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Researching Teacher Associations

Richard Smith and Kuchah Kuchah

Abstract

Here we argue not only for more research *into* English language teacher associations (TAs) but also for research to be carried out *by* and *within* TAs. That is, we advocate their becoming 'Researching TAs' themselves. This suggestion derives from our recent collaborative work with/within CAMELTA (the Cameroon English Language and Literature Teachers' Association). In this context we have initiated and helped to facilitate the development of what we term – by analogy with 'teacher-research' – '*TA-research*': systematic inquiry which is based on members' priorities and officially endorsed by a TA, and which engages members as active participants in what they see as a collective project. This initiative offers promising signs that a TA can become a 'researching association' in the service of its members' needs. In the CAMELTA case, valuable local knowledge is being uncovered and shared, helping members become less dependent on outsider expertise: in a word, more *empowered*.

Introduction

Participation in teacher associations has been influential in many English language teachers' professional and personal lives, including our own, but TAs have only rarely attracted the attention of ELT researchers. As this special issue attests, the situation may be changing to some extent, partly due to the two best-known international English language TAs – namely, TESOL International Association and IATEFL – celebrating their fiftieth birthdays in 2016 and 2017, respectively. It is perhaps a sign of the increasing maturity of ELT / TESOL as a profession that attention is now being focused on the institutions which structure it, including TAs, with a view not only to celebration but also, to some extent, to critical self-reflection.

The focus of our attention in this article is on the relationship between TAs and *research*, by which we mean systematic investigation carried out to gain knowledge and understanding in a particular area. Some kinds of research aim to contribute to theory but we are more concerned here with relatively practical research, of a kind which involves identifying and sharing either successful practices or problems and possible solutions, and which is, thereby, directly relevant and immediately useful to practitioners. Such research can be carried out *into* teachers' lives and practices, teacher development and TAs, but teachers and TAs can also research for themselves. On analogy with 'teacher-research', that is, research initiated and carried out by teachers into issues of importance to them in their work, in this article

we propose and illustrate the notion of *TA*-research, which, as we shall explain, involves a *collective* attempt within a *TA* to carry out research based on members' expressed practical needs.

Research *about* TAs

Aubrey and Coombe (2010: n.p.) note an 'alarming paucity of research related to ELT associations and conferences' compared with other forms of professional development, a point also made by Barfield (2014). English language TAs are, as these authors point out, almost invisible in the mainstream literature on professional development, despite their importance in many teachers' lives.

Some recent cases of *historical* research (e.g. Liu and Murphy (2015); Rixon and Smith (forthcoming)) have, though, affirmed the value of TAs at the same time as suggesting that a knowledge of the past can be a basis for future decision-making. A second, specific aspect of larger TAs that has attracted at least some research attention is conferences and their impact. Both Aubrey and Coombe (2010) and Borg (2015) have noted the importance of conferences in many teachers' professional development and have proposed practical improvements. This is an area in which leaders and staff of the larger TAs also adopt a researching role themselves, instigating conference evaluation surveys, as well as membership surveys and other types of opinion poll (see Lamb et al. n.d., Section 9, for examples).

Lamb (2012) provides an overview of a recent project in which different teacher associations, among them some English language TAs, have cooperated to share ideas with a view to mutual self-help. Along the same lines of collaborative self-development, but on a smaller scale, Barfield (2014) describes how members of the Learner Development Special Interest Group (LD SIG) of JALT (the Japan Association for Language Teaching) have come together to support one another in teacher-research. Indeed, Allwright (1998) has emphasized strongly the potential value of TAs supporting this kind of local, practice-focused inquiry: a TA's role, he says (*ibid.*: 8), can be 'to provide a "location", both physical and psychological (but mostly psychological), for the collegiality and continuity so essential to sustainability, and thus to the overall success of the [practitioner research] enterprise'. Elsewhere, Allwright (1991) provides evidence from the collective work of a relatively small association in Bangalore, India, which shows how resourceful teachers can be in collaboratively evolving their own research agendas (see also Padwad and Dixit 2014 on English Teacher Clubs in India).

