Action research in ELT: Growth, diversity and potential

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Two decades or so ago, readers in the field of ELT searching for accounts of action research written by teachers would have been hard pressed to discover any such body of work. Although the concept of teacher action research was becoming relatively well known in education more generally (e.g., Elliott, 1991; Goswami & Stillman, 1987; Hopkins, 1985), the ELT literature in the late 1980s and early 1990s mostly reflected uncertainty, or even scepticism, that research by teachers was a profitable form of activity (e.g., Brumfit & Mitchell, 1989; Jarvis, 1981), of which there are still echoes more recently (Dörnyei, 2007). Since this early rather shaky start, various forms of language teacher research have become a prominent theme in teacher education and recently have burgeoned dramatically internationally. It is therefore particularly exciting to see this Special Issue of the *University of Sydney Papers in TESOL* adding to the growing literature and making a further contribution from a national context where language teacher action research has always tended to be actively supported both by teacher and academic researchers.

Even in the early 1990s, there were encouraging signs that an interest in the teacher-as-researcher was beginning to permeate the field of English language teaching. The publication of Nunan's book, *Understanding language classrooms* (1989) made a significant contribution by speaking directly to language teachers about how they "might investigate their own classrooms" (p.xi). Nunan's aim

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was to "provide a serious introduction" (p.xi) to classroom investigation, thus signalling that research by teachers had the potential to offer worthwhile insights into the realities of teaching for the ELT field. During the 1990s, other volumes aimed at assisting practitioners who, in Nunan's words, did "not have specialist training in research methods" (p.xi), also began to trickle into the literature to offer descriptions of teacher action research and practical advice on how to do it (Allwright & Bailey, 1991; Burns, 1999; Freeman, 1998; Wallace, 1998). These 'how-to' publications began to be accompanied in the 1990s and early 2000s by a small, but gradually increasing number of publications authored by teachers themselves, illustrating research they had carried out in their classrooms (e.g., Edge, 2001; Edge & Richards, 1993; Hadley, 2003; Tinker Sachs, 2002). Among these, research by Australian language teachers has always made a prominent contribution, through a substantial number of large-scale programs, such as the Languages Inservice Program for Teachers (LIPT) (Burton, 1992), the AMEP Action Research Projects (Burns, 1999) and the Action Research in ELICOS Program (Burns & Khalifa, 2017). The last two have resulted in a large number of teacher researcher accounts published through the *Teachers' Voices* Series (e.g., www.ameprc.mq.edu.au/docs/research_reports/teachers_voices/teachers_voices_7.pdf) and through the journal *Research Notes* (www.cambridgeenglish.org/research-notes/).

As **Simon Borg** describes in the final paper in this issue, research conducted by teachers in their own educational contexts has recently become much more firmly established, with by now a substantial number of publications by teachers and with several large scale programs being initiated around the world with support from major organisations, such as the International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language (IATEFL), Cambridge English Language Assessment, The British Council, and Cambridge University Press. While, in 2009, it was still a surprise to me to read the series editors' assertion in Denos *et al.* that action research had "come of age in second language scholarship" (p.ix), this sentiment can now be said to be a much stronger reflection of reality, as the papers in this Special Issue illustrate.

TEACHER CONTRIBUTIONS TO THIS SPECIAL ISSUE

What is striking about the contributions to this volume is the way that they illuminate the diversity and flexibility of teacher action research and how it can be put into practice for a range of teaching locations, types of programs, and student profiles. Readers of this issue will gain insights into teacher research on peer assessment in an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) classroom in New Zealand, task-based one-on-one instruction for business students in Poland, independent learning for General English students in a Learning Centre in Australia, and the use of Web 2.0 tools for academic reading and writing development in an Australian institution providing pathways into university study. They will also find further analyses of the advances that have been made in teacher engagement in research, and the benefits these advances have offered teachers, as well as advice on what factors facilitate and support successful teacher research.

