

“Research *by* teachers *for* teachers”: **Richard Smith on teacher research**



Academic conceptions of research are sometimes foisted on teachers and might serve to alienate them from a process that can have a significant impact on teaching and learning. In this interview, Richard Smith argues that research can empower teachers if they are given the freedom and the support to engage in teacher-initiated forms of research.

Popularity of teacher research

Over the past few years, there seems to have been a rise in the number of publications and presentations at international conferences about teacher research. What do you think are the reasons?

I'd like to think it's because more and more teachers are understanding that answers to problems and questions can be found in their own classrooms, in their own practice, more than in books and articles written by outside 'experts'. However, there's a paradox, isn't there? These publications and presentations you talk about – are they being done by practitioners themselves or by academics doing research *about* teacher research and, in a way, talking to teachers about what they 'should' be doing? If it's too much the latter, that could negate the value and point of teacher research!

The presentations I've most enjoyed organising at recent teacher-research conferences have been those where teacher-researchers themselves give a joint plenary (instead of inviting an external speaker to give a keynote talk) – or where local teacher research mentors do the same. A particularly good example was when student teacher-researchers took centre-stage at the last IATEFL Research SIG conference in Istanbul, to share how they'd been inspired by their own research and their experiences at the conference.

Teacher research is subversive in this way – it can turn the ELT world on its head! It's a bottom-up replacement for following the latest academic or commercial fashion, an alternative to the failures of top-down research to address issues faced by teachers, and an alternative to the inappropriateness of commercial solutions. It's a way to help teachers resist what they're being sold by academics and publishers, or at least become more critical as consumers. But for the same reasons there's a danger of it being co-opted, academised, commercialised, reduced and essentialised, and 'sold-out'!

Value of teacher research

In what ways can teacher research actually help teachers and learners?

Applied linguistic research hasn't been involving teachers much, particularly in recent years. There's a dysfunctional theory/practice gap in our field. With a few notable exceptions, applied linguists seem to have been talking to one another in a bubble, without, it seems, taking much interest in teachers' own puzzles and problems. In the meantime, teachers seem to have become victims of increasingly heavy restrictions and their expertise is becoming more and more devalued in different parts of the world.

I don't think the alternative is to reject research-based expertise as some have been advocating recently – that just casts teachers adrift and makes them even more victims of fashion and imposition, whatever they're sold or told to do. A constructive alternative is to say that teachers are experts of their own classrooms and to support them in developing insights further through reflection and research – as well as to encourage teacher associations and university-based teacher educators and researchers to get involved in supporting this.

Asking how can teacher research help teachers and learners is exactly the right question, as that helps us avoid the idea that teacher research has to contribute to wider knowledge in some way, in other words be based on academic norms. It's something different – it's research *by* teachers *for* teachers (and their learners) in a particular context. The goals are developing appropriate methodology for the teacher's classroom and professional development for the teacher concerned, not contributing to 'the literature' by filling some generally applicable research gap. That might happen in fact, but it's not the goal.

This gives rise to plenty of important implications – you don't have to start with a literature review, for example – the research questions come from a problem or puzzle in your practice, and they've got their own validity for that reason, with no need for justification from the literature. And you don't need to write an article. It's your choice how you share your findings – it could be just with your students, or with a group of colleagues, for instance. So, some of the apparent barriers to doing teacher research disappear – it doesn't have to be done in an 'academic' way!

How does it help? It can empower teachers and make classrooms better places for learning. Some words that stay in my mind from teachers in the Champion Teachers scheme I've been involved with in Chile are Mauro's, who said something like, "action research can light the way in the darkness of the system," or Leyla's, who said, "I heard my students, I saw myself". Exploratory action research brought about a big change to a more positive mindset for them – it *empowered* them.

Teachers' engagement in research

Do you think that more teachers are actually engaging in teacher research nowadays?

It's very difficult to tell. Teacher research is definitely starting to get higher visibility, partly in the ways you referred to in your first question – in other words, it's attracting more academic interest. But, as I implied in my answer, it's important for us all to 'walk the talk' – i.e., not just talk about it but actually engage in practices to encourage teachers to do teacher research and support them better once they decide to do so. The choice needs to be theirs, of course – forcing teachers to do teacher research, or even implying there's a kind of professional responsibility to do research seems to me antithetical to the idea of *teacher-initiated* research or '*research by teachers for teachers*', as I've been calling it.

One factor in the rise in the general visibility of teacher research has been IATEFL Research SIG's efforts over the last five or so years. We've been seeing it as part of our mission to introduce teachers to teacher research – not just members of the SIG but English teachers worldwide more generally – via video-recordings, other resources, and social networking related to the workshops and conferences that we've organized or supported in Turkey, Latin America and India. We've also published innovative books of teacher research reports, starting with *Teachers Research!* in 2015, making these freely available and publicising them widely (<http://resig.weebly.com/publications.html>).

In parallel, there's been the development of an international exploratory practice network under the leadership of Judith Hanks in particular, and efforts led by Kenan Dikilitaş in Turkey and Amol Padwad in India. Anne Burns and Simon Borg have been continuing to promote action research, especially via Cambridge-sponsored schemes for language school teachers in Australia and England, respectively. And there's been a growth in British Council schemes – particularly in Latin America, India and Nepal – I've personally been involved with these. I also keep hearing of schemes elsewhere too, for example, work that Rama Mathew has been doing for the English in Action programme in Bangladesh.