Finally, as summarized by Gnawali (2013), there are a few further studies of TAs in developing countries, carried out by postgraduate students who have themselves benefitted from professional development within a *TA*, and who state a wish for their research to help strengthen the same *TA*. Both this commitment and the research studies themselves reveal how strong the impact of participation in TAs can be on teachers' personal and professional lives, specifically in developing countries

where the teacher training opportunities they provide can represent the only available avenue for professional development.

This overview largely confirms the paucity of research into TAs, and it is noteworthy that, in almost all the cases we have come across, the researchers were themselves active participants in the TA focused on, and in some cases the research was commissioned by association leaders. In other words, the research that does exist has, in various ways, tended to emanate from *within* TAs. Given the unique and pressing challenges facing teachers in developing country contexts, in particular, but also the strength of commitment many teachers feel towards their TAs, we wish to argue for the further development of collaborative approaches to research engagement *within* these existing communities of practice, in ways which mirror and extend the collaborative work already in evidence in some of the contexts reviewed.

Towards TA-research

As Clarke (1994), among others, has noted, what is of importance to practitioners does not necessarily get considered in academia, whereas what is of importance to most academic researchers is governed by concerns other than teachers' own priorities. Indeed, Pennycook (1989: 596) argues that within TESOL / ELT there exists a 'one-way flow of prescriptivist knowledge' which is produced in 'central academic institutions', with academic expertise emanating from western universities being privileged 'over other possible forms of knowledge'. The TA conference plenary tends to be one avenue for such knowledge transmission; in the opposite direction, the neglect of TAs as an object of academic study is another symptom of disjuncture. A gap between theory and practice, which Clarke (1994) terms 'dysfunctional', is perhaps particularly in evidence where teachers in developing countries are concerned – they too often seem to find themselves being called upon to fit in with fashionable theories or models which have originated in relatively privileged first-world conditions and which can seem far from appropriate to the conditions they themselves face (see Kuchah and Smith 2011).

On the other hand, it is important not to dichotomize too much where the theory–practice 'divide' is concerned. As we saw above, there are promising signs of academic researchers playing cross-over roles – that is, of both relatively experienced and novice researchers identifying with TAs and recognizing the value of carrying out research which is linked in with, in fact which positively supports TAs. There are, then, opportunities to be grasped whereby academics who do identify with TAs can provide useful expertise for research work within them.

Also, as the above overview shows, leaders and members of some TAs have *already* engaged to some extent in different kinds of self-generated, self-implemented research, for purposes of celebration (affirmation of the TA's value) – e.g. Rixon and Smith (forthcoming) -- or more explicit reflection on and improvement in practice (cf. Lamb et al. n.d.). As we now hope to show, this principle can be extended, and this potential maximized, if the starting-point for research is expanded to other issues of salience to members, not just internal TA concerns. We have also seen how research

can be officially instigated and sanctioned by a TA (e.g. conference and membership surveys), and how there can be mutual support for research within TAs (e.g. Allwright 1991). What we have not yet seen, and hope now to illustrate, is how TAs can host effective collective action in the area of research, whereby a common agenda or theme of relevance to the membership is determined and many members take part in exploring it.

What we are proposing, then, by analogy with 'teacher-research', is what we call 'TA-research', that is, systematic inquiry which is derived from members' expressed priorities and officially endorsed by a TA and which engages members as active participants in what they see as a collective project to improve understanding and practice. Potentially, a TA can exert collective pressure for change on such a basis.

TA-research in practice: CAMELTA experience so far

We now report on a pilot initiative we have been helping to develop within the Cameroon English Language and Literature Teachers' Association (CAMELTA). This initiative has sought to empower members to engage in a collective, systematic research process based on their own developmental needs. Experience so far suggests that 'TA-research' of this kind (as defined above) has the potential to bring about change and could be empowering to participants in other TAs, too.

