

Language Teacher Research: Enlightenment or Academic Terrorism?

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Introduction

In previous issues of TEC, I have written a lot about the importance of self-reflection where language teachers reflect not only on what they do but also *who* they are as human beings. In this issue, I want to address the growing popularity of “language teacher research,” which has been encouraged by many academics; I really wonder if this is truly for the benefit of teachers or if they are being manipulated to concentrate on what the academics want to research.

Language Teacher Research

For a long time, teachers – regardless of what subject they are teaching – have often felt a lack of ownership of what and how they teach. Teachers have been told what to do by so-called experts, and this has been the tradition in the Teaching of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL). In the field of TESOL, we have had to endure many years of publishers dominating conferences, selling (supposedly teacher-proof) textbooks that all teachers should follow without question. Some teachers have followed these books and the methods within without question, but others have begun to question some of these approaches because they feel a lack of self-worth in the whole process.

So now, language teachers are being encouraged (mostly by academics, but also supported by some administrators) to engage in “teacher research” in order to gain more ownership of what they do. However, there are so many different terms used to identify teacher research (e.g., teacher research, practitioner-research, action research, collaborative action research, exploratory practice) that we do not really know what (or who) we are referring

to. Indeed, the presence of all these terms and how they are often used interchangeably is probably an indication that the “research” is being directed by academics who are interested in developing their own academic empires.

Academic Terrorism

When the word “research” is used in a publication, readers have particular expectations about what they will read in terms of the language that is used and how the research is presented. In most cases, research publications in education are written with a particular audience in mind: academics. Academics usually author these publications for many reasons, including their own academic advancement and the dissemination of their research results.

Many of these academic publications related to teaching contain papers that explain why language teachers teach in the way they do. This is research *on* teachers *by* academics *for* academic audiences. Such papers may be fine in themselves because they may advance both the knowledge base of the profession and (of course) the career of the author. However, there is an uneasiness in the relationship between academics and teachers; Elliott (1991, p. 52) has gone so far as to say that “academics tend to behave like terrorists” when they play the “role of theoretical handmaiden of practitioners” because

academics have hijacked the research process by reinterpreting it for their needs and to fit the theories they are formulating. In other words, the focus of the research is placed on what academics regard as important rather than the teacher. So what is really missing from the literature is the teacher’s perspective

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on what they consider important about what *they* do, or research *with* teachers, *by* teachers, and *for* teachers so that they can become enlightened about *their* practice.

Enlightenment

One of the main problems I have with the new push to encourage language teachers to engage in teacher research is that very issue of teacher perspective; the person at the center of *all* of the research seems to have been omitted in favor of what academics perceive as important, such as “fixing” some perceived 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 simply one-dimensional problem-solving, but is multi-dimensional and includes the *moral, ethical, spiritual, and aesthetic* aspects of our practice (Farrell, 2015).

When we teachers are encouraged to research our practice by academics, we are asked to examine our lessons and teaching techniques with the idea of improving our teaching mainly to achieve educational objectives that have been designed by others. Teacher researchers busily go about gathering data from classroom observations and the like so that they can examine their teaching from a technical perspective. However, the moral, ethical, spiritual, and aesthetic aspects of what we do must also be taken into account if we are to transform our practice. I believe we cannot separate the teacher (person) from teaching (practice) because the teacher teaches in light of his or her life values or what he or she thinks is morally right. The only way that a teacher can “research” his or her practice from such a perspective is to engage in self-reflection (in the manner I have outlined in previous articles). We must be cautious of this recent call by academics for teachers to act as researchers because what may be efficient (and even effective) from a technical or methodological perspective may not be morally right for an individual teacher in a way that the teacher can maintain personal integrity (yes, we may

also wonder about an academic’s personal integrity). I believe the process of self-reflection can facilitate language teachers in becoming who they want to be as a second language teacher more so than language teacher research can.

Conclusion

When teachers engage in teacher research (with or without academics) on what they consider important, classrooms become places where teacher learning flourishes because they have become enlightened (rather than manipulated) by the results of their research and reflection. From a TESOL perspective, I should point out that 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, *for* teachers – not for academics.

References

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The Author

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