

Conditions for Teacher Research

Teacher research refers to “all forms of practitioner enquiry that involve systematic, intentional, and self-critical inquiry about one’s work” (Cochran-Smith and Lytle 1999, 22). It extends beyond thoughtful teaching of the kind often associated with reflective practice and should also involve, as Freeman (1998) argues, making public one’s findings. This notion has a long history in the field of education (e.g., Stenhouse 1975); more recently, a number of book-length guides for teachers on the subject (e.g., Lankshear and Knobel 2004) have demonstrated the continuing interest in it.

Benefits of teacher research

The emergence in recent years of evidence-based practice (EBP) as a model for professional action in education has emphasised even further the idea that engagement by teachers in research is desirable. A fundamental argument behind EBP is that when teachers are able to engage in research and make justified pedagogical decisions informed by sound research evidence, this will have a beneficial effect on both teaching and learning (Davies 1999). Although the precise

manner in which this should or can take place has been the subject of much debate, it is generally accepted that more involvement in research by teachers can enhance the quality of education.

Numerous more specific benefits to teachers of engaging in such activity have been proposed. Kincheloe (2003, 18–19), for example, provides an extensive list in which, amongst other benefits, he argues that through research teachers can:

- appreciate the benefits of research;
- begin to understand in deeper and richer ways what they know from experience;
- be seen as learners rather than functionaries who follow top-down orders without question;
- be seen as knowledge workers who reflect on their professional needs and current understandings;
- explore the learning processes occurring in their classrooms and attempt to interpret them.

In the field of language teaching, although a range of perspectives have been adopted in defining what teacher research is and how it relates to the process of teaching (Burns 1999; Freeman 1998), a similar overall message

emerges: when teachers inquire into their own practices, individually or collectively, that process benefits teachers' professional growth and pedagogical activity.

Incidence of teacher research

Empirical interest in the prevalence of teacher research in our field has been scarce. How much teacher research takes place? Where? What are the characteristics of the teachers who do it? What motivates them? What conditions support or hinder their efforts? Evidence about these issues is lacking.

With respect to how much research teachers do, my experience suggests that the majority of professionals in our field remain uninvolved. I do not feel that this is a controversial assertion—English language teaching (ELT) is certainly not the only subject where this is the case—nor is it meant to be a criticism of teachers. As I argue below, there are many reasons for this situation.

In considering where teacher research is done, I would argue that a small proportion of the settings in which ELT occurs is represented: work in Australia and North America would seem to be most prominent; such work is often conducted in atypical instructional contexts, such as private institutions, courses for adult learners, small classes. A significant amount of the teacher research which does occur in our field takes place within the context of formal programmes of study, such as degree programs or certification courses. This does not detract from the value of such research, but if teacher research is to become an integral part of teachers' professional practices, then it needs to extend beyond such settings and purposes. Teacher research, then, is clearly not a widespread activity in ELT. In the rest of this article I will consider why this is the case.

Conditions for teacher research

In the absence of empirical evidence in our field of why teacher research does or does not take place, the ideas I present here are informed by the literature, both in ELT and in education more generally, as well as by my own experience of promoting and supporting research with language teachers. These sources suggest ten conditions that I believe affect the incidence of teacher research: (1) aware-

ness, (2) motivation, (3) knowledge and skills, (4) choice, (5) mentoring, (6) time, (7) recognition, (8) expectations, (9) community, and (10) dissemination potential. Although the impact of these conditions cannot be explained formulaically, I believe that the more of them that are met, the more likely it is that research by teachers will take place. Below I discuss each condition in turn.

Condition 1: Awareness

Many teachers associate research with academics and scientists, experiments and statistics. In a study by McNamara (2002, 16), for example, teachers' notions of research included "professors undertaking tests and surveys and making reports." Shkedi (1998) found that teachers' definitions of research commonly focused on quantitative tools, objectivity, hypotheses, representativeness, and generalizability. While these are central concepts in educational research, they do not on their own provide a suitable basis for understanding the particular assumptions about research, its purposes, and its methods that underpin teacher research. In teacher research, the goal is often understanding rather than proof; the researchers are the teachers themselves; and the self is accepted as a legitimate focus of inquiry. Teachers whose conceptions of their own role and of research do not extend beyond traditional notions are unlikely to be able to engage in teacher research in a productive manner. An awareness of teacher research and its assumptions is thus an important condition for it to occur.

Condition 2: Motivation

Many teachers have been made aware through reading or professional development initiatives of the potential benefits of teacher research, yet they do not engage in it. Awareness alone, then, is not a sufficient condition for teacher research to occur. Teachers must have a reason for wanting to engage in teacher research. Thus a second condition is motivation, which can be viewed as the belief, as opposed to the awareness, that the process will be beneficial to their work, or it may be more instrumental. Obtaining a qualification, for example, motivates many teachers to engage in research (as I noted earlier, much teacher research in our field occurs during formal

programmes of study). Clearly, there are different kinds of motivation for teacher research, and, like most of the issues I discuss here, this is not a matter that has been empirically explored. Where motivation exists, though, teacher research is more likely to occur.

