
Twelve tips for doing teacher research¹

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ABSTRACT

Teacher research has been advocated in the field of ELT for many years, but more recently it has received increased practical attention via various international initiatives and also been the focus of more critical discussion in the literature. This recent activity has developed our understandings of what teacher research means in practice, of its real benefits to teachers, and of the challenges that teachers face when they take on the role of teacher researchers. In this paper, I will first outline the background to teacher research, highlight different forms it can take and discuss some of its benefits along with criticisms that have been levelled against it. Then, via a task for readers, I will outline twelve strategies teachers can use to do better quality teacher research. These strategies draw on my own experience of supporting teacher research over many years, as well as on evidence of successful teacher research programmes reported in the literature.

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING TODAY

Teacher research is a strategy for professional learning and I would like to begin by locating it within contemporary thinking about how teachers learn. It is possible to extract from a series of reviews in recent years some characteristics of professional development that ‘works’ i.e., which impacts positively on what teachers know and do

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and which also improves the quality of students' learning experiences (see, for example, Borko, Jacobs, & Koellner, 2010; Broad, 2006; Gulamhussein, 2013; Martin, Kragler, Quatroche, & Bauserman, 2014; Timperley, Wilson, Barrar, & Fung, 2008; Wei, Darling-Hammond, Andree, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009). One distinction commonly made in these analyses is that between a training model of professional development and a practice-based model. As discussed in Borg (2015b) and Lieberman and Miller (2014) among others, a training model of professional development assumes that teacher competence is improved through knowledge acquired via external input (for example, in the form of a lecture, workshop or seminar) which is then applied by teachers in the classroom. This model of professional learning has a number of defining characteristics:

- the content (i.e., what teachers are expected to learn) is externally defined (i.e., not determined by teachers themselves);
- input is the primary mode of teacher learning;
- the training tends to be short-term (or intermittently extended over time);
- teacher development is seen to be a process that occurs outside the context of professional practice (e.g., in a training room);
- the expertise teachers need to develop resides in external experts (trainers);
- effective teaching is seen to be a process of applying theory to practice.

The alternative to a training model of professional development has been described using various terms. For example, Borg (2015b) refers to development-constructivist models, Lieberman and Miller (2014) talk about a growth-in-practice model and Raphael *et al.* (2014) talk more generally about sociocultural approaches to professional development. In contrast to the training model, schools and classrooms are recognised here as powerful sites for teacher growth. Teachers thus learn *through* professional practice: the term job-embedded professional learning is often used in this respect, see, for example, Zepeda (2015); agency, i.e., teacher involvement in key

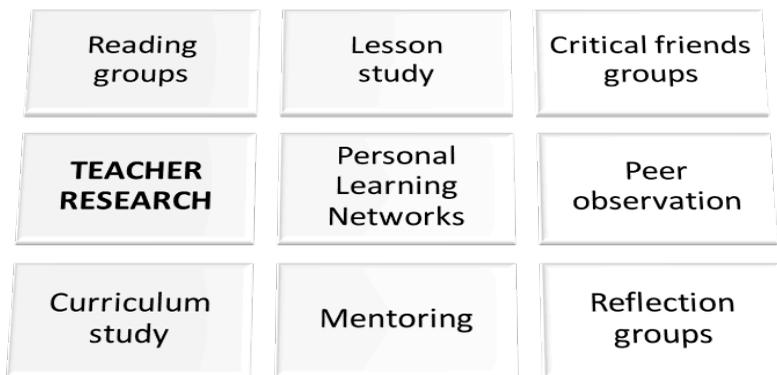
decisions about their professional development, is also central while rather than input, inquiry and reflection are seen as the key professional learning processes. Collaboration is another key characteristic of professional learning here; Hargreaves (2014, p.xvii) notes, for example, that “collaborative professional learning in professional communities is not the only valuable form of professional development, but it is, in general, the most effective one”. And, in contrast to the one-shot or intermittent opportunities for professional learning that workshops provide, the practice-oriented model provides substantial and continuous opportunities for teachers to learn. In practice, this model of professional learning can be realised through a wide range of strategies (see Figure 1), of which teacher research is one. Readers will be familiar with some of these; in peer observation, for example, teachers support one another through ‘friendly’ lesson observations coupled with constructive, supportive discussions of them (see, for example, Cosh, 1999) while in reading groups (Fenton-Smith & Stillwell, 2011) teachers meet regularly to discuss a text (e.g., a professional article or research paper) which is of relevance to their work. Other strategies in Figure 1 may be less familiar, for example ‘curriculum study’ involves teachers in working together to deepen their knowledge of the subject matter they teach (see Loucks-Horsley, Stiles, Mundry, Love, & Hewson, 2010) and I would encourage readers who want to know more about specific items in the diagram to follow these up as a professional development task. In the rest of this paper I will focus specifically on teacher research.

