AINET) successfully completed one cycle of a teacher research project in 2015-2016 (with the next cycle currently underway). The project has helped (mostly school) teachers to design and conduct research by exploring their specific puzzles or concerns. Besides the support of a small group of mentors, there was a lot of peer support and collaboration among the participants (Dixit, Joshi, & Mane, 2016).

Interestingly, these initiatives and similar other undertakings point to some common features of teacher research:

- Teacher research studies are marked by teacher volunteerism. Teachers usually undertake this kind of research out of personal interest and because of practical concerns rather than for any external compulsion or extrinsic rewards. The initiative normally rests with teachers themselves.
- Various kinds of support seem to play an important role not only in sustaining teachers' interests and engagements, but also in providing direction and purposefulness to such engagement. Many teachers in these initiatives appear to have particularly benefitted from both material support, such as leave, funding and resources, and intellectual support in conceptualising, planning, and implementing the various stages of their research.
- Working in groups and peer collaboration seem more supportive than working in isolation. Though most teachers in these initiatives were working on their individual studies, they were members of groups and had regular opportunities to share, discuss, and seek help or ideas from each other.

“It is important that teachers are helped to unpack their beliefs about research and question the ones that may hinder their work.

Support is thus extremely crucial for teachers to sustain their interest in and commitment to doing research. More than material support, like funds, leave, and resources, teachers seem to need intellectual and affective support.”

- It can be seen from some reports (Dikilitaş, Smith, & Trotman, 2015; Rebolledo, Smith, & Bullock, 2016) that in reality teacher research studies do not proceed in a linear manner from the formulation of a research question to data collection to data analysis and to dissemination of findings. Many teachers were found to shuttle between the different stages of their studies, going through recurring mini-cycles that are even more complex than some models of teacher research suggest (Burns, 2010, p. 9; McIntyre, 2008, p. 7). For example, some teachers came back to revise their tools or even reformulate or revise their research questions when they were midway through data collection.

Engaging in research is a demanding and painstaking process for teachers, further aggravated by their lack of confidence and feelings of inadequacy in the absence of any research training or qualifications. Regular support at all stages is therefore crucial. However, such support can be more effective and gainful if it is built around an awareness of some specific areas or issues, which seem to trouble teacher-researchers in particular. Drawing on various reports and experiences of teacher research (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Edge & Richards, 1994; Dikilitaş, Smith, & Trotman, 2015; Dixit, Joshi, & Mane, 2016; Padwad & Dixit, 2018; Rebolledo, Smith, & Bullock, 2016; Smith, Connelly, & Rebolledo, 2014), we may list some key challenges and difficulties that teachers seem to need greater support with:

- Teachers are seen to hold various beliefs and views about ‘research’, often influenced by the notion of ‘academic’ research. Some common ones include the belief that any research must involve numbers, or that research is the prerogative of only university academics, or that a small-scale study by an ‘ordinary’ teacher has little value. It is important that teachers are helped to unpack their beliefs about research and question the ones that may hinder their work. Besides developing their knowledge and skills of doing research, it is also necessary to help teachers see the value of their studies and the gains to be made from them, as well as to help them overcome the limitations of their own beliefs and assumptions.
- Collaboration with peers can be a significant contributor in terms of support. The ‘insider’ support of peers may nicely complement the support of ‘outsider’ mentors or academics. Fellow teachers bring with them their insider knowledge of the context, and they are better aware of circumstantial and intellectual challenges and can provide more relevant ideas. This was seen in the Champion Teachers project, in which some teachers from the first cohort came back as mentors for subsequent cohorts. These ‘peer-mentors’ were valued more because they “not only clearly understood the context of the teachers [they were] mentoring, but [were] able to relate the value of the process to [their] mentees far more effectively because of having first made the EAR journey [themselves]” (Rebolledo, Smith, & Bullock 2016, p. 3).
- Three aspects of the research process have been most commonly reported by teachers as particularly challenging or difficult: conceptualising or visualising the whole study and thus leading to an overall plan; formulating research questions; and analysing the collected data (Padwad & Dixit, 2018). Though teachers may easily identify a particular



concern or puzzle that has been bothering them, converting this concern/puzzle into a concrete, manageable, and investigable ‘research question’ is a big challenge for many. Yet, it is important to spend enough time and energy on it because a clearer question makes the rest of the study easier. Similarly, teachers may not find data gathering daunting, but how to make sense of the collected data might be a real challenge for them. Identifying trends and patterns in the data, drawing generalisations and abstractions, and picking out insights in the process is a great intellectual and conceptual task, for which teachers often need specific and sustained support.

- It is interesting to note that in all the initiatives cited above – Turkey, Chile, or India – some face-to-face interaction or work was involved. In these projects, the participants seem to especially value the face-to-face component. It is possible that online, distance support may take a significantly large share, but occasional face-to-face meetings and exchanges seem essential and more effective/productive than working entirely online or through the distance mode.

## Conclusion

Teacher research is primarily aimed at addressing the context-specific and individual concerns that teachers may have, and it is carried out by teachers themselves. It, therefore, follows different paths than ‘academic’ research and does not necessarily go by the same kind of rigour, norms, and standards as expected from ‘academic’ research. Yet it is a very complex and demanding process, where teachers face not only internal challenges like their own beliefs and assumptions, or their lack of research knowledge and skills, but also external ones like an apathetic environment, lack of institutional support, or inadequate funds and time. Support is thus extremely crucial for teachers to sustain their interest in and commitment to doing research. More than material support, like funds, leave, and resources, teachers seem to need intellectual and affective support.

This article argues that a combination of ‘outsider’ mentors, like trained researchers, and ‘insider’ supporters, like experienced peers, offers more effective and valuable support. As the experience of teacher research initiatives in some countries seems to suggest, this article also argues that more targeted support for teacher-researchers is needed in some common areas of difficulty – like the overall conceptualisation of a study, the formulation of research questions, and the analysis of data.

“...a combination of ‘outsider’ mentors, like trained researchers, and ‘insider’ supporters, like experienced peers, offers more effective and valuable support.”

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# Supporting language teachers as they engage in research

JUDITH HANKS



## Abstract

This article considers the skills and support needed for language teachers to conduct research and disseminate their findings. It argues that teachers already possess many of the skills needed to engage in researching their classrooms. If teachers are encouraged to engage in research that is integrated into their pedagogy, there are many innovative ways in which they can disseminate their findings, providing valuable insights for the field as a whole. Thus the support that teachers need rests in the attitudes of those in the field. Trust (in teachers' acumen; in the contributions they can make; in the creative ways they share their findings) is required on all sides.

## 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.

## 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 and Lytle (2009) note, to imply that research is static, or that these norms and genres are monolithic and 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 and 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, and 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, p. 47).

*“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.”*

## 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 generalisable” 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 (e.g., large-scale, quantitative studies, which aim at broad-brush generalisations). It can eventually contribute to teacher burnout.

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, Mesman, & Carroll, 2013, p. 172) 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. This is research that (at its best) goes beyond mere solutions. As van Manen (1990) 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” (p. 4). So ‘support’ actually means: respect and encouragement from

others, and enough autonomy and empowerment for teachers to undertake research that is deeply relevant to learning and teaching.

## Developing the necessary skills

Arguably, teachers already possess the necessary skills to do research. We routinely engage in critical thinking as we question the coursebooks, 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:

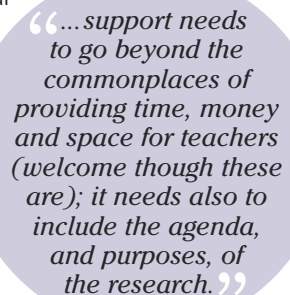
- Why do I give so much homework?
- Why do so many students fail to follow advice about learning *outside* class?
- Why are some learners not interested in learning?
- Why are my students motivated? And why are they demotivated?
- Why do my students want lectures while I want discussion?
- Why don't 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, and 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, and 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, and Braga (2015). They provide an analytical account of the development of their question: “Why do some 7th grade students ‘disrespect’ long-term friends?” (Miller, Cortes, de Oliveira & Braga, 2015, p. 66).



*“...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.”*

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 (pairwork, groupwork, as well as writing stories and giving feedback) to investigate their puzzle. Working in very different contexts, Dar (2015), Dawson (2016), Crane (2015), Stewart, Croker, and 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 understand 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.

### **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*, *ELT Journal*, *Language Teacher Research*, *System*) are, of course, one way of sharing findings. Some journals provide free access to some articles, such as the *ELT Journal* ‘Editor’s Choice’ section online: [https://academic.oup.com/eltj/pages/editors\\_choice\\_videos](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 20 years, teachers are able to disseminate their work in a variety of ways.

Besides an annual newsletter, the IATEFL Research Special Interest Group has a range of publications both for and by teachers available online: <http://resig.weebly.com/publications.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/>, or this, by Yasmin Dar: <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>.

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/UCc9aqv6OH2edRym2Ull9ffg>. Similarly, teachers have uploaded videos of themselves talking about their work to *ELT Research*: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC7zn1w6lleROMkKhHz1cTg>.

Dissemination does not only have to take place using the spoken or written word. Following the inspirational work by Sousanis (2015), Darren Elliott (2016) 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 a special issue of the journal *English Language Teacher Education and Development (ELTED)*. Edited by Smith and Banegas (2016),

the special issue is entitled *Innovative Writing in English Language Teacher Education and Development* and it seeks to break boundaries in disseminating teachers' research.

## 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.

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# Supporting teachers' action research: Ten tips for educational managers

ANNE BURNS



## Abstract

While more is now known about supporting teacher research, there has been less emphasis on what support is needed by teachers institutionally. Essentially, institutional support relates to educational managers' roles, responsibilities, and awareness of how to encourage research by teachers. This paper aims to promote discussion of this neglected area and to alert English language managers to the important role they play in the development of quality teacher action research. To stimulate debate, this article provides ten tips that educational managers,

interested in introducing action research as professional development for their teachers, can consider.

## Moving towards action research

Around the world, ministries of education, educational sectors, and teacher educators are challenged, preoccupied, and puzzled by the question of how to support quality teaching and learning in English language classes. There is little doubt that while learners, their knowledge, characteristics, and motivation are at the centre of learning, the teacher is the one at the heart of opportunities for learning in the classroom (Hattie, 2003). It is therefore of vital importance that teachers receive the kind of professional development that will help them continue to strengthen their learning about their teaching and their students throughout their careers. Unfortunately, it is still the case that many language teachers find the professional development they are offered to be less than useful. For example, a teacher at a conference I went to in Turkey a few years ago had this to say:

I don't think one-shot seminars are beneficial. Educational programs should be conducted in our own context. Sometimes we join one-day seminars for [an expert] or raffle only. I took a lot of notes until now. However, only very little is relevant to me... A teacher development program should be long term, interactive, and suitable for our needs.

Over many years, I have been involved in one type of professional development – action research (Burns, 2010) – that is more likely to be of the sort this teacher is referring to. This is research carried out by teachers in their own workplaces on topics or issues they have been interested in or curious about for some time. It involves cycles of planning (by preparing some kind of new approach in the classroom), acting (by putting the plan into action), observing (by collecting information/data on what happens as a result), and reflecting (by considering what has been learned along the way).

Often the first cycle of action research leads to much deeper knowledge about teaching various skills, strategies, or activities, or using new materials, and helps teachers to understand more about their students and how they learn. Teachers are then in a position to develop their research further, building on what they have discovered. Teachers I have worked with in Australia, the UK, Chile, and elsewhere usually attend a series of workshops

or meetings across a school year, where they can learn about doing action research, discuss their ideas, and update each other on what they are finding out.

In my experience, these teachers have hardly ever found action research unhelpful. Most have said things like: “this was the best professional development I’ve ever done” and have commented on how much their skills as teachers have improved. One of the things I have noticed over the years, however, is that they don’t always receive adequate support from their schools or colleges. This has led me to think about what role educational managers, principals, department heads, and others who supervise teachers (here, I refer to these institutional personnel as educational managers) need to play if they want to encourage good ‘contextualised’ professional development of this type. In my view, action research by teachers is much more likely to lead to quality teaching and learning than ‘one-shot’ seminars. In the rest of the article, I offer some tips about how educational managers can support teacher action research.

### **1. Create a ‘research-friendly climate’**

By this, I don’t necessarily mean that all teachers must be forced to become researchers, but that the concept of a professional teacher as one who is interested in researching and investigating what they do should be celebrated within the institution. It may be very challenging for managers and principals to think of research as part of what teachers can do, but many teachers are natural researchers and encouraging, rather than limiting, their classroom experimentation and creativity is likely to pay off in terms of improved teaching practices and student outcomes. Moreover, if educational managers prefer to consider their teachers as professionals rather than technicians or operatives, the expectation that they will be curious and active learners of teaching needs to be part of their mindset. Managers can spread a strong message that they welcome action research by teachers.

### **2. Spot opportunities to research the curriculum**

Encouraging a research climate is all very well, but managers can make this more concrete by actively identifying areas for action research that would help to improve the curriculum. For example, a teaching centre could be introducing new course books, or developing new forms of assessment or testing, or be concerned about students who are failing in one particular skill area. Principals can ask teachers or groups of teachers to volunteer to research an aspect of the curriculum they are interested in to discover what could support effective changes in practice. Teachers’ research can provide outcomes that can more confidently be incorporated into the curriculum (Snyman, 2016).

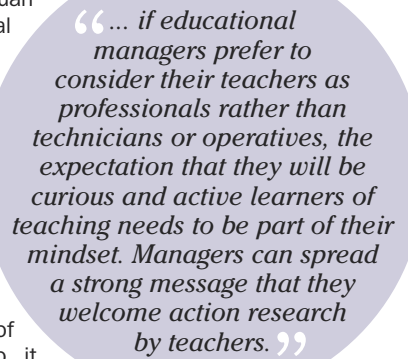
### **3. Become a learner about practitioner research**

Educational managers may or may not have had much exposure to language teaching research themselves, or see the relevance of research to teaching. Many managers and teachers operate with the assumption that research is “conducted by white-coated scientists plying their arcane trade in laboratories filled with mysterious equipment” (Nunan, 1992, p. 1). They may also consider that once a teacher is beyond the training stage and out in the ‘real world’ of teaching they should ‘forget all that theory’ and concentrate on what is practical and achievable in the classroom. This view of research is, however, to misunderstand the nature of action research, where outcomes related to practice, that enable teachers to develop their own “theories for practice” (Burns, 1996), are more relevant. Educational managers can support language teacher-researchers by familiarising themselves with some of the recent literature on action research which provides overviews

of what action research is or illustrates the significant understanding about teaching that action research brings about (Burns, 2010; Dikilitaş, 2014; Etherington & Daubney, 2017; Smith, Connelly, & Rebolledo, 2014).

#### **4. Identify a research leader or champion**

Several studies (Borg, 2013; Burns, 2000; Burton, 1992; Dikilitaş, 2014) have shown that teachers need knowledge and input about how to conduct action research if they are to make the transition from teacher to teacher-researcher. It is important for teachers to have access to a mentor who can provide guidance. One idea is for managers to approach local universities or teacher education institutes to encourage partnerships (see for example, Yuan & Lee, 2015). This form of collaboration can be beneficial for both teachers, who can receive expert advice from researchers, and researchers, whose research can become more grounded in teachers' concerns and realities. When research has become more established at the school, another approach is to have keen teacher-researchers mentor others by introducing them to the concepts and processes of action research (e.g., Haines, 2016).



*“... if educational managers prefer to consider their teachers as professionals rather than technicians or operatives, the expectation that they will be curious and active learners of teaching needs to be part of their mindset. Managers can spread a strong message that they welcome action research by teachers.”*

#### **5. Create a structured process**

Action research involves a continuing, evolving process of conducting research cycles as mentioned above. So, it cannot be completed in one or two sessions but needs a longer time scale. Managers can plan for a continued series of workshops or other types of interaction where teachers can be supported by mentors and each other over the period of the research. In my experience, a framework of approximately three workshops spaced at logical and convenient intervals across the year assists teachers to maintain the momentum of the research, but also gives them time to prepare to share it through presentations, publications, or other ways.

#### **6. Include dedicated time for research**

Conducting action research requires teachers to devote additional time to their teaching. Educational managers should consider how paid time can be built into the process. One way is to use hours that would normally be allocated to teachers anyway for professional development. Another is to provide a small amount of additional time to cover teachers' attendance at workshops or preparation for research presentations. A third way is to excuse them from (parts of) administrative meetings, if information can be accessed online or in other ways, so that they can use this time to discuss and workshop their research.

#### **7. Recognise the research teachers do**

Recognition by educational managers is extremely important to teacher-researchers, but it is not always routinely provided (see Edwards & Burns, 2016). Teachers gain a sense of their own agency in the classroom and empowerment in their workplaces when their research is publicly recognised by their managers. Recognition can take the form of integrative or instrumental recognition. Integrative recognition could mean actively using the research to improve programs or curricula, or encouraging other teachers to take up materials, resources or tools developed during the teacher's research. Instrumental recognition could involve

acknowledging research participation in promotion procedures or providing some small additional payment on completion of the research that teachers could use to purchase personal professional resources or attend conferences.

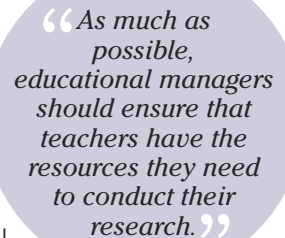
## 8. Facilitate resources for research

As much as possible, educational managers should ensure that teachers have the resources they need to conduct their research. If the institution has a library or self-study centre, it may be that some of the allocated funding can be used for teacher professional development books that link theory and practice, journals that include more practical articles, or newsletters and magazines from professional associations that outline interesting areas of English language teaching that are attracting wide interest. Teachers may also need access to equipment to support their research, such as audio or video recorders, or licenses for certain technology software for student learning. Small and regular contributions from managers for these kinds of resources not only support a research culture; they also provide further recognition that action research is worthwhile.

## 9. Encourage the dissemination of action research

Conducting action research requires energy and commitment on the part of teachers. It is very important that once the research is completed teachers are given opportunities to share it with their colleagues and others in the institution who might be interested in the outcomes. Educational managers can identify ways for teachers to present their research at an institutional level and even beyond. At the institutional level teachers can be given time to talk about their research at staff meetings or professional development events, either informally or by making structured presentations. Alternatively, the institution could encourage teachers to produce posters (preferably professional-looking ones) that could be displayed in staff rooms, corridors or on noticeboards to provide a research 'presence'.

Some teachers might prefer to make videos that are then made available on the institution's website for colleagues to view. If the institution has an in-house newsletter or journal, teachers can be encouraged to publish written accounts of their research and managers can draw the attention of these publications to their staff. Beyond the institution, managers can provide support and encouragement for teachers to attend local or regional conferences. Some managers I've worked with have even provided their teacher-researchers resources to attend international conferences, such as IATEFL.



*“As much as possible, educational managers should ensure that teachers have the resources they need to conduct their research.”*

## 10. Monitor the outcomes and benefits for the institution

One very reasonable question that educational managers might pose is: *Is action research by teachers at my institution worth the effort?* Managers can evaluate the impact of the action research on teachers by surveying them or interviewing them to get their reactions and suggestions for improvement, and to see whether they feel conducting action research is helping them to develop professionally. Another way to consider this question is to identify whether the students who have been involved in the teachers' research show improved learning outcomes, whether these be scores on tests or assessments, greater motivation and engagement, improved behaviour, or more autonomy for learning. All of these indicators should be able to tell the educational manager something about whether the teachers' research is paying off and adding to the school's success and teaching quality. One manager,

whose teaching centre introduced a program of action research two years ago, recently had this to say on the question of whether action research is worth the effort:

Our expectations have been surpassed for both teachers' professional development and the students' experience. Participants in the program say it encourages teachers to collaborate and share ideas, and connect with TESOL research and theory. Many teachers have developed their project into conference presentations, journal publications, and in-house workshops.

These flow-on effects create momentum in the staff room; the effort required may be considerable, but the benefits cannot be underestimated.

“It is very important that once the research is completed teachers are given opportunities to share it with their colleagues and others in the institution who might be interested in the outcomes.”

## Final thoughts

There has been little research in the field of English language teaching on educational managers' support for action research (see Borg, 2013 for a review of managers' responses to teacher research engagement). Recent work by Edwards (2017) has begun to shed light on this area. This is unfortunate as it is becoming clearer that the extent to which educational managers promote, recognise, and support action research has a direct impact on teachers' sense of themselves as competent researchers and empowered teachers. Manager support is likely to become much more central to discussions of teacher action research, because, despite the spread of the 'teacher as researcher' movement in English language teaching, teachers are unlikely to take up and sustain research on their practices in conditions which discourage this kind of professional development.

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# Supporting ‘quality’ in novice teacher research: Data collection and data analysis

COLIN LANKSHEAR AND MICHELE KNOBEL



## Abstract

This article describes an approach to engaging teachers as novice producers of qualitative research. It focuses on describing a range of supports put in place to help teachers enrolled in a Masters of Literacy course develop an understanding of effective data collection and analysis design and processes in producing good quality research.

## Introduction

This article describes our approach to supporting teachers enrolled in a Masters of Literacy program in acquiring some basics of becoming competent (novice) producers of qualitative research in the area of ‘new literacies’. Participants typically have had no prior experience with conducting research. The course is based on a quite formal academic view of qualitative research as a systematic, methodical, coherent, rigorous, and reflective process of inquiry and reporting that takes the form of a sustained argument – where the research findings comprise the conclusions to the argument.

Research, in this sense, aims to generate robust and defensible claims to knowledge. This means there has to be a coherent chain of reasoning that runs all the way from the research purpose and questions to the research findings; via appropriate and adequate data collection and data analysis processes that are informed by relevant theory and concepts, and subsequent discussion of analytic results that is informed by wider work in the field as well as by the study’s aims and objectives. For the research conclusions to be taken seriously, the reader/audience must be satisfied that the reported research provides sufficient grounds for believing in the *quality* of the research process. This does not necessarily entail that a reader/audience *accept* the conclusions as compelling, but they *must* be able to see and understand those points at which they agree or disagree, and the extent to which claims are warranted at each point in the argument.

In what follows, we indicate some key features of the course structure and process and provide some examples from participants’ work that illustrate how they respond to the challenge of ensuring quality at the level of data collection and data analysis.

## The course approach

This Masters of Literacy course requires participants to create a popular culture digital media artefact of a kind they have never created before (e.g., stop motion animation, movie trailer remix); document this using a range of data collection methods and strategies; analyse their data using some basic but powerful data analysis methods; write a formal research report of 5000-7000 words; and at the end of the course make a formal 30-minute presentation under formal conference conditions to their peers. We have them study their own learning and ‘making’ in order to avoid needing formal ethical clearance from the university to conduct research.

The fundamental key to the course is that it is team-based, collaborative work. This, of course, reflects the circumstances of mature real-world research activity where ‘serious’ research is undertaken by teams, rather than by individuals. From the outset, participants are working together, bringing their respective strengths – their reading and understanding of the course resources and the formal instruction sessions, their digital skills and internet savvy, their popular culture interests and knowledge, and anything they might already believe about qualitative research – to a common cause. They are welcome to interact with other teams, too; anything to help them produce the best research result possible. The course operates under two different modes: an intensive mode of ten days face-to-face work and ten of home-based reading (before and between the face-to-face meetings); and a semester-long version with three face-to-face sessions, and a month of home-based work between sessions.

