

‘Research doesn’t feel like an add-on. It feels like good teaching’: Daniel Xerri on classroom research

*Daniel Xerri’s [plenary](#) on classroom research at the 58th IATEFL International Conference in Edinburgh marked a significant moment, giving this essential professional practice the attention it deserves. Being a former ReSIG coordinator, he has spent years supporting teacher-led inquiry and encouraging educators to embark on their own research journeys. For ReSIG’s 35th anniversary, **Josianne Block** sat down with Daniel to explore his vision for classroom research and his commitment to making it more accessible to language teachers worldwide.*

In your plenary, you quoted Carl Sagan (1980): “We make our world significant by the courage of our questions and by the depth of our answers” (p. 193). How does this quote capture the essence of classroom research?

Sagan’s words capture the very heart of classroom research because they speak directly to the spirit of inquiry that drives teacher-initiated research. Classroom research is not about producing universal truths or adhering to rigid academic models. It begins with teachers asking brave, context-specific questions about their own practice: ‘Why is this strategy working with one group but not another?’ ‘How can I better support these learners?’ ‘What am I not seeing here?’ These are questions rooted in real language classrooms, in lived experiences, and in a desire to improve learning in meaningful, immediate ways.

What gives classroom research depth is the way teachers answer these questions: not through distant, detached measurement, but through reflective, sustained, and ethically grounded inquiry. It is depth that comes from being embedded in the daily dynamics of language teaching, and from the courage to examine one’s assumptions and practices openly. As I explored in the plenary, research becomes significant when it is *owned* by educators, when it emerges from *practice*, and when it is used to generate change. This change is most often beneficial for teachers, as well as their learners, schools, and communities. In that sense, Sagan’s words resonate as a powerful reminder that what matters most in education is not only the knowledge we generate, but the questions we dare to ask.

You described how a practitioner you worked with initially felt like there was a “smooth and unscalable concrete wall” separating her from classroom research.

Do you think this research-practice divide still exists? Are teachers genuinely interested in engaging with research?

Yes, the research-practice divide still exists. More than a metaphorical wall, it is often a structural and cultural reality within educational systems. Many teachers continue to feel that research is something *done to them* rather than *by them* or *with them*. This perception is shaped by longstanding hierarchies that position academic, externally produced knowledge as more legitimate than the experiential knowledge language teachers generate in classrooms. As a result, they may internalise the idea that research is inaccessible, overly theoretical, or irrelevant to the daily complexities of their work.

That said, the desire to engage in inquiry is absolutely there. Most teachers are naturally curious and reflective; they are constantly observing, experimenting, and adapting. What often holds them back is a lack of support, whether in the form of time, training, access to resources, or recognition of their efforts. When these barriers are addressed, many teachers find research not only relevant but empowering. As I mentioned in the plenary, when teachers engage in research that they define and lead themselves, they develop deeper understandings of pedagogy and a stronger sense of professional agency. So, while the divide remains, there is growing momentum to bridge it meaningfully and sustainably. This can happen through exploratory practice, research–practice partnerships, and other forms of practitioner inquiry.

You’ve also expressed the idea that teacher research can be ‘subversive’. However, many teachers face significant challenges, such as the need to meet academic demands, assessment pressures, and rigid syllabi. How would you respond to a teacher who says, “I simply don’t have time for classroom research”? How can classroom research be both ‘subversive’ and ‘sustainable’?

That response is both valid and deeply understandable. The pressures language teachers face – tight syllabi, high-stakes assessments, administrative demands – are very real, and it’s precisely within this context that we need to reframe what classroom research can be. Research doesn’t have to mean adding something extra or formal on top of already overwhelming workloads. Instead, it can be embedded in the very fabric of teaching; it’s a reflective and responsive way of making sense of what’s happening in the classroom.

When I describe teacher research as ‘subversive’ (drawing on my interview with Richard Smith, 2018), I don’t mean it’s revolutionary in a confrontational sense. Rather, it challenges the idea that knowledge only comes from the top down. Even small acts of inquiry, whether consisting of pausing to reflect on why a lesson didn’t land, collecting feedback from learners, or tweaking an approach and observing the

outcomes, are forms of research. These are things many language teachers are already doing informally. What practitioner research offers is a way to make that reflection more intentional, documented, and, crucially, shareable.

The key is shifting from a compliance-driven mindset to a curiosity-driven one. It's not about finding extra time, but about viewing the everyday challenges of teaching as opportunities for professional learning and pedagogical improvement. With appropriate support, such as peer collaboration, mentoring, and institutional recognition, classroom research becomes a sustainable, even empowering, part of professional practice. As the PRACTICE Framework I proposed in the plenary highlights, when research is practical, teaching-driven, and integrated, it doesn't feel like an add-on. It feels like good teaching. Other equally important elements of this framework's conceptualisation of classroom research are: relational, accessible, collaborative, community-oriented, and empowering.

In your plenary, you mentioned how research is sometimes perceived as researchers 'exploiting' teachers. You also discussed how empowering teachers to conduct their own classroom research is a redistribution of power. Could this newly-acquired power risk being misused, with teachers potentially 'exploiting' their learners for professional growth, rather than prioritising their learners' needs?

This is a crucial and ethically complex question. I'm glad it's being asked because it touches on one of the most important principles underpinning classroom research: relational responsibility. Yes, while empowering language teachers to conduct their own research is a necessary redistribution of epistemic power, it must always be accompanied by a strong ethical framework that prioritises learners' dignity, voice, and wellbeing.