TEACHER RESEARCH

Teacher research has been present in the ELT literature for many years (e.g., Nunan, 1989). Various briefer and more elaborate definitions of teacher research are available (see Borg, 2013) but in essence it is an activity which:

- teachers do;
- through systematic inquiry;
- into their own professional practices;
- in order to enhance teaching and learning.

FIGURE 1
Contemporary approaches to professional learning



Let us consider each of these elements in turn. Firstly, it is activity that *teachers* carry out. It is not something that is done *to* teachers, nor is it conventional research in which teachers provide the data or complete tasks on someone else's behalf. Secondly, teacher research involves systematic inquiry, in the same general sense that is true for all kinds of research. Thus, while teacher research differs from conventional academic research in many ways, it does have in common the fact that it involves careful planning, thoughtful execution and the sharing of results. Third, the focus of teacher research is teachers' own professional activity, i.e., through teacher research teachers study their own teaching and learning context; a teacher who conducts research for an MA degree, then, by distributing questionnaires to teachers in other schools, is *not* doing teacher research as it is being defined here. Finally, the purpose of teacher research is to improve the quality of teaching and learning. Of course, improvement assumes informed decision-making which stems from the deeper understanding that teacher research generates and in this sense, *understanding* is also a key goal of teacher research, though ultimately this understanding needs to be put to concrete use for the benefit of students (see, for example,

Timperley, 2011 for a discussion of the links between professional learning and student outcomes).

Teacher research comes in different ‘flavours’: action research (Burns, 2010), exploratory practice (Hanks, 2017), self-study (Attard, 2017) and, particularly in its more structured varieties, reflective practice (Sellars, 2017). ‘Exploratory action research’ has been recently introduced as yet another ‘flavour’ (Rebolledo, Smith, & Bullock, 2016). However, irrespective of differences in emphasis, each perspective shares a commitment to developing pedagogical understanding through systematic inquiry, where ‘systematic’ means principled; it does not rule out an emergent or flexible approach to inquiry nor does it imply that all aspects of teacher research must be rigidly predefined. The process of doing teacher research has been represented diagrammatically in many ways, as a search for images of ‘action research’ online will illustrate, though in essence these can be reduced to a simple process of asking a question, collecting information to address it, evaluating the information that is collected, and taking what is learned from this analysis into subsequent practice.

The action research project of one teacher I worked with recently illustrates this process (Taylor, 2016). Andy worked in a language school that was investing heavily in technology, and in particular in an online platform through which increasing amounts of learning activities would be delivered. This included homework, with a view to introducing a shift within the organisation from traditional pencil and paper homework to online exercises. The assumption being made was that this would be welcomed by learners, but Andy was not sure and decided to investigate this question with his class. Over a number of weeks, he gave his students both traditional and online homework and collected information in the form of spoken and written feedback on how they felt about it and about the factors that affected their views. He evaluated the collected information to conclude that, contrary to institutional expectations, there was no clear preference for online homework; rather, by the end of the study he found “a more marked preference for paper-based homework” (p.54). A key learning point for Andy was that “I cannot make assumptions that learners will

automatically find E Learning more appealing than paper-based tasks” (p.55). As a result of the study, he also became aware of the value of learning more about his students’ preferences for homework (the task seemed to matter more than the medium), an awareness he would be able to take forward in his work.

An analysis of Andy’s project illustrates how teacher research reflects several of the characteristics of effective professional learning highlighted earlier. His work was teacher-driven and owned, it unfolded over time, and it involved systematic inquiry and reflection. The investigation emerged from a practical concern in his own teaching context, was integrated into his routine classroom practice, and fed back into it, shaping his subsequent understandings of his learners and his practices when making decisions about setting homework.