Using online resources is likewise fundamental. Participants access a dedicated Google site a month prior to the course that hosts their readings and other supporting resources (e.g., lists of media production options, exemplar papers). Three main online resources are introduced in the first session: Google Docs, the Google Scholar search engine (including setting library preferences), and their university’s online library archives. Setting Google Scholar library preferences to include their university’s online library facilitates finding full text academic materials. Each team also creates a Google Doc and invites us to each document as ‘critical friends’. This role is grounded in qualitative research traditions where such friends contribute to the quality of a study by asking key questions about methods, processes, and interpretations that help researchers gain some critical distance from their work and to shore up the explicitness and justification of their methods, processes and claims (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

One key operating principle for everything done in the course is “just in time and just in place,” which is facilitated by Google tools. Feedback and suggestions, additional resources, all manner of sharing and updating, and so on, can be made available on request at point of need. As such, we do very little ‘lecturing’ on ‘how to do research’ in this course and work directly with groups as their study unfolds. In short, we set up a kind of ‘sandbox’ for learning to become qualitative researchers, with a particular eye to maximizing *quality* in research. A ‘sandbox’ suggests a safe, give-things-a-go space in which to engage in activity within parameters set by the affordances of the available resources (Gee, 2007).

As indicated above, we provide an initial ‘kit’ of resources to guide their work. This includes setting a research purpose in the form of an in-common research question: e.g., “*To what extent and in what ways might your media creating activity be understood in terms of engaging in a new literacy practice?*”; or “*What are some salient features of how you learned to create a piece of digital media?*” This ‘kit’ also includes some broad theoretical framing for their research learning: e.g., a version of social learning theory (e.g., Brown & Adler, 2008); a sociocultural conception of social practices (e.g., Reckwitz, 2002); concepts associated with new literacies (e.g., Black, 2009), etc. In addition, focused resources pertaining to how to collect written, spoken, and observed data are provided (e.g., Lankshear & Knobel, 2004), together with introductions to common forms of data analysis like coding and category development (Saldaña, 2016) and pattern matching (Fetterman, 2009). In addition, participants are told that “Google is your friend,” and at every point they are encouraged to identify additional resources to assist in all aspects of the work, and to share these.

Gee (2007) makes the point about the limited use of computing and games manuals for learning how to ‘drive’ a computer or play the game – he argues that these manuals make most sense once the game has been played. This principle applies to the direct instruction we provide in this course. We explain that the ‘metalevel’ concepts and knowledge involved in research only become clear when they are experienced in sustained, material activity. We aim to introduce technical/specialist concepts as close as possible to their point of



application in practice, and as concretely as possible, under an overarching idea of research as a *systematic* and *methodical* practice that aims to generate a *quality* result (Lankshear & Knobel, 2004; Lankshear & Knobel, 2011).

### Focus on quality in data collection, data analysis, and reporting research

Qualitative researchers have developed concepts and criteria designed to shore up confidence in the quality of the research process and the claimed results of research. They do not aim for ‘truth’ or ‘proof’ or approximations to ‘certainty’, so much as for ideals like *communicative validity*, *trustworthiness*, and *defensible interpretation*.

#### (a) Data collection and reporting

At the level of data collection this means showing how the collected data is appropriate to and sufficient for addressing the research purposes, and how this was decided. We provide participants with simple tools like a design-focused matrix (see **Table 1**) to help with study planning.

**Table 1: Data collection design matrix**

<i>Kinds of data</i>	<i>Means of data collection</i>	<i>Justification for data to be collected</i>	<i>Sources to inform and guide data collection</i>
Data needed for addressing the research purpose	What kinds of tools and methods will provide the appropriate data?	How does this kind of data address the research purpose?	Who shows how to collect these kinds of data well?

Interviews, observations, relevant artefacts, and *in situ* ‘talk throughs’ of what is being done in the moment generate data that can be cross-referenced to create multidimensional accounts of what happened. Having multiple team members collecting data at the same time, while others are working on the digital production – with participants moving fluidly in and out of these roles – heightens confidence in data quality, too.

In explicit instruction we emphasise the importance of recording speech and action digitally. In the following examples, a participant used his phone to record speech, and when the speech was too soft to record, he (re)spoke the exact words *in situ* and named the speaker. He also spoke brief observations of the context and event into the recording and noted the time of activity. These notes were included in his transcription (see **Table 2**).

**Table 2: In situ talk (collecting spoken data)**

Date and time	Transcription
11:30	[S and A and R analysing video] S - They caught one guy? R - Did they dig it up? A - They have love letters? R - Look at the fire [They watch the video three times and have a discussion] A - Should we have the same script? K - Let’s use Batman and Robin A - Ya, Lego people A - Bert and Ernie? N - Ya, thats a great idea S - Lego people? R - I have lots of Lego

This team’s fieldnotes documented written data resources (such as URLs) used in learning-on-the-go how to create stop motion animation (see **Table 3**).

**Table 3: Textual sources documented *in situ* (collecting written data)**

Time	Observations
11.55	K suggested to look up how many photos it is required to make one minute of video. R google searched the key words “number of pics for 1 sec stop motion.” R reviewed the website: <a href="http://stopmotionexplosion.com/blogs/blog/6394410-6-stop-motion-beginner-mistakes-and-how-to-avoid-them">http://stopmotionexplosion.com/blogs/blog/6394410-6-stop-motion-beginner-mistakes-and-how-to-avoid-them</a> She discovered that 12-24 “frames/sec is ideal” and shared the information with the group.

It is worth noting that this data was collected within the first three hours of these participants’ introduction to qualitative research practices.

We likewise emphasise the importance of making full and richly *descriptive* fieldnotes (see **Table 4**). We provide readings on and examples of how to write detailed fieldnotes, which include identifying time and location (e.g., to triangulate against another participant’s fieldnotes of the same events/episodes/activity).

**Table 4: Observation fieldnotes**

5 July 11.15	I got back into YouTube.com to search for Haiti, started with search ‘President Obama on Haiti’. Parts of the speech I think we can use, so I copy and paste the url into www.zamzar.com. I got error message ‘File has no extension’. I asked H and J if they got this error. They didn’t, so I went back to YouTube.com. I repeated the process, opening up a new Explorer window and it worked (code: “problem solving through messing about”; also see Ann: 7:31, 32, 33, & 34).
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Participants are required to produce a written research report, and this includes detailing and justifying their data collection activity in ways that are accurate, honest, and well-informed (see **Table 5**).

**Table 5: Overview statement of data collection approach from a final report**

Data were collected by three participants over five days ... resulting in a total of 30 hours of observations, field notes, head notes, post facto notes taken by team members individually at differing times. Field notes documented specific written details of what was occurring, what was being created, and the emotions group members had felt. Field notes involved writing descriptively, marking the time down regularly, and developing a shorthand language. [When] it was difficult to write an observation down as events were taking place, team members made ‘head notes’ and would write details as post facto notes ... as soon as possible after the observed event... Group members copied and pasted URLs of websites that were useful sources of information and took screenshots of those websites (text from Donovan, Hawley, & Whitty, 2010, p. 12).
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**(b) Data analysis and reporting**

We introduce course participants to pattern matching and a basic coding process that focuses on using *in vivo* and descriptive codes to develop categories and themes.

For example, the observation fieldnotes presented in **Table 4** above were typical of a large subset of fieldnotes coded by this team. Within the large set of data items initially coded as “problem solving,” participants subsequently identified five sub-patterns of problem solving behaviour: “Problem solving through messing about”; “Problem solving by using an affinity space”; “Problem solving through group collaboration”; “Problem solving through using a search engine”; and “Problem solving by other means” (for occasional, less frequent types, such as consulting a book, emailing someone, asking children at home).

Participants were asked to devise a system such that they could subsequently ‘point to’ the location of data samples they used in their report. So, for example, in **Table 4**, Ann notes that her fieldnotes organised as “7:31, 32, 33, and 34” are all instances of what they categorized as “Problem solving through messing about.” This provides a kind of ‘audit trail’ for readers, saying in effect, “if you would like to check out our analysis to see if you agree or not, these are the places in my fieldnotes where you could evaluate our coding and subsequent category development.”

Our final example comprises a group describing their data analysis approach in their research report (see **Table 6**). Their text recounts how they set about finding patterns in their data, and subsequently used concepts associated with a sociocultural understanding of ‘new literacies’ to assign patterns to pre-determined categories; an analytic strategy that coheres perfectly with the kind of theory-guided research they were learning to engage in.

**Table 6: A group describing their data analysis approach**

The primary [analytic] method used was pattern finding ... [where] the researcher begins with a “mass of undifferentiated ideas and behaviour, and then collects bits of information, comparing, contrasting, and sorting gross categories and minutiae” (Fetterman, 2009, p. 92) until discernible patterns emerge. We used four questions [derived from Fetterman] to guide our analysis of data:

1. What’s going on here?
2. Who is doing what?
3. Have I seen this particular event or action before? Is it significant? Why or why not?
4. What things are happening or being done more than once? What does this mean or suggest?

Applying these questions to our data ... we began to notice similarities in what we had collected. We colour coded and identified patterns as they emerged from the data. [This] was guided by our review of the literature; that is, we expected to find patterns ... that corresponded to key characteristics of what constitute new literacies (e.g., participation, collaboration, distributed knowledge). At the same time, we remained open to finding additional insights into what constitutes a new literacy practice in our data as well (Beck, Coley, Conway, Hoven, & Maynard, 2009, pp. 11–12).

Needless to say, the final reports produced have limitations. We do provide models of good quality papers from previous classes and discuss academic report writing conventions with them. However, time is short, and prior experience practically non-existent. Experienced researchers would likely disagree with many of the analytic results claimed, and with the level of sophistication of demonstrating data analysis. We would be surprised, however, if they found serious shortcomings in the quality of data collected by teams like those represented in our examples, or in their initial appreciation of what it means to aim for *quality* in their research.

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# A conversation about supporting teacher research

WILLY A. RENANDYA AND FLORA D. FLORIS



*Recent literature has acknowledged the value of teacher research as an empowering means of teacher professional development. However, to date, many teachers still remain uninformed or seem to attach little importance to classroom-based research. What are the sources of their seeming reluctance to conduct research? This article provides an explanation for some of the sources of difficulty that teachers face and offers practical suggestions for how teacher research may be supported.*

## Introduction

The call for classroom teachers to do research is getting louder by the year. Ministries of education and school administrators have been trying to encourage teachers, without much success, to do research as part of their professional development activities. The thinking behind this call is that teacher research can help teachers become more effective and reflective practitioners, which in turn would benefit their students.

We know of many teachers who are keen to do research on their own classroom, but who have not done any for various reasons. Some of the most heard reasons include lack of research skills, lack of time, limited access to relevant literature, or lack of interest in research as teachers often cannot see the link between research and teaching. The purpose of this

article is to discuss some of the difficulties that teachers encounter and suggest ways of supporting teacher research.

Instead of writing this article in an essay format, we thought our readers would appreciate a question-and-answer format, in which we will ask and respond to each other's questions about issues and concerns teachers often have about research. We hope readers will find this format more stimulating and invigorating.

But first, let's introduce ourselves.

We are what people have referred to as teacher-scholars. We both work in a university setting. Flora teaches skills courses (e.g., communication skills) and also methods courses (e.g., principles for teaching English as an International Language) in a university in Indonesia. Willy is a language-teacher educator, mostly teaching methods courses to pre-service and in-service teachers in a university in Singapore. Both of us have done pedagogical research both individually and also jointly. We have also co-authored a number of practical papers on some aspects of English Language Teaching.

## Time, resources, and other support

**Flora:** Would you agree that teachers are more interested in teaching than research?

**Willy:** Yes and no. I have seen teachers whose main interest is to develop their knowledge and skills in teaching students. Their main concern is how they can help their students acquire, maintain, and extend their students' language proficiency in the most efficient manner. They want to know more about how they can enhance their students' ability to understand spoken and written language and to use language for social and academic purposes.

But I have also met teachers who while being keen to do research, seem to have difficulties getting started. Most of them say that time is a major factor. In addition to a heavy teaching load, teachers have to do many other school-related duties that take up most, if not all, of their non-teaching time. Many consider themselves lucky if they can get through the semester alive. Not surprisingly, research is often not at the top of their to-do list. They hardly have time to keep themselves updated about recent developments in language learning and teaching, let alone setting aside a chunk of their time for a research project.

**Flora:** What can be done to support teachers who want to do research? Can't school administrators reduce their staff's workload? If they truly believe that research brings numerous benefits, then it makes sense to give teachers some time off for their research. What do you think?

**Willy:** Yes, great idea. But schools can't just give every single teacher time off for them to do research as this will create a serious staffing problem that can disrupt normal schooling activities. For a start, schools could consider giving a reduced workload to a small group of teachers (say between 10 to 15 percent); this could be a viable solution. So, say a school has a staff strength of about 20 teachers; two or three of them could be put on this reduced teaching scheme for a semester or two. Would this idea work in your institution, Flora?

**Flora:** Yes, that would solve the staffing issue. But just giving teachers time is not enough. My experience is that teachers also need other types of support. They need relevant resources to get started with their research. They need access to recent literature on ELT, which they then can use as a basis for contextualizing their own classroom-based research.

**Willy:** I understand that there is a huge body of literature on ELT. Can you give some examples of the types of literature that is most relevant for the kind of research that teachers typically do?

**Flora:** Good question and very relevant too! Teachers are normally not interested in academic research. According to Maley (2016), academic research is done by academics who do research in order to critique existing hypotheses or theories and to advance new theories about the nature of language and language learning. Academic research takes months or years to complete and involves lengthy and complex data collection and analysis. This type of research, Maley says, has no immediate applications for language teaching in the classroom. So, I am not sure if teachers will find reading the academic research literature particularly useful for their own research.

Since teachers are typically more interested in doing the kind of research that is immediately relevant for their students, I feel they should be reading pedagogically oriented research studies which they can then use as a model for their own research. Reading this type of work would also give teachers an idea about how to ask pedagogically sound research questions, how to collect useful classroom data, how to go about analysing and making sense of this data, and how to draw useful pedagogical insights from the research.

I would suggest that we should make available books and articles written by ELT scholars who are known for their ability to summarise and synthesise research findings in an accessible and teacher-friendly style of writing. Personally, I have learned a great deal from reading professional books written by Anne Burns, Christine Goh, Jack Richards, Alan Maley, and Jeremy Harmer, just to name a few.

The book you edited with Jack Richards, *Methodology in Language Teaching: An Anthology of Current Practice* (2002), is an example of the kind of book that I found useful during my early years as a novice teacher-researcher. The book covers a wide range of relevant topics in TESOL and was written in a very accessible style.

**Willy:** I am glad you found that book useful. I think teachers would also find a more recent book that I co-edited, *English Language Teaching Today: Linking Theory and Practice* (2016), informative and useful. The chapters discuss familiar topics within ELT (e.g., teaching listening, speaking, reading, and writing) in which the link between theory and practice is systematically highlighted using a set of research-based principles. For example, the chapter on extensive reading and listening contains a set of principles that can be used as a basis for conducting a small-scale research study that examines the effectiveness of an extensive reading/listening programme. Some of these principles include the following:

- students read and listen in quantity
- the reading and listening materials should be interesting and comprehensible
- teachers should provide interesting and enjoyable post-reading and listening activities
- teachers should provide ongoing support to weaker readers and listeners.

**Flora:** In many developing countries, educational institutions operate on a rather limited budget and many find that professional books or journals published by mainstream publishers are just too expensive. They may be able to purchase these books once in a while, but probably not every year. Are there online resources that you could suggest? I mean free online resources.

**Willy:** Yes, there are some really good open access journals that publish high quality articles. These journals are managed by professional associations in our field or educational institutions (usually universities). I have used articles published in these journals as references for my own research. I list some of them here:

*English Australia Journal: The Australian Journal of English Language Teaching*

– [http://www.englishaustralia.com.au/english\\_australia\\_journal.html](http://www.englishaustralia.com.au/english_australia_journal.html)

*Humanising Language Teaching* – <http://www.hltmag.co.uk/index.htm>

*Korea TESOL Journal* – <https://koreatesol.org/content/korea-tesol-journal>

*Language Education in Asia* – <http://www.leia.org>

*TEFLIN Journal* – <http://journal.teflin.org/index.php/journal>

*TESL EJ* – <http://tesl-ej.org/wordpress>

*TESL Reporter* – [http://tesol.byuh.edu/tesl\\_reporter](http://tesol.byuh.edu/tesl_reporter)

*The English Teacher* – <https://journals.melta.org.my/index.php/tef>

Can you add a few more, Flora? Or perhaps you have other useful online resources that teachers can use for their research?

**Flora:** Yes, here are a few more:

*English Teaching: Practice and Critique* –

<https://edlinked.soe.waikato.ac.nz/research/journal/index.php?id=1>

*TESL Canada Journal* – <http://teslcanadajournal.ca/index.php/tesl>

*The CATESOL Journal* – <http://www.catesoljournal.org>

In addition to journals, teachers can also check the websites of well-known scholars in our field, who often put their works online. Some of the websites I often go to when I need references include the following:

Stephen Krashen – <http://www.sdkrashen.com>

Jack Richards – <https://www.professorjackrichards.com>

Paul Nation – <https://www.victoria.ac.nz/lals/about/staff/paul-nation>

I am sure these online resources will come in handy for our budding teacher-researchers. Are there any other types of support that teachers would need to get started with their research?

**Willy:** A refresher course might be useful, I would think. But the course content will need to be customized so as to meet the needs of teachers who will soon be doing a practice-oriented type of research. Unlike academic research, which normally begins with an extensive review of the literature to identify a research gap, pedagogically oriented research begins with a practical problem that teachers want to solve.

One important topic in the refresher course could be on how to identify practical language learning/teaching problems and how to turn these into workable research questions. Here are some examples of practical classroom problems that teachers can examine via research:

- My students seem to be on task during my lessons but their performance on the mid-term test was below my expectations. What are some of the things I can do to increase my students' level of engagement so that they can learn more from my lessons?
- My students do not speak much in my speaking class. Is it because: (a) the topic is not interesting? (b) the task is too challenging? (c) they don't have the language to express their ideas? or (d) they don't feel comfortable working in groups?

**Flora:** How about educational authorities? Is there anything they can do to support teacher research?

**Willy:** Yes, I think so. They can for example provide a small amount of funding for teacher research. This can be used to pay for the work done by a research assistant during the data collection and analysis stage of the research. As we know, classroom data (e.g., video-recorded lessons) take many hours to transcribe and analyse and teachers do not have the luxury of time to do this. So, having a research assistant to do this work is a big help for teachers.

In Singapore, the Ministry of Education goes one step further and has developed a research-mentoring scheme for school teachers. Teachers can apply for funding for their research and, if successful, they are then assigned a research supervisor (usually a professor teaching at the National Institute of Education) whose job is to provide ongoing support throughout the duration of the research project. I have served as research supervisor for a number of English teachers and found the partnership to be mutually beneficial. The teachers get to learn about doing classroom-based research more systematically and I get to understand the kind of problems they encounter in their teaching and how these problems can be addressed (or solved) by research.

## Disseminating teacher research

**Flora:** Once the research is done, would you encourage teachers to write up their research findings and get these published in a journal? What are the pros and cons here?

**Willy:** Yes, that's a very good option. It is an excellent way to share research findings with other teachers working in different places but facing similar problems. But teachers also need support here; finding the *right* journals for their research is not always straightforward. I have written a practical paper entitled "Choosing the Right International Journal in TESOL



and Applied Linguistics” (Renandya, 2014) that offers practical tips on how to choose the most suitable journal for our research work.

For teacher research, I would suggest that teachers consider submitting their manuscripts to practice-oriented journals. These are journals that publish both practical teaching ideas and research papers written by classroom teachers. There are two benefits. First, the readers of these journals are teachers, so we are sharing our research findings with the right target readers. Second, the rejection rate of practice-oriented journals is lower compared to that of academic journals, so the chance of our manuscript being accepted is higher.

For beginning teacher-researchers, I would suggest that they consider sending their manuscripts to magazines such as *Humanising Language Teaching*, *Modern English Teacher* (<https://www.modernenglishteacher.com>), *English Teaching Professional* (<https://www.etprofessional.com>), or *The Language Teacher* (<http://jalt-publications.org/lt/>). These magazines publish short practical and research articles, and have a wide, international readership.

For more experienced teacher-researchers, they could consider *ELT Journal* (<https://academic.oup.com/eltj>) and *RELC Journal* (<http://journals.sagepub.com/home/rel>). The latter has a special section called ‘Innovation in Practice’, which publishes short teacher-research papers of about 3,000 words. This section is particularly suitable for teacher research reports. Both are well established mainstream language education journals with a wide international readership. The rejection rates of these journals, however, are quite high (roughly about 95 percent rejection rate).

**Flora:** I agree those are good teaching journals. In fact, I have just completed a small-scale classroom-based research project exploring how technology can be used to enhance the teaching of oral skills. I have written up the findings and I’m ready to submit the paper to the ‘Innovation in Practice’ section of *RELC Journal*.

I have one piece of advice for teachers who plan to submit their papers to journals. They need to exercise caution when selecting journals. There are hundreds out there; many publish good quality papers and are managed by dedicated scholars in our field. However, there are some that publish low quality papers and are managed by irresponsible individuals whose main goal is to enrich themselves. They accept manuscripts for publication based on the authors’ ability to pay publication fees and not based on the standard blind review process that good journals conduct.

It is not always easy to distinguish good from bad journals. To the uninitiated, bad journals (also known as predatory journals) may look legitimate. My advice to novice teacher-researchers is for them to consult their more senior/experienced colleagues about how to avoid sending their manuscripts to bad journals. One good source that I often consult is Jeffrey Beall’s list of predatory publishers and journals (<https://beallslist.weebly.com>). Another useful source is (<https://predatoryjournals.com/journals>). I would just stay away from journals listed on these two websites. However, it does not mean that journals not listed in there are automatically good. The lists on these two websites are quite comprehensive, but new predatory journals keep appearing almost every month, if not every week. So we need to do our own research when choosing our publication outlet.

**Willy:** In addition to journals, what other options are there for teachers to share their research findings? Is it a good idea to share your research at conferences?

**Flora:** Conferences can be a very good place to share your research with other people. You can present your research in a parallel session. This is a formal session where you speak for about 20 minutes to a group of participants about your research, describing your research objectives and research questions, your research methods and the key findings of your

research. You then conclude with a discussion of possible pedagogical implications for your research. The presentation usually ends with a brief Q&A session. The Q&A is a useful part of your presentation as you get to hear what people think about your research, i.e., if there is any flaw in your research methodology, if your interpretation of the research data is too subjective or biased, and what kinds of follow-up research studies could be conceptualised to address some of the problems in your just completed research.

One cautionary note: do avoid presenting at conferences organised by profit-making companies as such conferences tend to be poorly organised and offer low-quality submitted papers. I normally participate in conferences organised by professional associations in our field (e.g., CamTESOL, VietTESOL, ASIATEFL), by reputable universities or educational institutions (e.g., RELC Conference), or by Ministries of Education.

**Willy:** Personally, I find a workshop session more useful for the teacher-researcher because the focus is more on application. Also, the time allotted to a workshop session is usually longer, about 60 minutes, which would allow the teacher-researcher to share pedagogical insights from the research with the workshop participants through hands-on activities. For example, after completing a study on the use of cooperative learning strategies to enhance more student interactions in a speaking class, the teacher-researcher could discuss specific cooperative learning strategies that promote greater interaction and those that do not. Afterwards, workshop participants could be invited to reflect on their own practice and suggest ways of making cooperative learning strategies more effective and applicable in their teaching contexts. Thus, both parties can learn a great deal from the rich discussions during the workshop.

