INSIGHTS

'Teachers want to know answers to questions': Dudley Reynolds on teacher research

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The value of teacher research as a source of professional development and change within the classroom has grown in importance in the past few years. In this interview, Dudley Reynolds, the 51st President of TESOL International Association, shares his views about the benefits of teachers engaging in research, the challenges they face when seeking to do so, and how teacher associations can provide them with support.

Popularity of teacher research

Over the past few years, the topic of teacher research has been given increased attention in the literature and at international ELT conferences. How do you explain this rise in popularity?

I see it as an attempt to give it relevance. As a field we are very much focused on improving the learning of languages. It's a practice oriented field and yet if the research that is being done is located only within university settings and large scale projects, there's a real disconnect or the potential for a disconnect between the theories that are being built and the realities of how languages are learned in instructional settings around the world. I am increasingly hearing people talk about things such as researcher-practitioner collaborations, which are collaborations between equals and that go in both directions. It's not about researchers coming in and making the teacher a research assistant on their project. It's really about a dialogue back and forth. Researchers need to be listening to what the issues are that need to be solved. So I think that's attempted relevance, making what we're doing and learning more relevant.

Recently, some prominent ELT figures published articles saying that research is not relevant for teachers and that teachers don't have time for research. They argue that teachers shouldn't be encouraged to engage with research, let alone engage in it. How do you respond to that kind of argument?

First of all, you have to define what you mean by research. If your definition is based on what a product of research looks like, the detail of the methodology, or if you are expecting teachers to do something that in a sense replicates what a university based academic does with grant funding, graduate student assistants, and a limited teaching schedule, then you are asking too much of teachers. If, however, you define research

as more of a heuristic, as a way of problem solving that is systematic, measured, analytic, that is grounded in the notion that it has to be relevant to a larger context, that it has to be connected, and that it is a process which has to give back, then you are talking about something which is within any teacher's capacity to undertake. I definitely understand the argument that teachers have limited time and resources, but I don't think of them as people who are uninterested in questions. Teachers want to know answers to questions.

Does the fact that more academics and professional researchers are giving attention to the value of teacher research imply that more teachers are engaging in it in their own classrooms?

I think there are more teachers talking about it. You definitely see more teachers talking about things like action research. But it's hard to quantify. I'm not sure we have the baseline data to actually quantify whether there are more teachers doing research. However, because of the kinds of questions that I get asked, I do think there are two things going on. One is that some people are feeling more pressured to do research, possibly from their institutions so as to improve their status or ranking in league tables. But there's also an increased understanding, which is a more positive understanding, of research as part of being a professional, a component of professionalism. Again, this is in line with my view that research is primarily a heuristic. It is something within anybody's reach to do. I hope that this more positive understanding of research is something that is catching on and people are thinking more about.

Benefits and challenges

You mentioned that all teachers have questions and want to know the answers to their questions. If you were talking to a group of teachers, how would you try to convince them of the value of doing research?

I would start by trying to get at either the questions they might have, or something that they've observed in their classrooms and they're not sure whether it's a pattern or not. Maybe while hearing them talk they would state an assumption that I could build on. So, by using their own context and their own frame of reference as a starting point, I would begin to turn an assumption into a question. I would ask them to think about how to get an answer to that question. It's a dialogic process. It's about helping them to see that the questions they have are really the beginning of the research process. The next stage is to empower them to take it a step further. Many pre-service teacher-education programmes do not prepare teachers to think of themselves as researchers and do not necessarily provide protocols or a structure for answering classroom questions. Unfortunately, what these programmes communicate is that research is not a process but something that you're supposed to know. What that really means is that you're supposed to know all the latest findings that are being published in all the journals you don't have time to read. It's a very disempowering understanding of research.

Here you seem to be indicating some serious obstacles to teacher research. In your experience of meeting teachers from around the world, what would you say are the main challenges to teacher research?

The traditional obstacles that are typically cited are that teachers don't have time for research because they're often teaching five or six classes a day. All their time and energy is sucked into planning lessons and evaluating students and handling the bureaucratic tasks that go along with that. But I think the main obstacle is simply the understanding of what research is. It's an understanding that can disempower the teacher; it makes them feel deficient and dependent on the outside expert. So, the first step is really to begin to change that understanding of what research is and how it fits into practice.

Research literacy

We're doing this interview at the TESOL Arabia Conference, at which you took part in a pre-conference event on research literacy. What kind of support do teachers require in order for them to develop the necessary skills to engage in research?

The event was framed by the idea of research literacy because just as with any other course focusing on a specialised field, whether it's EAP or Business English, there are specialised literacies that are involved in doing research. So, there's an introduction to the process, the components, and the terminology. One level of support is providing teachers with access to the specialised literacy of doing research. But I think the bigger task is providing teachers with an on-going support network for research. This is where as a field we haven't developed the mechanisms that really support and enable robust teacher research. What I'm thinking about here is, for example, involving teachers in communities of practice where research is a central component, or setting up a research project at a school.