Benefits and criticisms of teacher research

The benefits of teacher research have been extensively documented (see, for example, Halsall, 1998; Lankshear & Knobel, 2004; Mills, 2014; Olson, 1990; Wyatt & Dikilitaş, 2016) and the process has been found to impact positively on teachers in many ways, such as improved confidence, autonomy, understanding of self, knowledge of learners, motivation and criticality. The value of action research, in particular, is also discussed widely online; for example, in a short video, Richard Sagor, author of ‘The Action Research Guidebook’ argues that action research “makes teaching far more rewarding and meaningful for teachers involved ... while it’s making schooling more effective for students” (Corwin Press, 2012).

However, despite these many documented benefits, it is important to avoid approaching and promoting teacher research naively; it does present many practical challenges, which I return to later, and has also been the subject of some criticism. For example, some time ago, Dörnyei (2007) wrote of action research in language teaching that “there is still too little of it ... I am still to meet a teacher who has been voluntarily involved in an action research project” (p.191). I would hope that in the intervening ten years he has met such teachers, for they clearly do exist. The increased international profile of teacher

research in our field is perhaps best demonstrated by the number of schemes, supported by educational organisations, that now exist to enable systematic inquiry by teachers in their own classrooms. Cambridge English has been supporting an action research scheme in Australia (www.englishaustralia.com.au/action-research-program) and the UK (www.englishuk.com/action-research) for several years now; Cambridge University Press has also had its own Teacher Research Programme (languageresearch.cambridge.org/trp), while the British Council is supporting schemes for teacher research in India (tinyurl.com/h8d7ms8) and Chile (tinyurl.com/y7aalwfx). The criticism, then, that there is little evidence of teacher research in the field of language teaching is easily countered.

Another criticism of teacher research that was voiced recently comes from John Hattie, who is globally known for his meta analyses of research on the impact of different instructional strategies (e.g., Hattie, 2009). In comments to the Times Education Supplement, Hattie was recently quoted as saying that “Researching is a particular skill ... Some of us took years to gain that skill. Asking teachers to be researchers? They are not” (Stewart, 2015). This criticism seems to be based on a misconception of what teacher research is. If teachers were seeking to be academic researchers in the sense that Hattie himself is, then his position would be justified. But this is not the point of teacher research, which has primarily practical and local concerns. This does not mean that rigour is unimportant (more on this below), but it does mean that the criteria against which teacher research should be assessed cannot be entirely the same as those which are applied to academic work. For example, whereas in the latter ‘findings’ are generally the primary outcome, in teacher research much value is also attached to the process. In fact, I have argued that a key benefit of teacher research lies “not in generating clear-cut results, but in providing the kinds of professional reinvigoration and attitudinal realignment that will stay with teachers long after the formal conclusion of any particular ... scheme” (Borg, 2016, p.4). In reflecting on their experiences of teacher research, teachers, also, often place more emphasis on the transformative nature of the process than on the specific results that their projects generated. For

example, a teacher researcher from Pakistan noted in their feedback form at the end of a teacher research scheme that “we have been teaching the same way we taught ten years ago but now we have an urge to experiment with new ideas in our teaching”. Another from the UK summed up their experience (again in post-course feedback) by saying in a post-course interview that the experience of classroom inquiry is “kind of lodged in my life now as something that informs what I do”. Australia has for many years also been a very active site for action research and here, too, much evidence is available of the benefits that teachers accrue from the process; for example, Campbell and Thorpe (2017) wrote that “we found engaging in this AR program a stimulating and educative experience. It has informed our teaching and provided us, as well as our colleagues, with valuable tools that can be implemented in the classroom” (p.16). I am not suggesting that teacher research is an unproblematic activity; dismissing it for its lack of academic rigour, though, is misguided as its benefits extend beyond a narrow focus on results, and can lead to substantial long-term changes in how teachers perceive themselves, their teaching and their students.