One particularly noteworthy development, I think, is the way teacher research is being talked about and *done* not just in universities or language schools but in relation to secondary school and even primary school English teaching (there's another recent project I need to mention in this connection, one led by my colleague Annamaria Pinter involving children as co-researchers in Indian primary schools).

Also, something I've been particularly keen to promote myself is the idea – well, more than that of course, the *reality* – that teacher research can be appropriate in difficult circumstances in schools in developing countries (see <https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/al/research/groups/lta/research/trdc>): it's not just a luxury for privileged settings. Anyway, I think all of this activity clearly disproves statements like Zoltan Dörnyei's about teacher research being all very well in theory but not actually done in practice, or Simon Borg's about the lack of teacher research outside formal degree programmes. Teacher research is happening nowadays on a voluntary basis, being better publicised, and is occurring in a wider range of contexts than previously seems to have been the case.

How do you reply to the claim that not many teachers are engaging in teacher research?

Well, how do we know teachers don't already do research? If you ask them via a questionnaire, without probing further, of course many will say they don't do research, because they associate it with academic ways of doing things. But many teachers nevertheless ask themselves questions about their practice. In other words wonder why things are as they are, or why something does or doesn't seem to be working, and I think there are a lot of good teachers who both do this *and* go beyond reflection into research, trying to answer their questions with data like student homework, chats with students, parents or other teachers, reflections they ask students to write, and so on.

These teachers don't necessarily view what they're doing as 'research' but it *is* a kind of research – it involves questions, data, and analysis. And I think denying to this the label 'research' and calling it 'inquiry' or something like that is doing the opposite of democratising or opening the doors of research – it is maintaining the false idea that only professional researchers can come up with 'expert' findings about classroom teaching.

Teachers don't have to judge what they do according to academic norms or feel embarrassed about a 'lack of quality' – after all, the data they gather and the analyses they carry out in teacher research are for them and their students, not for an academic gaze.

So, teachers need to be encouraged to see what they already do as research and shown how they can build on their existing practice to improve and share it. Teachers who reflect and ask themselves questions but don't gather data can be shown how doing so could help them answer the questions they have. And those who aren't used to self-questioning can be encouraged to do so via dialogues with mentors as a first step in a research process.

In all these cases, a mentor or other forms of guidance (for instance, via reader-friendly guidance materials) can be helpful. I also think that teacher associations have a major role to play in promoting and supporting teacher research, as do university-school partnerships.

This is the opposite of saying teachers 'must' do research, or must do research in a certain way. I think it's partly over-academic models which make research seem off-putting to teachers – another paradox to be avoided when academics do get involved in promoting teacher research!

Supporting teacher research

What kinds of support do teachers require in order for them to develop better skills to engage in research?

From my experience both doing and mentoring teacher research, I think there are four main areas which are difficult and where teachers can benefit from support:

- changing a problem, puzzle or success into research questions
- considering what kind(s) of data – and how much or how little – will be appropriate to answer different questions
- analysing data to answer the questions
- knowing where and how to share findings.

As we learned from the Chile project, teachers benefit most from mentoring by a more experienced teacher-researcher or other kind of mentor who knows the context and can understand the problems they are facing. Often, it seems to be 'near-peers' (teachers who have gone through the same experiences as beginning teacher-researchers) who can offer the best guidance.

So, finally, if they're interested, how can teachers get involved in teacher research and be supported to do it?

I personally think it's good to start by looking at examples, not just hear or read about teacher research in the abstract. For example, one could look at the website of the International Festival of Teacher Research in ELT (<https://trfestival.wordpress.com>), or join and scroll down in the Teachers Research! Facebook page, where various teachers have posted videos of poster presentations (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/teachersresearch>). I'm sure IATEFL Research SIG will carry on promoting and supporting teacher research and their website is another place to look, including in the open access books available there (<http://resig.weebly.com/books.html>).

One could also look at the *Champion Teachers: Stories of Exploratory Action Research* book, which I edited with Paula Rebolledo and Deborah Bullock (bit.ly/champion-teachers). Paula and I have also written a *Handbook for Exploratory Action Research* for the British Council (bit.ly/handbook-EAR).

To actually get involved, it's always good to try to find someone who can mentor you, and my strong hope is that those who've done teacher research themselves will continue to offer

mentoring support to others, for example, via IATEFL Research SIG, or in university-school partnerships (university-based teacher educators need to wake up to their responsibilities to the profession by establishing more of these, it seems to me!).

For the last three years in January and February, the TESOL CALL-IS Electronic Village Online has been organising a five-week session on Classroom-based Research for Professional Development where volunteer mentors have been generously offering support to anyone who wanted to join in (<http://classroombasedresearch.weebly.com>). Teachers could also form a self-help group to give one another support, for example, inside their teacher association. That's what teachers in AINET – the All-India Network of English Teachers – did a few years ago, which later grew into a full-scale mentoring scheme!

The most important message, though, is “take a look, and – if you want to – do it and share it!” That's how you'll learn more about teacher research – from the inside!

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