

PERSPECTIVES

'Breaking boulders into pebbles': Christine Coombe on teacher research

DANIEL XERRI

Teacher research is deemed to be an important way for practitioners to develop professionally and learn more about their classroom and students. However, there exist a number of challenges that hinder teachers from engaging in research. In this interview, Christine Coombe, Past President of TESOL Arabia and TESOL International Association, discusses what role teacher associations can play in supporting teachers to do and disseminate research.

Popularity of teacher research

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

At tertiary level institutions in my own context, which is in the Gulf region, research – or more specifically applied research – is on all the mission statements. So, because teachers are evaluated based on the mission statement and the goals pertaining to that statement, I think research is gaining importance here amongst teachers. Now, this is not actually the way I'd like to see teachers becoming interested in research. I'd rather it come just from the value of doing research, but at the end of the day I'll take what I can get. I truly feel that once they have engaged in a certain number of research projects and benefited from the many advantages that often come with that, teachers will buy more into doing research in order to inform their classes.

Definitions of research

One of the criticisms levelled at academics interested in teacher research is that they are imposing their definition of research on teachers and expecting them to do the kind of research that they want them to do.

That's true. For me, research is basically finding out something that I either have an interest in and I didn't know about before or just learning something new about my students. So, I start from that kind of capacity. I feel that if you try to impose whatever research paradigm on teachers, they will be turned off. In my own classes, where I teach undergraduate students about research, we obviously talk about the three methodological frameworks – qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods – but one of the things I feel strongly about is that you can't

impose a research topic on a student. Topics have to evolve from their own interests and their own curiosity.

My policy in my research classes is that students can choose whichever methodology they want to use and they can choose whichever topic they want to research. The same holds true for teachers. It is very important that the topics evolve from their own interests with regard to teaching and learning, and from their own classes if they're going down the road of action research.

There are some people who complain that we are restricting the definition of what research is all about or what research teachers should be doing. They suggest that we should democratise and broaden the conception of research. What do you think about that?

I'm all for that because I think you don't want to pigeonhole people into one very narrow definition. There are lots of statistics showing that the typical research produced by academics is not read by many people. The latest journal article I read basically says that the average paper in an academic journal is read between seven to 15 times in its entirety. When you think about the amount of time an author spends getting their article up to the standard of top tier journals, that's not a lot of bang for your buck. I would much prefer to see a definition of research evolve through the teachers that do it and through more frequently accessed publication avenues, like teacher magazines, newsletters, and conference proceedings. I'm very proud of the number of publications that TESOL Arabia has produced, most of them of very high quality. People are citing our publications much more readily these days. Many more people read the average TESOL Arabia book than an article in a top tier journal.

Value and challenges of doing research

In your experience of working with teachers, what would you say is the value of teachers engaging in research?

Everything I do in the classroom is based on research. I think that's the value of having a doctorate or a degree from a programme that places an emphasis on research. You have an overall grounding in lots of things within your field. I feel that knowing the reason why we do something in the classroom and why it's beneficial should always be informed by research. I think teachers would much better understand their students and the various

teaching methodologies that they might utilise if they were familiar with the research grounding of that particular methodology or particular approach to instruction.

At the same time though there are a number of challenges that inhibit teachers from doing research. What would you say are the most significant ones?

In my context, it's always time. It's like when we give our students a big project. Most of the time they psych themselves out. They think, "Oh I can't get started. I can't do this project because it's just so big." When teachers think about research, they don't think about the analogy of breaking boulders into pebbles. You don't have to do the whole thing in one day or one weekend. You can take 15 or 20 minutes or one hour a day and do a little bit of it. Some teachers think of research as if it's this huge project and it might very well turn out to be a huge project, but it doesn't have to be.

So, I think time is a big issue. Increasing workload demands also inhibits teachers from doing research because so much more is laid on the teacher. We're big in technology here in the UAE and although it has made our lives much easier, it has also increased the workload demand. Whereas in the past if you received a message on your phone or in your mailbox you had a day or so to respond, now if my supervisor sends me an email in the morning and I haven't answered it within the hour, he's on the phone asking whether I've received it. So, technology has helped us a lot but it has also increased our workload tenfold.