Despite my defence of teacher research, though, I would like to argue that it is a professional learning strategy that needs to be approached realistically. And although it is often presented as an approach that *any* teacher can benefit from, in the context of ELT worldwide I do not think such claims are warranted. I can think of at least five categories of ELT practitioner for whom teacher research would not be a suitable option (see Borg, 2017 for further thoughts on this issue):

1. Teachers whose own proficiency in English is low. In many contexts worldwide, teachers of English, particularly but not only in primary contexts, have A1 or A2 competence in English, as measured on the Common European Framework of Reference. In such contexts, teachers’ primary professional development need is likely to be improving their English, not doing teacher research.
2. Teachers whose pedagogical skills are very basic. Again, particularly in primary schools, there are many contexts where teachers of English have not received sufficient pedagogical

training prior to becoming classroom practitioners. Their priorities are likely to be to develop those skills, for example, related to questioning, classroom management, and giving feedback, and it would not be appropriate or effective given these basic instructional priorities to push teacher research as the strategy that these teachers need.

3. Teachers for whom the notion of self-directed and/or classroom-based professional learning is novel. I have worked with teachers who have no experience of professional development other than attending workshops or seminars organised by their employer. For such teachers, the gap between their experience of professional learning and teacher research is so substantial that the latter is unlikely to work; rather, teachers first need experience of more accessible options for professional learning such as reading groups, peer observation or reflective teacher meetings.
4. Many language teachers also work in conditions which are not at all conducive to teacher research (see Borg, 2006 for a discussion of such conditions); for example, in places where teachers have very high workloads with no institutional support for professional development or where economic or civil conditions are unstable, then teacher research is unlikely to be productive.
5. Finally, teachers do exist who have no interest in professional learning. Even if these teachers might be persuaded to take part in some form of professional development, they are highly unlikely to commit to teacher research in the manner that is necessary for it to be productive.

Several of the points I have made here about the suitability of teacher research for different types of teachers centre around the fact that professional learning activities can be placed on a continuum in terms of how 'advanced' they are. Teacher research is a more advanced option. Let me use an analogy from the world of food to explain what I mean here. My own cooking skills are very basic; if you wanted to help me develop my competence in this domain, you might start by teaching me to make an omelette, not a three-tier wedding cake. During the talk this paper is based on, I asked the audience if any of them knew how to 'anti-griddle their vinaigrette' (only one did

– he explained his knowledge of such matters by saying ‘I am Belgian’), and then we watched a short video² where a chef demonstrated what this actually entailed. It is an advanced food preparation technique that beginners like myself would not be able to handle. The point of this culinary diversion is that, as with cooking, some professional learning activities are easier to grasp and implement than others; teacher research is a more advanced strategy which will, therefore, not be the appropriate option for all teachers.

In summary, these are my key points about teacher research:

- Teacher research is a theoretically sound approach to professional learning – it encapsulates many of the characteristics of professional development that ‘works’;
- Teacher research, in its various forms, is an established activity internationally for language teachers;
- Numerous benefits of teacher research have been extensively documented;
- Various criticisms have been levelled at it too, though at times these are unwarranted;
- Nonetheless, it is important to approach teacher research realistically given the challenges it can create;
- While the many benefits of teacher research have been well-documented, it is but one of many options available to teachers and not always the best one for certain types of teachers.

TWELVE TIPS FOR DOING TEACHER RESEARCH

Now that I have discussed some background issues relevant to teacher research, I will move on to discuss in more practical terms ways in which teachers can engage productively in this professional learning activity. At this point I would like to refer you to the box below and to invite you to complete the task before reading on.

² See www.youtube.com/watch?v=yYz1mz84HNw (about 2 minutes in)

12 Tips for Doing Teacher Research

Here are 18 'tips' for doing teacher research – but I'd only recommend 12 of them. Which 12 would you pick? If that's too easy, can you sort the 12 statements into four groups, each having three related items?

