Classroom Research and Classroom Teachers

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Abstract: It is not uncommon to hear complaints from teachers about the lack of practical application in much of the research published in language education. Teachers want more research that is directly linked to the issues they encounter daily in classrooms. While there has been a noticeable shift in the direction of experiential research in second language education, this paper argues that filling the perceived gap between research and practice requires regular classroom teachers to do classroom research. Underlying this argument is the claim that by engaging in classroom research, second language teachers can enhance the quality of their teaching as they reinforce their professional status. The major obstacle to this proposition is the overwhelming reticence of classroom teachers to think of themselves as teacher-researchers. On one hand, teachers want greater valuing of experiential knowledge. At the same time, however, those best situated to elevate the profile of practical knowledge, classroom teachers, claim that they cannot do research. The paper lays out the rationale for teacher-research and explains practical steps teachers can take to research their practice and, thereby, contribute directly to discussions about theory and practice in the research literature.

Key words: classroom research, teacher-researcher, action research, academic publication

Introduction

Foreign language classroom teachers typically choose their work because they enjoy teaching. Many language educators I know simply want to teach and not bother with other obligations. An indication of this attitude is revealed if I suggest to a classroom teacher that she should research her practice and publish her findings. The likely response will be to protest that she cannot do research. This response comes from a misunderstanding about what classroom research is. The aim of this short article is to demystify the process of doing classroom research and how to begin publishing in the language education field.

The Credibility Gap

The classroom is the space where the fun and excitement of learning happen. Most of the teachers in these classrooms do not think of themselves as researchers. This is a misconception, however. Engaging in classroom research can be done by practitioners and indeed it is something that teachers should do. Teachers regularly complain that much of the research published by second language acquisition researchers is not useful to them. That claim is made so often in fact that it is impossible to ignore, or dismiss. This stubborn perception indicates that something is missing in the research that regularly gets published in the field. This missing element has allowed an unfortunate gap to widen between practice in the classroom and theoretical perspectives offered by the published research literature. This begs the question: How can the gap between research and practice be filled?

Typically, research articles and books are written by second language professionals who work in tertiary institutions. These university-based teachers dominate the research literature, but most of the practice is obviously done outside of post-secondary schools. I believe that the missing element in academic publications is classroom research done by regular classroom teachers. Teachers’ research is something that can empower teachers as it contributes significantly to their professional development. More than this, by researching their practice teachers add valuable voices to the professional conversation that tend not to be heard by the
larger community. Classroom teachers are the very community that “expert” researchers often seek to influence, but currents of influence should run both ways if second language research is to be accepted more readily by practitioners. This credibility gap can be bridged by classroom teachers themselves engaging in classroom research.

The fact is that teachers naturally research their teaching to some extent; they simply need to add more rigour to their methodology. In addition, higher levels of professionalism are expected today in second language teaching. More teaching positions now require advanced credentials such as master’s degrees and doctorates, as well as professional activity including publication. I have met many language teachers who feel the need to publish, but lack confidence to move forward.

Classroom Research

As Nunan and Bailey (2009) explain, there are different possible definitions for “classroom research.” Fundamentally, classroom research involves doing research in school settings about teaching and learning. In this article I define classroom research as a process of investigating questions about teaching and learning that is undertaken in a systematic way by teachers who want to better understand their own work. This definition is inspired by action research wherein people research their own work in order to improve a situation. In the foreign language classroom, teachers will conduct research studies to help them improve their teaching practice and the learning of their students.

What process should I follow?
In this short article it is not possible to provide an adequate overview of the wide range of classroom research methods so I limit my focus to action research. Besides expediency, there are several reasons for selecting an action research focus. Most importantly, action research is done by classroom teachers. The teacher researches her own teaching situation (local context) in order to take action, that is, to bring about a desirable change in the classroom. In this way, action research is small-scale because it is used to investigate situated issues (in classrooms). Finally, it provides teachers with an organizational framework to explore teaching issues in a disciplined way. The discipline involves, amongst other elements, the systematic collection of evidence. Action research is an accessible research method for teachers and, most importantly, the rigour of the action research process differentiates it from practices such as reflective teaching.