**Flora:** Presenting in a conference is great, but some teachers may not afford the luxury to participate in a conference. Taking time off from teaching can be a problem due to teachers' tight teaching schedules. Also, not all teachers can secure conference funding from their schools or institutions.

**Willy:** Yes, I understand what you mean. Fortunately, technology has enabled people to communicate with each other at minimal or no cost involved. We can encourage teachers to use social media to share their research with other language teaching professionals from around the world. I know of a number of teacher development groups on Facebook where people share teaching ideas and research insights in a friendly and productive manner. I myself am an active member and administrator of a number of such groups. Here are some language teacher development forums that I would recommend to both language teachers and researchers:

Teacher Voices – <https://www.facebook.com/groups/teachervoices>  
ELT in Vietnam – <https://www.facebook.com/groups/196442957356639>  
KOTESOL – <https://www.facebook.com/groups/kotesol>  
TESL-EJ – <https://www.facebook.com/groups/teslej>

These are professionally moderated online communities managed by dedicated language teaching professionals in our field. Membership is voluntary and free of charge. Members can write posts on almost anything related to our language teaching profession. In Teacher Voices, for example, members have shared useful teaching resources available on the web, including extensive lists of references on various aspects of language teaching (e.g., <https://www.tirfonline.org/resources>).

## Teachers' engagement in research

**Flora:** There is one last question I would like to ask you about teacher research. Do you think that research is something that ALL teachers should do?

**Willy:** If by research you mean formal academic research of the kind that you read in academic journals and valued by the academic research community, then the answer is no. Freeman (1998) says that the teacher's main job is to help students learn in the most effective manner, not to do high profile research and generate new knowledge about teaching to be shared with the public. Researching, documenting, and generating public knowledge about teaching is the job of academic researchers who work in research centres or universities.

Having said that I must hasten to say that most teachers are engaged in research most of the time. When they reflect on their just completed lesson, thinking back about what they have done right (or wrong) and making plans about how they can improve on their teaching, they are in fact doing 'research' on their classroom. When they invite a colleague to observe their lesson and then discuss the strengths and weaknesses of their lesson, they are researching their teaching. This type of teacher research has been referred to as 'teacher inquiry'. Writing about the differences between academic research and teacher inquiry research, Medgyes (2017) says that the latter is concerned with real classroom problems and how to solve them, rather than about developing broad theories about language teaching.

In a large-scale international study on teacher's conceptions of research, Borg (2009) reports that close to 55% of the teachers in his survey conducted research at least sometimes. Their reasons for doing research were associated more with the definition of teacher inquiry, such as finding more effective teaching methods, solving practical teaching problems, and engaging in professional development. This figure is quite encouraging, although I would like to see more teachers engaging in inquiry research. I like how Medgyes (2017) defines what a teacher inquirer is: "a professional capable of analysing their work on their own and exchanging their knowledge and experience with fellow teachers" (p. 491).

## Concluding remarks

We believe that teachers are capable of doing the kind of research that can help them become more effective and reflective practitioners. The rather low percentage of teachers doing formal classroom inquiry is probably more to do with contextual factors such as lack of time or lack of support, rather than factors to do with teacher interest or capacity. As we have shown in our conversation above, teachers seem to be doing informal and ongoing research, reflecting on their teaching, and thinking about how they can design and deliver more effective and engaging language lessons.

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# 3

## PART THREE:

# Embedding research into professional practice

*Built into action research is the proviso that, if as a teacher I am dissatisfied with what is already going on, I will have the confidence and resolution to attempt to change it. I will not be content with the status quo... .*

McNiff, J. (1988). *Action research: Principles and practice* (p. 5). London, UK: Routledge.

## “Generating knowledge for themselves”: Kathleen Graves on teacher research



*Some teachers might have certain misconceptions about research that make them see it as alien to their professional identity and practices. In this interview, Kathleen Graves challenges these misconceptions and discusses how teacher research can help practitioners to explore their questions about teaching and learning and share their knowledge with their peers.*

***Over the past few years, the topic of teacher research has been given increasing attention in the literature and at international ELT conferences. How do you explain this rise in popularity?***

I wonder if it's cumulative; in other words, whether it's the work of many years of trying to foreground teacher knowledge as an important part of the fabric of the knowledge of our profession. So, I think its recognition is probably long overdue.

***Does the fact that more academics and professional researchers are giving attention to the value of teacher research imply that more teachers are engaging in it?***

I would imagine that academics are basing their work on studies done by teachers. For example, the work that Donald Freeman has done on teacher research looks at the idea of developing a question, gathering data, and interpreting it. What's interesting is the idea of making teacher research public, or that somehow it isn't just contained within the classroom, or within the teacher's sphere of understanding, or that of the students' if the teacher is sharing the research with their students. I think that's the crucial link: making teacher knowledge come from teachers and not just from the academics who write about teachers. There are different fora for teachers to make their knowledge public, for example, presenting at conferences and blogging.

***One criticism that is sometimes levelled at academics is the way they have imposed their definition of research on teachers and encouraged them to do that kind of research in their own context. What are your thoughts on this?***

If you take at the core the idea of having a question that you want to get some data to find out what possible answers there are, the process for both teachers and academics is similar. For teachers the question often is, "What happens when I do this?" or "What happens when I don't do this?" This is followed by getting the data for doing it, finding ways of interpreting it, and then

thinking about the findings and implications. If you take that as the core of what a teacher does and what an academic researcher does – perhaps with different kinds of tools, modes of analysis, and constraints as to what constitutes a research question – I think you have basically the same process. So, I'm not sure that the definition of research has been imposed on teachers so much as the conditions under which and how research should be conducted. The idea that research has to involve statistics or that you need to add so much into it takes away from what teachers want to actually find out.

***Some people believe that research can be democratised even further by opening up the construct and enabling other kinds of activity to be considered as research; for example, reflective practice. What's your opinion on this?***

I think there's something at the core and then there are different ways of enacting each of the processes involved in research. Research writ large – the idea of having a hypothesis and being able to generalise – is not suitable for teachers who might need a very specific application of research. I think the core of research is available to everybody. So, I'm not sure that it's about democratising it – especially if you accept that there's a set of core processes – so much as recognising that it is something that teachers can do in a systematic way.

***Does it always have to be systematic for it to be research?***

There's a system to it. Can you gather data without a question? Maybe the components need to be there but the way in which you work with them doesn't follow one specific cycle. There's certainly a norm and a classic way of doing and presenting research, but I think research can probably be much freer for teachers. For example, a literature review might not be essential for someone doing teacher research.

***What is the value of teachers engaging in research?***

What it allows teachers to do is to stand back from their teaching and to see it in a different light because they are trying to get a perspective on something or a question that has emerged from their practice. As part of their practice, they don't necessarily need to answer this question. But research is another way of generating knowledge for themselves. Most teacher-preparation programs don't train teachers on how to do research; they mainly train them how to become good practitioners. However, research allows teachers to take a different stance. They become learners of what they're doing as well as the protagonists of it.

***What are some of the challenges that inhibit teachers from engaging in research?***

Self-concept is one of them. Teacher and researcher are not seen as part of the same identity. There's also the idea that research is something with a capital 'R'. Some teachers conceive of research as consisting of something that is found in a journal, involves statistics, and is generalisable. Such teachers may see research as separate from them. Overcoming this challenge involves understanding what it means to be a researcher of your own practice, even though it doesn't necessarily have to be of your own practice. Understanding that research is a possible part of your identity as a teacher is important.

***We're doing this interview at a conference, at which there was a pre-conference event focusing on research literacy. What kind of support do teachers require in order for them to develop the necessary skills to engage in research?***

For me research literacy is not only about knowing how to design and deploy a research instrument. Methodology is only one of the processes involved in research. I would be worried if we were to look at research literacy as consisting of training teachers to use research instruments that might not really serve their needs.

### ***How would you support teachers' research literacy?***

I would support them by helping them to develop a stance of inquiry that enables them to ask questions about their practice or about their profession. I would start from the idea that one can ask questions: "What happens when...? Why does this work? Why does this happen?" Also, I would help them understand what researchable questions are and to think about what data one would need to gather in order to answer a question. There's also the process of starting to see patterns in the data so that it can be useful to whatever the inquiry is.

### ***This conference is organised by a teacher association. Do you think such conferences are being used as a platform for the dissemination of teacher research?***

I do. I think it's one avenue for teachers to make public what they've learnt about their teaching. In that respect, conferences are extremely valuable for teachers, both in terms of taking on the public persona of someone who has something to share and also to learn from fellow teachers. Conferences organised by teacher associations are extremely important in making teacher knowledge public.

### ***What other avenues are there?***

Depending on how it's managed, a real learning organisation allows people to learn from each other. I think it's important that schools institute ways for teachers to share their knowledge within the school itself. There are also teacher publications, such as newsletters. In the work that I've done on curriculum design, the impetus for me to start writing about it was to bring teachers' voices into the discourse because they were pretty much absent. All of the work that I've done has involved practitioners sharing their understandings and their processes. When teachers write about their experiences, other teachers can see themselves in what their colleagues are talking about. Electronic media offers teachers huge opportunities in this regard.

### ***What is the role of teacher associations in helping teachers to engage in research and to develop the necessary literacy to do so?***

By means of their conferences and events, teacher associations can provide teachers with a form of initiation into the sharing of research. One of the challenging things is how to find a productive format for teachers to be able to share their knowledge or their questions so that it doesn't become a complaints session. Finding good structures for teachers to get together and share their knowledge is one means by which teacher associations can help.

**DANIEL XERRI**

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# Action research: Helping you and your learners get to the heart of the matter

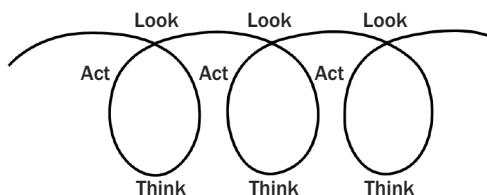
LYNN WILLIAMS-LEPPICH



## What is action research?

Action research can be usefully defined as “a specific method of conducting research by professionals and practitioners with the ultimate aim of improving practice” (Koshy, 2010, p. 1). In educational contexts, it is a method of teacher inquiry that arises out of, and has direct applicability to, day-to-day classroom teaching. It is characterised by changes made following (and in part, during) phases of action, evaluation, and reflection. Though conducted by individuals, it is fundamentally participatory in that it seeks to include a variety of voices and commentators working towards a shared goal. Lastly, it involves a situation-based exploration of learning and teaching and, as such, has direct relevance for ongoing classroom work. In short, action research addresses practical problems; generates knowledge; enacts change; is participatory; and is a cyclical process (Koshy, 2010, p. 33).

These guiding principles appear either explicitly or can be implicitly understood in a range of graphic representations of the action research process. See, for example, Stringer’s Action Research Helix below (reproduced in Mills, 2011, p. 7):



Source: Stringer, E. (2004). *Action research in education* (p. 12). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.

## Who can do action research?

Mills (2011) argues that action research in educational contexts essentially involves “developing the *professional disposition* of teachers, that is, encouraging teachers to be continuous learners – in their classrooms and in their practice” (p. 8). Osterman and Kottkamp (1993, p. 46) argue that any teacher can do action research because:

1. everyone needs professional growth opportunities.
2. all professionals want to improve.
3. all professionals can learn.
4. all professionals are capable of assuming responsibility for their own professional growth and development.
5. people need and want information about their own performance.
6. collaboration enriches professional development.



## Classroom teachers as researchers?

Why not? Who better than teachers to be actively investigating what goes on in a classroom? Teachers know the curriculum inside out, are familiar with a vast array of published and online materials, and engage in regular exchange about methods. Crucially, teachers also know the class – that is, they can, for example, fairly intuitively pitch a lesson at the right level, offer ongoing support or extras to learners known to need these, and hazard a useful guess as to which learners will be ready to participate at which stage in a class discussion.

*“... action research addresses practical problems; generates knowledge; enacts change; is participatory; and is a cyclical process ...”*

Teachers base these decisions on valuable diagnostic information gleaned through listening to individual learners engage in dialogue, checking answers to tasks in class, and evaluating written work – i.e., through being present and being involved, and through interacting with learners and caring about their progress. Teachers are continually exposed to information that helps them to shape a lesson in an ideal way and which, in the long-term, can help a class to systematically address difficulties and challenges.

Teachers involved in this cycle or loop can probably feel very satisfied with the level of interaction (teacher-learner, learner-learner, written, oral) and feedback (formative, summative) going on. And yet, there are still bound to be little issues that niggle. For example, “*Why do the two learners at the back chat so much? Are they bored? Is it all too easy for them? How can I get them ‘on task’ and involved in the lesson?*” Or, “*Why don’t learners ask if they fail to understand a task instruction? What can I do about that?*” Questions like these form the ideal jumping-off point for an action research investigation and, by the same token, action research offers the ideal strategy to investigate precisely questions like these.

## How can teacher-researchers collect useful information?

Brookfield (1995) suggests that teachers can meaningfully jumpstart reflection on classroom proceedings by engaging with their own learning and teaching ‘autobiography’ through the use of various tools and strategies, including keeping a teaching log, filming a classroom sequence, and peer observation, amongst others.

Another helpful approach could be for teachers to examine classroom learning from the learners’ perspective. As Brookfield (1995) comments, “[o]f all the pedagogic tasks teachers face, getting inside students’ heads is one of the trickiest. It is also one of the most crucial” (p. 92). Methods which might be useful here are student learning journals, ‘letters to successors’ (in which learners write to fictional students who could be in the teacher’s class the next year and represent their take on their classroom learning experience), as well as drawing learner attention to the curriculum and collecting their thoughts on how certain topics and tasks have been implemented. Learners might also complete a so-called critical incident questionnaire (CIQ), which asks for their thoughts on such issues they felt most engaged or distracted them during recent lessons.

Involving learners in this reflective process can help teachers identify potential areas for change, by drawing their attention to any perceived or real problems before they become more serious. It also gives teachers the opportunity to show appreciation for the learners’ perspective on classroom proceedings and to take this seriously. The information gleaned can usefully serve to better shape classroom sequences with more or less immediate effect and also help teachers develop their classroom skills.

## What should teacher-researchers be aware of?

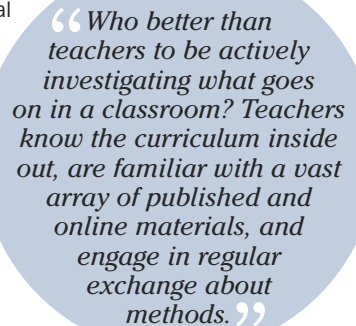
Teachers embarking on an action research project need to do so with the confidence that they can effect change. An acknowledgement that support might be necessary – whether in the form of initial encouragement, moral support, IT support, or time resources – is also essential. Furthermore, teachers will want to pay attention to the established and accepted learning culture of a school, as well as bear in mind that the outcome must benefit learners. Last but not least, a dose of belief, hopefulness, and optimism will serve teachers well in any action research exploration!

Importantly, I would personally argue that action research does not need to be conducted in a hugely formalised or institutionalised set-up. For teachers beginning with concepts of action research and wanting to test the water, a small-scale, manageable project is an ideal starting point. At a later point, it might be interesting to share results with colleagues or make any findings public (for example, by publishing these in a newsletter or presenting them in a workshop).

Overall, however, action research functions essentially on an immediate, local, and ultimately altruistic level and seek to improve learning in a clearly defined setting and with a clearly defined group of learners. So, as Mills (2011) puts it, “action researchers don’t need to worry about the generalizability of findings because they are not seeking to define ultimate truths” (p. 118).

It is quite possible that teacher-researchers will generate findings and come to conclusions that might have wider applicability. In this case, and providing they feel ready, sharing the outcomes of a project makes abundant sense. This can have advantages all round – colleagues benefit from the findings, a professional exchange of ideas occurs, a dynamic for identifying areas for possible change ensues, and a framework, however informal, comes about which fosters commitment and delivery of results within a team.

Sharing valuable results will be an important factor for teacher-researchers so that others can benefit too. Mills (2011), however, highlights a few issues that define action research *because* of its sensibly local, immediate, infinitely manageable, and sometimes informal nature. He cautions that teacher-researchers should “be aware of personal bias” (notice that his formulation is not “beware”, i.e., consciously steer away from, but rather simply “be aware”), and that subjective interpretations are likely to arise in such a situation-bound exploration of classroom learning. Identifying critical friends to guide the process and knowing – for yourself – when you are ready to share any findings are also important aspects. Lastly, Mills (2011) warns against being “evangelical” (p. 151) about any findings and interpretations.



*“Who better than teachers to be actively investigating what goes on in a classroom? Teachers know the curriculum inside out, are familiar with a vast array of published and online materials, and engage in regular exchange about methods.”*

## How can teacher-researchers keep it manageable?

With action research being the ultimate localised, immediate, and applicable strategy to effect classroom change, the best approach for teachers starting out on this track seems, to me, to be a pragmatic one. Choose an area of investigation that interests and motivates you. If you’ve read this far and are perhaps consequently already considering a small-scale action research project, it’s quite possible that you already have your question! It has been bothering you, for example, that not everyone participates equally in discussions and you’d

*“... teachers can meaningfully jumpstart reflection on classroom proceedings by engaging with their own learning and teaching ‘autobiography’ through the use of various tools and strategies, including keeping a teaching log, filming a classroom sequence, and peer observation, amongst others.”*

like to find out why. Or, you’ve read about the opportunities presented by peer feedback and wonder whether gradually introducing activities in this area would benefit your learners in their writing processes. Consider your action research question as a way of getting to the bottom of an issue, problem, or question that directly impacts your teaching.

Moreover, see the action as ongoing and don’t concern yourself (at least not initially) with formalised data collection. As Mills (2011) notes, the very dynamic nature of teaching necessitates that teachers make many changes to instruction during the course of a day based on the formative feedback (data) collected as an integral part of the teaching process... Often... data are collected intuitively and informally in non-invasive ways. It is such a normative aspect of teaching that we take it for granted. As teachers we have been programmed to collect, analyze, and interpret data quickly and efficiently so we can suggest ‘findings’ and take necessary ‘actions’ (remediation, re-teaching, related material, extension activities) that enable learning to proceed in a connected fashion (p. 160).

In short, as a teacher you are bound to already be doing many of the things action research advocates, be they gathering diagnostic information from learner assessments, realising and making a mental note of the difficulties those few students have in expressing themselves orally and wondering how you can help them, or debating whether to choose a different approach to vocabulary practise in the next few months and, if so, which.

## **What are the challenges?**

Some teachers may understandably be hesitant to conduct action research for a variety of reasons. The concept might be entirely new and therefore brings with it all the insecurities associated with venturing into new territory. A (perceived or real) lack of resources, such as time or opportunities for professional exchange, can also hold teachers back. Furthermore, teachers might question the ultimate added value of such endeavours, wondering too how to deal with accepting any uncomfortable (home) truths that crystallise during the research process, or concluding that a class or department or school might be sceptical of, or even actively resist, change.

At this juncture it is worth pointing out that action research can be conducted in a very informal, small-scale, and low-key manner, simply for the benefit of improved work in a particular classroom. Change can then be instigated bottom-up, and teachers can communicate their findings in informal exchange with colleagues rather than in any kind of formalised reporting session.

## **Why does action research matter?**

As I have argued above, action research does not need, in my view, to be a grand undertaking in any way, shape, or form. At the outset, it might even be more

*“Teachers who explore their own classroom work with a view to enhancing it and then effect necessary or advisable changes are – whether knowingly or unknowingly, whether formally or informally – conducting research in their own way. This research has direct relevance and applicability, and they are thereby making a difference right where it matters.”*

a question of adopting a particular mindset than anything else. Teachers who, however subconsciously, reflect on what is happening in their classroom and actively look for solutions to problems and variations to established routines are, I would argue, already engaged in action research, no matter how small-scale the investigation seems to be on the surface.

Teachers who explore their own classroom work with a view to enhancing it and then effect necessary or advisable changes are – whether knowingly or unknowingly, whether formally or informally – conducting research in their own way. This research has direct relevance and applicability, and they are thereby making a difference right where it matters.

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# Researching in your own voice: Making the research leap

JANE SPIRO



## Abstract

This article suggests teachers move through stages of alienation, social acculturation, and ownership as they become research writers. This view is verified by 50 teachers who perceived research writing as less authentic than professional writing. This article describes a writing programme scaffolding the writing leap from alienation to ownership.

## Introduction

This article tracks the stages of change as teachers make the leap from professional to research writing. These stages are conceptualised as firstly, alienation and distance from the research culture; secondly, acculturation and socialisation; and finally, participation in and ownership of the new culture. The article shows how these stages from alienation to ownership might be facilitated by drawing mindfully on teacher experiences of the research writing leap, and examples of successful research writing as tools for development. In so doing, we address a core concern amongst teachers that they communicate their own practitioner understandings in a voice that is authentic and meaningful to them and other practitioners.

### 1. From alienation to ownership: The writing journey

#### 1.1 *Research writing as an alien culture*

Research into doctoral journeys reveals the challenges as postgraduate students 'imagine' their move into academic careers (McAlpine, Amundsen, & Jazvak-Martek, 2010). In this imagining, they perceive not only a writing leap from current to future target writing, but also a mismatch between their own personal values and academic values (North 2005; Golde & Dore 2001; Gaff 2002). It is not only content, but the way it is communicated which is experienced as alien. Surface discourse features and textual patterns are not only stylistic choices, but choices which imply underlying approaches to knowledge and values (North, 2005; Nesi & Gardner, 2012). If these values are felt to be unknown, or not owned, the injunction to match a journal or academy house style becomes the imposition of an alien writing 'self' which sits uncomfortably, and feels inauthentic (Ivanic, 1998).

#### 1.2 *Journey into research writing: Learning as socialisation*

The journey, then, is not one that can be smoothed by imitation and surface learning. Learning surface 'tricks' and conventions is not the same as understanding the culture which underlies these conventions and internalising them as one's own. Austin (2002) describes the need to prepare future academic faculty as a process of socialisation. This socialisation recognises that movement into academic roles is social change, as with any move from one culture into another. To do this successfully is not only a private journey of discovery, but one that requires engagement with others, participation, and interaction; learning is thus 'culturally shaped' (Sfard & Prusak, 2005). Yet the 'tribal' conventions of an academic

discipline are often so unconsciously internalised that they are unexplained by the insider and inscrutable to the outsider (Becher, 1994). The newly arrived researcher thus might approach the academic culture as an ethnographer understanding a new tribe. This process entails interacting with others, learning through trial and error, and ‘noticing’ what others do and what leads to success and integration.

### 1.3 Finding a place as a research writer: Learning as explaining systems

Knowing the systems, and the differences between them, can be a liberating tool. Nesi and Gardner (2012) unpack the characteristics of student writing awarded a 2:1 and above, across disciplines, and note the patterns specific to subject disciplines and academic writing genres (such as essays, research papers, reflective diaries). These disciplinary differences might manifest themselves in apparently small surface features, such as choices of pronouns, verb forms, or citation strategies (Bruce, 2008; Hyland, 2009). Yet these choices reveal the relative importance of the researcher and the researched, how far claims can be made, what constitutes evidence, even what knowledge actually means (Hyland, 2002; Wigglesworth & McKeever 2010). ‘Noticing’ these surface features and recognising their ‘deep’ structure has the chance of helping the newcomer uncrack the academic writing code.

