Teacher Research

What is in it for teachers and how can teacher educators help?

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Introduction

As committee members of IATEFL's Research SIG, enthusiastically involved in supporting and doing teacher research (henceforth referred to as TR), we have found the recent narrative about the apparent little value of teachers engaging with and in research penned by two prominent ELT writers (Maley, 2016; Ur, 2016) concerning. Both of them concede that there may be some value in research. For instance, Maley (2016) states:

> It is sometimes argued that the kind of experience of in-depth inquiry derived from carrying out research projects is of value primarily not so much for the quality of the research it produces but rather for the way it helps teachers develop professionally. I would readily concede that this is sometimes, though not inevitably, the case. (p. 8)

Most of their argumentation, however, suggests that this is often a futile enterprise. For example, Ur (2016) echoes much of Maley's argument when she claims:

> But the problems remain: the sheer amount of research available, the impracticality or irrelevance of much (most?) of it for teachers, the rather academic and somewhat opaque language in which it is often written – and the lack of time, for most teachers, to spend reading. (p. 4)

Both authors seem to be sceptical about the value of research for teachers' professional development.

While it might be true that the kind of educational research conducted by some academics may be distant from the immediate concerns of those at the chalkface, it is erroneous to brand all research as irrelevant for practitioners. We worry that an unfair, wholesale dismissal of research can discourage teachers from drawing on relevant studies to enhance their practices.

We believe that TR constitutes one form of highly relevant research because it is conducted by teachers in their own professional contexts, with the purpose of informing their practices. This is why engaging in researching one's own contexts can be a potentially rewarding avenue for professional development. We are not claiming that all teachers should do TR – this would very much depend on each teacher's aptitude as well as the context and purpose of the professional development activity.

In this article, we seek to create an evidence-driven case for TR and discuss how teacher educators could support practitioners in their TR pursuits. Our argument is organised in three sections, following a reflective framework guided by the following questions: What? So what? Now what? (Rolfe, Freshwater, & Jasper, 2011).

What?

What exactly do we mean by TR? To avoid communicating at cross purposes, we would like to first define 'research' in the context of TR, especially as misconceptions among teachers about this term have already been identified in the literature (Borg, 2013).

The ELT writers cited above seem to conceive of research along predominantly theoretical lines, quoting as its distinguishing features getting to 'the truth' without necessarily offering practical implications (Ur, 2016) and being predominantly carried out in academic environments, often as part of costly programmes (Maley, 2016). Scrivener views research as focusing on "narrow, susceptible-to-measurement 'objective' aspects of classroom life" (in Scrivener et al., 2016). While some research can, indeed, be characterised as such (some natural sciences come to mind with regard to seeking absolute truths, for instance), this is not the context we have in mind when referring to TR. To us, TR encompasses a range of not necessarily positivist approaches, such as: action research, exploratory practice, narrative inquiry, to name but a few. We are instead aligned with Borg's (2013) conceptualisation of TR as "systematic inquiry... conducted by teachers in their own professional contexts... which aims to enhance teachers' understandings of some aspect of their work" (p. 10).

The purpose of TR, then, is continuing professional development (CPD), e.g. by getting at teachers' own, context-dependent and therefore local truths, at little (if any) cost. As such, TR is driven by and embedded in teachers' practices, which makes pursuits like it meaningful and engaging for teachers (because so are their contexts). A basic amount of systematicity is required to distinguish research from speculation and ensure that any ensuing decisions are informed and responsible, not driven exclusively by our intuitions. If disseminated and appropriate, TR findings can be used to inform other contexts, however, this is not TR's primary purpose.

Ur (2016) claims that teaching and researching are two different jobs. This is true, however, there seems to exist an important overlap between the two: a drive to develop a more elaborate understanding of those contexts that intrinsically interest us. Who am I as a professional? How do I (not) support learning? Why is it so? How can I improve? These are just some queries that could initiate a systematic inquiry into our practices. TR affords a conscious opportunity to stop to think, i.e. to withdraw from one's context temporarily in order to see it anew and, in the process, to see oneself anew. It comes, therefore, as little surprise that professional development is viewed as a type of personal development (Edge, 2011).

Moreover, by maintaining a curious, questioning attitude, teachers are more likely to identify any mismatches between their beliefs and practices, which are considered a common occurrence among professionals, teachers included (Pajares, 1992). Teacher educators, in this sense, are called on to create opportunities for practitioners to reflect on such (in)congruencies in order to minimise them and develop more coherent practices. For a practical idea about how to engage teachers in reflecting on (1) a past lesson, (2) the professional development that informed the lesson planning and (3) the specific beliefs underpinning it, see Woodward (1999).

A considerable amount of TR work has been done in recent years, (Bullock and & Smith, 2015; Dikilita , Smith, & Trotman, 2015; Dikilita , Wyatt, Hanks, & Bullock, 2016; Rebolledo, Smith, & Bullock, 2016).

In an informal polling of some teachers about their experiences of conducting research, Farrell (2016) reports on their appreciation of:

- learning about, with and from their learners;

- improving classroom dynamics via collaboration on research with their learners (e.g. by involving learners in various stages of the research project);

- positively influencing other teachers' practices by sharing their own work.

To these, Borg (2013) adds the following, less specific benefits of TR, as identified in his broad review of the literature:

- promoting teacher autonomy (e.g. by boosting teachers' criticality so they depend less on educators and/or 'external' authorities);

- developing teacher empowerment (e.g. by getting involved in processes of social change);

- improving teacher well-being (e.g. reducing feelings of professional inadequacy).