Condition 3: Knowledge and skills

Motivation will only take teachers so far in their attempts to engage in teacher research. If the inquiry is to be soundly conducted and the findings effectively shared, teachers need to possess relevant research-related knowledge and skills. They need to be aware of the different methodological options available and to make informed choices from amongst them. If teachers want to collect data through questionnaires, well-established guidelines for their design and administration exist. Likewise, conducting and analysing qualitative interviews is a challenging activity, technically and conceptually. Although thoughtful teachers may possess certain skills they can exploit during research, such as observation skills, many have not received the “research education” (Borg 2003) that equips them to effectively conceptualise and implement a piece of research.

Teachers may see their lack of such knowledge and skills as an impediment to their involvement in research, or, if they do not recognise their needs in this respect, they may conduct research that is methodologically flawed. A common example I have observed is the teacher researcher who wants to examine the relative effects on learning of “method A” over “method B.” Frequently the inquiry is conducted without sufficient understanding of how to establish cause-effect relationships, thus significantly limiting the value of the findings. I believe it is important not only to promote teacher research but to promote good quality teacher research. This cannot occur unless teachers have the prerequisite knowledge and skills.

Condition 4: Choice

A further condition that facilitates teacher research is choice. Not only should teacher research be an activity that teachers opt to engage in, but teachers should also be involved in shaping the nature of the inquiry they conduct. The extent of such involvement will vary, depending upon the skills and experience

of the teachers. I have observed some situations where teachers preferred to be assigned research topics rather than to be given the freedom to plan their projects. (This may be particularly true in assessed programmes of study, where the only motivation for doing teacher research is to pass a course.)

Allowing teachers to make choices does not negate their need for support. However, teacher research is more likely to be productive when the support teachers receive enables them to exercise choices about what to study and how to do so. Sustained teacher research is an element in self-directed professional development, and this implies that it must be driven by the teachers themselves.

Condition 5: Mentoring

Many teachers will not engage in or sustain research without initial and continued support from a mentor. The research mentor can function in many different ways, depending on the needs of the teacher. My experience supporting teachers in Switzerland, Turkey, and Oman over the past two years suggests that key roles for mentors of teacher research are (1) assisting in setting up a general framework for the conduct of the research, (2) helping teachers to find a focus, and, importantly, (3) commenting on teachers’ initial attempts to collect and analyse data. Mentors can also function as an audience who responds to teachers’ efforts to communicate their work by, for example, commenting on drafts of reports they write.

If we acknowledge that most teachers have not had a sound research education, the role of the mentor becomes crucial. Teacher research, at least initially, will often need to be scaffolded by a more experienced and skilled individual. This person need not be an academic; where communities of teacher researchers exist, the mentoring role can be assumed by a local colleague. The availability of a mentor who teachers know will value and support their attempts to be teacher researchers can encourage more teachers to assume this role. This is perhaps even more important where teacher researchers feel isolated and where a research culture does not exist.

Condition 6: Time

Good teacher research can be conducted at minimal expense and with limited technology.

Financial and physical resources, while certainly facilitative, are not necessary conditions for teacher research to take place. Time, however, is. No matter how well research is integrated into the teaching process, planning, conducting, and sharing teacher research requires additional time and effort from teachers. In many contexts where the conditions specified so far exist, teachers may still not feel they are able to engage in research because they do not have enough time.

In exploring why teachers did not engage in research, Crookes and Arakaki (1999) found that some teachers worked 50 hours a week to make ends meet. A teacher from North America sent me a personal communication making a similar point:

I've found it extremely difficult to carry out research projects and publish. I just don't have the time. I teach 32.5 hours a week and need to prepare for those classes in addition to work with the teachers' union and our technology committee. It's a shame. Until policy changes to permit teachers to do research in their classrooms and publish results, there won't be much connection between research and practice except within the individual classroom. In my own context almost nobody reads TESOL publications—they don't have time.

Admittedly, pleading a lack of time is often a convenient excuse for not engaging in professional activities, but many teachers of English around the world work under conditions that provide little if any space for professional development activities, such as teacher research. Combined with the absence of many of the other conditions conducive to teacher research outlined here, a lack of time can act as a powerful hindrance to the promotion of teacher research. This point has been highlighted in discussions of teacher research in education generally (Hancock 2001; Barker 2005).

Condition 7: Recognition

The classroom often is not recognised as a site for generating knowledge. Rather, it is viewed—by employers and parents, but also often by teachers themselves—as a place where knowledge is transmitted or implemented. This belief hinders the conduct of teacher research.

I have heard several teachers say that there is nothing in their work worth researching or which other teachers would find interesting. Unless teachers see the classroom as a site for generating knowledge, they will not be aware of the potential of teacher research. However, if the knowledge that stems from teacher research is recognised as having value—by teachers themselves as well as by head teachers, local education authorities, and others—then teacher research is more likely to occur.