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In the study by Russell and Yañez (2002), non-specialists in an Irish history course overcame alienation from the discipline when they were helped “to see the textual pathways (genre systems) of specialist discourse” and when they realised that this knowledge actually built useful skills (Russell & Yañez 2002, p. 331). Making generic and disciplinary patterns transparent not only explains success (North, 2005), but also provides the resources to ‘join in’ and make a contribution to the community.

## 2. Joining the research culture: Teacher perceptions and the learning process

### 2.1 Research writing as an alien culture: Teacher perceptions

In exploring where teachers start in making the journey from teacher-writer to teacher-researcher, 50 teachers engaged in part-time research development programmes between 2014 and 2017 were invited to share their writing histories. Their common starting point was three or more years of experience in education, as school leaders, curriculum leaders, teachers, and teaching assistants. Their common end goal was an award from a UK post-1992 university requiring a thesis demonstrating research capability at either MA or doctoral level. The task was to:

- describe the different kinds of writing you have engaged in through your education and professional life: for example, practice papers, lesson plans, notes for newsletters, reports, essays
- explain what this reveals about your own preparedness for research writing as you see it currently: what will be familiar to you, what will be new to you, what are the areas you will need to work with, what are your areas of concern?

Teachers in these writing histories described the following kinds of writing typical within their working week:

- worksheets, handouts, project booklets, newsletters and short presentations for colleagues, student profiles and case studies for teaching observations (ID08)
- lesson notes, to-do lists, TES (Times Educational Supplement) clippings, team teaching with colleagues, notes from CPD courses, thoughts about the learners, and reflections on sessions and feedback (ID09)

In spite of these many writing roles, 21 mentioned the gap between the writing they had done thus far, as a professional, and their perception of research writing.

*“I discovered there was a massive void in my vocabulary” (ID16).*

*“passive voice was not something I would encounter around my communications in East London” (ID28).*

*“To my dismay some of the grammatical constructions I had proudly cherished as evidence of my language aptitude turned out to be irrelevant in academia. I had to relearn English by learning to write academically” (ID17).*

It was possible, in these narratives, to identify three core myths about research writing. These myths were all perceived to be blocks to confidence and ownership of the research writing process. The first, perhaps most damaging myth, related to the view that “becoming a researcher means leaving your practitioner self behind” (ID32). The research endeavour was experienced as actually contradictory to the mission of being a teacher.

1. There is a large gap between professional and academic writing.
2. Changing your writing style or text type entails changing your whole identity.

The second broad area related to the gulf between academic and professional writing, with academic writing seen as somehow less honest, less authentic, and more rule-bound than the other kinds of professional writing, and with ‘rules’ controlled by an invisible insider.

3. Only academic writing abides by conventions.
4. Following conventions leaves no room for personal voice.
5. There are rigid rules about academic writing which someone somewhere is closely controlling.

Since academic writing was perceived by most to be unfamiliar, the more familiar writing styles were seen as ‘easy’ and less guided by underlying conventions.

6. Writing reflectively thus frees you of rules and conventions.
7. Writing more informally is also writing more honestly.

These myths complement those described in other learning contexts, such as the doctoral students “at cross purposes” in the research of Golde and Dore (2001), or the Irish history students in the research of Russell and Yañez (2002) alienated by lecturer discourse. What helped in the current research was the chance for newly arrived research writers to recognise these blocks and realise they are shared by others along a wide spectrum that includes both first and second language writers, newcomers to research, and those with more experience.

*Journey into research writing: A teaching strategy*

In the writing programme now being described at the post-UK university, these core myths were reframed as tools for learning.

**Myth 1:** If there is a gulf between teachers and researchers, how can teachers become researchers and at the same time remain true to what they value and the questions they wish to ask and answer?

Novice researchers were asked to review the reading that had influenced them as professionals and helped to shape their practice and beliefs, and to expand this into reading recommended on academic booklists (Spiro, 2014). Each novice researcher was asked to identify at least one journal, paper, or cluster of papers, which modelled the writing they valued. Across 50 teachers on the programme, some were able instantly to identify journals that shared research in a way that was meaningful to them; others needed the recommendations of others; and all, by the end of the review process, found teacher-researchers in the public domain whose writing not only resonated with them, but provided a template for how they might want to write in the future.

**Myth 2:** If professional writing appears to be more honest and personal, where are the examples of research writing which is equally honest, practical, and personal and how can I follow this example?

The novice researchers were then invited to explore the academic culture of these chosen publications by looking at five contextual aspects, also identified in guidelines about targeted writing for journals (Murray, 2009; Thomson & Kamler, 2012).

- The Editorial Board or publisher: Who has validated the publication? Are they practitioners/ researchers/professionals valued by you?
- Author guidelines: Who is being invited to contribute and do you consider yourself one of these potentially?
- Editorial/journal 'pitch': How does the journal describe itself to readers? Are its core values and goals made clear and are these congruent with your own?
- The contents page: What are the typical topics? Are these relevant to you?
- The article types: Letters, book reviews, editorial, research articles, practice papers

These initial explorations aimed to answer the question: Where will I find examples of writing that is congruent with my own beliefs and values? What are the characteristics of these settings? What do I need to know in order to participate?

**Myth 3:** If research writing appears to be bound by invisible rules, how can these rules be made transparent? Where do they come from and who 'polices' them?

Appreciating where target writing appears and who the community is that validates it is a starting point, but equally important, is knowing how to turn this writing into a tool for development. The student reader-writers were invited to analyse articles in their chosen journal, drawing on five analytical tools well trialled in the literature, for example by Hyland (2002, 2009), Lillis (1999), Swales (1990), and North (2005).

- Where is 'I': how often, and in what ways, does the author refer to him/herself?
- Citation: how often, and in what ways, does the author refer to the work of others?
- Moves: how is information structured? What comes first/second/third and how is this flagged up?

*“Appreciating where target writing appears and who the community is that validates it is a starting point, but equally important, is knowing how to turn this writing into a tool for development.”*



- Given and new: what information is assumed to be known by the reader (e.g., unexplained jargon or acronyms) and what is presented as new (e.g., defined, explained, repeated)
- Claims: are claims presented as indisputable, or are they 'hedged' (e.g., by using modals such as may, might, should, it is possible that...)

These five tools for analysis revealed, for example, whether the author is or is not a visible agent of their research; whether literature is used to support claims, or as 'straw dogs' raised in order to refute. In other words, analysis of chosen texts became the ethnographer's journey into the hidden culture of the chosen tribe (Becher & Trowler, 2001).

*Finding a place as a research writer: Scaffolding the writing leap*

At the end of the writing programme, the participants felt better placed and motivated to become research writers. Firstly, they had identified a journal congruent with their own interests and beliefs; secondly, they had come to understand the culture of this journal through scrutiny of its contextual features; thirdly, they had come to appreciate the construction of articles inside the journal, including patterns and conventions, varieties and exceptions. As a result, they had come to realise there is no invisible authority determining rules but rather communities of practice that shape what writing is made visible: editors, peer reviewers, and writers themselves pushing the boundaries and making their reviewers rethink.

Amongst the 50 students on the programme, 20 published within a year of completing the programme, across a range of text types such as: opinions piece in an educational newspaper (two students), articles on good practice in professional journals (six), book reviews (six), pre-dissertation research articles in a research journal (four), blogposts (two). Two completed doctorate dissertations, three more are en route to doing so in the coming academic year, and 36 completed MA dissertations (four at distinction standard). Tutor feedback about these completed dissertations and related papers identified the following features of distinctiveness:

- Recognising how your own career story was influenced by professional/disciplinary cultures
- Interrogating what you read for its relevance and meaningfulness to you and your own practice
- Identifying your own aspirations for development as a professional/researcher
- Seeing the evolving links between your practice and your future research
- Recognising the way your reading has and will change as a result of doctoral study.

These are all indicators that the teachers had come to experience ownership of the research culture, seeing its relationship with their own practice; and, in addition, had found ways of writing about it that were congruent with themselves as practitioners. As a core message, this entailed seeing published research writing not as a template for imitation, but as a tool for development; and by aiming not to fit into a controlling academic culture, but rather to understand that culture and find a place inside it to be authentic.

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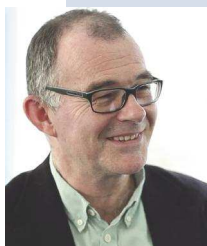
# First steps towards achievable action research

BUSHRA AHMED KHURRAM AND STEVE MANN



## Abstract

This article discusses the process of starting and conducting an action research project. The article offers a brief introduction to the fundamentals of action research as well as outlines its core characteristics. It begins by providing guidance and practical advice on initial steps. It then explains how to find a focus for carrying out this type of research, how to examine the social context to understand the field of action, how to narrow the focus and define the scope of action research, and how to implement and evaluate action steps. Taken as whole, the article helps readers to consider how to plan and implement a successful action research project.



## Introduction

This article focuses on the process of starting and carrying out an action research (AR) project. The aim of the article is to encourage teachers to engage in AR for continuing professional development (CPD) and to develop understanding of their professional context and the teaching-learning process. We believe it is important for the TESOL profession to have more teacher-researchers not only to “bridge the gulf between researchers and teachers” (Burns, 2009, p. 290), but also to draw strength from a practicing teacher’s understandings and experiences (Richards, 2003). The great advantage teacher research has is its connection to context; we believe that teachers are in the best position to understand and respond to their contextual practice-based needs, but that they often lack guidance and support in beginning an action research process. In writing this article we draw on our own experience of investigating materials and methodology through AR, as well as include comments by two other teacher-researchers, Dario Banegas and Mohammad Manasreh.

Getting started is the key. We are not suggesting this is easy. Dario (personal communication, July 26, 2017) shares this view:

More often than not we want to engage in AR because we have a problem we want to solve in our classroom, but we can’t quite picture how. We brainstorm dozens of questions, talk to colleagues, start a journal, and we are still there standing on the starting line.

We hope that this article will make it easier to move off the starting line by thinking about what might be involved and what you can do to begin.

## AR: Definition and characteristics

AR is a form of “disciplined enquiry” (Calhoun, 1994) that is conducted by practitioners in their own professional contexts (Nunan & Bailey, 2009), in response to a perceived problem, puzzle, or question (Burns, 2005). In the AR community there is a general agreement that AR is about “taking action to improve practice, and finding things out and coming to new

*“AR allows language teachers to systematically reflect and analyze their everyday practice to come to some decisions about what future practice should be. This provides teachers with an opportunity to make routinized and unconscious classroom teaching practices visible and concrete to a certain extent by bringing them to a conscious level...”*

understandings, that is, creating new knowledge” (McNiff & Whitehead, 2012, p. 10). AR is generally aimed at enhancing and improving understanding, and improving practice (McNiff & Whitehead, 2012; Nunan, 1992; Richards, 2003); influencing others’ learning (McNiff & Whitehead, 2012); bringing about improvement and change (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988; Richards, 2003); and generating new knowledge to feed into new theory (McNiff & Whitehead, 2012).

For language teachers, AR has been seen as a way “to adopt an investigative stance towards their own classroom practices” (Burns, 2009, p. 290). According to Wallace (1998), AR allows language teachers to systematically reflect and analyze their everyday practice to come to some decisions about what future practice should be. This provides teachers with an opportunity to make routinized and unconscious classroom teaching practices visible and concrete to a certain extent by bringing them to a conscious level (Mann, 1999). In language teaching, the major goals of AR are considered to be investigating curriculum change or innovation (Lotherington, 2002); addressing and finding solutions to problems in a specific teaching or learning situation (Wallace, 1998); and enhancing the development of teachers’ personal practical theories (Golombek, 1998).

The AR process has been characterized “as a spiral or cycle of movements between action and research” (Burns, 2009, p. 290). As the researcher identifies an issue and then plans and carries out an action to change or improve the situation, he/she also observes and reflects on the outcomes of the action (Nunan & Bailey, 2009). This reflection forms the basis for further planning and subsequent critically informed action, which is further observed, reflected upon and documented. A core characteristic of AR is its reflective nature. Burns (2010) states that AR is “part of the general ‘reflective teacher’ movement” (p. 17). However, it “takes the possibilities for reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action further into the realms of research” (Burns, 2010, p. 17). Mann (2005) clarifies the relationship between reflection (which is common) and research (which is less common):

there is a continuum between, at one end, what Wallace (1991: 56) calls ‘normal reflective practice of many teachers’ or what ‘caring teachers have always done’ (Bailey 1997: 1) and, at the other end, the more structured and rigorous forms of teachers’ research which include action research. The shorthand for this continuum would be reflection and research where reflection is a pre-requisite of development and research is a desirable option for development (p. 108).

What is noteworthy is that in AR reflection is “dynamic” (Burns, 2010, p. 141) and happens from the start of the process. In fact, reflection “flavours and moulds the whole AR experience” (Burns, 2010, p. 141) for action researchers. During AR it is important for teacher-researchers to keep in view three key values, namely, open-mindedness, responsibility, and whole-heartedness; these are prerequisites for successful reflection (Mann & Walsh, 2017). Briefly, open-mindedness is the “willingness to listen to more than one side” (Farrell, 2004, p. 14). Responsibility involves “careful consideration of the consequences of actions” (Farrell, 2004, p. 14), and whole-heartedness “implies that teachers can overcome fears and doubts to critically evaluate their practice in order to make meaningful change” (Farrell, 2008, p. 1).

AR is generally described as “collaborative” (Burns, 1999, p. 13; McNiff & Whitehead, 2012, p. 32). Several publications (e.g., Mathew, 2000; Tinker Sachs, 2002; Wang & Zhang, 2014) indicate that working collaboratively on action research projects can be productive. Especially, as suggested by Nunan (1993), collaboration with individuals who have training in research methods could help overcome the problem of conducting AR. However, some researchers (e.g., Nunan, 1992; Wallace, 1998) foreground a more individualistic rather than collaborative view of AR. Nunan (1992) argues that though collaboration is “highly desirable” in an action research project, some teachers “are either unable, for practical reasons, or unwilling, for personal reasons, to do collaborative research” (p. 18). In short, both are possible: teachers can develop successful AR projects as individuals, or as pairs or groups.

## Finding a focus for AR

The first step in AR is to find a general focus or topic. Burns (1999) indicates that, especially for practitioners new to AR, finding a focus and developing a research question is one of the most difficult parts of the research process. An important question therefore is what teachers might do to find a focus for their AR project. In this regard, Allwright and Bailey (1991) advise starting with a general issue, thinking about the issue, then deciding what data is needed. The general idea for an action research project, as pointed out by Kemmis, McTaggart, and Retallick (2004), could stem from the realization of the gap between the actual and ideal practice on hearing or reading a promising new idea. Kemmis, McTaggart, and Retallick (2004, p. 16) indicate that for making a start a teacher could answer statements like:

- I am perplexed by...
- Just what do I do with respect to...?
- I have an idea I would like to try out in my class.

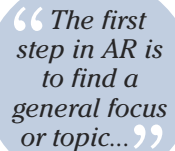
Besides that, teachers who want to make a start could think about topics they are interested in researching. They could ask themselves why are they of interest to them and if they are feasible.

What helped Khurram (2015) to select a topic for her action research project was a process of asking reflective questions. This early process helped to establish some initial thinking before moving to more systematic research. Other than that, keeping a diary for a specified period of time helped her to find a focus, as this provided valuable insights into the patterns of her classroom practices and the dilemmas she faced during teaching.

Burns (2008) suggests that in order to start an action research project, teachers could undertake the following tasks:

1. List things that have puzzled/intrigued them.
2. Make a mind map and connect ideas.
3. Read an article and develop questions from it.
4. Finish statements (*I don't know enough about...*).
5. Observe a situation in their workplace.
6. Survey colleagues on 'hot teaching issues'.
7. Look through recent journals for key topics (p. 14).

We have found that combining these tasks is helpful in making the initial scope and nature of the AR project clearer. You do not need to do them all. We all choose the most appropriate



“The first step in AR is to find a general focus or topic...”

way to take our first steps. As a further insight, here are Dario Banegas's (personal communication, July 26, 2017) top tips for getting started with AR:

1. Think about your aims. What do you want to achieve?
2. Look for and read articles in professional journals or newsletters in your country that report on AR studies carried out by other teachers. This will help you see the bigger picture and think about your overall project.
3. Don't do it alone. Share the issue you want to solve with other colleagues and plan to do AR with them. Collaborative action research is far more motivating and rewarding.
4. With your aims in mind, plan your AR project with clearly identified stages. Be organised and systematic, but be flexible at the same time.

“... teachers need to closely examine and reflect on their setting – communities, schools, classrooms, and students – to understand where it may be leading them.”

### Examining the social context

Once the general focus/topic has been identified, teachers need to locate it in relation to their professional context to understand the constraints (time, resources, human) and opportunities that it provides so as to realistically define the field of action (Kemmis et al., 2004). In other words, teachers need to closely examine and reflect on their setting – communities, schools, classrooms, and students – to understand where it may be leading them. For this purpose, it is especially worth reflecting upon what is negotiable, possible, answerable, and worth trying out in the social and political context of the school or classroom. This kind of thinking and decision-making could help in understanding the limitations of the field of action and may help in defining the 'absolute' and 'negotiable' constraints. In simple terms, considering what is practical, feasible and possible is an important aspect of getting started.

### Narrowing the focus of AR

After locating the general idea of the research in relation to its context, it is important to narrow the focus of the research and to make the topic of research as specific as possible so as to make the general idea more manageable. Phillips and Carr (2006) state that after finding the general idea an important challenge is “moving from broad concerns, curiosities and wondering to a focused question appropriate for the task at hand” (p. 44). To achieve a small enough focus to manage, it is useful to consider which aspect of the area/topic one wishes to investigate, and what one expects to learn from their action research project. For narrowing the focus of AR project, Mann (1997) suggests using the techniques of focusing circles (Edge, 1992) and mind mapping (Buzan & Buzan, 1996).

*Focusing circles* – In this technique a small circle is drawn inside a larger one. The general idea for research is written in the small circle. The larger circle is divided into four sections and in each section an aspect of the topic is written. One of these four sections then becomes the centre of the next circle and the process of narrowing down the focus of research continues.

*Mind maps* – In a mind map the general issue/research topic is written at the centre of the page. The sub-themes related to the main concept branch out from the centre. The branches comprise a key word or very short phrases. Topics related to the branches are represented as 'twigs' of the relevant branch.

## Defining the scope of AR

A possible next step after finding a focus for research could be defining the scope of the study. This entails asking questions such as what knowledge, skills and resources (funding, materials, space, time) is needed for carrying out the research; who else (colleagues, students, parents, boss) could be involved in research and what they would need to do; how best to monitor the effects of the intended strategic action; how the data/information will be collected and analysed; and what ethical issues, including confidentiality, anonymity and seeking permission/consent must be considered. Reviewing these points could help a teacher-researcher become more prepared to take the first step.

## Discussing the topic with colleagues

We mentioned that some AR projects are more individual whereas others are more collaborative. We certainly believe that once an individual teacher/practitioner has narrowed his or her focus, it is ideal if they could discuss their research plan with an experienced researcher, an interested teacher or a 'critical friend', who could respond realistically, honestly and constructively to their initial ideas. This person could also act as a critical colleague throughout the action research process. Selecting critical colleagues early on in the AR process could provide teachers the space to articulate their ideas. Mann (1999) points out that teacher-researchers often value sharing their ideas with others. With respect to the role of colleagues in the action research process, McNiff, Lomax, and Whitehead (2003) state that:

Your critical friend should be willing to discuss your work sympathetically but critically. You and your critical friend choose each other, so you need to negotiate the ground rules of your relationship. They may turn out to be your closest allies, so never take them for granted. As well as expecting support from your friends, you must also be prepared to support them in return. This means being available, even in antisocial hours, offering as well as receiving advice, even if it is painful or unwelcome, and always aiming to praise and support (pp. 38–39).

Such collaborative support is both formative and developmental. However, AR also gives you a chance to work constructively with fellow teachers/practitioners. In the following comment, Mohammad Manasreh talks about how his project was successful because of its collaborative and interventionist nature:

The overall aim of my project was to improve my practice as a teacher trainer. Action research provided me with the opportunity to work together with fellow practitioners to identify how we can improve our practices, implement potential solutions and reflect collaboratively on the impact. Since AR was linked to my daily professional life, it maintained the theory/practice balance, provided a relevant research experience and kept both participants and myself engaged. Finally, AR's flexible nature helped me respond to predictable and unpredictable developments and adapt the study design accordingly (personal communication, July 26, 2017).

The key points to highlight here are that AR is a flexible, collaborative, and useful process that is very closely related to

*“ AR is a flexible, collaborative, and useful process that is very closely related to classroom practice. If a practitioner/teacher is working collaboratively, he or she can use small-scale AR to co-construct understandings of the intervention and how it plays out in practice. ”*

classroom practice. If a practitioner/teacher is working collaboratively, he or she can use small-scale AR to co-construct understandings of the intervention and how it plays out in practice. As such, the research is best seen as collaborative praxis, that is, a theorisation of practice supported by colleagues. Edge (2011) describes praxis as a deliberate process whereby “one discerns in one’s working environment an opportunity for further intellectual effort that one believes will feed back into and enrich one’s praxis” (p. 26). As such, praxis is “informed, principled, sensitive, socially just and culturally appropriate practice” (Mann & Walsh, 2017, p. 227). Our view is that while individual AR is possible, it is more likely to be sustained and have an impact if it is collaborative.

“ *Informed praxis through AR can help bridge the gap between researchers and teachers. AR is a form of research that has a unique connection to context, as teachers are in the best position to understand and respond to their contextual practice-based needs.* ”

### Implementing and observing the first action step

The next step after formulating and articulating the focus of an AR study is to undertake and observe the first action step to know and make sense out of what has happened. Observation of the implemented action step provides the basis of reflection and the possibility of improving the strategic action in the subsequent cycles. It is worth making the point here that it is important to remain open to new and changing impressions of the classroom events and the unanticipated and unintended outcomes of the action steps. This is so since the processes of AR are inherently flexible and subject to changes in direction (McNiff, 1988).

### Conclusion

This article has outlined some core features of AR. We have used our own experience and the voices of two other teacher-researchers who have engaged in action research to provide a short introduction to the process of starting and carrying out an AR project. We hope that the article will encourage teachers to consider ways of developing a sense of ‘praxis’. Informed praxis through AR can help bridge the gap between researchers and teachers. AR is a form of research that has a unique connection to context, as teachers are in the best position to understand and respond to their contextual practice-based needs. We believe that AR is a good way to renew and understand appropriate practice and that it can be a useful tool for collaborative continuing professional development.

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# “We can also be researchers”: Teacher research in initial English language teacher education

DARÍO LUIS BANEGAS



## Abstract

Teacher research literacy can be promoted through formal education as part of undergraduate or pre-service teacher education programmes. The aim of this article is to describe how research modules are included in a programme in southern Argentina and evaluate their impact through examination of student-teachers' and a tutor's perceptions.