Action research differs from most reflective teaching practice in two significant ways. First, reflective teaching is often a private, or internal, process that results in teachers making non-observable behavioural changes. Research, on the other hand, needs to be shared or published somehow in order to contribute to the professional discussions of the day. Second, action research is a cycle that involves specific steps performed over a period of time, whereas reflective teaching can sometimes “occur at one point in time” (Nunan & Bailey, 2009, p. 227).

So what exactly are the steps involved in the action research cycle? There are many reference books available to guide teachers through the process of doing classroom research with the action research cycle. Nunan and Bailey (2009) have written one of the most comprehensive of these books:

We define action research as a systematic, iterative process of (1) identifying an issue, problem, or puzzle we wish to investigate in our own context; (2) thinking and planning an appropriate action to address that concern; (3) carrying out the
action; (4) observing the apparent outcomes of the action; (5) reflecting on the outcomes and on other possibilities; and (6) repeating these steps again. (p. 227)

Teachers who wish to explore the possibilities of classroom research and learn more about their own teaching, should go through these action research steps. There is another step – writing a research report for publication and/or presentation. That step is dealt with briefly at the end of this article.

**Starting an Action Research Project**

**Finding a research focus**
All researchers struggle to find a clear research focus. Most researchers begin with some vague area of interest and they think for quite a long time about what in particular interests them about this area. After much careful thought, including a good deal of background reading, a research question (or questions) is formulated.

A good starting point for novices is to look at recent issues of foreign language education journals to see what other people are researching. Also, if you have a program book from a conference you attended recently (such as FLLT 2013), scan the titles for possible ideas. In fact, going to conferences can be an ideal way to spark your imagination and give you motivation to start your own classroom research project.

**Formulating a research question**

Once you have found an interesting research focus, you will need to write at least one research question. Having clear research questions is extremely important because the question(s) gives your research project a solid starting point that you can plan around. Since action research is a cycle of planning, action, observation, and reflection, it is highly likely that your questions will change after you reach the end of one cycle. In fact, subsequent runs through the action research cycle will almost certainly be easier than the first run.

If you have difficulty formulating a concise research question, begin with a general question and investigate recent research (i.e., within the past 5 years) on this topic. Practice active reading by taking notes and posing questions related to your own teaching experience. It may help you most to read action research and/or classroom research studies done by practitioners. Another point to remember is that it is always best to talk with colleagues about your classroom research interests. Find a trusted colleague and discuss your research ideas at length.

Freeman (1998) illustrates the qualities of a “research-able” question. He defines good questions as “open-ended [with] multiple directions and responses” (p. 63). A good research question should aim toward a broad understanding of the issue. Classroom research is done in a specific context, but to contribute to the second language teaching field as a whole results should be examined from a wider perspective.

Classroom inquiry is an ongoing process for teachers and once you enter the planning and action stages, you may find that your real focus emerges. This is the nature of social research. For this reason, it is advisable to go through the action research cycle at least two times during your investigation. Often it takes one cycle for a researcher to find the focus she is really looking for.
**Planning**
Now that you have a satisfactory research question, you must plan the action steps carefully. This involves systematically thinking through each step of the action procedures of your research project. The core of research is gathering data. First, you need to think about the types of data that can help you investigate your research questions. Next, you have to make a concrete plan for collecting the data. Finally, you must decide how to analyse the data. Planning is a crucial step in the action research process so take your time. Think through your plan a number of times and test it by explaining it to colleagues before you take action.

Novice teacher-researchers will more than likely want to consult some of the many sources available on action research, teacher inquiry, and classroom research in order to create their action plan. Nunan and Bailey (2009) break down data collection issues for second language classroom research into three procedural groups. The first group is classroom observation which can be done manually using field notes, or electronically with Internet data or audio-visual recordings. The second group is introspective research. Introspection can be done during a classroom event, immediately after the event, or after some delay. Data gathering techniques for this kind of research include think-aloud protocols, diaries, and journals. Elicitation is the third category of data collection procedures. This type of research is oriented toward obtaining data directly from participants of classroom interaction, as opposed to simply observing them. Elicitation procedures include interviews, tests, role plays, questionnaires, production tasks, and so on. Novice classroom researchers should not rely on one type of data for analysis (e.g., student journals), but should investigate their research question with two or three different perspectives on the same phenomenon (e.g., including questionnaires and/or transcripts of student-student classroom interaction).