Condition 8: Expectations

Teacher research is more likely to occur when teachers feel it is an activity they are expected to engage in. In many language teaching contexts, this is simply not the case. Research is often seen—by employers, parents, learners, and even by teachers—as an activity that lies outside the scope of the teacher's work. Studies of student learning suggest that one factor that promotes achievement is high expectations on the part of the teacher. A parallel argument holds true for the conduct of teacher research. If, in our field generally and in teachers' own working contexts specifically, there is an expectation that being a professional language teacher involves researching one's own practices, then such inquiry is more likely to occur. The power of expectation is perhaps nowhere more strongly demonstrated than in the commitment many teachers around the world show to the often laborious task of correcting piles of student exercise books each evening. A primary motivation for this practice is the teachers' knowledge that it is expected of them by head teachers, colleagues, parents, and students.

Condition 9: Community

Conducting teacher research as part of a like-minded professional community is likely to be more productive than working in isolation. Thus, forms of teacher research such as action research are often conceived of as collaborative, rather than individual, activities (see, for example, Burns 1999). Highly motivated teacher researchers may attain their goals even when they are the only individuals in their schools who engage in such activity. However, the majority of language teachers are likely to consider the lack of institutional and collegial support for their research to be a bar-

rier to such activity. By community support, I am not referring to resources, but to one or more of the following:

- shared understanding about the value of teacher research
- encouragement from school leaders and colleagues
- opportunities for collaboration with other teacher researchers
- opportunities to discuss the research with others
- a sense of collective activity with others engaged in teacher research

At the institutional level, if management sends positive messages about teacher research and values and acknowledges such activity as part of the institutional culture, language teachers are more likely to engage in research. On the other hand, if management does not value attempts by teachers to research their own practices, or actually obstructs their research (research is sometimes seen as an activity that will highlight deficiencies in the school system), then research by teachers is less likely to occur. Community can most obviously be created in the teachers' own working context. However, national and international teachers' associations as well as web-based discussion groups can also provide supportive collegial forums for promoting and supporting teacher research.

Condition 10: Dissemination potential

If teachers are to commit themselves to research, they need to know that there is the possibility that their inquiries will be made public so that others can benefit from their findings. Moreover, as most academic researchers acknowledge, the prospect of publication is a major incentive for conducting a study. Thus, a final condition for teacher research is that mechanisms be in place to disseminate the results of the research. At a local level, opportunities for teachers to share their work can be created through newsletters, websites, and professional development events. Presentations at regional or national conferences and written reports submitted to the journals of professional associations are further steps. Dissemination on an international scale, orally or in writing, is also an option, though one which teacher researchers may want to build up to gradually by first sharing and receiving

responses to their work at more local levels. Advice from experienced teachers or mentors about appropriate outlets to target can facilitate teacher researchers' efforts to disseminate their work.

Additional considerations

If teacher research is to become a sustained feature of the language teaching profession, a considered analysis of the conditions that facilitate such research is desirable. The conditions discussed above may provide an initial framework for examining the circumstances under which teacher research can thrive. These conditions also provide the basis for a set of questions that can be used, almost diagnostically, by teachers thinking about doing research or by project managers or professional development officers planning to introduce teacher research at an institutional, regional, or national level. These questions are:

1. Are teachers aware of the assumptions behind teacher research and of its potential benefits?
2. Do teachers have a reason to engage in teacher research, such as personal interest or promotion opportunities?
3. Do teachers have the knowledge and skills required to conduct quality research and communicate it effectively?
4. Will teachers be involved in decisions about the nature of their inquiry, including what to study and how to study it?
5. Will teachers have access to mentoring from professionals who value teacher research, have experience in it, and are willing and able to support it?
6. Is the time required for teacher research available, given the teachers' overall workloads and working conditions?
7. Is the classroom valued—by teachers, institutionally, and in the wider professional, educational, and social context—as a valid source of knowledge about teaching and learning?
8. Is there an expectation in the teachers' context, both in and outside the school, that doing research should be a feature of teachers' work?
9. Do teachers belong to, or can they become members of, a community that promotes, values, and engages in teacher research?

10. Do opportunities exist, locally or on a larger scale, for the oral or written dissemination of teacher research?

Good quality teacher research is most likely to occur when as many of the above questions as possible are answered affirmatively. This is not the case in many ELT contexts; thus, teacher research is not a widespread activity in our field.

Conclusion

Most teachers I talk to about research agree it is good thing to do. A much smaller proportion, though, implement practices that mirror that view. By acknowledging the lack of teacher research in ELT and examining the reasons for it, my aim here has been to stimulate a constructive discussion in our field of how, if quality teacher research is a goal we are committed to, the conditions that promote such research—informed, sustained, and shared inquiry into our professional practices—can be created.

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