Of course, TR is not without its problems. We acknowledge that there may be many barriers for teachers wishing to engage with/in research. Some publications might be geared to exclusively academic audiences and some research might not be immediately accessible and/or relevant and/or practical for teachers (Maley, 2016). Other problems include teachers' personal (belief-/knowledge-/skill-/motivation-related) or institutional obstacles (e.g. lack of access to relevant research, lack of time for research, school management's scepticism with respect to TR, top-down professional development traditions, etc.) (Borg, 2013). Unsurprisingly, TR "remains a minority activity in the field of language teaching" (Borg, 2013, p. 6).

So what?

If we agree that there is promise in encouraging teachers to engage in TR, then the obstacles outlined above should not be impossible to overcome.

When teachers find existing published research unhelpful for their CPD, TR could be "a viable alternative to dependence on often inappropriate academic insights, enabling teachers to generate their own insights and be producers, not just consumers of knowledge" (Smith, 2015, p. 207). However, while some research may not be relevant to some teachers' interests and/or contexts, a lot of research can be. For instance, a primary school teacher may well be interested in reading about Pinter and Zandian's (2014) use of the 'new sociology of childhood' (James, Jenks, & Prout, 1998), which posits that since children's viewpoints and experiences may be essentially different from adults', children can be insightful collaborators in shaping their courses and/or in their teachers' professional development activities. Accounts of educational innovation may well inspire teachers to consider innovating in their own contexts, along similar (or not) lines.

With regard to the personal and institutional obstacles to TR, it seems that this is an area where teacher educators can usefully step in, highlighting what potential TR holds and offering a suitably contextualised TR format as one of the many available CPD tools. Some ideas to *systematically* engage teachers with/in research include encouraging them to:

- discuss published research in creative ways – e.g. summarising findings by drawing on genres not typically associated with research, e.g. drama, storytelling, music, etc.;

- critically engage with research findings – e.g. by assessing their validity in their own and/or others' teaching contexts;

- involve their learners in various stages of researching their own practices, from identifying research questions to dissemination;

- collaborate with colleagues on gaining understandings of aspects of each other's teaching.

One of the central roles of teacher educators, therefore, would be to create opportunities for discovery(doing)-based learning when it comes to engaging with research – e.g. inviting teachers to produce their own research summaries rather than, as Ur (2016) seems to suggest, being summarised to. Another key role of teacher educators would be to help practitioners engage in research by providing adequate belief-/knowledge-/skill-/motivation-related support – from pointing teachers in suitable directions with regard to reading, via developing research questions and gathering and analysing data, all the way to dissemination.

Now what?

To help move the TR debate in a constructive direction, we suggest drawing on an exploratory practice principle that urges teacher educators to spend sufficient time understanding an issue that puzzles them before attempting to solve it (Allwright & Hanks, 2009), especially as in our TR pursuits we sometimes find that the 'issue' may not need solving as such!

Below are some suggested questions to guide a discussion on an exploratory practice-inspired mentor development session with the purpose of investigating mentors' attitudes, beliefs and practices in relation to research. By 'research' here we mean ELT research. Please note that the focus on problem solution (should a solution be required at all) comes later in the process, as late as in question 10.

> Questions to prompt reflection on using research for CPD on a mentor development session:
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> 1. What is research?
>
> 2. What is the purpose of research?
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> 3. How is research similar and different to teaching?
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> 4. Is there a gap between research and practice?
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> 5. What kind of research do I use in my teacher education sessions? Do I engage my mentees with published research? Do they carry out any research themselves? What is my role when using research in my sessions?
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> 6. Who chooses the topics of the research I use in my teacher education sessions? Why?
>
> 7. How do my mentees feel about research? How do I know that?
>
> 8. Can engaging with/in research support professional learning? How? Why (not)?
>
> 9. What are the perceived obstacles to professional learning when it is centred around research?
>
> 10. What can I change about the ways/formats I use research in? Should I?

It is worrying that some teacher educators are prepared to reject TR as a CPD tool on the basis of little evidence and/or effort to examine its feasibility in specific teaching contexts. Would it not be more sensible to try and tackle the personal and/or institutional obstacles before giving in to them? It would be interesting to see how popular TR could be in some contexts if, for instance, teachers were provided with sufficient CPD time and appropriate support. Some teachers may well be curious to follow what is going on in their field and/or engage in TR themselves.

Instead of creating "a false dichotomy between 'research' and 'teaching'", we believe our time is more usefully spent on looking for "interface issues to benefit both parties" (Ellis in Scrivener et al., 2016), one such interface being TR. The ReSIG initiatives quoted above suggest that there is promise in such efforts, though TR could arguably be made more accessible if more attention were to focus on:

> ways in which research can become part of teaching, on context description as a replacement for literature review, or on alternative ways of sharing, so that TR can be seen as primarily by teachers for teachers (and their students), rather than as something which necessarily has to be subjected to academic judgment. (Smith, 2015, p. 207)

In teacher education, opportunities for teachers to question their own, and others', practices are often central to learning. Otherwise, teachers risk piling one classroom experience upon another, not necessarily being able to establish meaningful and lasting connections between the experiences, (n)or between the experiences and their belief systems. TR is certainly not the only way to introduce a focus on questioning in teacher education; however, it can be a rewarding way of doing so, while supporting teachers in becoming more autonomous, empowered and, ultimately, more fulfilled practitioners.

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