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Review

Teacher-Researchers in Action

K. Dikilitaş, R. Smith, and W. Trotman (eds.)

IATEFL 2015, 438 pp., free online: http://resig.weebly.com/teacher-researchers-in-action.html

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Teachers Research!

D. Bullock and R. Smith (eds.)

IATEFL 2015, 78 pp., free online: http://resig.weebly.com/teachers-research.html

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When the word 'research' is used in any publication, readers have particular expectations about what they will read in terms of the language that is used in the publication. In most cases, such publications in education are written with a particular audience in mind that for the most part is academics. Academics usually author such publications for many reasons, such as their own advancement and dissemination of the results of their research. In many of these academic style publications related to teaching we usually get reports of, for example, why language teachers teach in the way they do, or research reports *on* teachers *by* academics *for* academic audiences. Such reports are reasonable in themselves as they may advance the 'knowledge-base' of the profession and the career of the academics, all fine of course. However, many times we also see that practising teachers have been criticized for their lack of knowledge or engagement in such 'research'. The teachers themselves remark in many cases that these publications are not really accessible in the form they are presented. In other words, from the teachers' perspective, what is missing from the literature are research reports that are accessible to teachers or reports about what language teachers themselves think about what they do: research *with* teachers, *by* teachers, and *for* teachers.

When I was invited to review the two publications I was excited because an initial glance indicated to me that perhaps we have finally published some research *by* teachers *for* teachers. And for the most part we have, but these are two different publications. Before I review each of them, however, I will first talk about the terminology used in both books because it was confusing most of the time and it could be confusing for teachers interested in conducting similar or their own research, which is a main aim of both publications.

A wide range of terms is used in both publications to cover research conducted by teachers: 'Teacher Research!', 'practitioner-research', 'teacher-research', 'integrated teacher research', 'action research', 'informal action research', 'collaborative action research', 'small research', 'exploratory practice', 'exploratory practice study', and 'exploratory action research', to name but a few. I felt a bit dizzy with all the different terminology that in some cases was used interchangeably. For example, from: *Teacher-Researchers in Action*, 'In my action research, I focused ...' (p. 225); 'From this teacher-research project ...' (p. 233). However, one author at least attempted to reflect on some of the different meanings of dissimilar terminology: 'I discovered while carrying out research that my study is actually not action research, in which the primary aim is an action for change, but exploratory practice, in which the researcher aims to understand what is going on in the classroom and why' (p. 353).

At the very least the fact that we have so many diverse terms leads me to believe that we still have a way to go outlining what we mean by 'Teacher Research!' (I do not know why it has capitals, an exclamation mark, but no hyphen). Elliott (1991: 14) has pointed out that the idea of teachers as researchers has been overgeneralized to the point of being '*applied* to any sort of practice in schools, regardless of teachers' conceptions of education, knowledge, learning and teaching, and regardless of the institutional and social context of their practices' (emphasis in original). Thus, the very presence of all these terms, and how they have been sometimes used interchangeably in both

publications, is an indication to me that the 'research' reported is still to a certain extent being directed (even if subtly) by academics. I believe we (academics *with* teachers) still need to have a discussion about the traditions and meanings behind all of these terms, but ultimately it is up to practising teachers to decide what they want to look at within their own practices.

I outlined my cautions about the terminology used in both books above so that readers will understand why I use terms differently in the review below (for example 'teacher research' with and without hyphen, and so on). I also do this because both books have different titles that make use of such terminology and so now I do not have to address these: *Teacher-Researchers in Action* and *Teachers Research!*. However, although these titles suggest they are similar, in fact they are quite different. They are different in appearance, context, content, and length.

The first book, *Teacher-Researchers in Action*, for the most part contains chapters by 'teacher-researchers' working at universities mainly in Turkey and is the result of an initial conference supported by the IATEFL Research SIG. In terms of appearance, it looks like a scholarly book (438 pages including index) with many chapters displaying neat tables, theoretical models mapped out in figures, line charts, area charts, doughnut charts, lots of bar charts, bubble charts, and pie charts (indeed one chapter has 25 pie charts), tables and surveys, and, of course, appendices with lots of questionnaires which actually make it look like a book on 'real research'. I hope this is not off-putting to practising teachers, especially since the main aim of the book is 'to inspire other teachers across the world' (p. 3).