The context of English language education in Cameroon

Since independence, Cameroon has had both Anglophone (English-medium) and Francophone (French-medium) subsystems of education coexisting within the same country. In 1998, following significant education reforms, bilingual education was implemented at all levels of the school system, making it imperative for teachers in French-medium state schools with no or very limited proficiency in English to teach English in their classrooms, and increasing the demands on existing English teachers. Since the 1998 reform and the subsequent implementation of free and compulsory primary education, Cameroonian teachers have had to work in very difficult circumstances, some of which include:

- very large, multigrade classes;
- a lack of prescribed coursebooks and other teaching and learning resources;
- students from a multiplicity of first language backgrounds in the same classroom;
- a complete absence of technological facilities;

The situation has further been complicated by the intermittent promotion, mainly in primary schools, but also at secondary level, of different pedagogic principles and practices, mostly by external funding organizations.

CAMELTA and its developing research

CAMELTA was created in April 2001 with the aim of breaking the isolation that had existed amongst English teachers around the country, and creating a platform for teachers to network and share good practice. Since then, CAMELTA has organized 14 national annual conferences and over 300 seminars and workshops across its 10 regional chapters. Following complaints from its members about evident mismatches between policy recommendations and teachers' classroom realities, a research committee was set up in 2009 and charged with initiating research projects relevant to the needs and strengths of members. However, several attempts at instituting action research remained unsuccessful, partly due to lack of training in this form of research.

In August 2013, CAMELTA's 12th Annual Conference was preceded by a TESOL International Association K-12 Teacher Development and Training symposium which focused on some areas identified as relevant to regional needs, including teaching English in difficult circumstances.

It was during the symposium and conference – out of our joint reflections on the desirability and feasibility of teacher-research in difficult circumstances – that we¹ first formulated the notion of 'TA-research', to take account of specific problems, needs and opportunities which had become apparent. In brief, these were as follows:

- General dissatisfaction with conditions of primary and secondary school teaching;
- Perceived need to understand the nature and extent of difficulties, as a basis for proposing change;
- Unlikelihood of most CAMELTA members being able to carry out individual research, due to time and resource constraints as well as lack of research experience or training.

Discussions between us following the symposium and during the conference, in relation to the last point above, in particular, led Richard Smith to propose a change to the projected title of his last-day plenary talk, from 'In difficult circumstances, the power of teacher-research' to 'In your circumstances, the potential of CAMELTA research'. Rather than providing guidance on how to carry out individual teacher-research as originally planned, he suggested in his plenary that CAMELTA could select some questions of general importance to the membership and then mobilize collectively to gather data from across the membership. Advantages of this, he suggested, could include:

- gathering a large amount of data if the association as a whole could be mobilized;
- resulting relative persuasiveness of the research to those in authority;
- sharing of appropriate possible local solutions to problems if successes as well as problems could be shared;

- collective development of research skills;
- increased confidence of participants in their own ideas, serving as a preparatory basis for future projects, including more individual or small-group research.

The response to the idea of a large-scale, common CAMELTA research project was very positive – a total of 170 participants individually wrote their perceptions of the idea and suggested research questions on slips of paper distributed during Richard’s session and it was later agreed that the idea would be discussed by the CAMELTA research committee.

Shortly after the conference, the CAMELTA research committee approved the idea of a collective project and members of the committee began to prepare an inquiry emanating from the inventory of research questions gathered at the 2013 plenary. Quite a few of the suggested questions were inward-looking, focusing on how CAMELTA’s own processes could be improved. The committee decided that these might form the focus of future research *about* the TA which could benefit members. However, the majority of the questions were outward-looking and concerned problems teachers were facing in their teaching contexts. Some representative examples of these research questions, showing the contextually located nature of teachers’ concerns, included:

- How can teachers cope with the lack of textbooks on the part of learners?
- What strategies can be used to engage students in English lessons in a multilingual society?
- What methods of teaching are appropriate in teaching a multigrade class?
- How can students in a large class be managed, motivated, taught and assessed effectively?