Supporting teacher-researchers

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

I think they need a step-by-step process. They need to know about some things beforehand to get them started, but they need a step-by-step process. For example, before I started working on my doctoral dissertation, I attended a two-month intensive course during the summer in which we went through all the steps, step-by-step, of how to come up with the first three chapters of a dissertation. By the end of that course, I had produced a final report consisting of three chapters of a dissertation. Making the process clear in order for teachers to know what they have to do when they do research is the first step.

WINNER SILVER AWARD
Learning Technologies Awards 2016

learning
technologies
awards



OXFORD ENGLISH VOCABULARY TRAINER

Your personal English tutor!



Build your vocabulary and deepen your understanding of English words!

- ✓ **Personalised intelligent feedback:** adapts to your learning style, and the beautiful Feedback Butterfly gives visual coaching on spelling, grammar, meaning and choice of word.
- ✓ **Rich multimedia hints:** including images, audio and scrambled letters, guide learners to the right answer, encouraging users to think in order to progress.
- ✓ **Practice is made engaging:** with experience points and achievement badges rewarding effort.
- ✓ The new **Teacher Dashboard** allows class management and tracking of student progress.

Add wordlists from best-selling Oxford courses, or build personalised lists from the integrated multilingual dictionary.



Download and start
improving today!

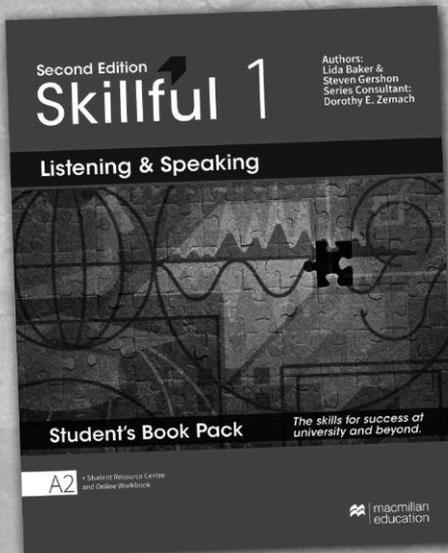


NEW

Second Edition

Skillful

5 level Academic English course for students in university programs - step by step, tailored approach to help students gradually build up their abilities.

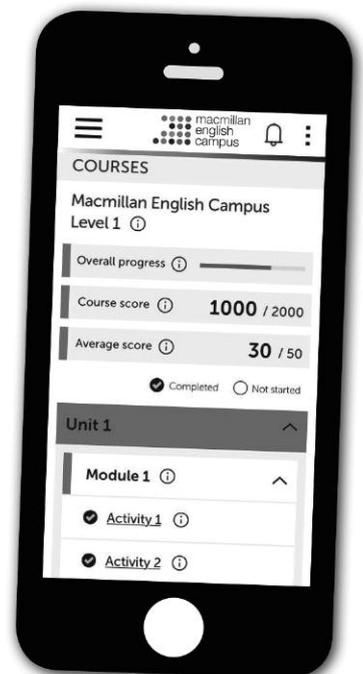


- Authentic video material from *Reuters*
- Syllabus of academic skills based *Stella Cottrell's* approach, widely recognised as the leading Study Skills expert. Students will learn invaluable skills and strategies they can use to improve their academic performance, not only in English, but in other areas of study too.
- Listening and Reading activities mapped to the IELTS exam
- Supports students to develop critical thinking skills
- Comprehensive digital offer, including a digital student's book with interactive activities, an online workbook for further practice and a teacher's presentation kit.



Macmillan's online language practice and teaching platform.

- Over 5000 activities covering a wide range of subjects, grammar practice, and preparation exercises for exams such as Cambridge English, IELTS, TOEFL and TOEIC, covering all levels from A1-C2.
- Graded practice materials to cover all competences all in the same place therefore facilitating teaching and learning in and out of the classroom.
- Over 60* pre-built practice courses for busy teachers who want a ready to use teaching companion, many of which are purpose built to be used with Macmillan series titles and other courses.
- All courses are customisable
- Fully tablet and mobile compatible
- Real time *The Guardian Lessons*, bringing fresh and globally relevant material to students on a weekly basis, to encourage debate and critical thinking across varying language levels from beginner to advanced.





As an association, does TESOL Arabia provide that kind of support?