The Introduction tells us that the book contains three opening chapters by 'leaders in the area of teacher-research' (p. 2). In Part II, we have 18 chapter reports by teachers engaging in professional development followed in Part III by five studies with in-service and pre-service teachers carrying out action research in Turkey. Part I includes Anne Burns' chapter on the value of collaborative action research, Dick Allwright's contribution on the concept of 'understanding' in teacher research, Richard Smith on an exploratory action research project in Chile, and Kenan Dikilitaş on professional development through teacher research. These may be of interest to teachers who want to have an overview of the main issues and know more about the vast terminology that is used in the 18 chapters in Part II the book.

My main interest (and I suspect that of most practising teachers) in this book is the 18 chapters outlined in Part II by practising teachers. All these chapters have the a similar 'standard' formatting (in direct contrast to the other book) that generally starts with an introduction, then some kind of literature review (not all connected to the topic at hand), some have research questions (usually four, for me three too many) listed next, but all have some kind of procedure, findings, and discussion sections (although some chapters combine all three), and reflections. I guess we are to assume that readers will be familiar with the context (Turkey) as no details are provided in these chapters (for example one chapter has the following: 'The study involved 25 A2 level EFL learners ... classes in an A1 classroom' (p. 81); we are not given any further details). In addition, some of these chapters are short and some very long, but most did not give a lot of detail on how data collected were analysed so that other teachers in different contexts can replicate these studies. Many of the chapters have titles that would not lead readers to realize that these were the actual topics covered, such as in the title of Chapter 19 'How can teachers find a happy medium between what students want and their own practices?', which is really about vocabulary instruction.

That said, the topics covered in each of these chapters (with some overlap as indicated below) will be of interest to most practising teachers because they cover such issues as: corrective feedback, peer observation, student motivation, speaking challenges of low proficiency learners, speaking anxiety, peer assessment, academic writing, pair/group work, team-teaching, learner autonomy/learning strategies (2), learner-centred instruction (2), learner diaries, incorporating ELF, pronunciation error treatment, vocabulary instruction (2), integrating culture, and use of L1 in the classroom. In each of these chapters, the teachers pose important questions concerning their practice in reference to these issues, and in this sense this collection can act as a great resource for other practising teachers to consult on similar issues. In addition, many of the reports in these chapters include teachers consulting their students about their perspectives on teaching and learning and this is a very useful way of promoting their reflective learning.

The final part of this book contains five chapters which relate to 'how teacher-research can be well-supported' as written by 'professional researchers' in Turkey. I must say that the term 'professional researcher' is off-putting to me and these chapters really read like academics (who recommend 'suitable topics' for future research) reporting their own research *on* teachers, which is fine, so I leave it to teachers to consider their relevance to their individual practice.

The title of the second book, *Teachers Research!*, got its name, we are told, from an initial day-long IATEFL Pre-conference Event in 2014 that involved poster presentations of 'teacher-research' (with hyphen), that subsequently evolved into a multimedia website providing a record of the day. Then the poster presenters were invited to prepare a written version of their story for open access/online publication, which resulted in this book. In terms of appearance it does not look like a scholarly book (78 pages, no index), with many chapters displaying colourful photos of posters and people (although some have pie and bubble charts) that immediately gave the image (literally) of a reader-friendly collection.

The two introductory chapters set the scene for the book by explaining the origin of the title and informing us that the collection was designed to capture the teachers' own experiences of teacher-research, rather than on ideas or findings *about* teacher-research from academic experts. These chapters also explain that the book outlines nine stories (according to the editors: 'because they are personal, unique and engaging' (p. 18)), written by practising teachers interested in exploring their practice. As with the book above, even within these stories, we have different terminology that needs to be clarified.

Each 'story', we are informed, begins with some issue related to learner needs and then proceeds to outline how the teacher explored these issues. Some do not look like 'stories' because they are structured and 'look' more like research reports, and some go out of their way to explain the 'type of research' they are undertaking with 'exploratory practice' (for example Chapters 6, 7, and 8), a common title in many chapters. Many stories end with teacher reflections, which are a welcome addition to the literature on teacher research because what it means for the teacher is at the centre of reflecting on practice.

Again, as in the other book, the topics that are covered will be of interest to most practising teachers and include: students' use of technology, balancing exam-oriented activities with meaning–learning activities, dealing with student cliques in a writing class, student perceptions of reasons for success and failure learning English, preparing students to deliver successful presentations (2), getting EAP students to take responsibility for learning outside the classroom, and addressing student use of offensive nicknames.

I should point out that Chapter 9 has a curious title for this collection, 'Some issues in practitioner-research', and I cannot see how it is a 'story'. That said, this chapter is an interesting type of stimulate recall (somewhat after the fact) of a teacher conducting 'research' in order, as she says, to facilitate 'an honest discussion of important and often taken for granted questions regarding practitioner-research'. I agree!