1. Integrate your research into normally occurring teaching and learning activities.
2. Complete your teacher research as quickly as possible.
3. Examine an issue that is of interest to your colleagues and school generally.
4. Make the project as complex as possible.
5. Make 'small-scale but high quality' your motto.
6. Look for ways to make teacher research a collaborative activity.
7. Find a 'critical friend' who can help you think things through.
8. Remember that teacher research *will* make additional demands on your time.
9. Take a course in statistics before you start your teacher research project.
10. Make sure you are able to prove something – otherwise the project is a waste of time.
11. Focus on a practical issue which is of immediate relevance to your work.
12. Ensure that your plans are feasible given the resources available.
13. Look for opportunities to talk to colleagues about the work you are doing.
14. Abandon the project as soon as it becomes clear that it will not provide the results you were hoping for.
15. Don't try to become a researcher, but do research to help you become a better teacher.
16. Become familiar with basic issues in collecting and analysing research data.
17. Ask your principal or director for a reduction in your workload so that you can do your project.
18. Do some background reading related to the topic.

Quality

Given the points I have already made, identifying the twelve recommended tips should be straightforward, though some variations may be possible in how these are grouped and labelled. In my analysis, Statements 5, 16 and 18 all relate to ways of enhancing the quality of teacher research and a heading such as 'quality' or 'rigour' would thus be suitable for this group. It is important to emphasise the need for rigour in teacher research; it is not 'amateurish' research where anything goes and, as I have argued elsewhere, "a basic level of (not necessarily 'scientific') rigour must apply to the collection and analysis of data if teacher research is to generate findings we can have confidence in" (Borg, 2013, p.20). Statement 5 encapsulates the importance of quality whilst reminding us that teacher research, in order to remain feasible, is more likely to be sustainable when it is small-scale. Statement 16 notes the need for teachers to develop some familiarity with basic issues in data collection and analysis if they are to do teacher research. This does not mean they must attend a research methods course or spend months studying research methods textbooks. But it does mean that teachers should be able to collect and analyse information in a way that leads to valid conclusions. For example, many teachers I have worked with design simple questionnaires for their projects, but they typically need to develop their understandings of basic issues in questionnaire design (Gillham, 2008; Munn & Drever, 2004 are relevant accessible sources); interviewing and class discussions are other strategies that are common in teacher research and, again, teachers often need guidance on what to do with the data once they have been collected (Drever, 2003 is another accessible source of guidance here). It is also important to help teachers go beyond the more conventional ways of collecting data, i.e., questionnaires and interviews, and think more creatively about the strategies they can use in their work; for example, questionnaires for students might be designed using graphics rather than just text (see Hopkins, 2008 for an example), while visual methods of collecting data such as video, photos and drawings also have interesting potential (see, for example, Kalaja, Dufva, & Alanen, 2013).

The third statement in the rigour category encourages teachers to do background reading related to their topic. Again, this needs to be interpreted pragmatically and there is no suggestion here that reading should dominate a teacher research project or that teachers should be aiming to write a comprehensive literature review. Rather, the modest suggestion here is that teachers can benefit from identifying a handful of sources that are relevant to the topic they want to study; these readings can provide some direction in terms of what is already known about the topic as well as in terms of how it might be studied. How much prior material is available will depend on the 'flavour' of teacher research being done and what the focus of the teacher research is; a popular topic among teachers I have worked with has been corrective feedback, especially on written work, and this is a topic for which extensive literature does exist (e.g., Hyland & Hyland, 2006); other topics, such as homework (which I discussed earlier), are characterised by a smaller body of literature. The overall, point, though, is that even a small amount of prior reading can be beneficial. Of course, questions arise here about teachers' accessibility to the literature and this is not an issue that can be waved away, as the norm will be that teachers (apart perhaps from those working in universities) do not have access to journals and other sources of relevant information. My response to this issue has been to encourage teachers to identify some relevant reading but then to facilitate access to this reading for them as required (i.e., teachers send me the details, I access the resource and share it with them). I also refer teachers to free online sources of reading material³.

Feasibility

The second group of tips consists of Statements 1, 8 and 12 and a heading for these could be 'Feasibility'. I referred earlier to the fact that, to be productive, teacher research must be supported by conducive conditions. One condition is that teacher research should not constitute an unmanageable additional burden on teachers' time.

³ See simon-borg.co.uk/free-sources-of-language-teaching-research/ and resig.weebly.com/uploads/8/1/4/0/8140071/resig_efl_research_reports_free_online_7jan2013.pdf.

