



CREATING QUIET REFLECTIVE SPACES:

LANGUAGE TEACHER RESEARCH
AS PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Edited by

Loreto Aliaga Salas

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Foreword

Mark Wyatt

Stories of teacher research can inspire and invigorate. The encouragement of English language teacher research in recent years, supported by organisations such as the IATEFL Research Special Interest Group (ReSIG) and mentors such as Darío Luis Banegas, Anne Burns, Kenan Dikilitaş, Judith Hanks, Paula Rebolledo and Richard Smith, has helped many teachers to find reflective spaces, investigate the puzzles in their daily classroom lives, and engage closely with those around them to explore and reach out, to help their learners and themselves fulfil their hopes and dreams, to help make the learning environment more special, to help themselves and those around them contribute to the world in a more positive, meaningful way. So teacher research is an emancipatory activity; it is a means for teachers to take charge of their own professional development, and we need to hear the stories and the voices of teachers who have found freedom through teacher research, so that they can then inspire and invigorate others.

It follows that this volume is intrinsically important. Conceived, developed and edited by the IATEFL ReSIG Outreach Co-coordinators, Loreto Aliaga Salas and Elena Ončevska Ager, it provides a space for English language teacher-researchers from all over the world to share their stories in their own words and in whatever creative way appeals to them; there are some fascinating stories. These accounts by teachers illustrate how, through being resourceful, committed, reflective and inquiring, teachers can overcome the obstacles they face to do research, to learn and grow, to empower their learners and themselves. The contributors to this volume and the editors are to be warmly congratulated.

Mark Wyatt

IATEFL ReSIG Publications Officer

Introduction

Elena Ončevska Ager and Loreto Aliaga Salas

As members of IATEFL's Research SIG and its Outreach Co-coordinators, we passionately believe in the transformative power of teachers engaging with and in research to develop professionally. This conviction is based on our personal experiences of investigating our practices and encouraging inquiry in colleagues in our respective contexts, North Macedonia and Chile, as well as being supported by the literature.

Teachers' engagement in research is referred to in the literature as practitioner research, or teacher research (TR), the term we use in this volume. TR is defined as "systematic inquiry... conducted by teachers in their own professional contexts... which aims to enhance teachers' understanding of some aspect of their work" (Borg, 2013, p. 10). This broad conceptualisation of TR accommodates a range of research methodologies (quantitative, qualitative, mixed) with which to ensure systematicity. This distinguishes TR from speculation, and gives weight to any ensuing pedagogical decisions. Further, working in and with one's own teaching context makes the experience meaningful and immersive, while improving classroom dynamics (Farrell, 2016).

The main purpose of TR, then, is continuing professional development. Teachers look to understand fully an aspect of their context, in order to develop a strategy to address it – if they decide it needs addressing at all, that is! In this way, TR affords a much needed 'quiet space' in the ever-busy lives of teachers – a prerequisite for good professional learning, e.g. via making meaningful and lasting connections between their teaching experiences and/or by interrogating their beliefs to check if/how they align with their practices (Ončevska Ager and Xerri, 2017).

On the cover page of this volume, we use the metaphor of photography to think about TR. To us, teachers engaging in TR resemble photographers reflecting on their snapshots. Like photographers, teachers quietly take 'pictures' (i.e. collect data) capturing classroom life, and can benefit from

a safe, contemplative moment to rewind the episodes that have stood out for them personally. By ‘re-viewing’ and re-living their experiences, they attempt to understand better what goes on in their classrooms, which, in turn, enables them to respond to classroom life in informed ways.

Back in 2013, TR was seen as “a minority activity in the field of language teaching” (Borg, 2013, p. 6). Since then, a number of TR projects have been carried out in various parts of the world, many of which instigated and/or supported by our Research SIG. Examples of these include the TR conferences in Latin America (Argentina and Chile) and in Turkey, as well as the more global Electronic Village Online (EVO) scheme designed to provide mentoring for TR. A good amount of this work has been documented in publications freely downloadable from the SIG’s webpage¹. A selection of the most recent publications includes: Sağlam and Dikilitaş (2019), Barkhuizen et al. (2018), Mackay et al. (2018), Burns et al. (2017), Etherington and Daubney (2017). If you would like to find out what other work the Research SIG is involved in and/or would like to become a member, please visit our homepage².

Our work in producing this current volume of TR accounts was motivated by our curiosity to learn more about our SIG members’ (and non-members’) TR ‘portfolios’ to date, with a focus on how teachers found such TR experiences and what their perceived impact on teachers’ lives was. We were pleased by the enthusiastic response to our call, with initially around 30 teachers from all over the world contributing their TR accounts. 26 contributions made it to the final draft of this volume. These are arranged according to the geographical areas the authors were based in at the time of writing: the Americas, Europe, the Middle East, Asia and Oceania.

Since personal accounts lend themselves to various formats of expression, in our call for contributions we encouraged authors to venture beyond the usual text format of sharing, e.g. by embracing arts-based approaches of their choice, if that helped them reflect on their TR. An exploration of creative writing formats in which to report on practitioner research was previously undertaken in a special issue of the journal *ELTED* (Banegas and Smith, 2016). Our invitation for creativity resulted in a colourful collection of accounts, with teachers using visuals, but also experimenting with genres not typically associated with a volume of this kind (e.g. interview, poem).

