

TWO HATS OR THE SAME ONE? EXPLORING THE CHANGING ATTITUDES OF TESOL TEACHERS TO CLASSROOM-BASED RESEARCH

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As an early part of the Sheffield Hallam University MA TESOL, students undertake a research-oriented task that focuses on a classroom-based issue or puzzle. Students are guided and supported through their research by communication via a VLE and e-mail with tutors and peers. In previous research we have examined the stages that students go through during this assignment and how this has helped focus our use of differing discourse modes at each stage to foster an emergent greater autonomy of purpose and action in research decisions and actions.

The objective of our current work is to shift and take our focus further and to explore whether – and if so to what degree – the attitudes of student teachers themselves change and evolve with regard to practitioner research. We were interested in how teachers with little or no research skills or experience at the outset of the task took on board the input of both tutors and peers and how this input shaped their developing classroom practice with respect to their potential role as researchers. In essence we wanted to ask whether experienced teachers but novice researchers felt more comfortable with investigative practices after completing the assignment, and roughly what degree of comfortability was achieved. Based on this we wished to discover the extent to which research experience changed teachers' attitudes towards the classroom dynamic as a whole and their role and investigative place within it.

The findings from the research suggest that with various means of support, students do indeed see research as a positive component of a teacher education course and that the undertaking of it leads to modifications in their views of themselves as classroom practitioners and to an extent in their practices.

Introduction

The role of action research in a reflective model of language teacher education has been well documented for at least the last 12-15 years (Wallace 1998, Edge & Richards 1993, Nunan 1992, Ellis 1997) and there is a clear rationale for its inclusion in most advanced Master's level qualifications. There also now seems to be a growing recognition within the profession as a whole of the at least partial role that action research has to play in the incremental education and development of classroom practitioners:

“We hope that the experience of planning, implementing and evaluating a research project, whatever its scope, will motivate teachers to develop new approaches to dealing with their students' learning process.” (Pugsley, J. 2006)¹.

¹ This is a quote from Jenny Pugsley, Head of TESOL at Trinity College, London with regard to the recent inclusion of a compulsory research task in the assessment for the College's LTCL Diploma in TESOL.

More than a decade ago Allwright & Bailey (1991) felt able to document 7 main “external” aims of action research in teacher education:

1. Relevance – bringing research into teachers’ own teaching should ensure that what they explore is relevant to themselves
2. Reflection – integrating research and pedagogy promotes reflection
3. Continuity – it should be encouraged as a continuous enterprise
4. Collegiality – it should bring teachers closer together, bring teachers closer to learners and bring teachers closer to academic researchers
5. Learner development – it should ensure that questions asked are seen as relevant by learners
6. Teacher development – it should contribute to teacher’s own development.
7. Theory building – it should develop our own understanding of classroom language learning and teaching

It was with this backdrop in mind that we sought to clarify for ourselves some of these variables involved within the teacher/action-researcher matrix and how these impacted on teachers undergoing in-service developmental teacher education. This paper will explore three aspects of immediate interest:

- a) the nature of action research as part of language teacher education courses for its own sake
- b) the attitudes of teachers towards doing research as part of their studies
- c) the outcomes and effects of having undertaken research on teachers’ own classroom practices and beliefs

As TESOL as a profession has begun to mature, it has spawned a wealth of research data on a seeming myriad aspects of the teaching-learning continuum. Generally speaking, however, practitioners themselves have been largely bystanders in the wealth generation. Seen either as disinterested per se due to their own professional duties, pressures and concerns or often at best as sporadic partial consumers of the emerging canon of knowledge and resultant speculation on the roles and behaviours of learners and teachers (Ellis 1997), their voices have been noticeably muted. This seems to us a shame and a shame at more than one level.

Teachers are often the driving force behind classroom change and methodological innovation. They both manage their learners’ learning and experiment with ways of better facilitating it. Potentially they have a huge amount to tell the profession as a whole but often see themselves as isolated voices without an obvious means of communicating their experiences beyond their own staffrooms or peer-groups, even should they feel emboldened enough to do so. By a parallel token, those engaged solely in the pursuit of research in language teaching and learning and therefore operating without the aforementioned distractions of the classroom practitioner, can sometimes find that the focus of their studies strike the non-researcher as too esoteric or as too seemingly un-actionable as to be readily consumed by them, so drawing into question the ultimate utilitarian value of what they are investigating.

It is with this idea – the value of research – and its hopeful accessibility and utility to the profession as a whole, that we have gradually increased the role of significance of

research work in our courses at SHU .We have been successful in supporting students' production of Masters level research projects. The classroom-based research project (CBRP) that teachers undertake as a central part of the Postgraduate Certificate/Diploma in TESOL is a device designed to enable them to focus on activities they already undertake in their everyday working environment.

Its key function, for those unfamiliar with research as a part of normal teaching duties, is to encourage them to begin to critically examine this environment from an investigative and question-oriented perspective (Graham & Oxholm, 2005). Students have undertaken a range of research studies, the scope and focus of which have been determined by their immediate context of practice. Examples of these include:

1. 'Learners as teachers: developing learner autonomy through the peer teaching of grammar in the language classroom.'
2. 'Learner Evaluation of a ten -session intensive listening programme to develop listening micro-skills.'
3. 'Evaluating the effectiveness of teaching reading strategies to learners of lower-intermediate level.'