Jane Hislop and Elke Stracke focus on the beliefs of first year EAP students studying in a New Zealand university context about peer review (PR) in a process writing class. As they point out, PR may be an approach to formative assessment which is unfamiliar or even alien to some students, and they may be resistant to using it. The study explores these issues by analysing the responses to PR of two groups of students. While the first group experienced PR and commented on their experiences, the second group's comments were constructed after they had also received training on giving PR responses. The paper provides fascinating insights into the challenges, both linguistic and emotional, that students encounter in undertaking PR, but also how the process of doing so creates rich opportunities for cognitive and social development in EAP. The study is also unusual in that it highlights both the student assessor and the student writer perspective, thus providing a rounded picture of their PR experiences. It makes a valuable contribution to studies on PR by focusing explicitly on the beliefs and experiences of student writers and reviewers and illuminates their insightfulness about the writing process.

In his study, **Rob Cooper** confronts an important and long-standing challenge in the field of education: the extent of

transferability of major theoretical ideas to classroom practice. In his case, he wanted to investigate whether and how he could implement theoretical ideas about task-based language teaching, which he had studied extensively in a Masters course on methodology. Moreover, his classroom situation was unusual and not frequently the subject of classroom research, as he was teaching a 1:1 course to Polish business students, which created particular kinds of interactional conditions and constraints. He provides an interesting in-depth account of the teaching activities and interactional strategies he adopted with two students who were at different levels of proficiency. His goal was to focus primarily on meaning while also providing opportunities for a focus on form relevant to the interactional tasks. The research highlights the sensitivity teachers must have in judging the level of intervention they should take in 1:1 interaction. It also illuminates the role that emotional, interpersonal and social factors play in actual classroom practice, and therefore potentially in the implementation of any one methodological approach. His research led him to see greater value in adopting a more explicit approach than he had previously taken to metalinguistic intervention in his students' learning.

Gemma O'Donoghue worked with students in a General English program set up within the Learning Centre of an Australian university pathway provider. The aspiration of most of the students in the program, which was attended on a voluntary basis, was to go on to study in academic programs; thus the development of independent learning skills was important. The researcher's interest was in investigating what concrete, practical forms of support would best support her students to achieve greater independence, particularly in an environment of increased access to online and technological resources. A further interest was in the role played in independent learning of enhanced learner confidence, both in terms of language development and ability to learn. Collecting both quantitative (survey), and qualitative (peer observation, discussion, focus group interviews, research journal, photographs) data, she conducted two cycles of action research. This process gave rise to a number of insights, which included the importance of local contextualisation of the concept of independent learning, the need for clear procedures

for students to follow, the value of teacher input in pointing students towards appropriate resources, and the importance of deliberate practice and goal setting in developing learner confidence. The research also clarified some potential, and not necessarily well recognised, obstacles to independent learning, such as student fatigue, or reluctance to participate in formalised group instruction about ways to learn independently.

Over the last two decades technology has had a profound impact on language teaching and yet, relatively little is still known about how teachers actually use it in daily practice. **Finlay McCall's** paper on the use of Web 2.0 tools to promote academic reading and writing offers valuable practical insights into how a teacher might harness the potential of social media for the development of greater complexity in formal academic reading and writing. The research was conducted with students enrolled in an EAP program at an Australian institution that provided pathways into university study. Adopting a task-based approach, over three cycles of action research the teacher introduced students to a range of microblogging activities that created extensive opportunities for online interaction. The teacher researcher concluded that with sufficient scaffolding of tasks, social media can contribute effectively to increasing students' academic reading and writing ability and produce high levels of engagement, thus contributing to positive affect in relation to motivation and confidence.

CONCLUSION

Research conducted by teachers seems set at this point in time to have a much greater impact than in the past on future advances in ELT, both for its potential to transform the practices and understandings of teacher practitioners and to inform theories of language teaching more generally (Larsen-Freeman, 1990), where the knowledge and experiences of teachers as "an important agent in the process" (p.266) are taken into consideration. Teacher accounts, driven by a systematic process of investigation, such as that offered by action research, also have the potential to bridge the gap between theory and practice that has tended to dichotomise the field. It is through research studies such as those illustrated in this issue that

clearer insights into the lived experiences of teachers and students, and into the kinds of transformations in practice and understanding that can be made, will emerge and help the field to flourish.

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