Classroom concerns, then, became the focus of the committee’s work. There was agreement that a questionnaire would be prepared to gather information from across the Association’s membership, but what to focus on among all the issues raised?

At this point we suggested that, in order to make this first phase of research as broad-based and constructive as possible, a simple open-ended questionnaire could be designed to collect relatively extensive accounts of practice that would help provide deeper insights into the general question of ‘What are teachers’ pedagogic challenges and successes overall?’. The research committee accepted this idea, and a set of three open-ended questions was framed:

1. Please tell the story of a recent successful experience in your teaching – what was successful and what made it successful, do you think?
2. What are the major problems you face in your teaching situation - what is problematic and why?
3. Please describe anything you have done to address (some of) the problems in (2) above. Was this successful? Why / Why not?

Between October 2013 and February 2014, a total of 1,000 questionnaires, each consisting of the three questions above, an initial section for personal information, and a final section for comments about the questionnaire itself, were distributed to teachers during CAMELTA regional chapter events. Time was given to teachers to write answers to the questions (in English) during the events themselves, and the completed questionnaires were then posted back by local organizers to the CAMELTA Vice-President with responsibility for Research and Projects. In all, a total of 504 questionnaires were returned.

Since this article focuses on the overall characteristics and *process* of TA-research, analysis of specific pedagogic challenges and successes will not be presented here. Instead, we wish to highlight how the data has been and can in the future be *put to use* in this context, and we simply provide a link to the raw data for those interested, in the following section. However, it is important to note that the basic value and procedures of TA-research as it had developed up to this point were affirmed in questionnaire responses. Thus, we do list here the themes (each one illustrated by a representative quotation) which emerged in relation to the question asking specifically for participant feedback:

Value of questionnaire design: *The open-ended nature of the questionnaire gives room for free expression of the successes and/or failures encountered in ELT by the respondent.*

Sense of Ownership: *I really feel proud to be part of this initiative by our association. I wish we had more time to respond to this questionnaire because it is meant to address issues with our own teaching as identified by us, rather than dealing with issues that are not part of our own experience.*

Motivation/self-fulfilment: *The questionnaire is very interesting. It has reminded me of a recent successful teaching experience I had last week. It feels good to celebrate our teaching successes and not just focus on our difficulties.*

Potential impact: *This questionnaire has enabled me to talk about some of the difficulties I faced [in] the field. I hope it will be taken into consideration by coming up with some strategies to help teachers working in my kind of situation. That it will also make the government to do a good feasibility study before creating bilingual schools.*

Sharing: *This is a laudable initiative because it creates room for teachers to express some of the problems and successes they face and to bring up some ideas on how they can curb those problems. By so doing, they get to educate other teachers. Thank you.*

Self-reflection: *It has helped me explain the difficulties I face in my work and to reflect on my responses to these difficulties. This will help me improve my teaching and thus help my students.*

Beyond the questionnaire: Looking forward together

It is important, also, to describe what is being done with the data gathered, what the process has so far led to, and what further steps are now being planned. At the 14th annual conference of CAMELTA in August 2015, the research committee ensured that a plenary session would be devoted to reporting back to the membership about developments on the project. The session, led by Kuchah Kuchah, focused on the theme of professional development through collective research and highlighted some of the principles and practices emerging from the stories of success which had been gathered. This was followed by a workshop in which participants looked at excerpts from the data and, in groups, discussed ideas arising which might benefit their own future teaching or individual research. Reactions from participants in the plenary and workshop sessions revealed a general sense of empowerment arising from the fact that CAMELTA members' own experiences were being reflected back to them for the first time. Several contrasted this with previous conferences where plenary presentations were mostly decided upon in a top-down manner, with some speakers treating themes that were inappropriate to the needs and experiences of members. Workshop participants also particularly liked the fact that they were given an opportunity to explore the value of their own practices and how policy requirements related to these, rather than policy being treated as primary.