## Introduction

When the word *research* appears in educational discourse, it usually inspires at least two divergent views. One view promoted by academics and teacher educators is that teacher research is a way of empowering teachers to create knowledge through a critical and context-responsive attitude. The other view, common among teachers, is that research is for researchers and other educators based at universities. Aware of such differing perceptions, Borg (2013) has noted that teacher research engagement is still heterogeneous among practitioners. Often-cited reasons for little teacher research engagement are lack of time and lack of knowledge and support to carry out research. Despite these apparent drawbacks, and marginal role of teacher research among teachers' activities, there have been recent publications which discuss teacher-researcher identity (Xerri, 2017), together with concerted efforts to promote and support teacher research through international undertakings (Borg & Sanchez, 2015; Burns, Dikilitaş, Smith, & Wyatt, 2017; Burns, Westmacott, & Hidalgo Ferrer, 2016).

## Teacher research in IELTE

Argentina, the wider context of this article, has a long tradition of research in ELT as discussed in Porto, Montemayor-Borsinger and López-Barrios (2016). A number of publications (Coelho Liberali, 2016; Villacañas de Castro, 2015; Yan, 2016) offer accounts of student-teachers' engagement in research by becoming part of collaborative action research projects. Such engagement needs to be supported through student-teachers' education in research if they are to be empowered as professionals. ELT research starts in university undergraduate programmes and continues into the postgraduate programmes such as MA and PhD studies. However, universities are not the only institutions that are engaged in research. Tertiary institutions in Argentina are also officially recognised to offer initial/pre-service teacher education programmes. Not only do they work to educate future teachers in one specific subject (e.g., English, Geography, History, or Spanish), but they are also required to promote teachers' continuing professional development as well as teacher research. In some cases, initial teacher education and teacher research are merged in order to maximise resources and increase synergy among educational actors and institutions. In the context of this landscape, this article examines the inclusion of teacher research initiatives in an initial English Language Teacher Educational (IELTE) programme in southern Argentina and reflects on their impact on teachers' professional development.

With reference to Argentina, all pre-service teacher education programmes must be four years long and each province in the country has the autonomy to develop their curricula based on nationally agreed guidelines. In the province of Chubut, a new initial English Language Teacher Education (IELTE) curriculum was designed in 2014 (Banegas, 2014; 2016) and implemented as from 2015. In addition to the modules designed and with the aim of promoting teacher research literacy, ministerial authorities and teacher educators agreed to develop two mandatory modules: (1) Educational Research, and (2) Research in ELT. What follows is a brief description of both modules.

Educational Research is a module delivered in Spanish, the L1 in the context of this experience, by two tutors: a teacher educator with knowledge and experience in research, and a teacher educator with experience in academic writing. The module seeks to introduce student-teachers to basic epistemological concepts and to provide them with theoretical and practical tools to design a research project and carry it out within the scope of one academic year. Together with introductory concepts to research, student-teachers also develop their L1 academic reading and writing skills. The module has the format of an extended workshop rather than lectures because the student-teachers learn about, for example, quantitative research or action research, as they draft their projects. In other words, they learn to do research by doing research.

The topics and fieldwork are carried out in the student-teachers' practicum experiences or in their own experiences as students in higher education. Student-teachers' projects are usually framed as descriptive-exploratory based on participants' perceptions or content analysis of materials, for example, coursebooks, and may examine areas such as materials development, lesson planning, adult student motivation, peer teaching, and inclusive education, among others. At the end of the academic year, the institution organises a one-day conference where the student-teachers from the different pre-service teacher education programmes present their findings.

On the other hand, Research in ELT is an English-medium module delivered by a teacher of English with experience in research and writing for publication. The aim of the module is to help student-teachers refine their knowledge of research acquired in Educational Research and concentrate on research issues which emerge from the processes of teaching and learning English in primary and secondary education, as well as in their own learning in the IELTE programme. Although the module is supposed to be delivered through weekly two-hour lessons for a whole academic year, face-to-face lessons are reduced during the second term so that the focus is on student-teachers' projects and their own dynamics for meeting and drafting their reports.

Student-teachers are encouraged to work in small groups and embark on a follow-up study based on the project they do in the previous module. However, in this module they receive further training on classroom research, action research, case studies, and qualitative research with a particular focus on interviews, observations, and thematic analysis. See list illustrating some of the key readings in the module at the end of this article. It includes international books as well as conference proceedings from ELT conferences in Argentina. The reading list also includes articles from professional journals (e.g., *AJAL*, *ELT Journal*, *LACLIL Journal*, *Profile Journal*) selected according to the student-teachers' research projects.\*

This module proves to be more challenging as the reports the student-teachers are expected to produce have to be written in English with an international audience in mind.

## Opportunities and challenges

I teach the Research in ELT module and module evaluation is part of my responsibilities not only as a tutor but also as the programme coordinator. In the paragraphs that follow I condense the student-teachers' voices, collected through group discussions and written questionnaires throughout the academic year, as well as my own, mainly based on my professional diary.

Without intending to be a rigorous thematic analysis, **Table 1** condenses the student-teachers' perceptions on the impact of the module in terms of opportunities and challenges.

**Table 1: Student-teachers' perceptions**

	Category	Extracts
<b>Opportunities</b>	Content and language learning	<i>I learn a lot of vocabulary and examples of reported speech together with research. Through research it's like we're integrating what we've learnt in other modules like Didactics or Grammar.</i>
	Expanding teacher identity	<i>I don't know if I'll be able to do research once I get my first teaching post, but this module has shown me that we can also be researchers. Teaching is whatever happens in the classroom, and out too. I feel like we are developing other areas of the teaching profession and we can choose where we want to go.</i>
	Collaborative work	<i>We've learnt a lot together – working with other peers, with experienced teachers, and with students in the practicum. This is learning with others for real.</i>
	Reflection	<i>Because we have data, and because there are others working with us, the research helped me reflect on what I was doing and be able to swallow my pride and accept criticism or feedback. I am more critical and more reflective now. It's not easy but it pays off.</i>
<b>Challenges</b>	Academic writing	<i>Everything goes relatively OK until you need to write. That's when we panic because we need to think, organise our ideas, use structures and words we're not used to using, and write in English. You feel you haven't learnt anything. It's like learning a new type of English. Even in Spanish it's difficult for me.</i>
	Time constraints	<i>We could have done something better if we had had more time. But then there's always something that slows us down. And we have the constant pressure of submitting the report.</i>

The student-teachers' perceptions and assessment of the research module bears resemblances with those perceptions reflected in my own journal as the module tutor. **Table 2** summarises the constant concerns and topics contained in my journal entries.

**Table 2: Tutor's perceptions**

	<b>Category</b>	<b>Extracts</b>
<b>Opportunities</b>	Learning through English	<i>We're doing CLIL [Content and Language Integrated Learning] or EMI [English-medium Instruction] here! They [student-teachers] are learning new content while developing their academic English.</i>
	Sharing local	<i>Today I made sure that every group has a publication by somebody from Argentina to work on.  I also have to stress that we need to be aware of the works of ELT professionals in our own country.</i>
	Collaborative work	<i>After today's students' presentations, I realised that we've been working a lot with fellow tutors and teachers based in schools. It's fantastic.</i>
	Situated learning	<i>Today we discussed the benefits of doing context-responsive research. This allows us to situate our endeavours in the here and now and be more aware of our students and our own reality.</i>
<b>Challenges</b>	Academic writing	<i>How can we scaffold academic writing? We've done a lot of reading and focusing on this and that, and in other modules they're working on academic writing, but they just feel intimidated by the idea of writing formally.</i>
	Critical thinking skills development	<i>What a day! It's hard to help them develop their criticality. They're used to summarising and parroting without stopping to understand or critique what they're saying.</i>

Both tables show that benefits appear to be more prominent than challenges in teacher research literacy through an ELT research module. Among the benefits, it is worth stressing the relevance given to learning content and language in tandem, an approach that appears to be a motivating factor not only with the student-teachers but also with the tutor. Such integration is also translated to the focus on collaboration, an asset detected by both student-teachers and tutor. Both content and language integration and collaboration signal the importance of synergistic opportunities as they help expand our experiences and knowledge. Collaboration may also be associated with reflection, either individual or collegial. Conversely, the main challenge encountered is that of academic writing. It is possible that the student-teachers' issues with critical thinking skills development are linked to their ability to write critically in English. In other words, the issue may be that the student-teachers have not developed their academic English to a proficiency level that enables them to express their critical views in writing.

## **Conclusion**

In this article I have shared a modest account of how teacher research literacy can be promoted through initial teacher-education programmes. The implementation of the modules described above is possible because they are part of a programme that has been inter-institutionally developed and is the result of higher educational policies of the Ministry of Education. In the context of this experience, teacher research literacy is a top-down

decision whose implementation has been endorsed and participated in by teacher educators. Future research may concentrate on following the professional trajectories of student-teachers after graduation and examine the extent to which they engage with research.

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# Engaging in enquiry: Tracing the trajectory of a research project

HANNA BROOKIE AND CYNTHIA WHITE



## Abstract

Interesting moments and dilemmas in the classroom can trigger questionings and reflections, which, if given time, can engage the teacher in a process of enquiry and research. This article reflects on one such enquiry and how it developed into a project that was beneficial for the researcher, participants and wider professional community.



## Introduction

*How do we learn about research? How do we identify research problems? How do we identify ways of enquiring into those problems? How do we deal with problems and contingencies that arise? Who is the audience for our research? How do we make our findings available to different audiences and communities?* In this article we want to address some of these questions by tracing and reflecting on critical moments in the trajectory of a research project in which we were both involved: the first author as the teacher-researcher and the second as the supervisor-researcher. The specific contingencies that arose during this project make it an interesting site to examine engaging in enquiry.

Here we aim to offer a “behind the scenes” look at teacher research: we move between the more traditional description of the research process, and reflections on those stages, and on what guided the focus of the enquiry at particular points and ultimately the overall trajectory of the project. So we emphasise the dynamic, emergent nature of research showing how it shapes enquiry alongside the theories, frameworks, principles, and best practices that inform our field. The “I” voice here is that of the teacher-researcher, highlighting decisions and dilemmas which shaped the course of the research. The article concludes with some observations on the value of teacher research.

## Identifying the research problem: Navigating cultural conflict and dissonance in the classroom

The focus of this research was on how English language teachers of immigrants and refugees in New Zealand navigate cultural conflict and dissonance in the classroom (Brookie, 2016). It was driven by one teacher’s interest and need, and very much situated in the immediate teaching context. Below we see how the teacher-researcher brings together both a real-world issue and a significant gap in the published research literature to identify the research problem. Bringing the research problem into focus at this stage took place over several months and involved not only reading, discussion and reflection, but also on-going consideration of what was feasible in terms of time frames, access to participants and participant engagement. The research problem was framed after reflections on teachers’ roles and accountabilities along with difficult classroom moments and choices, and after consulting relevant literature.

## Reflections on role and accountabilities

In my practice as a teacher of English for migrants and refugees in an employment-focused class in New Zealand, I had found culture to be a crucial aspect. As a facilitator of work readiness, I felt it was paramount that I exposed my learners to the target culture and helped them make sense of this and of what cultural practices may be considered acceptable in their new context. Further, as a teacher and mentor of learners who often had a history of marginalisation and who highly valued their cultural identity, I also found it important to assist them in the deeply critical process of redefining themselves in light of new sets of values, while also impacting and evaluating the new cultural spaces they encountered in New Zealand.

*“Interesting moments and dilemmas in the classroom can trigger questionings and reflections, which, if given time, can engage the teacher in a process of enquiry and research.”*

## Reflections on classroom moments

I had found that the most valuable teaching opportunities often came as a result of cultural conflicts or dissonance in the classroom – incidents where differences were exposed, sometimes through painful experiences, and sometimes through low-key tensions between values and perceptions. In the multicultural migrant classroom, conflicts can often be very immediate, and potentially productive. However, not all instances of conflict or dissonance can be solved productively, and when incidents escalate into open conflict they can result not only in disruptions to classwork, but can also lead to a sense of disempowerment and failure for the teacher.

## Reflections on choices teachers face

The multicultural migrant second language classroom by its very nature has the potential to force cultural issues to the forefront, a point also identified in the literature (see Dytytnyshyn & Collins, 2012; Kramsch, 1993; Li & Girvan, 2004; Menard-Warwick, 2009). Within their specific contexts, teachers have several choices when faced with cultural conflict, or an instance of perceptible cultural dissonance, depending on their knowledge, assumptions and beliefs (Woods, 1996) regarding culture and its place in second language teaching. They may choose to ignore it, capitalise on it, or incorporate the issues in later lessons. Their approaches may focus on acculturation, on understanding the learners' cultures or on intercultural communicative competence (Byram, 1997). The extent to which teachers perceive this conflict or dissonance and what choices they make in relation to it became the subject of this study.

## Reviewing the literature

An initial review of the literature enabled me to identify the areas of research that most closely aligned with the identified research problem, namely the role of culture in language acquisition and the concept of teacher cognition. This initial review showed that there was little research dealing with how teacher cognition affects teachers' choices around intercultural competence teaching and responses to cultural incidents in the classroom.

Reviewing literature and selecting the best framework for the study is a complex and time-consuming activity, involving a process of wide reading and unravelling threads of research to explore them in-depth, and ultimately selecting some of these threads as relevant to your own particular perspective, while discarding others. In the present study, several alternative frameworks could have been used – such as teacher agency, conflict resolution, critical teaching – but ultimately I chose a fairly broad framework, drawing on three main areas of literature: the role of intercultural competence in language teaching and learning; the



concept of teacher cognition; and how teacher cognition has been used to research approaches to culture teaching in the classroom. As a novice researcher investigating a fairly un-explored area, I was able to be more flexible and open in my interpretation, without too much restriction from theoretical frameworks, with the help of this broad framework. The study addressed three main research questions:

1. How are cultural conflict and dissonance in the classroom interpreted and responded to by teachers as and when they occur?
2. How do teachers reflect on and evaluate cultural conflict and dissonance and how does this reflection impact on teacher identity?
3. How, and to what extent, do teachers structure teaching on cultural issues and to what extent do these approaches reflect earlier unplanned episodes?

### **Developing the research methodology**

When developing the research methodology, it is important to not only consider how to elicit or create useful data, but also to take into account the possible effects and benefits for participants in the research. To enable participants to directly benefit from the research process, I developed a methodology that was narrative and reflective in nature, and could therefore, potentially, assist participants in reflecting on their own practice. Three avenues for reflection were included: written narratives in the form of narrative frames (Barkhuizen & Wette, 2008), spoken narratives during one-on-one interviews, and narratives presented as part of a focus group.

By choosing to begin with written narratives, I was able to address another primary concern relating to participant involvement: minimising negative effects, by allowing participants to select and manage potentially sensitive narratives and remain in charge of their disclosures (especially important given the potential sensitivities of the research mentioned below). The narrative frames used in this study were designed to elicit description and reflection on unplanned incidents and planned practice, in a way that was intended to reveal the underlying beliefs, assumptions and knowledge of the participants, along with the cognitive processes employed in dealing with cultural issues and conflicts. Each frame was designed to be written as a paragraph, with the help of sentence starters. The written narratives were followed up by interviews, based on the information selected for disclosure in the first phase, and analysed in conjunction with this to form the basis for individual case studies.

The focus group was designed as a one-off session involving three participants and two facilitators, and was primarily intended to create an interactional setting for the discussion of culture in the classroom and to illustrate reflective processes. The focus group included three scripted scenarios of cultural conflict and/or dissonance in the classroom, and a discussion of possible short and long term responses and solutions. This was expected to assist in discovering how formal or informal teacher conversations may assist in the reflective processes, and also in the formulation of beliefs, attitudes and practices. A focus question regarding training and professional development in relation to cultural conflict was also included.

A further stage, an assessment of the research process using an evaluation questionnaire, was also added, to inform me, as a novice researcher, about the usefulness of my methodology from the participants' point of view.

*“When developing the research methodology, it is important to not only consider how to elicit or create useful data, but also to take into account the possible effects and benefits for participants in the research.”*

## Ethical dilemmas

Despite the careful design of methodology, the data gathering process was significantly complicated by the fact that I was conducting my research at several local institutions, including my own workplace. I had chosen this local context not only for the sake of accessibility, but primarily for the sake of immediate relevance, as the enquiry was driven by a very personal interest and need – I wanted to explore the closest possible context.

Despite a full research proposal, complete with relevant literature and a carefully-developed methodology, the university's human ethics committee declined my application on grounds of potential conflicts of interest, especially as the area of research was deemed potentially sensitive. After much negotiation, the issues were resolved by employing a third party, an experienced researcher, in the data-gathering phases. This researcher conducted the interviews and the focus group and assisted with the distribution and collection of narrative frames. Data was transcribed and anonymised before being submitted and analysed to protect the identities of participants.

Paradoxically, this meant that selecting the most immediate context actually removed me further from the research process and participants, as I became a step removed from the creation and primary analysis of data, especially in the interviews and focus group. It also added several additional interpretative layers to the narrative data (Riessman, 1993) as data was co-created by participants and my co-researcher, and then reinterpreted as part of the transcription process, before I commenced my own interpretation of the (not-so) raw data. Thus, though I initially aimed for an active, participatory researcher identity, where I was part of the co-creation of data in a collegial setting, ethical constraints meant that my role became that of uninvolved observer and analyser, a researcher identity that I was much less comfortable with.

Ethical considerations also affected the way I was able to finally present the data. I had initially intended to use a case-study approach where each participant was presented individually, but after initial case-study analysis, data was grouped thematically. This was done in order to further protect the identities of the participants especially as I wanted to present the research to local audiences.

## Summarising the findings and making research available

Making research available whether in presentations or publications is a valuable process that involves challenges to both identity and practice. It is not only an important way of communicating findings to communities of scholars, colleagues, teachers and researchers, but also a way of extending further one's professional skills and engagement in other communities of enquiry.

Going further into the processes of making your research available – whether in poster presentations, talks, or published papers – is beyond the scope of this article but we can offer some key reflections. Self-doubt can strike at many stages of these processes and it is important to have colleagues or mentors to talk things through with, to see issues in

*“ Making research available whether in presentations or publications is a valuable process that involves challenges to both identity and practice. It is not only an important way of communicating findings to communities of scholars, colleagues, teachers and researchers, but also a way of extending further one's professional skills and engagement in other communities of enquiry. ”*

perspective and to gain insights into the broader complexities of making your research available, and ways of negotiating those complexities. This applies too to getting feedback on your work – whether in the form of questions, comments or reviewers' comments. Learning about these processes has a strong affective dimension as well as developing specific expertise and competencies; such learning is crucial to developing a scholarly identity (see Ding & Bruce, 2017).

I chose to make my research available primarily through local and national conference presentations organised by TESOLANZ (the professional organisation for ESL teachers in New Zealand), with the local conference being easily accessible to the research participants. At both of these events, I presented the key findings that I felt were most relevant to the teacher audience, covering theoretical aspects but allowing sufficient room for presenting participant narratives and approaches. The approaches covered participants' inclusion of culture, cultural integration, and cross-cultural awareness into the classroom, as well as the purposeful creation of an accepting and respectful classroom atmosphere. Narratives focused on how low-level cultural dissonance was acknowledged and to some extent capitalised on to facilitate cultural integration and intercultural awareness in the classroom, and how cultural conflict – interpreted by participants as potentially threatening incidents – was managed contingently and reflected on after the event. Using a reflective, narrative focus in both the research methodology and in the presentations to the professional community appears to have made the study accessible and relatable to other teachers; attendees at both events related to the narratives and were keen to share their own stories, echoing the findings regarding the need for training and professional development.

### **Concluding perspectives: What the experience meant for the teacher participants**

The final questionnaire was included in the research project specifically to ensure that the research process had benefited the participants, and results from this were encouraging. Participants stated that they appreciated the opportunity to reflect further on their teaching practices and to talk with other professionals. Two of the participants felt that an important aspect of the research process had been “the realisation that issues around cultural conflict are neglected in training” and “how professional developing and support from colleagues is vital in maintaining integrity and good professional practice in what is sometimes a very stressful work environment”.

These participants both felt encouraged and prompted to seek further professional development around cultural issues. The benefits of the research process itself as a form of professional development was also highlighted: “this was a real opportunity to reflect on [cultural issues] explicitly and critically.” One of the participants, who started the research process with a somewhat unresolved incident of conflict, felt that the research process had helped her find alternative ways to deal with similar situations in the future.

This project began as a very personal enquiry for the teacher-researcher's own benefit, but then changed to take on broader considerations, including the benefit to the participants and the wider professional community. The trajectory of the project also has a future focus in that it has been extended to refugee classrooms in Sweden drawing on the teacher-researcher's identity, with a similar concern to ensure that engaging in enquiry has the maximum possible benefit for all participants.

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# The centrality of story in teacher inquiry

GARY BARKHUIZEN



## Abstract

Since stories are such a central part of our professional lives and are always available and accessible, it makes sense to use them productively to better understand what it is we do as teachers and what our learners do as learners. Narrative inquiry is an approach to research that uses stories as a means to find out about these experiences. In this article, I briefly describe what story is. I then present four core dimensions of narrative inquiry and conclude by summarising some of the claims made about the value of narrative inquiry approaches to investigating

language teaching and learning. Suggestions for teacher research practice are included in the article.

## Introduction

As teachers we tell stories all the time – *all the time*. We talk about what happened in class, we tell stories about difficult students or those who have done something amazing, we gossip about other teachers, and we complain about workload and the implementation of a new curriculum. We also *hear* stories, constantly, those told by our teacher colleagues, by administrators, and by our students. Stories surround us and our work. We live and work in the midst of these stories. These stories tell about our lived experiences, our ideas, our emotions, and about our imaginings of events and desires in other places and future times.

In this article, I argue that since these stories are such a central part of our professional lives and are always available and accessible, it makes sense to use them productively to better understand what it is we do as teachers and what our learners do as learners. Using stories to study a phenomenon is not something new in teacher inquiry for professional development. Advocates of exploratory practice (Allwright & Hanks, 2009), teacher research (Borg, 2013), action research (Burns, 2009), and teacher reflection (Farrell, 2015) have all recommended examining stories in one way or another to investigate matters relevant to language teaching and learning. The branch of qualitative research that has as its primary concern the stories people tell of their life experiences is called narrative inquiry. The aim of narrative inquiry in language teaching is to understand the meaning teachers make of their lived (as well as imagined) experiences. In other words, it is about using stories to explore our understandings of what we do. The events of our teaching lives (e.g., what happened in a particular class) are in the past, and exactly what happened cannot be captured (in any kind of research). The best we can do is to take a look at how we experience those events – how we make sense of them. One way to do this is to elicit stories about the events and then to analyse those stories to see what was said and what meaning was made about what happened. The word ‘narrative’ is often taken to mean the spoken, written, or multimodal articulation of those experiences; i.e., the stories’ representation in oral, written, and/or visual form.

“The aim of narrative inquiry in language teaching is to understand the meaning teachers make of their lived (as well as imagined) experiences. In other words, it is about using stories to explore our understandings of what we do.”

Exactly how narrative inquiry is done has no simple answer. There is no one right way and no formula. This, of course, can be confusing and disheartening to some, but I like to argue instead that it can be quite liberating for teacher inquirers. We can shed the fears of getting the inquiry process wrong. Many of the methods for collecting and analysing narrative data are similar to or the same as those associated with qualitative research generally. However, in narrative inquiry, story is central. Narrative inquiry is all about story. Next, I briefly describe what story is (and that question also has no easy answer). I then present four core dimensions of narrative inquiry which, for me, help to break through the complexity of narrative approaches to inquiry as a whole. I conclude by summarising some of the claims made about the value of narrative inquiry approaches to investigating language teaching and learning.

