

IATEFL BESIG Pre-Conference Seminar Malta 2017:

Sarah Mercer & Daniel Xerri – *How to find answers to your questions.*

Ellen Keates discovers that research can be fun!

The weekend of the 2017 IATEFL BESIG Annual Conference got off to a flying start on the Friday afternoon with the pre-conference seminar by Sarah Mercer (University of Graz, Austria) and Daniel Xerri (University of Malta). This BESIG conference was held in cooperation with IATEFL ReSIG (the Research Special Interest Group), so the subject of their seminar very appropriately was: *How to find answers to your questions in your business English teaching practice.*

This highly interactive and energising workshop was divided into two parts:

1. Tackling myths and misconceptions: The benefits of research for your professional roles.
2. Finding your researcher identity: Setting goals and examining strategies.

I'd read their intro to the session in the conference programme. I thought: Research? In my everyday business English teaching practice? I am not a researcher. Is this for me?

But once Sarah and Daniel set off to "tackle the myths and misconceptions about research", I soon realised I do quite a bit of informal research myself when I try to find answers to my teaching questions. Questions like: Why do the things I do work out well? Or why don't they, sometimes? Why do my learners respond the way they do?

In small groups we discussed scenarios to find a good definition of research and to explore why we want to engage in research. The most obvious reason for research? We want to know and find answers to our questions. We want to



Sarah Mercer and Daniel Xerri about to be introduced by Dana Poklepovic

develop professionally and become better teachers!

In part 2 of this seminar, we went through the stages of the research process:

Step one: the importance of a good research question.

In small groups, we exchanged what topics we were currently working on and what our main questions were. In answer to: "How do you know you've got a good research question?" Sarah advised "Try to prove it wrong!"

Step two: the methodological design of your research.

Define your topic, generate questions, and by narrowing these down, formulate your researchable questions (O'Leary, 2004). This makes your study doable in practical terms of time, money and expertise.

Step three: what types of data can we generate?

We discussed empirical research and quantitative and qualitative data.

Step four: what tools can we use to collect our data?

We shared possible research tools such as:

- Interviews
- Observation
- Questionnaires
- Investigating what has been done in the past
- Corpora
- Asking experts
- Asking different participants (students, peers, past experts)
- Focus groups
- Think alouds: thinking out loud while tackling a certain assignment, describing what you are actually doing
- Keeping a research diary or blog

In the handout for this workshop, Sarah and Daniel briefly set out the final three steps of research:

Step five: who are your participants?

Step six: how would you analyse your data?

Step seven: what next, what is your time plan?

At the end of the afternoon the room was buzzing with ideas. For me, Sarah Mercer and Daniel Xerri had opened up a new world. Yes! Research is fun and something for all business trainers to deliver ever-higher quality instruction. This start to the conference was a wonderful surprise!

Reference

- O'Leary, Z. (2004) *The Essential Guide to Doing Research*. SAGE Publications Ltd.

Ellen Keates has been in teaching since 1972 – these past 15 years at the Business School of Windesheim University (The Netherlands), where she works with both young and mature business students. She also teaches courses in Cambridge general & business English.



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