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PERSPECTIVES

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 uninvolved 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 – in the form of an answer and question format – is to discuss some of the difficulties that teachers encounter and suggest ways of supporting teacher research.

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%); 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 (2016) 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.

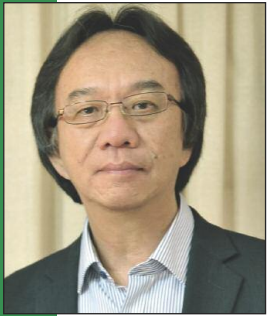
I would suggest that we should make available books and articles written by ELT scholars who are known for their ability to summarize and synthesise research findings in an accessible and teacher friendly style of writing.

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.

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
Humanising Language Teaching – <http://www.hltmag.co.uk/index.htm>
TESL EJ – <http://tesl-ej.org/wordpress>
TESL Reporter – http://tesol.byuh.edu/tesl_reporter
The English Teacher – <https://journals.melta.org.my/index.php/tet>

Flora: 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.

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. 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

has probably more to do with contextual factors such as lack of time or lack of support, rather than 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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