Scattered throughout the article are eight suggestions regarding the practice of narrative inquiry for and by language teachers. In a short article such as this one, it is impossible to provide a comprehensive overview of narrative methods appropriate for exploring one's language teaching. However, as I have said above, many of these methods can be found in discussions of action research and exploratory practice for teachers. A useful introductory text for those wishing to investigate narrative inquiry further is Barkhuizen, Benson, and Chik (2014).

**Suggestion #1:** Read Barkhuizen, Benson, and Chik (2014).

## What is story?

Stories in narrative inquiry come in many different shapes and sizes. Researchers have varying ideas about what a story or a narrative is, and the way they work with narratives – how they are collected and how they are analysed and interpreted – reflects these differences. The differences also represent their disciplinary perspectives. For example, ‘the famous sociolinguist, William Labov (1997), required certain elements to be present in the telling of a past event for it to count as a narrative: elements such as an orientation or background to the story, some complicating action, evaluative commentary ‘by the narrator on that action, and some sort of resolution. His work, which was based on interviews during which narrators were asked to tell a story about a past experience, had sociolinguistic aims (e.g., the sound of New York speech, the structure of stories) rather than being concerned with what the stories were actually about.

**Suggestion #2:** Before starting your first narrative inquiry, have a discussion with a teacher colleague about what a story is. You could also ask your learners, and this way might get different cultural perspectives on story.

Others too have focused on the form of narrative, but their stories don't necessarily have the familiar elements specified by Labov. In fact, they hardly ‘look like’ stories at all. *Small story analysis* (Georgakopoulou, 2015) examines how stories are (co-)constructed in interaction (mainly spoken conversations, and more recently stories in other mediums such as written Facebook posts). Stories here are merely snippets of talk that don't have any pre-defined narrative structure. *Big stories* are the larger or longer (auto)biographical accounts

of our lives often recounted in multiple interviews, a series of journal entries, or a lengthy memoir. The research focus of big stories is really to find out what they are about – what happened in the lives of those who tell them. The focus is more on their *content*, in other words, than their *form* (see Barkhuizen, 2011).

In my view, stories have the following characteristics:

1. They narrate experiences from the past or the imagined future. They tell about something that happened or will happen in the life of the person telling the story.
2. They include reflective or evaluative commentary on those experiences – comments which portray emotions and beliefs associated with the experiences.
3. They typically have a temporal dimension. In other words, something happens over a period of time – very much like a plot.
4. They embody ‘action’. Something happens in the story. There is action.
5. This action takes place in a social context. The context always includes micro levels (relating intimately to the immediate situation of the narrator; e.g., teachers’ actions, emotions and cognitions in their classrooms), meso levels (moving outwards into institutions and communities), and macro levels (taking into account socio-political issues and debates; e.g., in teacher education, language-in-education policy, curriculum development, and often at the level of the region or state, such as ministries of education and governments).
6. Stories always make reference, implicitly or explicitly, to *who* was involved in the story (characters in the story world), *when* the action took place (time), and *where* it happened (place and space).

**Suggestion #3:** When analysing stories, always ask these questions (see Barkhuizen, 2016): *Who are the characters in the story, including the narrator, and how do they relate to each other? In what places and spaces (physical and social) does the action of the story take place? In what historical and future times are the narrator’s experiences located? Finally, how do time, place and characters interconnect with each other?*

7. And, simply, stories look like stories. We are all familiar with stories, so we have a feel for what a story is (e.g., there’s a beginning, a middle, and an end), and usually these feelings are right!

**Suggestion #4:** When you collect data, use the characteristics of story above to check whether you have collected any data which could be classified as a story.

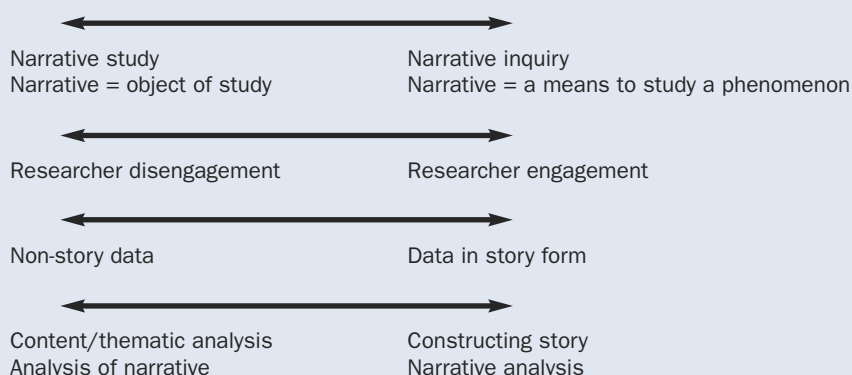
## Core dimensions of narrative inquiry

By ‘core dimensions’ I mean basic features of narrative inquiry that can be distinguished in terms of methodological practices. As such, their focus is more on the processes of data collection and analysis than on theoretical or epistemological underpinnings of narrative inquiry. These features lie along four continua, to which I regularly refer in order to (re)orientate my thinking about what it is I am doing as a narrative inquirer.

**Suggestion #5:** When planning a narrative inquiry project, try to figure out approximately where on each continuum the methodological processes of your project lie.

The first continuum (see **Figure 1**) makes a distinction between those methods of narrative analysis that focus more on the form of narrative and those that focus more on what the narratives are about. The former (towards the left side of the continuum) are concerned with studying narratives to find out what their linguistic and organisational structure is. In other words, narratives are the object of study, typically the work of (socio)linguists. The latter are concerned with the content of narratives; that is, using narrative as a means to explore what happened in the stories. Remember, this is a continuum, and so there will always be some elements of one approach within the other, the amount of overlap depending on where along the continuum the particular approach lies.

**Figure 1: Core dimensions of narrative inquiry**



On the extreme left side of the second continuum we have a situation where the researcher is neither engaged with the lived experiences of the participants nor the action of the research process (perhaps aiming for some sort of 'objectivity'). Quite simply, this is not narrative inquiry. Narrative inquirers are intimately involved in the lives of the research participants. As Clandinin and Connelly (2000) say, they do their inquiry work in the midst of the ongoing action. It is from this vantage point where thorough insights into the participants' meaning making (understanding their experiences) are gained. Since this is the case, when a teacher is inquiring into his or her own practices, such as in action research or exploratory practice, it becomes clear that narrative inquiry is a favourable candidate for a research approach.

**Suggestion #6:** Do not attempt to remain distant from the data you collect and analyse. Include yourself as the inquirer as much as possible in the research process.

The third continuum refers to the type of data that narrative inquirers collect and analyse. Sometimes the data comes in the form of a story (see above); for example, a teacher writes a story in a journal or on an online blog, or tells a story in response to an interview question. At other times, narrative inquirers collect data which does not have the characteristics of a story, yet nevertheless includes content that tells of teaching experiences and may even include reflective comments on those experiences. One option with such data is for the inquirer to turn it into a story – so, constructing a story from the original non-story data. This process is shown on the right side of continuum four.



Polkinghorne (1995) makes a distinction between two major kinds of narrative analysis. What he calls 'narrative analysis' is the process of constructing stories from a set of data, such as notes from classroom observations, teacher reflections, and responses from a student survey.

Constructing a story is itself a process of analysis, but the story product could undergo further analysis. As with the original data, constructed stories could be analysed thematically (the left side of continuum four); that is, the inquirer codes the content of the stories for themes, which could then be divided into sub-themes and/or grouped together into meaningful categories. This latter process, Polkinghorne (1995) refers to 'analysis of narrative' (see also Barkhuizen, Benson, & Chik, 2014).

**Suggestion #7:** If you are going to construct stories (written, spoken, multimodal) for your narrative project, use the characteristics of story above to guide your composition.

### The value of narrative inquiry

To conclude, I highlight some claims about the value of narrative inquiry for teachers. I hope that these will convince you to search for or construct stories in your professional inquiry practice and to examine these in order to learn more about what it is that you do – in the classroom, with your learners and teaching colleagues, in your schools and beyond. The first claim is that narrative inquiry is reflective inquiry. Through constructing, sharing, analysing and interpreting teaching stories, we reflect on our own practice and articulate our interpretations of this practice. Constructing and thinking about stories in this way, therefore, involves both introspection and interrogation. And the consequence of this is meaning making; in other words, making sense or gaining an understanding of our teaching knowledge and practice.

The result of this deeper understanding is change; change within self and our practice. Johnson and Golombek (2002) make this point, saying, "inquiry into experience...can be educative if it enables us to reflect on our actions and then act with foresight" (p. 4). When we articulate and interpret the stories of our practice we develop our personal practical knowledge to the extent that we act in the future with insight and foresight.

*“When we articulate and interpret the stories of our practice we develop our personal practical knowledge to the extent that we act in the future with insight and foresight.”*

**Suggestion #8:** In planning a narrative inquiry project, think ahead to what the implications of your project might be – for you, your students, and your school.

This is not always easy to do, of course. Any teaching situation is a complex, dynamic arrangement of many factors. In constructing and interpreting stories we bring many of these together, and in reflecting on and analysing the stories there exists the potential for us, therefore, to see the whole picture. So, as opposed to focusing on only one or two isolated variables in a particular context, stories reveal the interrelationships of many, and the process of making sense of the stories means unravelling this complexity.

A final reminder and an important final claim is that narrative inquiry is contextualised inquiry, which involves teachers exploring the numerous aspects of their particular, local contexts such as the needs of their students, the teaching resources and facilities available,

the institutional and community culture, existing curricular, assessment and language policies, as well as the macro socio-political context in which the teaching and learning take place. We can only make sense of our teaching and our students' learning if we take into account the full picture, the whole story.

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# Academic writing from a tutor's perspective

SUSANNE OSWALD



## Abstract

Why do we do research? Intrinsically, I would say it is the quest for an answer that is not yet known or has not yet been explored in a way that makes it relevant to the parties involved in a particular situation. Doing research and writing papers in connection with a Master's degree is one of those particular situations. Through my work tutoring Master's students in Applied Linguistics and TESOL, I have repeatedly witnessed my tutees' struggle to write up the sum of their newly gained knowledge in a scholarly essay, which is in essence a prelude to writing publishable academic articles. In this short piece, I would like to outline some academic writing topics and offer advice on how novice writers can approach them.

## The research essay question

In order to supply an appropriate answer, a question must be posed. Many universities allow MA students to choose from a range of research essay questions. Depending on the question, the expected answer could entail engaging in a theoretical discussion, applying a model, or conducting research. Furthermore, research could be original or follow a set framework.

One key to answering the question while maintaining relevance and exploring implications is understanding the wording of the question and meeting the expectations of the reader/marker. If we look closely at the following two essay questions, used by the University of Birmingham Master's programme on second language acquisition, it becomes apparent what type of essay is expected.

A) **Conduct a survey** among your colleagues and/or students to **investigate** their **beliefs** about how a foreign/second language is acquired. **Compare** their beliefs with SLA theories and research findings **reported in the literature**, and **discuss** the **implications** of any **discrepancies** you find.

To answer this question, one needs to understand, firstly, how to conduct a survey and have access to participants. In addition, the term *belief* as opposed to attitude needs to be defined. Then, a thorough understanding is required of research findings about beliefs concerning the acquisition of a foreign or second language in order to compare with one's survey results. Lastly, a discussion highlighting differences and their possible suggested meaning is expected.

B) **Do you think** that there is such a thing as a 'good language learner'? To what extent do you think that it is possible for people to become 'better' language learners? **Discuss** with reference to **your own students**, past or present.

This question does not require hands-on research or other participants; instead a prerequisite to answering the question is that one has enough teaching experience to discuss and support their opinions on the abilities of language learners. It might be possible

to answer this question hypothetically; however, the impact would be considerably less significant. When conducting original research, such as in a thesis or dissertation, the formulation of research questions is equally important. By carefully wording one's questions, the direction is set, the path is paved and ready to follow.

## Essay structure

Once a question has been decided upon, the structure of the essay will follow suit. The standard structure of a research paper includes: introduction, literature review, methodology, results, discussion, and conclusion. The structure of a theoretical essay would be similar, although the methodology and results sections would be replaced with an extended discussion where situations or problems can be evaluated or claims and counterclaims discussed.

The introduction should inform the reader of what to expect, without giving away too much detailed information or conclusions. It can begin with a quote to set the pace, start broad before homing in on the core topic, or be quite short and succinct. Regardless of its form, the purpose remains the same: to set the pace of the work by providing a roadmap that promotes interest in an informative manner.

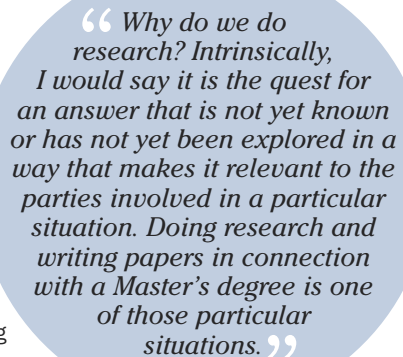
Subsequently, it is beneficial to place your research in perspective with what has been accomplished to date. The reasons for doing this are manifold. Firstly, one can demonstrate one's comprehension of an entire area of study, theory, or method. This is valuable for students as well as for experienced researchers because the significance of new research can be placed in an existing framework or break new ground. A carefully written literature review can also be used to express your voice by displaying your interpretation of the significance of previous research.

Some novice writers are so overwhelmed by their reading of vast amounts of information that they do not realise the subtle yet important difference between the various verbs available for referring to sources. By using words such as *argued*, *suggested*, and *claimed* instead of the neutral *stated*, a researcher's voice can be developed (see the link to an extensive list at end of this article).

In my experience, another area which proves problematic is presenting ideas, data, or results analytically instead of merely reporting or explaining:

- 1 Reporting:** The words A, B, and C were found 10 times in the text.
- 2 Analysing:** Not only have the words A, B, and C been found 10 times in the text, but there is a correlation to their use and the use of D. This can be seen in the following three examples... The correlation could be accredited to XYZ theory.

The first example demonstrates a preliminary evaluation, while the second demonstrates critically analysing the data and drawing conclusions as to its implications. Critical thought is similarly essential when evaluating theories or claims.



*“ Why do we do research? Intrinsically, I would say it is the quest for an answer that is not yet known or has not yet been explored in a way that makes it relevant to the parties involved in a particular situation. Doing research and writing papers in connection with a Master's degree is one of those particular situations. ”*

“One key to answering the question while maintaining relevance and exploring implications is understanding the wording of the question and meeting the expectations of the reader/marker.”

### Additional points

Although the content is the most important element to focus one's resources on, presentation and format constitute the first impression and can be influential in generating an overall positive or negative effect on a reader.

Too often, presentation and format are neglected until the last minute and can affect the mark assigned to an essay or the chances of an article being accepted for publication.

One way of avoiding this problem would be to have a clear idea of formatting requirements from the onset. There are numerous tools available to aid in the formatting/writing process.

However, the best tools do not replace the essential planning stage, which allows you to visualise the completed product or, at least, create a general framework that can be elaborated upon while writing. After obtaining a degree of knowledge from researching a subject in detail, you will need to either expand or reduce the vast amount of information to conform to various word limitations, be it expanding a small research project into a more complex PhD thesis or reducing a 15,000-word Master's dissertation into a 200-word abstract. In my opinion, this can only be achieved through thoughtful planning, and being able to understand and recognise the essential message you wish to convey.

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## References

### Helpful websites for academic writing

Academic blog: <https://thesiswhisperer.com/>

Academic phrasebook: <http://www.phrasebank.manchester.ac.uk/>

Academic writing: <http://aeo.sllf.qmul.ac.uk/>

Improve writing: [http://www.bristol.ac.uk/arts/exercises/grammar/grammar\\_tutorial/page\\_01.htm](http://www.bristol.ac.uk/arts/exercises/grammar/grammar_tutorial/page_01.htm)

The writer's handbook: [https://writing.wisc.edu/Handbook/QPA\\_paraphrase.html](https://writing.wisc.edu/Handbook/QPA_paraphrase.html)

Verbs for Referring to Sources: <http://advice.writing.utoronto.ca/english-language/referring-to-sources/>

# A doctoral journey: The first steps

PATRICIA DANIELS



## Making the right choice

The first question I asked myself when I decided that I was going to take the plunge and embark on a doctoral journey was, 'Where do I start?' You often hear about people commencing their research or entering into this phase or that, but not about what they actually had to do to reach that stage. Hence, I would like to share with you the first steps of my doctoral journey and how I experienced them.

My first step was to locate a university and a doctoral programme that suited my needs and was also affordable. Yes, the financial aspect cannot be ignored. Most importantly at this stage, I felt that it was necessary to find a university that had suitable supervisors in my field of interest.

This is crucial, as you need people who have the expertise to provide you with appropriate supervision. I spent hours searching through diverse doctoral programmes in the UK, Australia, the USA, and Switzerland. It took me 12 months to make my choice. This was because I was simultaneously developing my research focus and questions and it was only when these became clearer that my choice of university, doctoral programme, and potential supervisors did as well.

I chose the Doctorate of Education (EdD) programme offered by the Open University in the UK because their department for educational technology has a lot of expertise in the area of open education and they are involved in diverse global initiatives. I am particularly interested in language teachers' use of open educational resources and their open educational practices. I consciously chose the EdD rather than a PhD programme because of the practical implications of the EdD on policy and education. This is also something that you will need to consider when journeying along this path.

Additionally, when browsing through potential doctoral programmes it is vital to check the prerequisites for entry. These will vary depending on the institution. In my case, it was necessary to have already completed a 60-credit point course in research methodology, which can take nine to 12 months of your time.

## Reviewing the literature

Developing a provisional research topic and formulating the ensuing research questions can be a lengthy process because you first need to review the relevant literature. It is here that you will discover what has and has not been researched and how your potential project could add an interesting perspective to the current body of research or perhaps fill a small gap that has not yet been considered. You need to be able to build on existing research and justify to your university of choice as well as the ethics commission why your project is worthwhile pursuing.

Justifying what you are doing and why is key throughout the whole process. You need to be able to defend your choice of theories, research methods, choice of research instruments, sampling strategies and so on. Therefore, I would recommend taking the necessary time to dig into the literature rather than trying to rush through this part of the process.

When engaging with the literature, you need to view everything through a critical lens and dig through peer-reviewed journals, books, blogs, and social media. The latter might sound a little peculiar for those of you who are not used to using sites such as Twitter or Facebook for education or research. But think again! The professional connections I have made through Twitter have been invaluable. I have Skyped with some of my new contacts and have been able to discuss my field of interest in more depth. People have been extremely generous and have shared research articles, books, and links; I have reciprocated in the same manner.

Do not underestimate the power and dynamics of networking through social networking sites. I have located numerous current research articles as well as relevant live events through these online participatory spaces, and I have met some wonderful and inspiring people. It is worth trying them out.

Besides the path I have taken, there is also an alternative route to developing your research focus. During my search for a suitable university, I uncovered a couple of instances where doctoral supervisors were looking for doctoral students to work on a particular topic. This is another avenue that you can pursue. However, it is by no means a shortcut. You still need to submit a research proposal, which means you cannot avoid the extensive reading and writing process. This is a process that will continue up to the thesis writing stage because you have to keep up-to-date with what is happening in your field.

## **Writing the proposal**

Once you have settled on your research topic and central questions you can commence with writing your proposal. The OU website was extremely helpful here and even had sample templates of what a proposal could look like. Fortunately, this meant that I did not have to start from scratch but had examples of headings and a format that I could use. The most difficult part was trying to compose a sound argument for my topic together with all the other information that was stipulated and then glue it together in a very tight 3,000-word proposal. In my case, I had to provide an abstract, an argument defending my research topic, followed by a discussion of my conceptual framework and proposed methodology, as well as policy implications.

I also had to explain how my project could possibly contribute to educational research. To top it off, I was required to design a comprehensive three-and-a-half-year work schedule detailing what I planned to do each month. I somehow managed to pull it all together and the educational technology team from the OU opened their doors to me a few months later. I have been provided with two supervisors who are very active in the field of open education globally so I feel very fortunate to be supported by such knowledgeable people.

## **Residential weekend**

Doctoral programmes inevitably vary in their structure but it seems as though most provide an obligatory residential weekend at the beginning of the first year. Let me guide you through my experience of the OU's residential weekend. I arrived on a Friday afternoon in Milton Keynes and proceeded to check out the campus and locate where all the seminars were being held. Good thing I could read maps as I ended up being the tour leader for some of my cohort as the weekend progressed. One wrong turn and you landed in the gym instead of the library, or even worse, you found yourself heading off on one of the many maze-like trails in the surrounding countryside. Need I say more! We managed to stay on track and arrived punctually at all the organised events.

I was a bit nervous about the Friday evening session as we were divided into our groups of interest and then in an informal round had to present our research topics, conceptual frameworks, and proposed methodological approaches. Leading up to the residential weekend, I imagined scenes of interrogation and not being able to get a coherent word out, but it was the complete opposite. All of the supervisors were extremely helpful and a very lively and engaging discussion ensued, punctuated by regular bursts of laughter.

Needless to say, it was a really enjoyable and invaluable session. During the course of the discussion, we were all told that we would have to narrow down our research focus. It was made clear that the consequences of attempting to cover a research area that was too broad could result in a thesis that lacked depth and only superficially covered the relevant literature. And it was unlikely that a thesis written in this manner would be able to stand up to the critical scrutiny by experts in our research fields.

The Saturday and Sunday were full of interesting talks and interactive workshops with numerous topics covered, such as research ethics, methodologies, literature reviews, online library searches, interviewing techniques, and so on. Every couple of hours we had scheduled meetings with our supervisors to discuss our individual projects and what changes we felt needed to be made. Yes! You heard correctly. We were already starting to make changes. This is something that you will also need to get used to. A research topic or research questions are not fixed in stone. It is quite possible that your final thesis topic will vary considerably from your initial proposal. It is apparently part of the process.

Throughout the course of the weekend, we had time to socialise during meals and at the bar in the evenings. This gave the cohort an opportunity to get to know one another better and to make contact with research students with a similar focus. Overall, it was a very valuable weekend both for the intellectual discussions and also because of the opportunities I had to meet my supervisors and my fellow research students.

So, if you get the chance to participate in a residential weekend, embrace it. The supervisors are there to assist you and to give you advice. Remember that they had to go through the same process as well, so they know what it feels like. We can learn a lot from them, including very practical things like using reference tools and managing large amounts of literature and data.

## **Programme structure**

Getting back to the structure of the EdD programme in the UK, I chose this route because I like the fact that we have essay deadlines throughout the entire programme. These relate to our work, are formative, and can be used, in part, in the final thesis. Naturally, they will need to be developed and polished further, but for me they are like creating pieces of a puzzle with frayed edges. I have, for example, just submitted a literature review, and in a few months I have to submit an essay about my methodology. These two topics are normally chapters in a thesis, particularly one that is written in a traditional manner.

So, although it feels like a lot of work at present, in comparison to doctoral students who do not have to submit regular essays, I am completing pieces of work that can be integrated into my thesis regardless of how much I need to rewrite and edit them later. At least some of the arguments have been developed and the relevant references attached, which means that I will not have to start my thesis from scratch.

At the end of Year 1, we also have one summative assessment, which is a 15,000-word report covering our pilot study. This is assessed by external examiners and needs to receive



a pass in order for the research student to continue with the doctoral programme. It is a means of checking whether you are competent enough to work at this level. A bit scary, I must admit, but there is a chance of doing slight modifications if the examiners are not entirely satisfied with one or more aspects of your report. I have spoken to a couple of people doing doctorates in the UK and they need to go through this summative process as well. I am not sure what it is like in other countries but these are things that you can reflect on when choosing your preferred programme.