1 <http://resig.weebly.com/books.html>

2 <http://resig.weebly.com/>

Reading and re-reading the teachers' TR accounts, we noticed several common themes emerging from the narratives. The teachers seemed to appreciate the potential of TR to help them develop context-specific understandings about the teaching and learning that went on in their classrooms, as well as about their learners. Paulina Rojas González (Chapter 1), for instance, realises that in teaching one size fits one (not all); Nathan Thomas (Chapter 2) noticed, as he was making sense of his classroom data, that "every moment had meaning". TR seems to have enabled teachers to notice what they previously took for granted and see their contexts anew. Professional fulfilment ensued in many of the authors, often accompanied by a desire to share their new understandings, e.g. via writing up their TR experiences. The sharing with colleagues, in some cases, led to new colleagues joining in in the TR pursuit, suggesting that professional enthusiasm may be 'contagious'. On a more personal note, some TR projects have resulted in new friendships and further TR collaboration. Finally, some teachers found their experiences so uplifting as to keep the risk of burnout at bay.

Teachers were not the only ones affected positively by TR; one consistently recurring motif in the accounts was that learners generally welcomed their teachers' TR initiatives and were interested to help, presumably as they perceived their teachers' extra engagement to be a sign of care and dedication; it can be argued that the novelty of the TR-related tasks was a source of appeal, too. Learners' involvement in TR, in itself a reflection of their investment and ownership, meant that they interacted more intensely with their teachers and were eager to help shape their courses, in turn, presumably, learning better. Indeed, improved quality of classroom life (Hanks, 2017), with the learners central actors in the teaching-learning-researching process was a common ascribed consequence of TR.

As with any rigorous practice undertaken over a period of time, obstacles are bound to emerge. The authors write about their struggles with time management due to their already heavy workloads. Another concern was their limited background in research methodologies; some experienced difficulty with regard to data collection and/or analysis, despite receiving training. Learner perceptions presented a challenge in some contexts, since some learners had different expectations of what their English language teachers should be doing in class.

All TR accounts in this volume, however, are illustrative of resilience and triumph over hardship. All doubt about whether it was worth, to use the metaphor from the cover page, engaging with one's (photography) port-

folio appear to eventually have been offset by fulfilment derived from a sense of professional, hence, inevitably, personal growth (Edge, 2011).

Because of TR's local and context-dependent nature, any emerging insights (i.e. the products of research) may not be immediately transferrable to other teaching contexts; however, the principles underpinning the systematic inquiry (i.e. the process of research) may well be. We hope that the TR accounts in this volume will inspire language teachers to inquire along similar (or not!) lines, in an attempt to make sense of the intricacies of their own classrooms.

We would like to thank all authors for affording us insight into their classroom snapshots, and for their patience and hard work during the revision process. Our thanks also go to our fantastic SIG colleagues, for their valuable feedback on how to make this volume more useful to ELT professionals. Finally, we would like to thank you, the reader, for engaging with this volume – we hope you enjoy the authors' quiet reflections on their TR 'portfolios'.

The Editors,

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Implementing SMART goals to foster HOTS in speaking lessons

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Currently, I work as an English professor at Universidad Santo Tomás (Villavicencio, Colombia). My research experience arose from teaching legal English to students of law. Prior to the beginning of my courses, I usually administer various instruments to determine my students' background knowledge, learning experiences and needs, such as speaking placement tests and questionnaires.

In one of my needs analyses, it transpired that my students (a group of 30+ students) felt they had issues with expressing their ideas effectively and participating assertively in discussions on controversial topics related to law. Furthermore, the needs analysis suggested a lack of self-study and self-assessment techniques in my students.

To support my students' autonomy, I included in my speaking lesson plans support for the development of their Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS), alongside a focus on SMART goals (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic, Time-based). The starting point was to draw on my students' background knowledge on a current controversial concern by posing questions to encourage opinion and discussion. Afterwards, real legal cases were analysed and evaluated in order to lead students to develop and defend their own stances. Finally, they participated in a speaking task in which they were expected to speak about real-life settings related to their field of study and propose solutions to a given issue. As they were discussing real-life situations, they could go beyond the mere communication of facts, venture to think critically and devise alternative solutions to contemporary problems, such as violations of the right to health or defamation.

In addition, based on their learning needs they were able to self-set their SMART goals and define the most appropriate course of action to attain them. To prepare them for this, I organised training sessions where the students became acquainted with SMART goals. Furthermore, they kept a learning journal to monitor their achievement throughout the classes.

Speaking activities were usually followed up by self-assessment sessions in which students recorded their learning memories and gave account of the main difficulties they faced while speaking English, and how they managed to overcome them. Afterwards, they shared their self-assessment outcomes with the whole class so that they could receive feedback from their classmates and teacher. An example of a set of SMART goals is displayed below:

What do you want to achieve? (to do what)	What is that for? (concrete action)	So, YOU WILL	but what of what?	When?
I would like to have a fluent conversation	I more for week, take and write different verbs.	To facilitate and communicate with my teacher and Nabeel Khan	Write the verbs to memo card.	by 20th November

Figure 1: Sample student's SMART goals

Data were collected with the aid of the students' journals, a speaking rubric and a survey, and subsequently analysed following the principles of Grounded Theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1999). It was demonstrated that the implementation of SMART goal-setting and HOTS guided students to overcome their difficulties in speaking English, so that they gradually became more confident and actively involved in small debates. Concerning their higher-order thinking skills and the awareness of their role as future lawyers operating in real contexts, they became increasingly engaged in their learning processes and developed confidence to tackle their future professional hurdles. For instance, a student stated that SMART goal-setting allowed him to "study a little bit more in order to overcome weaknesses regarding vocabulary, speaking and listening" (Survey, student 59, 16-11-2017).

As a result of this research experience, I am eager to continue inquiring into the implementation of SMART goal-setting along with the HOTS framework to foster the development of other communicative skills.

Reference:

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