Most teachers who engage in teacher research do so without any remission from their normal teaching duties (which is why I do not include Statement 17 among my recommendations); it is essential, then, that teachers' inquiries be integrated as much as possible into their existing classroom practices (Statement 1). Teacher research will always involve some additional work for teachers (Statement 8), but the goal should be to minimise this as much as possible and mapping a project onto what teachers normally do is a sensible way of achieving this. For example, one teacher I am working with at present is investigating how teenagers respond to classroom activities that involve physical movement; the study does not disrupt her normal routines; rather, she follows the curriculum in the way she normally would and periodically asks the students to do an activity that involves physical movement; the activities are linked to the lesson's learning objectives and can therefore be integrated smoothly into normal class teaching. Integration of this kind minimises the disruption and additional work that teacher research can create; it also narrows the gap between 'teaching' and 'research'.

Statement 12 also relates very directly to feasibility; teachers must consider the resources available to them to ensure that their plans are realistic. Time is the most obvious resource, but others are also important. For example, it can be very difficult for teachers to plan and implement a project without support, both from their institution and from a mentor; most of the international teacher research schemes I mentioned earlier (see also Borg, 2015a; Smith, Connelly, & Rebolledo, 2014) recognise the importance of the latter and one feature they share is the presence of a mentor who is able to support teachers. Mentoring support can take various forms: for example, a sounding board for discussions of teachers' preliminary ideas for teacher research; advice on reading material teachers might find helpful; input on specific ways of collecting and analysing data; comments on any research tools teachers design; feedback on drafts of presentations or written reports teachers produce at the end of their project. For further discussions of facilitating teacher research, see Dikilitaş and Mumford (2016), Groundwater-Smith (2012) and Yuan and Lee (2015). If a prior analysis of the prevailing conditions,

including the resources available, (see Borg, 2013 for a checklist that can be used for such an audit) suggests that these are not conducive to teacher research, it may be more productive to consider an alternative professional learning strategy (e.g., from those listed earlier in Figure 1).

Relevance

My third group of tips can be grouped under the heading of 'Relevance' and includes Statements 3, 11 and 15. The first two emphasise the need for the focus of teacher research to be of immediate practical relevance to the teacher, as well as of some interest to their colleagues and school more generally. While the first of these points may seem obvious, the second is often overlooked and can lead to a very individualist conception of teacher research and, often, to a rather isolating experience for the teacher whose inquiry is not seen to have any broader relevance within an institution. Teachers, though, are more likely to be supported by colleagues and their institution when their work is seen to have such broader relevance. And this suggests that there is value at the planning stage in a teacher research project for teachers to consult with colleagues and institutions more generally to increase the likelihood that a topic of general interest will be examined. Contemporary perspectives on professional learning (e.g., Darling-Hammond & Lieberman, 2012) increasingly argue for the need to see it as a collective enterprise rather than an individual activity and recent evidence of how such thinking can be applied on a large scale comes from the Teacher Learning and Leadership Program project in Canada (Lieberman, Campbell, & Yashkina, 2017). Much has also been written about the way that teacher research can support school development (e.g., Carter & Halsall, 1998) and, overall, I would argue that teacher research can be more productive when it is seen in collective rather than individual terms i.e., of wider value to the organisation, not only of interest to the teacher researcher.

The third item in the 'Relevance' category is more obviously about teacher identity, and this can be conceived of as a kind of personal relevance (for discussions of teacher identity with specific reference

to teacher research see Borg, 2017; Burns, 2017). The purpose of teacher research as I have defined it here is to help teachers become better at what they do; it may broaden their existing teacher identity so that it incorporates more than ‘just’ teaching, but the overall outcome should be a strengthening of teachers’ professional identity rather than the instability that can arise when teachers feel that their primary role is being challenged. In other words, teacher research should give teachers a sense of extended professionalism (Stenhouse, 1975). Many teachers’ first response to teacher research is ambivalent or even negative because doing research (often defined in academic terms) is at odds with the way in which they conceptualise their role (i.e., teaching). This distinction between extending and destabilizing a teacher’s professional identity merits attention when teacher research is being promoted; the emphasis must remain on helping teachers appreciate how teacher research is a means to the end of enhanced professional competence: it is a professional development strategy that enables them to become better teachers.