## **Narrowing the research focus**

On returning from the residential weekend, I needed to revisit the literature in order to refine my research questions and to narrow my research focus. It took me another few weeks of intensive reading before I finally decided to focus on freelance English language teachers in Switzerland. Initially, I thought the meaning of freelance would be clear but after discussions with some teachers I realised that in some cases interpretations differ. Hence, based on the literature I have redefined the term 'freelance'.

In relation to my project, the term refers to English language teachers who are paid on an hourly basis and whose teaching hours depend on the number of students available. In the literature, these types of teachers are often referred to as having sessional or fractional contracts but can also be called casual or part-time employees (Borthwick & Gallagher-Brett, 2014; Leigh, 2014; Stickler & Emke, 2015). The latter is not to be confused with part-time workers who have access to the same conditions as their full-time counterparts.

The hourly paid teachers I am interested in work in more precarious conditions due to the fact that teaching hours are not guaranteed. Some may have one or more contracts with a company or educational institution, as well as having private students. It may be that they work entirely with private students. Hence, these teachers are generally quite flexible and their working hours variable.

My rationale for choosing this particular group of teachers in Switzerland is because they are largely under-researched and, as a result of their working conditions, they are often quite isolated and do not have access to the same professional development opportunities that a teacher working in the Swiss educational sector might have. Therefore, my research topic has evolved from, "An exploration of language teachers' use of open educational resources and their open educational practices" to "Open practices as a professional development tool for freelance English language teachers". However, there is a real possibility that this will change again after I have completed my pilot study.

## **The pilot study**

The pilot study is an integral part of the first year of the doctoral programme. It is an opportunity to test your research methods and instruments, refine your research questions, and establish what is worth pursuing. It is quite possible that something emerges out of the data that you had not considered and you find it of more value than what you were originally aiming to research.

At the time of writing this article, I have just launched my pilot study and I hope to share my experience of it with you at a later stage. However, before I could get to the launch phase I had to seek ethics approval in the UK. This was a lengthy process and one that should not be underestimated. I will share that experience with you another time. For the moment, I hope I have been able to shed some light on what initial steps you can expect to take when you make the decision to commence a doctorate.

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## “A classroom is a centre of inquiry in all its forms”: **Thomas S. C. Farrell** on teacher research



Despite being widely heralded as an effective form of professional development, teacher research has also been criticised as being too closely aligned with the priorities and expectations of academics rather than those of classroom practitioners. In this interview, Thomas S. C. Farrell suggests that current conceptions of research might need to be broadened so as to embrace reflective practice.

### **Conceptions of teacher research**

*Over the past few years, the topic of teacher research has been given increasing attention in the literature and at international ELT conferences. How do you explain this rise in popularity?*

It's probably driven by academics. When you say it's become popular I worry about that because I would like to know whom it is popular with. I can guarantee that it's not popular with the teachers. So if we talk about teacher research we have to define what we mean. Is it research *on* teachers, research *with* teachers, or research *by* teachers? Have we asked the teachers what they would like to research? If you use the word 'research', you will turn off a teacher immediately. So I think we're using jargon that's comfortable for academics but not for the teachers.

If you had to ask a teacher further than their original teacher training programme, probably the word 'research' would frighten them anyway. This depends on their programme, of course. If it were a research-based programme with a thesis at the end of it, then they'd be more comfortable with a research approach using the large 'R' rather than the small 'r'. I'm on the same wavelength with people like Alan Maley regarding academics who co-opt research by teachers for their own benefits.

*Alan Maley and to some extent Penny Ur have recently suggested that teachers don't have time for research, shouldn't be expected to do research, and that research isn't relevant for them. What are your thoughts on that?*

I disagree, but I would frame it in a different way. A classroom is a centre of inquiry and you have to consider it a centre of inquiry in all its forms. If we were to say that teachers should

not do and read research, we'd almost be saying that a medical doctor should not do or read research because they don't have time for it or have no use for it or it's not relevant to them. And yet you're going to visit that medical doctor and be prescribed medication. Based on? Research, of course. But I think we're tripping on words and semantics.

If you want to look at the hard research, then there's probably a place for it. For example, in my humble opinion, teacher-cognition research is not relevant to teachers because it consists of academics researching teachers for academics. It generally focuses on beliefs only and not practices. A lot of the research that has been done has consisted of a survey or interviews of what teachers believe. I've done a lot of work on this but I don't call it teacher-cognition research because I think it's an insult. It's just a beautiful way of saying "What are you thinking?" But you can't say that apparently; it's not academic enough. If you ask a teacher what they believe, they have a very hard time explaining it. So it has to go through a kind of recursive type of existence.

First, ask teachers what their beliefs are, then examine their behaviours in the classroom, and then try to extract teachers' beliefs again. A teacher can say that they believe one thing this minute and they change their belief the next minute. Beliefs are very hard to pin down. When this research is published, it's a freeze frame of a particular time in which you talked to that teacher and it might no longer be relevant. This is especially the case when it's not connected to classroom work as well. So research should be an examination of beliefs and practices, and beliefs again.

***You seem to imply that the academics who study teacher research are merely writing for an academic audience and their work doesn't really reach the teachers themselves. But is there any value in teachers engaging in research?***

Yes, there is. But I would say in small bites and you don't even have to call it research. If they reflect on their practice, they're doing research. It only takes one particular item of your class that you're interested in to change the whole dynamic of that class. For example, wait time. Many teachers are not fully aware of what's going on in their classroom. If you want to call this kind of thing research then you could just say that the centre of inquiry entails becoming more aware of what's happening in your classroom to make you a better teacher. You don't even have to use the word 'research'. This kind of thing is relevant to every teacher.

***But some academics would dispute your views. They would argue that you can't call that kind of thing research since research has to be conducted in a systematic manner. How would you reply to that?***

I would say that if a teacher were to reflect on any aspect of their work, then that is very systematic as well. If as a teacher you're interested in looking at your instructions, then you can systematically collect evidence about that. You need retrievable data. So what do you do? You record your class. It could be video or audio. Then you transcribe it and analyse it. Then you interpret it.

***Am I right in thinking that you're asking people to broaden their conceptions of research?***

Yes! Look at who is gaining from the research. In what I've described, it's the teacher who is gaining from the research. The person working with the teacher, whether it's an academic, a facilitator or a mirror, can also benefit from the research. Both parties stand to gain. But if one is going to fight for what's acceptable for the academy, not necessarily the academics but the academy, then it's going to be irrelevant to the teachers.

## **Challenges of teacher research**

*Within your broad definition of research, which seems to go beyond how some people define it in academia, what are the challenges of teachers engaging in research?*

The first challenge is the sense of helplessness a teacher probably has at the beginning. They might not know what to look at. So a facilitator could help a teacher focus on some aspect of his or her teaching, or even on the self, which is outside the teaching, so to speak. I think it's very important that if you're going to help a teacher, you help the teacher to focus on some aspect of their work that they might be interested in looking more into. What I've done in my own work and what I've encouraged other teachers to do is to start with the self. Write a journal and keep writing for a month or so about your teaching. After every class, write down something. I guarantee you, and it's never failed, a teacher will begin to see patterns develop in the writing. You can write anything you like. I myself started that way even though I doubted the whole process. That's how I started my reflective process and I continue to write like that too. You will find a pattern and you will find a focus on what you can begin looking at.

*Aren't you assuming that writing reflectively is something easy for teachers to do?*

I wouldn't say "writing reflectively". I would just say "write". Writing as a stream of consciousness. Just write about your class. There is no correct method. You don't even have to write full sentences. You can even draw pictures if you like. Anything that gets your thoughts out. The reason I've mentioned writing is that there is a built-in reflective mechanism in writing. That's why I don't want to say "reflective writing". You must stop to think. You must shape your thought process to think about what to write. Once it's written, you can see the written word and you can see your thoughts. They may or may not reflect exactly what's going on. But you can rewrite it if need be. A lot of teachers are afraid of writing and that's why I wouldn't use the term 'reflective writing'. I suggest that if you want to help a teacher reflect on their practices, writing is a good way to start the whole process.

*In your experience, are there cultural issues involved in whether teachers engage in this kind of research or not?*

Yes, especially if you want to ask them to reflect with other teachers in particular cultures. There's a whole new dynamic there. If one person is senior or junior to the other person, what they'll reveal and what they're allowed to reveal may not really reflect what they're thinking. But then again, individual teachers have to take responsibility on themselves.

What I worry about with the teacher research aspect is that the responsibility remains outside the teacher. It's with the academic or whoever is running the show, so to speak. The teacher never fully takes the responsibility on himself or herself. Some teachers are happy to ask, "What should I do?" And academics are more than happy to tell them what to do. When teachers ask me, "What should I do?" I tell them, "I don't know. What would you like to do?" I never deviate from that. If you're supervising a teacher and you tell them what to do, you're generating a sense of learned helplessness. That's not going to help the teacher. If the teacher says, "I don't know what to look at", then you leave it alone until the teacher finds out what they want to look at.

I think teachers are afraid of the whole process of looking at their teaching. In the first few months after they graduate from a teacher education programme they're quite happy to talk about their teaching. That is because they've just graduated from a programme in which they had to talk and write about their teaching, and be observed teaching. But after three, four, or five years they build these metaphorical walls around themselves. If you ask a teacher four years down the road to tell you about their teaching or to share their lesson plans, they're

much more reluctant. I found that when some teachers talk about their practices it's totally unrelated to the reality of what they actually do.

Recently I discovered a new thing that I've called the third-year slump. Novice teachers, who are so eager in their first year, enter the third year and are in the slump because they are beaten down by the system, or they beat themselves down, or the students beat them down. I used to think that once you've survived the first year, you're OK. But actually you're not. As teachers gain this so-called experience, they begin to doubt themselves even more. The reason is that they haven't reflected on that experience. Experience means nothing unless you've reflected on it. I think reflective practice is the way to go for the teacher because it's not threatening. It doesn't use the word 'research'. I say 'evidence-based'. I'm even reluctant to say "collect data". I prefer to say "collect information".

## **Teacher development**

***We're doing this interview at an international conference at which there was an event on teachers' research literacy. What would you say is the role of such conferences in equipping teachers with the knowledge and skills to do research in their own contexts or to engage in reflective practice?***

Conferences and workshops can be very dangerous. They can be dog-and-pony shows. On a Saturday you might be doing a workshop on how to teach writing or how to teach speaking or reading or whatever, and you tell the audience, "Here's how you should do this and this and this." On Monday, the teachers may try to implement what you've told them. But, generally speaking, what usually happens is that it doesn't work. By Wednesday they're back to doing what they usually do.

Part of the issue here is because they hear something at a conference but they're not aware of what they're doing at this particular moment to see whether it fits in or not. They think they know what they do but this might not be the same as what they actually do. A conference is good. It can be a giant reflection session. But if you ask me how best to equip teachers, I would suggest giving them a workshop on reflective practice. I would show them that the human aspect of teaching, who they are, and self-knowledge are as important as the skill of teaching reading or anything else for that matter.

***Is reflective practice being given the attention it deserves at such conferences?***

Not in TESOL. I think reflective practice is threatening, not only to teachers but also to academics. It's threatening to academics because they don't actually engage in reflective practice themselves. They only talk about it. It's very hard to find an MA programme leaflet or pamphlet that doesn't use the word 'reflection' somewhere. It's a term that is being constantly used and abused. It's touted by a lot of people. Yet certain sceptics within our profession call it a bandwagon. But it's not. It's not designed to replace anything else.

What it is is dangerous. It takes people out of their comfort zone and away from their routines to actually look at what is really happening in their world. The horror and beauty of reflective practice is that you don't know where it's going to lead. That said, in TESOL today there is a growing interest in research on the practices that encourage teachers to reflect. I have a new book on this, *Research on Reflective Practice in TESOL* (<https://goo.gl/Uixhwm>), coming out in early 2018.

***Would you say that reflective practice is more important for teachers than developing the skills of, for example, writing a questionnaire, conducting an interview, or observing their students?***

Yes! I would say it's a necessary prerequisite to that because if teachers know themselves they would automatically be brought towards that. If you bring in these research techniques outside themselves, it's too far outside the teachers. It's the 'other' for them. It's not part of them. If they reflect on who they are and who they want to be as teachers, they will automatically drift towards that and they will ask you, "How can I look at my practice in this sense? What is a good way of doing that?" If we tell them what to do from the start, it's top down. It's as if they're going back into teacher training and they're being told what to do, rather than asking and becoming curious. We should develop curious teachers who would want to ask about what they're doing.

***Will this lead to the development of the skills needed to satisfy that curiosity?***

It may. But again, who's calling the shots on language teacher research? The teacher or the academic? What if the teacher doesn't want to do that? I would say that's OK.

***You seem to be implying that the academics we spoke about earlier are imposing their agenda on teachers and straightjacketing them into a particular approach to research.***

They're co-opting it. Let me give you an example. The action-research cycle is very popular in the UK and other places. Action research is fine, but it's problem-based. Not all teaching is problem-based. The teacher as a human being is nowhere in the cycle. It's like everything is out there. You have a problem in your class that you want to fix. But it's like the academic and the teacher are looking at a problem somewhere over there. It's like watching TV. Where's the teacher? And who is deciding it's a problem in the first place? What evidence is there of the problem? They're going through the cycle of action research but the values are divorced from the methods. It's all methodological. It's outside the teacher. Who benefits really?

***This interview is being published in a journal produced by a teacher association. What is the role of teacher associations in trying to foster the attitudes and skills needed to engage in this broadened conception of research?***

I think a teacher association should develop curiosity within its members. It should devise talks, workshops, and events that develop this curiosity and encourage teachers to talk to each other about what they do. By means of reflective practice, teachers can be guided to develop a language to explain what they do. A lot of teachers can't explain what they do. A teacher association should develop a sense of curiosity in teachers that can lead either to a change of practices or an affirmation of current practices. But it cannot be research that is outside the teachers; that is, research outside the person who is doing the research.

**DANIEL XERRI**

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# 4

## PART FOUR:

# In their own voice: Teachers talk research

*The inquiry process described here asks teachers to become actively involved in understanding and justifying their own practices, to consider directions in which they might change, and to talk about their practices with their colleagues. This requires the development of a highly trusting atmosphere, in which the participants acknowledge their own expertise and are willing to risk experimenting with new ideas and practices.*

Richardson, V. (n.d.). Teacher inquiry as professional staff development. *NSSE*, 93(1), 195.



## “Beyond monolithic thinking and practices in ELT”: **Daniel Xerri on teacher research**



*Daniel Xerri’s engaging plenary, “Supporting teacher-researchers through the development of research literacy”, at the 34th Annual ETAS Conference and AGM in Zofingen left a lasting impression on many in the audience. This interview delves deeper into the alluring idea of teachers positioning themselves as researchers.*

### **What exactly do we mean by research literacy and why is it so important for English teachers?**

Research literacy is defined in different ways by different researchers, though it consists of a number of key components. These include the technical competence to actually do research, that is, the knowledge and skills you require to collect data, to analyse it, and to write it up. But research literacy goes beyond that. It also involves the attitudes and beliefs of the individual with respect to research, so the conception of research is very, very important. If you don’t have a conception of research that is sufficiently broad, then you’re going to merely look at it in the way that some people define it; for example, in the way that academics define it. This might not be the most appropriate definition of research for your purposes as a language teacher. So, I think that research literacy involves the knowledge and skills with respect to doing research, but it also involves a set of attitudes and beliefs that allow you to see yourself as someone who is capable of doing research, and considers research as part of their identity.

### **In your plenary, you mentioned that the understanding of the term research is the main obstacle preventing many teachers from engaging with and in research. What are some common beliefs and misconceptions surrounding it?**

In my plenary, I featured a quote by Christine Coombe that comes from an interview published in the Winter 2017 issue of *ETAS Journal*. Research, for her, is basically finding things out, finding things that you are interested in learning more about. However, the misconceptions that arise and which some teachers might sometimes have when it comes to research are related to the fact that they might see it as something that needs to involve a hypothesis or statistics, or something that necessarily entails a very difficult process of analysis. Other teachers might think of research as something that is solely numeric in nature – a conception

much more aligned with quantitative research. They might see it as an activity that is only done by people who work in universities.

All of these misconceptions are ultimately based on a very narrow definition of research, a narrow perspective of what research entails. This stops teachers from actually seeing themselves as capable of doing research. So, if you feel that numbers are not your forte, that statistics is something you're afraid of, then you're going to feel and think that research is something that's alien to you. If you feel that research can tell you nothing new about what you do in the classroom because experience is the most important thing of all, then that is also going to distance you from any attempt to do research.

There are many such factors that discourage teachers from doing research. And here I'm not saying that all teachers should do research. I think it's very important that whenever we look at professional development, it should be something that you willingly choose to do and you have the option of choosing whichever approach to professional development works for you or appeals to you. So, what we're trying to do is to enable teachers to consider research as an alternative. Once they've considered it, they might realise that it is something that they want to do and that they are capable of doing. But they might also realise that it's not for them. It's very important to highlight the fact that doing research is meant to be voluntary.

***One of the other reasons why teachers might not do research is a lack of time. What would you say to teachers who could be concerned about this?***

Time has long been mentioned as one of the main obstacles to teachers doing research. All of us working in the teaching profession know that time is an issue. However, when we define research more broadly, what we are saying is that some of the things that you already do as a teacher are part of the research process. So, if you are concerned about an issue that your students might have with writing and you set them a writing task which is meant to help you learn more about that particular concern, you are collecting a form of data about what they can and can't do. Now there, you are engaging in the role of a teacher: you are teaching and assessing your students. But you are also learning more about them and their needs. Hence, you are also engaging in the role of a researcher.

Essentially, you're combining the two roles together. The amount of time required for teaching purposes, can also be used for research purposes. This means that research isn't necessarily a supplement when it comes to time. It can also be something incorporated into your pedagogy. The common misconception is that research is an add-on, whereas what I'm saying is that research might already form part of what most teachers do. Therefore you don't need to make a lot of extra time for it. You just need to change your perception of what you're doing as a teacher, and use your practices not solely for pedagogical purposes but also for research purposes.

***So, in actual fact, without fully realising it we already engage in some form of research whenever we ask ourselves why certain things occur in our lessons. What else is required of teachers in order to become sufficiently research literate and what advice can you give us to further develop these necessary skills?***

Well, there are various skills involved when we do research. I think it all starts with asking a question, or else thinking of an issue that you'd like to explore further, and knowing how to explore that issue in such a way that you come up with answers that are valid to your approach. One of the basic skills involved in research is the ability to pose questions that you're able to answer. In the kind of research we conduct in academia, we call those research questions. So, that's one of the basic skills. What kind of questions do we ask? How do we write those questions? How do we pose those questions? Then we move on to the skills we

require in order for us to find the best way of answering those questions. This is where we look at, for example, research methods. Should I interview people? Should I distribute a questionnaire? Should I observe a class? Should I observe myself? Should I take field notes? What is the best means by which I can answer my questions?

All of those different methods involve separate skills. Obviously, some of those skills overlap, but these methods involve a set of skills that enable us to answer our questions or else attempt to – when using a more traditional approach to research – prove or disprove a hypothesis. Those are some of the skills involved in collecting data. Then we eventually move on to analysing that data and trying to identify patterns and come up with findings that enable us to answer the questions that we would have asked at the beginning of our research.

Other skills are related to disseminating our research, if we so wish. Whether it's via writing or oral presentations, dissemination involves another set of skills. Not to mention the skills involved in reflecting on the findings that we come up with, and seeing how those findings might enable us to change or validate our practices, depending on the approach we are using.

For example, if we're using Action Research, we are looking to make a change to our practices. Whereas if we use some other kind of research approach, then we're trying to learn more about a particular issue that we're curious about. I would say that most teachers have a knowledge base when it comes to doing research, but they might not necessarily call them research skills or research-oriented skills. With a bit of assistance, perhaps through a mentor who might either be a peer or a professional researcher, teachers can use the knowledge and skills they already have and develop them in such a way that they can be used for research purposes, especially in order to do research within their own classrooms.

***It sounds like many teachers possess a lot of these skills already. They just need to retune them so that they can also be applied to the field of research. However, in your plenary you quoted Péter Medgyes as saying that there is little reason to jump on the bandwagon of research. This suggests that teacher research could be a fad that everyone is being encouraged to do, or that there is too much research out there already. What are your thoughts on this?***

I think that you can't ever really say that there is too much research. As humans, as professionals, we're constantly learning; our field is constantly evolving. Hence, research is one of the best ways of preventing ourselves from ending up in a rut and perpetuating practices and beliefs that might no longer be relevant for the present day or useful for the future. If, 30 years from now, we had to continue teaching in the way that we currently do, then most probably we would experience a number of problems. Research is a way of constantly refreshing our knowledge, and constantly developing as professionals. Professional development in itself is concerned with one's individual growth. Similarly, research is concerned with the growth of our field. Research is what thrusts us beyond monolithic thinking and practices in ELT.

***One of the most powerful points in your plenary was the reference to Thomas S. C. Farrell's convincing analogy comparing teachers who lack any kind of research engagement to medical doctors who do not read or do research. The analogy is meant to make us question the extent to which we should trust such doctors and teachers. However, there might be teachers out there who might have engaged with research during their teacher training but rarely get to do so nowadays, preferring to leave it up to the experts. How would you respond to this?***

I would contest the idea that research needs to be left to the 'experts' by saying that teachers are the experts. If teachers don't conceive of themselves as experts in terms of their ability

to find answers to the questions that they have, then those answers won't ever be generated. Why? It's because the answers are dependent on a teacher's particular context and classroom. The best answers are never going to be derived from someone else's context. Whenever academic research is published in a journal, its findings relate to a context that might not necessarily be applicable or relevant to your specific classroom, and your students and their needs.

So, you yourself as the teacher are the best person to conduct research because you are immersed in your context. You know what questions you have and you know what answers would really help you and your students. It's unfortunate when teachers see outside researchers as being more expert in the field than themselves. This kind of thinking stops teachers from actually realising that they themselves are the experts about the classroom in which they teach.

***Do you have any advice for teachers working in institutions that might not be willing to support their efforts to do research?***

It's good that you've asked this question because another obstacle to teachers doing research is a lack of support coming from the institution where they work. In fact, in the Winter 2017 issue of *ETAS Journal* Anne Burns lists ten pieces of advice that educational managers need to follow in order for them to support teachers. However, let's imagine a situation where a teacher is not being provided with any kind of support by their institution. Ultimately, what they need to keep in mind is that they do research primarily for their own benefit and that of their students. It should not be a question of, "I'm not being given support so I'm not going to do it. I'm not being given extra time and money, and I'm not being recognised as a researcher. Hence, I'm not going to do it." You opt to do research because you have questions that you'd really like answers to.

Whether you have support or not, you have to decide if those questions are worth answering. If you decide that they are worth answering, then you go ahead and do research in your own classroom. Even if you're not recognised as being a teacher-researcher and you're only expected to teach English, you can still decide to do research because you're doing it for yourself and your students. In fact, you can even ask for your students' support. They can be your co-researchers. This means that the students are not just people whom you are researching; they are also people who are enabling you to construct knowledge, doing so as co-constructors of knowledge. They are as involved in the process as you are. They are your research peers, in a way.