Professional associations, especially at the national level around the world, can play a huge role in supporting teacher research networks. That may involve collaboration between people who have more experience doing research and people who have more immediate access to the questions that need to be answered. I've done research that was an individual research project and I've done co-authored research. I enjoy the co-authored work much more because it's about shared responsibilities and shared opportunities. It's when I begin talking to somebody and the dialogue that occurs allows me to begin to see things in a whole new way.

I think this is something that professional associations could actually scaffold, set up, and invite people to sign up for. There's a paradigm for educational research called educational design research, which typically involves someone who is university-based working with a teacher, a school, or a group of teachers in a location. The university researcher doesn't come in with a hypothesis that they need help investigating. Instead, together with the teachers, they negotiate what the question is that needs to be answered. They look at what's happening in that environment that might provide answers to that question. If there's a need to collect additional information, together they design how they might do that in a way that is ecologically viable. They also share in the interpretation. The goal of this paradigm for doing research is that while there may be theoretical applications that have broader relevance, they're also going to solve something that's meaningful to that specific context.

Do you think that this kind of partnership between a professional researcher and a teacher-researcher can enable us to challenge those conceptions that teachers might have about what constitutes research?

Absolutely! It is not until you are involved in the process, the on-going cyclical nature of collaborative discussions, that your perceptions and attitudes start to change. We know that one of the limitations of most professional development programmes worldwide is that there's this perception that if the expert stands up and asks the audience to do something then they will go on to do it. That's not how people learn. Our students don't learn the difference between countable and uncountable nouns because we put a list on the board. We can give people the information, but that's not how they learn it. They learn it by trying it out, by making mistakes; they learn it by speaking it and writing it. Developing teacher knowledge and understanding requires a similar on-going process. If we're establishing the awareness of research as a heuristic, as a learning goal for our profession, then we have to set up processes that we know actually promote learning.

Role of Teacher Associations

Is the TESOL International Association Convention being used as a platform for the dissemination of teacher research?

The Association is divided into Interest Sections and many of them have very practical foci, directly related to what people teach. We also have groups that focus on particular segments of education. This taxonomy of interests is how our conference programme is organised. Anybody can submit a proposal but one of the things we ask is whether the session is more research-focused or whether it's about the application of a practical idea. For research sessions, we don't insist on the requirement that it has to be about something that can be published in a journal. We cast a wide net in terms of what is viewed as research. When you look at the conference programme, you'll find that many of the research projects consist of teachers presenting on questions they have about their particular context and the ways that they have investigated them.

In addition, as an association we're looking at a number of ways to support teacher research. It is not only about creating dissemination opportunities, but it's also about fostering the necessary research literacy. We have now issued three different research agendas. The most recent one was in 2014 [**https://www.tesol.org/advance-the-field/research**]. An agenda is typically about what needs to be done. When you find examples of research agendas that various groups put out, it's often about the hot topics that need to be researched.

However, in part because our field is so diverse and complex, we didn't want to necessarily presume that this is everything that needs to be done. So, what we've tried to do with the research agendas is to begin to craft the message that research needs to be on everyone's agenda. No matter how you fit into the field, you need to think about how research connects with what you do. I'm talking about programme directors, publishers, and classroom teachers. All of these are roles that, in a sense, you practise. Well, what is the role of research within your practice, however you fit into the field? By saying that that's what we need to be thinking about, we also realised that we needed to define research; we needed to provide a sense of scope for research and the many varied ways that research is done and the questions that it addresses; we needed to scaffold the process a little bit by reminding people of the ethics involved in doing research; and we also needed to indicate the steps in the process of identifying topics.

So, we provide examples of questions that could be investigated, as well as a framework for locating a question. We also talk about the current change drivers. The ones identified in the research agenda are: evolving understandings of what language is; the way technology is revolutionising teaching; and the role that teachers' understanding of themselves plays in effective language learning.

I can understand why TESOL International considers this document to be very important, but is it enough? There might be people who feel that providing teachers with a document is not the same as providing them with the kind of support that they expect when they join a teachers' association.

It's absolutely not enough. It's a starting point. In TESOL's current strategic plan we have five goals. These relate to making sure that our own house is in order in the way we govern the Association, promoting quality professional development, developing the best standards for the field, being good advocates for the field, and promoting research within and for the field. So, research is one of our strategic goals. We have a Professional Council specifically focused on supporting research within the field. They organise sessions at the convention on the development of research literacy skills and on how to bridge research and practice. They administer a small grant to support research projects, and they are also looking at developing webinars or other on-going professional development in the area of research.

But even with all that, I feel we're not doing enough. I would still like to see the association do more in terms of developing collaborative research networks. I think that's a harder task for TESOL International than it might be for a national teachers' association, which does operate more immediately at a local level. Those kinds of collaborative networks function best at local levels. That's something that I hope we can encourage through TESOL affiliates around the world.

Dudley Reynolds served as the 51st President of TESOL International Association in 2016-2017. He is a Teaching Professor of English, Liberal and Social Sciences at Carnegie Mellon University in Qatar. He is the author of *Assessing Writing, Assessing Learning* (University of Michigan Press, 2010) and *One on One with Second Language Writers: A Guide for Writing Tutors, Teachers, and Consultants* (University of Michigan Press, 2009).

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