The research committee has now decided to conduct follow-up interviews with a selected number of questionnaire respondents, to develop both their stories of success and their reflections on these further. The committee intends to share the responses with the wider membership in paper form, as a basis for reflection on contextually appropriate forms of pedagogy. In the meantime, all responses to the questionnaire have been uploaded to the CAMELTA website (<http://camelta-cameroon.weebly.com/resources--useful-links.html>) for all to see and explore as desired.

The original questions collected from teachers at the 2013 plenary have also been uploaded to the same place to help guide future research. They have been categorized by the research committee into 'research priority areas', as a resource and encouragement for CAMELTA members to pursue their own inquiries on topics which reflect CAMELTA members' priorities. Sessions at future conferences will be dedicated to presentations from members which are explicitly based, at least in part, on the questionnaire data and/or which focus on research priority areas as identified from the 2013 plenary data.

These are all indications that leaders within CAMELTA have come to see the research questions and questionnaire data gathered as a developing common 'bank' which can be built on collectively and which can also inspire at least some individual members to engage in analysis and further research of immediate relevance to CAMELTA members as a whole. This kind of broad involvement of individual teachers within a systematic research process, and the small further collective steps being taken by the research committee so far, are indications that a TA in a developing country has the potential to build on members' ideas to develop appropriate

pedagogic principles and practices in a systematic way. Encouraging further collective inquiries in this way will, it is hoped, not only scaffold and empower individuals, but establish CAMELTA as a major stakeholder in the development and dissemination of research-based policies for ELT in Cameroon.

Above, we mentioned CAMELTA's unsuccessful previous attempts to institute action research in the early years of its research committee. Since commencement of the project described here, the committee's focus has shifted significantly from the promotion of individual research projects to a more concerted and collective research endeavour. One outcome of this has been that, for the first time since its creation in 2001, CAMELTA (through its research committee) has been able to apply for and win external funding, in the form of an IATEFL Project Award. The project aims to support novice teachers working in rural communities in difficult circumstances, in the early years of their practice. Members of the research committee, without our involvement, took the initiative to apply for this award, due – they have told us – to the knowledge they had gained of teachers' priorities from the overall TA-research exercise.

Conclusion

Perhaps it is because TAs operate largely outside the control and thus 'beneath the attention' of the academy that they have not figured prominently as an object of academic research, indeed that they have been strikingly neglected in the broader literature on teacher development. In this article we have described some kinds of research which nevertheless have been carried out in relation to TAs but we have also set out an argument for collective, potentially empowering activities which involve TA members in defining and pursuing their own research priorities – 'researching back', as it could be called – within 'TA-research' endeavours which are given sanction and support by association leaders.

The CAMELTA initiative, as with previous smaller-scale innovations reported by Allwright (1991) and Padwad and Dixit (2014), suggests that there can be considerable merit in TA members being encouraged to identify issues of salience to them and developing solutions collectively via systematic investigation and sharing. The positive engagement shown so far by TA members around Cameroon suggests that this might be a practitioner-centred way of helping teachers who are working in difficult circumstances to overcome day-to-day challenges, as an antidote to top-down directives from Ministry officials, donor agencies or other 'outside experts' who may be less well-positioned to understand the actual classroom realities that teachers and learners encounter.

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¹ Richard Smith had been invited to the Symposium to lead a workshop on 'teaching English in difficult circumstances' and to the Conference to talk about teacher-research; Kuchah Kuchah, who had brokered these invitations, was a former Secretary-General of CAMELTA and about to step down from the post of Vice President (VP) for International Outreach at the time of the Conference. He then became a member of the research committee of CAMELTA, working on the development of the TA-research initiative under the VP for Research & Projects, Eric Ntam. Richard continued to support the project with advice from a distance, and secured a small amount of funding for it from IATEFL's Research SIG.