Teachers wishing to do research can also get support from other sources – their teacher association, online and face-to-face courses, open access publications about how to do research and accounts of teacher research, as well as collaboration with their colleagues. For example, Action Research can contain a collaborative element so that a group of colleagues work together to find answers to any questions they might have in common.

***What are some of the most interesting things you learnt from editing the three Special Supplements on teacher research for ETAS Journal?***

What's most interesting for me is how supportive all of the contributors are of the idea that we shouldn't narrow the definition of research. They all seem to believe that one of the most harmful things that can happen with respect to teacher research is when teachers are told what they need to do and how they need to do it by people who might not necessarily be in the language classroom anymore. It is very dangerous for academics to impose their definition of research on teachers and tell them that in order for them to do good quality

research they need to do it in a very specific way. It's dangerous because it might lead teachers to feel alienated from research, to believe that it's something that doesn't belong to them and that doesn't form part of their identity. Teachers might come to see research as belonging to someone else that is giving them the privilege to actually do it. I was glad to see that my colleagues from around the world seem to share the idea that research needs to be democratised further so that many more teachers come to believe that they can engage with it and in it.

**What do you hope to see happening in the future with regards to teacher research?**

Given that we're doing this interview for a teacher association's publication, my hope is that more teacher associations around the world consider themselves to be agents in enabling teachers to develop the necessary knowledge, skills, beliefs, and attitudes for them to do research – if they so choose. It's very important for teacher associations to see themselves as being at the forefront of any efforts to provide teachers with this kind of support. Supporting teachers should not just consist of equipping them with pedagogical skills, but it's also about furnishing them with the competences required to explore the many issues that arise in the language classroom. We need to respect teachers as thinking beings, professionals who have questions and want answers to those questions.

**HANNAH MCCULLOCH**

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# On “Supporting teacher-researchers through the development of research literacy”: Teachers’ reactions

**BEN HOYT**



After Daniel Xerri’s inspiring plenary at the 34th ETAS Annual Conference and AGM on 20-21 January 2018, ELT Springboard, a group of ETAS members and non-members in Bern, met to discuss what he had said. One of the main topics was Thomas Farrell’s analogy:

If we were to say that teachers should not do and read research, we’d almost be saying that a medical doctor should not do or read research because they don’t have time for it or have no use for it or it’s not relevant to them. And yet you’re going to visit that medical doctor and be prescribed medication. Based on? Research, of course (Xerri, 2017, p. 14).

There was a surprising amount of disagreement with the comparison. Some teachers felt that research was far less critical for teachers than doctors and that teachers could function perfectly well without always being fully up to date.

While out-dated methods do not carry the same level of risk in the classroom as in the operating theatre, complacency is not the answer. Nor should the responsibility of implementing the latest research findings rest solely with materials designers and publishers. Following this path leaves teachers unable to critically evaluate the materials themselves. Our role is reduced and we become consumers of knowledge rather than generators of it.

Research literacy enables teachers to recognise theories in practice and be aware of how materials are intended to be used. Furthermore, it gives teachers the ability to identify practices that require updates or improvement and to clearly explain why these changes are necessary and how they should take place.

Learning styles were examined in 2009 and no evidence was found of their effectiveness in improving learning outcomes (Pahsler, McDaniel, Rohrer, & Bjork, 2009), yet numerous books and lessons continued to be produced for a number of years to great commercial success. As Xerri asked in his presentation, “Is a teacher someone who just teaches and doesn’t ask questions? Is it not the role of teachers to demand evidence for the theories we are being asked to follow?”

As James Taylor (2017) stressed, we need to distinguish between evidence-based findings and gut-instinct. We also need to be humble enough to acknowledge evidence of our misconceptions when confronted with it. Achilleas Kostoulas (2017) wrote about the necessity of research literacy in becoming better teachers. Rather than being passive receivers of academic knowledge, we teachers are perfectly positioned to take a critical look at the studies being done, evaluate their relevance, create our own classroom-based research projects and develop our voices as experts in our domain.

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# Re+search: New teachers looking for new input

LYNN WILLIAMS-LEPPICH

## <sup>1</sup> research

*noun* | re-search | \ri-'sərch, 'rē-ˌsərch\

- 1 : careful or diligent search
- 2 : studious inquiry or examination; especially : investigation or experimentation aimed at the discovery and interpretation of facts, revision of accepted theories or laws in the light of new facts, or practical application of such new or revised theories or laws
- 3 : the collecting of information about a particular subject

Source: <https://www.merriamwebster.com/dictionary/research>



You've probably been there. Those first several (dozen) lessons where you still don't quite have the feeling you actually know what you're doing. (Well, I've certainly been there, anyway.) You've got the bit of paper that proves you can teach, but in your head you find yourself wondering, 'Can I really?' You're newly qualified, so you have just recently engaged at some length and in some depth with all kinds of teacher manuals and research studies that tell you how you could (should?) be doing things. There's a fair chance you feel just a little bit overwhelmed by the sheer number of competing voices on manifold subjects because what you actually feel you need to do is to *get-through-your-lesson*. Dealing with classroom practicalities. Addressing the unexpected. Coming out 'unscathed'. Ideally feeling exhilarated and a tiny bit proud when things do turn out OK after all (Well, yes, you knew they would really, but...).

So, you're wondering how you can possibly find the time and energy to look into research, and – frankly – whether it's even worth it. So, why bother? First of all, research can bring you reassurance. Ever wondered why you instinctively organise a group work activity in a particular way? You may well find that the research in the field confirms those intuitions. By the same token, research findings can unsettle us – new, perhaps surprising, findings might lead us to re-examine how we design speaking tasks or call into question long-established beliefs we've been nurturing about vocabulary acquisition. In short, research can offer us a much-needed security blanket – and also momentarily turn our (teaching) world upside down.

Once we decide to engage with research it's not of course just the *area* of inquiry which plays a role in the directions we take; it's also the way in which the research is presented. What manner of findings will best serve our purposes for the classroom? A state-of-the-art article can help us survey the landscape to establish the current state of play in an area of interest. A specialised journal presenting a selection of articles can help us synthesise information and compare and contrast what different researchers and practitioners have to say on a subject.

A seminal paper centred on precisely the question which has been niggling recently privileges us with wide-ranging, large-scale, and far-reaching information that we wouldn't be

able to collect in our everyday classroom work. Statistics confirm our beliefs or confound our expectations. Interviews, research diaries, and verbal protocols grant us insight into others' teaching mindsets and tell us we are not alone. Action research persuades us that research doesn't all have to happen on a highly formalised level. Research permeates our classrooms in myriad ways.

Where previously accessing research would have meant trawling through bewildering library catalogues and scanning typewritten abstracts in public reading rooms, today we can of course access research just about anywhere: research has become *accessible*. Efficient search engines, inspiring teaching newsletters, thought-provoking blogs and tweets, quality online presentations, uplifting free MOOCs – they all serve up findings we can engage with on our mission to optimise our classroom work and to develop as reflective and well-informed teachers. Engaging with research – whether by casual independent reading or targeted self-study – helps us develop a vocabulary for describing what we do in the classroom and why, and also for exchanging ideas and issues with other teaching professionals.

Of course, having once (re-)engaged with research, you may decide that you have enough to be going on – for the time being at least. However, it may equally be that you get the bug. It might look something like this. You attend a workshop, casually follow up on one of the reading suggestions, find the author engaging, discover that he/she has a blog, become a regular reader. Or you hear about a locally-organised research study and register your interest in participating. This inspires you to read up on the particular field of enquiry. You get into discussion in the staffroom about that reading. In passing, your colleague mentions a conference you might be interested in. Once there, you find yourself raising your hand to ask a question of the presenter, who recommends a website. You find inspiring materials online and decide to trial them in your classroom. Then you wonder how they would work with a different group of students and start asking yourself enquiry questions. And before you know it, you have your own action research project in miniature!

Keeping up-to-date with the latest developments in (language) education prevents us from getting stale and helps us re-evaluate our teaching. It shapes our beliefs, challenges our expectations, and sets us thinking. This mindset becomes a valuable cornerstone in our commitment to lifelong learning and continued professional development.

So, to all those new teachers out there: having devoted a lot of energy to searching for your way in teaching, you've now successfully found it. From this comfortable position, then it could just be time to 're-search'. Why not strike out afresh? Whether this means revisiting ground already covered or embarking on entirely uncharted territory, your search is bound to bring you rewards in the shape of input, ideas, innovation, and inspiration.





# What do 20 years of teaching experience amount to?

SUSANNE OSWALD



*Possibly being a researcher without even knowing it... .*

The experienced teacher has probably taught a wide range of language courses at various levels, while using a plethora of course books during their career. Throughout this time, I can imagine that they have noticed that some methods and activities just seem to work better than others in certain situations. According to Dudley Reynolds in the interview by Daniel Xerri (2017, p.12), “It [research] is something within anyone’s reach to do.” One could speculate that experienced teachers have been continually refining their repertoire through experimental studies directly in the classroom all along.

There are the case studies which involve small groups of students, be it the young learner, adolescent, or entrepreneur. Each group has a particular set of language needs waiting to be met. Then there are the longitude studies which could span decades and involve testing new technologies against tried and trusted methods to find a balanced mix appropriate for general or specific settings. With each written assignment in a classroom, a written learner’s corpus is formed – perhaps the corpus is actually tangible or merely mentally noted. During the process of correcting written language, not only grammar and vocabulary can be noticed by the keen eye of experience but L1 interference, challenges with metaphor, and indications of language trends.

I would even say that teachers already possess research questions and answers due to their first-hand knowledge about what works and what does not. The intuitive nature of a good teacher helps them choose the best approach for a class because it gets the results.

Such valuable information needs to be shared. We have been helping students for years, now it is time to help less experienced teachers and the community glean from our knowledge. The question is how to package the knowledge in order to be able to channel it through the process of academic recognition.

Perusing further education in short online or standard university courses, one finds options which could strengthen academic notions and give guidance. Although formal research might not be the answer for everyone, simple sharing can be an alternative. Staying active in teaching associations and in social media groups and contributing to teacher’s journals could get your ideas to someone who can carry your knowledge to the next level.

Research can verify and quantify the knowledge of experienced teachers and it is crucial to be able to document and share that experience with a wider audience instead of only in the local teacher room of a school. Only by sharing across the community can patterns and tendencies be recognised and added to the general pool of knowledge. The thousands of hours of experience shouldn’t go to waste after someone stops teaching but live on in the minds of the community.

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### Online academic writing courses:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/learningenglish/gothedistance/academicwriting>

<https://www.coursera.org/specializations/academic-english>

<https://www.futurelearn.com/courses/english-for-study>

# On Daniel Xerri's plenary, "Supporting teacher-researchers through the development of research literacy": A humble teacher's reaction

RACHAEL HARRIS



Daniel Xerri's presentation was everything I wanted from a plenary – a little theory, a well-argued case, and, especially, a sprinkle of that elusive stardust that make us reflect on how we can become better teachers.

I had already undertaken classroom research in the form of an action-research project on vocabulary learning for my MA TESOL a couple of years ago and thoroughly enjoyed the experience. Although it was time-consuming of course (teachers' main reason for shying away from such projects), I found it motivating, not just for my own teaching techniques. In particular, I was taken aback by the reaction of my students who took part in this project: they participated with enthusiasm, frequently gave up free time for interviews, and pestered me to know the results of my project. On finishing my studies, I'd always promised myself that I would set up a similar project on a different theme, but as with so many teaching ideas, I'd never got round to doing it.

In our secondary school, my colleagues and I often discuss the difficulty in providing effective feedback for the frequent tests we set. How could we best mark work and encourage students to learn from the feedback rather than just glance at the result? Daniel's plenary was thus a call for action. Inspired by it, I returned to school and called an impromptu meeting with like-minded colleagues. We made a plan: we would all get together a week later and suggest and share as many correction methods as we could, such as using a marking code, just underlining errors, writing the correct version above the error, and more. Each teacher then went off and tried a variety of new ways.

I also gave the students a questionnaire about their preferred method. It seems most of them preferred the correct version being written by the teacher although whether this is for ease I'm not sure. One student did point out that "if I knew the correct answer I would have written it in the first place".

We then got back together and discussed what we had learnt. Our conclusions included the fact that variety was important to many of us. Also, the nature of the test and the subject (Maths, French, etc.) affected the form of correction, as did the teaching style of the teacher – it would seem our ELT staff are less rigid than in some other subjects.

While this project was not carried out in a rigorous way or undertaken with a control group, it was still a useful experience in terms of encouraging teachers to reflect on various aspects of their teaching and in prompting us to get together to discuss our different methods. Getting the students involved also showed them that we have their best interests at heart – they felt as though they had more of a say in their learning journey.

This 'action-research' project will probably neither get published nor taken further, but we did agree to present our 'findings' to other colleagues at a future meeting. The most important thing, however, is that it did affect our teaching and encourage us to try ways to become more effective teachers, which surely is the point of research, if – as so many teachers want – research is to be relevant in the classroom.

# Reflecting through journals

GEMMA LUNN



The Academic Reading Group is a small but keen group of English teachers who meet each month in St. Gallen to discuss an ELT article and how this relates to our teaching contexts. These articles, although interesting and provoking good discussions, are often based on teaching contexts quite different from our own. Thus, following the *ETAS Journal* Special Supplements on research literacy and teacher-led research, we were inspired to use our own research as a basis for the next couple of meetings. We did this through keeping teaching journals for a month and then discussing and analysing these with the hope that this would lead us to some discoveries about our teaching practices.

When deciding how to approach writing in the journals, we decided to keep it simple and follow Farrell's advice: "Just write about your class. There is no correct method. You don't even have to write full sentences" (Xerri, 2008, p. 14).

This put us at ease as there was then no pressure to answer specific questions or write in a set format. Fortunately, we are a close group and most of us have been meeting regularly now for over two years, therefore there was no need to feel embarrassed or 'exposed' when sharing our journals.

In an interview by Xerri (2018), Farrell states that when looking over journal entries "a teacher will begin to see patterns develop in the writing" (p.14). This was certainly true. One pattern that was clear was that, generally, we had all used more negative rather than positive language and also been quite subjective: "I think the students were bored with this activity", "I don't think the students liked the article". We discussed how reflections can be more accurate if they are more objective, and how this can be done by putting feelings to the side, as shown below in the Experiential Learning Cycle – a very useful tool to aid reflection.

When reading one teacher's entries in particular, we all noticed that she had written mostly negative points and been very critical of herself. To help her build her confidence and understanding of her students, we suggested the teacher ask for more spontaneous, informal feedback from students to gain a more accurate idea of their opinions and feelings.

This is just one example of suggestions and advice that was shared among the group. We all walked away with ideas of how to improve at least one aspect of our classroom practice. Sharing journal entries is now a fixed part of our monthly meetings as everyone agreed how beneficial it for us, and consequently for our students. As Smith in an interview with Xerri (2018) said, teacher-led research "can empower teachers and make classrooms better places for learning" (p. 38).

For more information on the Academic Reading Group in St. Gallen, please check out this page: <https://earlyreflections1.wordpress.com/etas-elt-academic-reading-group/>

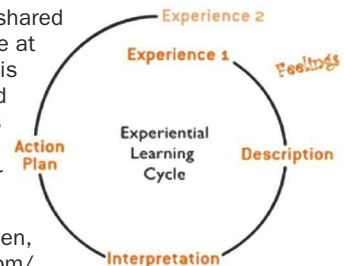


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## Afterword

### Teacher research as professional development

This book had its beginnings in the classroom. All the contributors to this volume are teaching professionals and engaged research-practitioners. Having experienced the rigour and challenges that accompany their respective professional journeys, they come with a wealth of wisdom and one fundamental insight from their experience underpins the groundwork of this collection: the importance of supporting teacher research through the development of research literacy.

The kind of professional development advocated in this volume calls for a long-term investment in building the capacity of teachers to exercise their judgment and leadership abilities that will enhance learning for themselves and their students. In the ways described by various authors, the articles in this collection address this issue by highlighting the need to provide the right kinds of conditions and support that can transform research literacy into a professional development experience, one that has a clear impact on teachers and their students. In short, becoming research literate can be a transformational professional development experience of great importance to teachers.



It is no surprise then that one of the fundamental issues resonating throughout this entire collection is the belief that the quality of learning and opportunities for professional development that teachers have access to ultimately determines the quality of our students' learning experience. Hence, among the issues similarly foregrounded in this book is the role of policy-makers, school administrators, and educational managers in setting directions for reforms and providing teachers with the knowledge, skills, and content that they need to carry them out.

Just as noteworthy is the book's focus on the place of this kind of professional development in teachers' lives, one which respects and nurtures the intellectual and leadership capacity of teachers and facilitates individual change and growth for the teacher-researchers. Writing in "The Teacher as Researcher" about the transformative impact of teacher research, Marian Mohr (1980) describes her accidental incursion into teacher research as resulting from experiencing and understanding that the "humiliation of not knowing everything catches up with every teacher". She stresses that one way of learning to live with this realisation is to "begin asking why things happened the way they did in my classes, to become a student of my students, encouraging them to teach me about the way they learned" (Mohr, 1980, p. 5).

By presenting examples of articles produced by teacher-researchers about developing and supporting teacher-research communities, the book argues for the establishment of teacher-research networks, the place of collaborative work in teaching and learning contexts, and the urgency of providing teacher-researchers with opportunities for disseminating their findings.

Responding to the question, *Why is Teacher Research important to me?*, Gail Ritchie writes:

Teacher Research empowers teachers to make a positive difference in terms of classroom practice; it enables us to provide relevant information about teaching and learning in actual classrooms. Most importantly, by engaging in reflective practice, the Teacher Researcher improves the lives of students by always seeking to discover better, more effective ways of implementing teaching/learning (<https://gse.gmu.edu/research/tr/tr-definition>).

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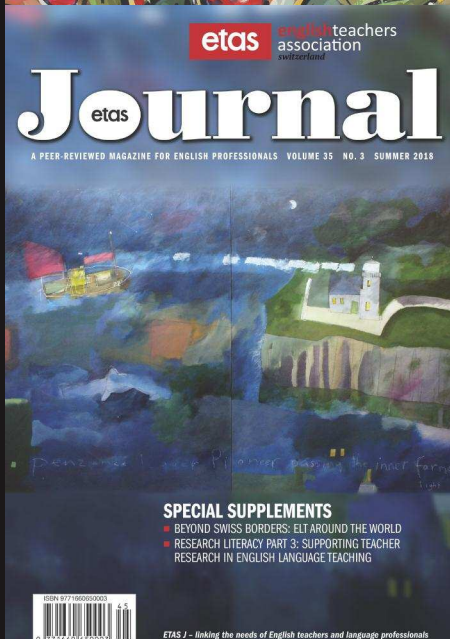
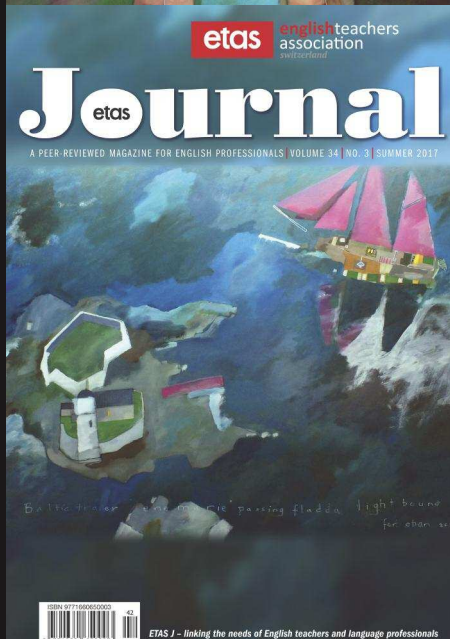
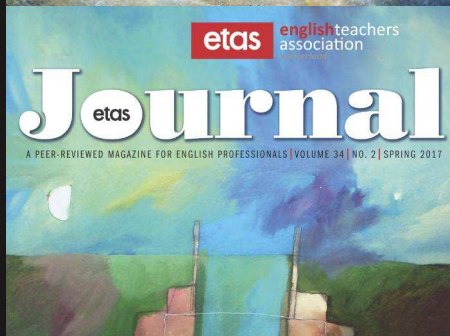
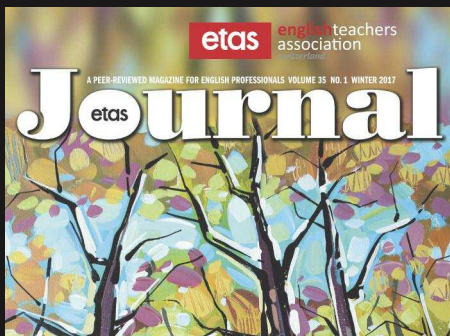
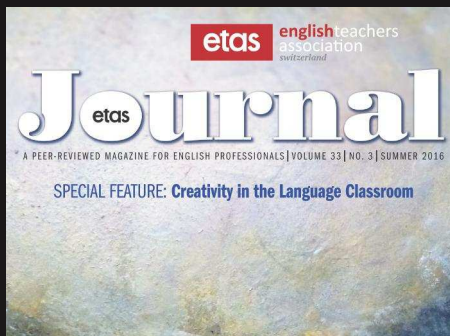
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ETAS J – linking the needs of English teachers and language professionals

# Becoming Research Literate

## Supporting Teacher Research in English Language Teaching

Edited by Daniel Xerri and Ceres Pioquinto

This book introduces readers to the concept of research literacy, which involves the ability to judiciously use, apply, and develop research concepts and tools as a fundamental part of one's teaching. To be research literate, one needs to develop the skills to draw on, critically scrutinize, and integrate different kinds of evidence. Specifically, the book aims to develop English language teachers into informed and critical users of research tools and by-products.

However, making research literacy an integral component of what teachers do in their daily teaching and learning contexts requires making available to teachers the necessary support for conducting research in their own classrooms and sharing their findings in an effective manner. Hence, the book foregrounds not just the importance of providing support but also the kind of support that needs to be provided if research literacy were to succeed as an essential and sustained part of what it means to be a language teaching professional.

Edited by two experienced teacher-researchers, this book compiles a broad range of perspectives to demonstrate the potential uses of a research-informed pedagogical framework not just in English language teaching but in the teaching of other languages as well. Thus, by promoting research-integrated professional practice, this book aims to facilitate the professional development of all language teachers. In particular, experienced and novice teachers who want to integrate research in their teaching practice but have no formal training in the research process or experience in conducting research will benefit from the profound insights that inform this book. And for research practitioners and scholars who want to further enhance their professional competencies in the research process, the book includes articles that provide a clear and thought-provoking path through the texts and arguments of this exciting field of teacher research.

### Key Features

- Aims to diminish knowledge gaps on research in English language classrooms by offering a solid rationale for developing teachers' research literacy.
- Addresses the various kinds of support different stakeholders – teachers, teacher trainers, school leaders, and teacher associations – need in order to create a culture of teacher research in their respective contexts and encourage it as a form of life-long learning endeavor among their constituents.
- Focuses on developing methodological knowledge and analytic skills that may be useful for anyone wishing to learn about conducting research in their classroom and those who consider research knowledge as a way of enhancing their professional competencies.
- Serves as a resource on various methods of inquiry for teacher trainers, school leaders, and teacher associations around the world wanting to know more about how to support teacher research in their contexts.
- Includes contributions written by world-class experts in the field of teacher research who have plenty of experience in supporting classroom practitioners in a wide variety of international and educational contexts.

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