**Action**
A comprehensive and systematic plan is essential to guide your research project. As we know, unexpected things happen regularly in classrooms. While no amount of preparation can prevent surprises, having a solid action plan will give you confidence to improvise.

**Observation**
During the action phase, try to observe the events and make mental or actual notes of your thoughts about what takes place. Observation also refers to the initial reading of the data you gather. You will need to categorize and make sense of your data. This stage can take a considerable amount of time to complete.

**Reflection**
After you have analysed your data thoroughly, you need to step back and think about what it all might mean. In this reflective step, you must decide what the outcomes tell you and try to see new or revised issues for further investigation in the next cycle of action research. It is highly advisable to engage in two full cycles when you do an action research project. Return to step one and proceed through the sequence again.

The second time around will almost certainly be easier and likely more productive. After all of your efforts running through the cycle the first time, your research focus will now be much more refined. In addition to this, the data and your analysis will give you a rich insight into the issue that you are puzzling about.

I have one final point about formulating a classroom research topic, focus and action plan. Classroom research needs to be based on current theoretical knowledge and practice as it is found in the research literature. You need to read the current research and situate your research...
project within contemporary knowledge about teaching and learning. Reading the research literature is essential when looking for a focus and selecting data collection methods. It is vital to learn from comparable studies before you finalize your action plan.

**Publishing Your Research**

The next step in the research process is making your classroom research public. When considering this phase, let us return to think about why people do research. They do it because they are curious. People want to know how things work and why things are the way they are. Teachers are always learning about their students and their practice so taking on the dual role of teacher-researcher is a natural transition to make. While it is possible for the action research loop to end at the reflection stage, research must be presented publicly.

Many classroom teachers engage in reflective practice of some type, but fewer take the next step to publish their findings. Writing up findings formally for presentation to colleagues can be somewhat intimidating. This kind of research requires you to expose yourself to colleagues since classroom research is personal – it is inspired by your own practice. This personal nature might lead some teacher-researchers to think that their results are of no particular interest to others. This would be a mistake and a major lost opportunity. Classroom teachers need to take control of research on practice if they feel dissatisfied with the large amount of research published by higher education “experts.” This is a crucial point for the future of language education.

**Conference Presentations**

Who might be interested in the results of your research? Giving this question serious consideration is important because it will shape how you package your research project for public viewing. The way I got started in publication was by sharing my ideas on teaching practice with other teachers in my own school and then in my region. At a couple of schools where I have worked over the years, teachers have organized small seminars or material swaps and every time the comments from participants were how these small in-school events were more valuable than going to international conferences. So start with local presentations by sharing ideas at your current school.

After you present your project to the people who know your context best, you may see some areas in your presentation that need further work. Good public speakers spend hours preparing their materials and practicing their speeches. We expect our students to practice their presentations and for good reason – it makes the presentation better. The logical next step would be to prepare a presentation for a regional, national, or international convention for second language teachers. As you prepare, always keep your audience in mind.

Reading professional publications should be a given for anyone who considers themselves to be a professional. You should find publications that you think help you to understand your practice better and read each issue. Reading as a teacher-researcher is different than reading simply as a classroom teacher. Once you accept the role of classroom researcher, articles written by colleagues will help you to see possibilities for conducting your own research projects. After doing some conference presentations you will probably begin to think about publishing your work in a journal or book.
**Material Reviews**

An excellent way to start professional writing is by submitting reviews. For many novice writers writing reviews of books, Web sites, software and other teaching materials is a comfortable entry threshold into the world of academic publication. Reviews are normally short at about 700 words in length. There are three advantages for novices in writing reviews. First, you become skilled at explaining your point with particular clarity. Second, you gain motivation to continue academic writing after seeing your work published. Finally, reviews tend to follow a template that may make entry into academic publication more attainable for novice writers.

Journals have varied requirements for review submissions. While many journals have an open submission process, others require interested reviewers to contact the reviews editor for materials and/or an invitation. In addition, some journals only publish invited reviews. You need to become familiar with the submission requirements of various journals. Of course, when you read reviews that you consider to be particularly well written, you should pay attention to the moves within the piece. Good writers try to mimic the good writing they have read previously while developing a style of their own.