When research is done on learners, especially without their informed involvement or without a commitment to mutual benefit, it risks becoming extractive, even if unintentionally so. That's why the shift scholars like Annamaria Pinter (2023) and Judith Hanks (2025) advocate for is not just from researcher-led to teacher-led, but from research *on* to research *with*. Classrooms should not be treated as data mines, but as communities of inquiry where knowledge is co-constructed. Language learners should not be seen as mere research subjects; they are participants, collaborators, and co-owners of the process.

The ethical compass for classroom research must remain firmly aligned with reciprocity, trust, and care. This includes transparent communication with learners, creating space for their voices in shaping inquiry, and using research findings to enhance rather than instrumentalise their learning experiences. In fact, truly

empowering classroom research strengthens learner agency because it often leads to pedagogical decisions that are more responsive, inclusive, and context-aware.

So yes, with power comes the possibility of misuse. However, when practitioner inquiry is guided by ethical reflexivity and relational values, it becomes a force for shared growth rather than exploitation. That's the kind of classroom research we should all strive to cultivate.

You have written extensively on diverse ELT topics, from teaching literature to school leadership and Generative AI. Yet, classroom research has remained a key focus of your work. What draws you to this area of study?

What draws me to classroom research is its transformative potential, both professionally and ethically. At its core, classroom research represents a reclaiming of voice, agency, and knowledge by those who are closest to the learning process: teachers and learners. Given that education is often shaped by top-down reforms, external mandates, and ever-shifting policy agendas, classroom research offers something radical in its simplicity: the idea that meaningful change can begin from within the language classroom, driven by teachers' questions and learners' realities.

I'm drawn to this area because it speaks directly to the tensions I've observed throughout my work, whether in teacher education, curriculum design, or the evolving impact of technologies like Generative AI. Across all these domains, the same question persists: Whose knowledge counts? Classroom research disrupts hierarchies by validating the knowledge that emerges from day-to-day language teaching and learning. It honours practice as a site of inquiry rather than just application.

Moreover, my conversations with teachers, whether they're exploring literary texts, navigating digital change, or trying to meet learner needs in under-resourced settings, have consistently shown that research, when done by teachers in and for their own contexts, can be empowering rather than burdensome. It nurtures reflection, fosters collaboration, and promotes justice. That's why I keep returning to it. Because in championing teacher-led inquiry, I believe we are not only enhancing professional practice; we are also reshaping the culture of education itself.

We're experiencing a time where emerging technologies, like Generative AI, are rapidly influencing education. How do you see the role of classroom research evolving in this context of technological advancement?

In a time of rapid technological advancement, classroom research becomes even more essential. When the educational landscape is shifting beneath our feet,

teachers need structured ways to make sense of new tools, assess their impact, and ensure that technology serves pedagogical goals rather than dictating them. Classroom research offers exactly that: a reflective, evidence-informed approach for navigating change with agency and criticality.

Generative AI presents exciting possibilities for language teaching and learning, but it also raises urgent questions about ethics, equity, and the reshaping of teacher–learner dynamics. Rather than passively adopting new technologies, teachers can use classroom research to ask: How is this tool affecting my learners? Whose voices are being amplified or silenced through its use? Is it enhancing or undermining creativity, critical thinking, or human connection in my classroom?

This kind of inquiry helps prevent what Neil Selwyn (2023) and other scholars call ‘techno-solutionism’, the idea that technology is a fix-all for educational challenges. Instead, research-engaged practice allows teachers to approach emerging technologies with informed scepticism, contextual awareness, and a commitment to learner wellbeing. It turns experimentation into knowledge-building, and uncertainty into purposeful inquiry. In this sense, classroom research doesn’t just keep pace with technological change; it helps shape how that change is understood, integrated, and ultimately humanised within our educational ecosystems. It ensures that innovation is not just about what technology can do, but about what education should be.

If you could offer three actionable steps or pieces of advice for advancing classroom research in the future, what would they be?

The three steps I would like to propose are grounded in accessibility, integration, and empowerment, these being principles that reflect some of the challenges and possibilities I highlighted in the plenary when discussing the PRACTICE Framework for classroom research.

Firstly, it’s vital to encourage teachers and institutions to see research as a part of professional life rather than an add-on. If teachers are willing to engage in it, classroom research can be integrated into the everyday structures of language teaching, schools, and professional learning. This means recognising inquiry as crucial to teacher identity, embedding research into CPD programmes, and valuing its contribution to enhanced performance and learner achievement. When research is built into the system, rather than treated as an extracurricular task, it becomes a sustainable practice.

Secondly, creating cultures of collaboration and mentorship is foundational for classroom research to thrive. Research takes root in supportive, dialogic environments. Schools and teacher education programmes should nurture peer

networks, mentoring relationships, and research communities where educators can learn from one another, troubleshoot challenges, and celebrate successes. Collaboration enhances research quality and makes the process more enjoyable and less isolating. ReSIG should be very proud of what it's helped many teachers to achieve in this regard.

Lastly, it's imperative to trust teachers as creators of knowledge. This implies shifting the culture of research by redefining who counts as a researcher. Teachers must be trusted to lead their own inquiries, ask their own questions, and share their findings with the wider profession. Institutions, journals, and conferences need to amplify teacher voices and make space for practice-based, practitioner-authored knowledge. By taking these steps, we move toward a future where classroom research is a recognised, valued, and transformational cornerstone of professional practice in ELT.

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