



Richard Kiely
Richard Kiely is Coordinator of the MEd TESOL at the University of Bristol and teaches courses in programme evaluation and Applied Linguistics on masters and doctoral programmes.

Teachers into researchers

Richard Kiely tries to bridge the gap between researcher and practitioner

Introduction

Many readers of *Issues* will be familiar with notions of research in the ELT/TESOL/Applied Linguistics field. They may have taken a course, such as a Masters, where research methods was a major part of the curriculum. They may have carried out empirical research as part of a dissertation or project. From learning about Communicative Language Teaching, they will know that many of our teaching methods and principles are developed from research findings in the fields of SLA and Speech Act theory. More currently, Task-based Learning (TBL) is being developed in this way: as Bygate, Skehan and Swain put it:

One of the basic functions of empirical research into language teaching is arguably feedback to the teaching profession. (2001:1)

Many in the teaching profession will also be aware that outside formal learning contexts, the role of research in the professional lives of teachers is limited. In a recent issue of this newsletter, Simon Borg addresses the issues of teaching and research in TESOL. He focusses on bridging the divide, with strategies based on more inclusive definitions of research, mutual recognition of expertise, and collaboration between researchers and teachers.

One context where this bridging might be expected to take place is a Masters in TESOL programme for experienced teachers. In a study of the TESOL research methods course – Teachers into Researchers (TIR)¹ – we examined three issues:

- the overall effectiveness of the research methods programme and an assessment strategy based on a critique of a specific research study;
- how teacher identity and expertise influences such reading; and
- how oral presentation of a critique of a study contributes to understanding research.

This study informs on the strengths and weaknesses of our research methods curriculum, and also on the wider issues of teachers becoming researchers. In relation to the latter, the data suggest there are issues of *perspective* and *identity* in the process of teachers learning to research. Some students approached published

research articles on interaction and collaboration with a focus on teacher action and classroom management; others took a more epistemological perspective, examining these concepts as valid or weak representations of classroom phenomena. In some ways these perspectives reflect teacher or

researcher *identities*. Overall however, the ways in which the Masters curriculum and assessment shaped responses, both teacher and researcher identities seem somewhat eclipsed by a student identity.

The next section presents the findings of this study. Then some implications for the relationship between teaching and research in our field are explored.

Findings of TIR

The findings of the research study can be summarised as follows:

The evaluation of the research methods programme

- The overall hour-glass curricular approach – research methods input, critique of one published study, and a series of oral presentations based on the critiques – to teaching research methods is a valuable one.
- The focusing of the assignment on one specific research article seems to have been particularly effective in developing critical reading skills, and this in turn may have added value to the dissertation-writing process.
- The oral presentation phase deepens understanding, and has the potential to broaden conceptions of research where the presentation is communicatively effective and interactive.
- The approach contributes to the dissertation writing component of the programme in three ways: first, it assists in scoping a study; second, it guides the research design and development of data collection instruments; and third, it provides a useful organisational perspective, both in terms of what the research does, or what the final study might look like.

Teacher/researcher perspectives

- Strong students tended to show a developing understanding of research from the perspective of the researcher. This is evident in the data in terms of their grasp of research purpose and their understanding of the research process in the written critique. The contribution of their teacher identity was in relation to the oral presentation: some who were successful here attributed their confidence and authority to their teacher identities.
- Weak students tended to look at the research article as a set of prescriptions for the classroom, a perspective which may derive from limited experience as teachers, and relatively low level of academic English skills.

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Learning through oral presentation

- Particular value was attached to the process of revisiting the article, the written critique and the tutor's feedback in the context of having to present it to peers.
- The public aspect of this engagement with the critique provided its own pressures, motivations, benefits and disappointments, deriving in part from personal expectations, and partly from social factors.
- While there was awareness of the opportunities for learning in the discussion which followed the presentation many students were disappointed by the limited feedback of peers.

The teaching research relationship

There are three particularly interesting issues arising from these findings. First the teacher–researcher divide was not as salient as we expected. The literature review suggested that teachers see themselves as users of research, and so would focus on the findings and recommendations for practice rather than the conceptual framework and nature of data. One reason for this is the identity factor: the participants were reading the studies as students, rather than as teachers or researchers. And as good students do, they focussed on what the assessment criteria require. This may suggest more flexibility and less rigidity in teacher and researcher identities than writers such as Borg (2003) suggest. In a world of lifelong learning and serial careers, the way forward may be a form of multi-skilling (through professional and academic education) and less rigid professional teacher and researcher identities.

Second, the ability to undertake both teaching and research tasks requires skills bases which mean that individuals are both teachers and researchers. They can teach according to institutional and wider professional norms, and they can carry out research tasks equally professionally. Current experience and intuitive awareness of the teaching task is likely to enhance research activity, and familiarity with research practices would enhance the routine teaching activities of evaluation and reflection. What they may not do is both at the same time, or in an integrated way. Being a teacher in and a researcher of the same classroom is a high-wire act, and perhaps only appropriate when there is a strong intuitive sense of issues to do with teacher responsibility, data requirements and the increasingly complex area of ethics and consents. What is needed to ensure that expertise in research and the complex realities of TESOL classrooms both contribute to enquiry in our field is

i) a strong research skills component in programmes for advanced professional development in TESOL (such as the Masters in ELT/TESOL/Applied Linguistics); and ii) opportunities for teachers who have successfully completed such programmes to participate in research projects and be part of a research community.

Third, we need to understand better how individuals might manage teacher and researcher identities. The TIR project found few research studies in the area of learning to research, particularly within the framework of Masters study. The findings of TIR suggest that the activities of reading, critiquing, and presenting are valuable and contribute to the research design and data management tasks involved in the dissertation. That experienced teachers achieve this by setting aside their teachers' insights into the problem presents two hypotheses that merit further exploration:

The student identity in the context of a Masters programme is a temporary learning stage which results in graduates having balanced teacher and researcher identities, and able to exercise skills in both areas as opportunities arise;

The student identity in the context of a Masters programme is a temporary learning stage, which leads to professional activity in either teaching or research and abandonment of identity with the other.

Masters programmes in our field have had a pivotal role in academic and professional development in ELT/TESOL for decades now. A better understanding of how they provide for these different learning outcomes will illuminate further the divide between teaching and research in TESOL and the ways of bridging it.

Email: R.Kiely@bristol.ac.uk

Note

¹ Teachers into Researchers – a Pedagogical Research Fund Project for the Languages, Linguistics and Area Studies (LLAS) subject centre of the HEFCE-funded Learning and Teaching Support Network (LTSN), carried out by Dr Richard Kiely; Gerald Clibbon; Dr Pauline Rea-Dickins; Dr Catherine Walter (now IOE, University of London); Helen Woodfield. Graduate School of Education, University of Bristol. For further information please see: <http://www.bris.ac.uk/education/research/centres/creole/projects/#tir>

References

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