The first thing to be considered from the point of view of content is the audience for the material. Is the material for parents, administrators, teachers, or students? As you read and consider the content of your review, look for themes that define the work. What are the themes and how are they reflected in the organization and content of the material? What are the main points and what evidence is given in support? How does this material build upon previously published materials? How is this material better or worse than other similar materials? Does the material deliver what it promises to deliver? What sections of writing stand out that you could use as quotations? Is the writing style accessible? Why should people buy or not buy this material?

The organization of your manuscript can be determined both by close reading of reviews in the publication you are submitting to and by communicating with the review editor. Basically, however, reviews consist of descriptive elements and evaluative ones. In most cases, it is best to have about a 40/60 split between these elements.

Many teacher-researchers begin their academic writing careers by submitting reviews and writing for professional newsletters. Learning how to write manuscripts that get accepted for publication simply takes experience and determination. Once you feel ready, you can submit longer manuscripts to academic journals.

**Other Venues**

There are other entry points for gaining experience in academic publishing, of course. Once you get a little experience giving presentations and writing, you should consider volunteering as a manuscript reviewer or proof reader. Journals, particularly smaller and more local journals, are typically short of staff. In addition, conference organizers seek out volunteers to vet presentation proposals. This is an excellent way to see how proposals are written. You will quickly see the difference between well-written proposals and marginal or poorly written ones. Becoming a volunteer gives you a valued insider’s perspective on academic publishing.

I can honestly say that every time I have submitted a manuscript the reviewer comments have helped me to improve my writing. Of course, some reviewers are more skilled at giving direction than others. Do not take the comments of reviewers personally. Instead, learn from them and thereby improve your writing. If you are serious about writing for publication you
need patience, flexibility and a lot of humility. We might agree with Francis Bacon that the best is the enemy of the good, however, the best is also the enemy of the better. There is an airbrushed myth of perfection in today’s society that permeates our lives. In writing, there is no perfection. There is only better. Striving for better is good enough. Striving for better is the best we can do.

Further Reading

I will end this short piece with an annotated reading list. My hope is that it will help interested colleagues find the resources they need to start doing classroom research and publishing.

Sources on why language teachers need to do research

- This article lays out the rationale for TESOL teachers doing research.

  - For a good brief summary about what teachers’ research is and why teachers should do it see the following online article at the Web site *TeachersCount*.

  http://teacherscount.org/topic/topic-ritchie.shtml

  - Werbner made an inspiring and passionate call to second language classroom teachers for doing classroom research in this 2004 article.


  - Another inspiring piece of writing that I strongly recommend foreign language educators interested in classroom research to read is this chapter by Freeman.


Sources on doing classroom research in language education

- A highly recommended book for novice second language classroom researchers. This book has an excellent appendix with detailed ideas on 12 different data collection techniques. See page 198 for the loop writing technique for focusing research topics.


  - Probably the best guide for novice foreign language teachers who are interested in beginning classroom research. A thorough and highly practical overview of classroom research.


  - An earlier book by Bailey and Nunan overflowing with classroom research narratives.

- For more recent and more extensive examples of teacher research around the world consult this series consisting of six volumes published by the TESOL International Association.


- Sandra McKay wrote a compact yet thorough overview of issues in classroom research.


- This is a more recent short volume focused on providing practical advice about action research.


- This book details an excellent method for working with colleagues on professional development. The focusing circles activity on pp. 100-103 can help you clarify your research topic.


- Here is a Web site of resources for teachers who want to begin doing classroom research.

http://gse.gmu.edu/research/tr/

5.3 Sources on publishing practitioner research

- Here is a scholarly, but personal take on the bumpy road of academic publication written by authors of note who reveal that they have and still do struggle when writing for publication.


- For a thorough summary of the process of writing a journal article see Hargittai’s 2011 piece in Inside Higher Ed. This article is part of a series of advice columns for current Ph.D. candidates.

http://www.insidehighered.com/advice/ph_do/advice_column_on_the_journal_submission_process

- In the post From Review to Publication, Hargittai describes the review process in detail and gives advice on how to read and react to reviewer comments.
For teacher research in general the online journal *Networks* is worth investigating. Articles range from just 300 up to 3,500 words.

http://journals.library.wisc.edu/index.php/networks