The final chapter, also fittingly called 'Coda' (given the editors' penchant for using the term 'story' instead of 'chapter'), outlines a general discussion of teacher research as conducted by the three 'academics' (called 'leaders in the area of teacher research' in the book above) who reviewed the research outlined above; and just as the editors declined to include the transcript of the discussion for fear of taking focus away from the stories themselves, I too will not comment further on this chapter for the same reason. This of course probably indicates my bias reflected in this review and within the field of TESOL. I am firmly planted on the side of the 'T' (teaching and teacher) and as such have spent my whole career (both as an ESL teacher and teacher educator) reflecting *with* teachers and *for* teachers, not *for* academics.

Overall, I think both books will be of great use to practising teachers because of the topics that are covered and also because they are free online resources. The extent of their usefulness will probably depend on the teacher's familiarity with all the different and confusing approaches to teacher research, but I fear that the use (and abuse) of different terminology will not help teachers in this quest. In addition, when research is mentioned in education circles the word 'rigour' is sometimes raised to judge the value of the research. While many of the chapters in both books could have outlined more details about the exact procedures they used and how they analysed the data they collected so that others could replicate them (at the very least), there is always a danger of academics writing off such research because it is not rigorous enough. For me, there is a further danger of requiring too much and unnecessary rigour with teacher research, so that it ultimately ends in rigor mortis setting in and ruining the whole experience for teachers interested in exploring their practice. Even though I have bashed the academics' role in this review, I think they do have a role to play by considering, as one of the editors of this collection states' 'how events and publications can best support teachers' rights to develop and inquire in their own ways, for their own ends and those of their students' (p. 12). In addition, I must praise the IATEFL Research SIG for all the work they do in encouraging teachers to reflect on their practice, as without them these two books would not have been possible.

Coda. In the spirit of the book *Teachers Research!*, I will end this review with a story 'coda'. In this 'coda', I will attempt to address one of the shortcomings of these

two books as well as much of the recent review and response on language teacher research in the reviews section of *ELT Journal* (for example Smith 2015; Borg 2016), and that is that the person at the centre of *all* of the research seems to have been omitted somewhat in favour of fixing some problem in practice. I believe that it matters *who* the teacher is and that reflection is grounded in the beliefs that teachers are whole persons and teaching is not one-dimensional problem-solving, but multidimensional and includes the *moral, ethical, spiritual,* and *aesthetic* aspects of our practice (Farrell 2015). We (academics) must be careful when encouraging language teachers to conduct any research that remains a technical activity without also encouraging them to look within at the person who is teaching. As Palmer (1998: 11) noted: 'The connections made by good teachers are held not in their methods but in their hearts—meaning heart in its ancient sense, as the place where intellect and emotion and spirit and will converge in the human self'. Thus, we must not forget that it matters 'who' the teacher is that is conducting the research and that they, as such, should be the subject rather that the object of their reflections.

I so admire all of the teachers who not only took time out from their busy lives to reflect on their practice, but also to put this in writing so we could all see what great work they are doing and also learn from all their wonderful reflections. Each time I have the chance to talk with teachers about their practice I am always amazed by their professionalism and most, if not all, are really working hard to provide opportunities for their students to learn. Thus, in the spirit of teachers matter, I decided to contact each of the teachers in *Teachers Research!* (I must admit my favourite of the two) to give them the last word. So I end using their quotes (with their permission but without naming them, as I thought it may take away from the wonderful quotes) as answers to my request for a comment about their experiences with their 'research' and how all their 'research' is for the benefit of their students' learning:

> Through the experience, I learned how important it is for teachers like me to share our work with others. It felt really good to know that my story had in some way impacted other teachers positively.
>
> It granted us a way of telling and reviving some great moments we experienced with our students, getting closer to them and reviewing some of our beliefs.
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> This experience made us realize that perhaps our students taught us much more than we taught them during our time together.
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> The process was enjoyable and highly worthwhile, as it added extra reflexive dimensions that led us to much deeper personal professional understandings.
>
> The academia has created rules that suit their academics. Teachers outside of the academia have other times and responsibilities ... it is unfair to ask teachers to adapt themselves to the academic's lifestyle when it comes to doing research. Teachers are capable of researching their own practice which should be done in a way that fits the nature of their work.
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> Indeed, my report is essentially a story about a puzzlement of mine which my students agreed to explore further as a class ... In this way, the audience for such stories expands to include students, too—not only teachers.
>
> Through this experience, I learnt the value of gaining an understanding of learners' perspectives and expectations, the mutual benefit of collaborating with students towards common goals and the highly beneficial impact that classroom-based research can have on individual and collective learner experience and output.

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