Working with others

My last group of tips, Statements 6, 7 and 13, share a concern for the social dimensions of teacher learning research. The value attached today to collaborative professional learning is something I noted earlier and this applies to teacher research too (this is illustrated very well in Burns, 1999). Teachers in and across schools can work together on teacher research that examines issues of shared interest and collective enterprise of that kind allows the sharing of workloads, achievements and challenges; responsibility to a group can also have a powerful stimulating effect on teachers’ sustained engagement in teacher research. It would, of course, be naïve to assume that collaborative teacher research is all positive; it can create additional demands (e.g., regular communication and sharing of information) that teachers working alone are free of; for example, in one action research project I supported (Flynn & Newby, 2016), two teachers initially worked rather independently and found that the lack of consistency in their approach to collecting data from their own learners limited the value of this information. But overall, there is

much to be said for the added value that team-work can bring to teacher research.

Another form of collaboration is noted in Statement 7, which refers to the value to teachers of having a critical friend to talk to during the study. When teacher research takes place in teams this is perhaps less necessary, but when teachers work alone (as is often the case) they will find it valuable to have a trusted but critical colleague who they can talk to about their work and who is able to provide appropriate feedback when needed. Perhaps, for example, a teacher wants to check whether their interpretation of some of their data makes sense or whether alternative explanations might be feasible; or they might want to assess the clarity of a questionnaire they have designed for their students by asking this colleague to read it first. Even when a mentor is available, a critical friend on the ground will mean teachers have access to a more immediate source of support from someone who understands their context well.

Finally, Statement 13 encourages teachers to talk to colleagues about their work. This advice needs to be qualified though, as it does not mean that teachers should talk about their project all the time and to whoever they manage to corner – this may lead to the teacher researcher becoming unpopular and isolated. The idea is to make effective use of appropriate opportunities to share one's work with colleagues at different stages of a project and to give them the chance to ask about or comment on it if they want to. For example, teachers may be able to secure five minutes during a staff meeting to give a quick overview of their work; they may be able to use a regular staff development session to introduce colleagues to their project; or there may be a school newsletter (in print or on-line) where they can write a short overview of their inquiry. The goals here are to raise awareness more broadly of the work teachers are doing, to create interest amongst colleagues, to enhance teacher research using any feedback colleagues can provide and to share with other teachers key findings from the study that may be of relevance to them. Such goals connect very directly with my earlier comments about making teacher research a collective rather than a solitary activity.

What teacher research is not

On the list of tips I presented earlier there were 18 items. The six I have not discussed here - 2, 4, 9, 10, 14 and 17 – do not in my experience constitute the kind of advice that will make teacher research a more productive activity for teachers. Good teacher research cannot be done as quickly as possible (Statement 2) – it must unfold over time, while trying to prove something conclusively (Statements 10 and 14) is also both unrealistic and against the spirit of teacher research where it is important to value the process as much as the results⁴ and where teachers should be comfortable with the flexibility and uncertainty that teacher research often entails. Unnecessary complexity (erroneously, complexity is often confused with quality) is normally counter-productive (Statement 4), while asking teachers to do a statistics course as a pre-requisite for teacher research (Statement 9) sends out the wrong kind of message about the nature of the work teachers will be doing, and if they do need to do some basic quantitative analysis, support for that can be sought out as required. Finally, while there is no harm in teachers asking for a reduction in their workload so that they can do teacher research (Statement 17), such requests are rarely approved and the reality for most teachers is that teacher research will need to be integrated into what they already do.

CONCLUSION

I am a fervent supporter of teacher research, in all its forms, and have been fortunate to witness the powerful transformative impact it can have on teachers. My fervour, though, is always moderated by an awareness of the fact that the conditions in many language teaching contexts are not conducive to this approach to professional learning. It is thus essential to consider teacher research positively but with a realistic understanding of the extent to which it can be productive in different contexts. When rigour, relevance, feasibility and collaboration are enhanced, it is very likely that teacher research will

⁴ The blog at simon-borg.co.uk/process-and-product-in-teacher-research/ discusses products and processes in teacher research in more detail.

be a much more beneficial experience for teachers and that it will fulfil its potential for being “an eminently practical way of being a professional” (Borg, 2013, p.217).

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