Williams & Burden (1997) discuss intrinsic motivational factors that will influence an individual's decision to act. They point out that the extent to which such factors interact with each other and the relative importance that individuals attribute to them will "affect the level and extent of learners' (sic) motivation to complete a task or **maintain** an activity" (p.136.) This level of perceived value of action research is what we hoped to find out more about. This present study, then, concentrates on the attitudes of neophyte researcher-practitioners towards approaching, engaging in and evaluating classroom level enquiry. It is small-scale, comprising just 20 respondents, but we feel that the information gleaned on both the 'before' and 'after' of being a classroom-researcher is nonetheless instructive. We saw it as important to gather data and opinions from those who had yet to embark on research and from those who had both completed and reflected upon it and begun to form ideas as to its place in their professional lives. The focus of this investigation is to compare and contrast these attitudes.

Methodology

Teachers context and background

The research group initially involved 13 pre-research teachers just embarking on this assignment as part of the Post Graduate Diploma (Group A) and 18 post-research teachers who have all successfully completed the course (Group B).

All 31 teachers teach full or part time and study individually via e-learning and communication.

Group A (pre-researchers): 5 working in UK teaching ESOL (FE), 8 teaching overseas in EFL/EAP /EYL environments, 2 in China, 4 in Italy, 1 in Saudi Arabia and 1 in Latvia.

Group B (post-researchers): 7 were UK based (ESOL, FE, HE, EAP/EFL), 2 in Japan, 2 in Thailand (EYL), 3 in Italy, 2 in Switzerland, 1 in Saudi Arabia and 1 in Greece.

None of the teachers involved had previously carried out systematic research into an aspect of language teaching or learning.

Questionnaires were sent out to all 31 teachers. 10 were completed and returned from each group. The questionnaires administered to both groups were in part parallel as we wanted to focus on particular aspects of the researcher experience and examine the attitudes of teachers in before and after frameworks. We asked a very open question on how teachers viewed the nature of research itself and then sought to explore different facets of the process from the pre- and post-researcher viewpoint.

Of the pre-researchers we elicited responses that dealt with the following issues:

a) (AQ2) what teachers did about things that they were concerned about within their classrooms

With this we wanted to see if teachers made any kind of tentative steps in the direction of focused research as a means of gathering information on classroom phenomena.

b) (AQ3) how teachers felt about doing research as part of their course

This question was intended to discover whether teachers felt that research would 'add something' to the experience of undertaking a teacher development course or whether they might perceive it as a burden.

c) (AQ4) what the practicality of doing research was in the context of their own teaching

Here we looked to establish what kind of hurdles, barriers or avenues of progress were available to teachers, and, indirectly, who might be the key holders, facilitators or bars to the process as a whole.

d) (AQ5) what aspects of the research process pre-researchers saw specifically as challenges

This question speaks for itself, though we were unsure what kind of range of factors might be highlighted here, or whether different contexts dictated necessarily different challenges or similar ones.

e) (AQ6) who else might take an interest in the teachers' research

This seemed to us important in potentially placing a positive or negative value on research in a wider community, be it the school or institution, or other possible professional network.

For the post-researchers we collected data on the following:

a) (BQ2(a)) how teachers had previously viewed the value of research

This was simply to establish whether teachers were positive, negative or neutral on the question of research as an exercise in itself.

b) (BQ2(b)) how they subsequently saw the value of research

This was an important category as it sought to elicit if attitudes had in fact been modified by the process of undertaking research.

c) (BQ3) as (b) for the pre-researchers

d) (BQ4) as (c) for the pre-researchers

e) (BQ5) as (d) for the pre-researchers

f) (BQ6) as (e) for the pre-researchers

g) (BQ7) how doing the research had furthered teachers' understanding of their target focus

This was asked to see if teachers felt that research had broadened their knowledge base.

h) (BQ8) whether doing the research had led to changes in the teachers' classroom status quo

This question aimed to discover whether any practical classroom level modifications of behaviour had resulted from undertaking research work. It turned out that this question was problematic in nature and had been misinterpreted by some teachers or not understood by others.

i) (BQ9) a ranking exercise that looked at what kind of influences teachers felt had shaped their research

This question was designed to produce some quantitative data on what teachers viewed as the most useful sources of support for their research project.

Results

Pre-researchers

In Question 1, on the nature of research, all responded with the view that it was to investigate something or find something out. Of these 5 added 'for a specific purpose', 2 added 'to develop as a teacher', 3 added 'solution to a problem' and 1 added 'adding something to previously established knowledge'.

In Question 2, steps taken included reference to: consulting colleagues (7); consulting school code of practice (2); approaching an authority figure(5) and consulting learners (3).

In response to Question 3, nine people reported feeling positive about undertaking research, whilst one saw it as a negative feature. Added to this 6 saw the process as enabling, though 2 also saw it as potentially time-consuming.