We're trying to. In fact, one of the things that I'm looking into doing with a colleague is to produce a TESOL Arabia publication that will focus on how to do research. I think that's very much needed so that's currently our plan. I would have liked to see more uptake with the research literacy event, but I think part of the problem with that was that it was pre-conference. Nowadays some teachers aren't getting an extra day off to attend a pre-conference event. It's simply a question of not being able to be released from work.

Disseminating teacher research

Does the TESOL Arabia Conference act as a platform for the dissemination of teacher research?

I think it does. If you look at the 500-plus presentations that are in the programme, many of them are research-based or they are at least couched in some kind of empirical rationale. That's not a pre-requisite for having one's proposal accepted, but many people submit a research-based proposal. So, yes I do think we help to disseminate research.

When you say 'research-based', are you referring to the research conducted by academics or by classroom teachers?

For me, they're both teachers. For example, at a positivity and mindfulness event that I organised some time ago, I spoke about happiness. After my talk, an Iranian teacher came up to me and asked me some questions about how she could judge the happiness of her students, who were young learners. I told her that we could work together over the course of a few months and put together a questionnaire and a series of tools that she could use to do research with her students, and then we'd deliver a joint presentation at the TESOL Arabia Conference.

And that's what we've just done. The presentation went well and there were a few things that we could have done better, but it was her first presentation and her first foray into research of any kind. She's now keen to go forward with more research because I took the time to help her along the way. I think lots of teachers just need a

group or a mentor-type situation to get them going and to let them know that they're on the right track.

Earlier we were talking about dissemination of teacher research. In what other ways can teachers share their research?

TESOL Arabia has a lot of publications that focus on the dissemination of research. We have *Perspectives*, which is TESOL Arabia's official magazine, and we're going to have another journal soon. That's a new project that we're currently working on. I'm personally the editor of the 'Brief Reports' section of *The Journal of AsiaTEFL*. When I took over, I made it clear that I didn't want to just accept the native speakers who send in papers. I wanted to give non-native English-speaking teachers an avenue for dissemination of their research. So far, I've been able to do that. At TESOL Arabia, we also have a very good email list, which includes calls for papers and information about other publication opportunities in the UAE and other parts of the Gulf. You have to look for them, but they're there.

Promoting teacher research

What can teacher associations around the world do to promote teacher research even more broadly?

A more traditional approach might be at the annual conference, which is usually the main event for most teacher associations. Just as there are TeachMeet events where people share their teaching ideas and materials, I'd like to see ResearchMeet events where teachers disseminate their research. They could do so by maybe bringing one-page descriptions of what they've done. Teachers could sit and share research that they've already conducted, or are presently working on, or maybe research that they want to do and which they'd like to get an idea about. Even though for the second year running we've had a research forum as part of our conference, I'm thinking of suggesting to next year's Conference Chair to have a ResearchMeet where teachers can disseminate, in a very informal way, their research results or plans.

I'm a co-author of TESOL International Association's *Research Agenda* [http://www.tesol.org/docs/default-source/pdf/2014_tesol-research-agenda.pdf]. That whole process was such an eye-opener and I think lots of people need to think about their own agenda. When teachers start doing research, they have all these different interests and it's often difficult for them to marry these

interests. I personally feel that research is easier and more useful if teachers decide on one area and they exploit different aspects of that area. A couple of projects down the road, they would have developed some expertise and that's a springboard to other areas.

Christine Coombe is an Assistant Professor in the General Studies Department at Dubai Men's College in the United Arab Emirates. She is a Past President of TESOL Arabia and TESOL International Association. She holds a Ph.D. in Foreign/Second Language Education from Ohio State University. She is the editor and author of numerous publications, including *Assessment Practices* (TESOL Publications, 2003), *A Practical Guide to Assessing English Language Learners* (University of Michigan Press, 2007), *Language Teacher Research in the Middle East* (TESOL Publications, 2007), *Applications of Task-based Learning in TESOL* (TESOL Publications, 2010), *The Cambridge Guide to Second Language Assessment* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), and *The Cambridge Guide to Research in Language Learning and Teaching* (Cambridge University Press, 2016).

Daniel Xerri is a Lecturer in TESOL at the University of Malta, the Joint Co-ordinator of the IATEFL Research SIG, and the Chairperson of the ELT Council within the Ministry for Education and Employment in Malta. Further details about his talks and publications can be found at: www.danielxerri.com