There was a range of responses on the subject of practicalities (Question 4), including concerns over availability of subjects (4) and, perhaps related to this, the willingness of participants, both teachers and learners, to cooperate (5). Six people cited concerns about fitting their research work into their normal timetable duties.

Challenges (Question 5) also elicited a range of factors. Amongst these the most frequently mentioned were time (5); deciding on a research focus (3); placing their own research in the context of past research and estimating its value (3); and deciding on the methodology for data collection (3).

Interested parties (Question 6) were reported as: other teachers at school (5); the 'wider profession' (5); and school/immediate authority (3)

Post-researchers

In Question 1 of the second questionnaire, all 10 respondents again saw research as investigating something or finding something out. Of these, 4 added 'to develop as a teacher'; 2 added 'solution to a problem'.

On the question of value, on the view of research before they had actually carried it out (BQ2a), none were positive, 1 was negative and the remaining nine all declared themselves neutral. However, in response to Question 2b, which asked the same thing following the completion of the research task, there was a sizable shift with 9 now seeing research as having value, 1 reporting neutrality and none seeing it as having negative value. Allied to this finding, in response to Question 3, on how they had felt on the whole about doing research, 10 were positive and none negative.

On practicalities (BQ4), the findings were mixed with 4 finding the process easy, none saying it had been difficult, 4 being either neutral or non-specific and 2 citing both easy and difficult factors.

With regard to the challenges they had faced (BQ5), the most frequently mentioned were: devising method (3); time (3); learner involvement (3); and teacher involvement (2).

Interested parties (BQ6) were seen as: other teachers at school (5); school/immediate authority (2); learners (2); and peers on course (2).

With regard to whether or not engaging in research had helped in furthering understanding (BQ7), all 10 respondents declared that it had. Of these, 2 said that it had added to their capacity for reflection and 7 stated that it helped in finding practical solutions to things in their classroom duties.

As far as whether doing research had changed their personal status quo (BQ8), 6 said yes, but a further 4 were neutral or either did not understand or misinterpreted the question.

Finally, on the ranking of influences on their conduct of their research, the following data was obtained, where 1 ranks as highly important and 9 as insignificant:

- a) Reading books
- b) Reading key set texts
- c) Reading journals
- d) Doing web-searches
- e) CD-ROM input
- f) Colleagues at school/work
- g) Individual tutor support
- h) On-line discussion with peers
- i) Other

Respondent:	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
a)	2	2	1	1	1	2	2	1	5	4
b)	1	-	4	2	-	7	1	1	1	-
c)	3	2	1	1	2	1	3	1	6	-
d)	6	-	1	1	-	6	8	1	-	3
e)	5	-	4	2	-	8	7	1	6	-
f)	7	-	4	3	4	3	4	3	3	1
g)	4	1	1	1	3	4	5	2	2	2
h)	9	-	4	2	-	5	6	-	4	-
i)	8	1	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	1

Thus factors a, c, b, g and d were identified as key: reading books; reading journals; reading set texts; individual tutor support; doing web searches.

On-line discussion with peers comes out as lowest.

Discussion and conclusion

The size of the sample in this study is of course low and it is important for us, therefore, to point out that its generalizability is at best questionable. However, we do suggest that the internal consistency of the results obtained from these respondents is, to a degree, compelling with regard to the specific experience of undertaking research on their course at SHU. Our main findings are that:

- a) Doing research in teacher education courses is seen as challenging but rewarding
- b) Our results suggest the aims along the lines of those noted above from Allwright are being largely met
- c) Research itself still appears individualised and non-collaborative

The most significant finding is the shift in perception of the value of research (BQ2a and BQ2b) in the before and after estimations of the post-researchers. However, even given this shift, it is encouraging to note that virtually everyone from each of the groups saw doing research as part of their studies as a positive thing and that, despite inherent practical difficulties and challenges, they were ready and willing to undertake it. This might suggest that the practitioner/researcher divide may not be so broad a one

to bridge as is sometimes wondered (Ellis 1997). Further research would need to be undertaken in order to validate our intuition that research can be an integral instructive part of teacher education courses at all levels and that the empowerment that doing such work gives to teachers both personally and practically can only be of benefit to the profession as a whole. It is also interesting to note that, although electronic input of various kinds by tutors had a high value rating from the post-researchers, their electronic mode of study and the peer contact it afforded through discussion boards was seen as largely insignificant, suggesting, as we do above, that the specificity of research focus on the part of any one student militates against such a dialogue.

At the outset of this paper, we suggested that teachers' voices had been noticeably muted on many of the issues discussed here, so we thought it apt to quote, albeit anonymously, from one of the respondents to this survey (BQ2a & b):

Before:

'I hadn't really thought about research as such. My priorities were producing good lessons and meeting the needs of my students which as far as I could see weren't achieved by carrying out research. Research was more academic – and perhaps more theoretical than practical.'

And after:

'Although I still am not particularly good at the recording of research info, I found that research is very much practical and should feed teaching practice and was hugely beneficial to my teaching as I created a whole new programme of materials which has been very useful. Also it made me think about how theory relates to practice.'

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