

“A classroom is a centre of inquiry in all its forms”: **Thomas S. C. Farrell** **on teacher research**



Despite being widely heralded as an effective form of professional development, teacher research has also been criticised as being too closely aligned with the priorities and expectations of academics rather than those of classroom practitioners. In this interview, Thomas S. C. Farrell suggests that current conceptions of research might need to be broadened so as to embrace reflective practice.

Conceptions of teacher research

Over the past few years, the topic of teacher research has been given increasing attention in the literature and at international ELT conferences. How do you explain this rise in popularity?

It's probably driven by academics. When you say it's become popular I worry about that because I would like to know whom it is popular with. I can guarantee that it's not popular with the teachers. So if we talk about teacher research we have to define what we mean. Is it research *on* teachers, research *with* teachers, or research *by* teachers? Have we asked the teachers what they would like to research? If you use the word 'research', you will turn off a teacher immediately. So I think we're using jargon that's comfortable for academics but not for the teachers.

If you had to ask a teacher further than their original teacher training programme, probably the word 'research' would frighten them anyway. This depends on their programme, of course. If it were a research-based programme with a thesis at the end of it, then they'd be more comfortable with a research approach using the large 'R' rather than the small 'r'. I'm on the same wavelength with people like Alan Maley regarding academics who co-opt research by teachers for their own benefits.

Alan Maley and to some extent Penny Ur have recently suggested that teachers don't have time for research, shouldn't be expected to do research, and that research isn't relevant for them. What are your thoughts on that?

I disagree, but I would frame it in a different way. A classroom is a centre of inquiry and you have to consider it a centre of inquiry in all its forms. If we were to say that teachers should

not do and read research, we'd almost be saying that a medical doctor should not do or read research because they don't have time for it or have no use for it or it's not relevant to them. And yet you're going to visit that medical doctor and be prescribed medication. Based on? Research, of course. But I think we're tripping on words and semantics.

If you want to look at the hard research, then there's probably a place for it. For example, in my humble opinion, teacher-cognition research is not relevant to teachers because it consists of academics researching teachers for academics. It generally focuses on beliefs only and not practices. A lot of the research that has been done has consisted of a survey or interviews of what teachers believe. I've done a lot of work on this but I don't call it teacher-cognition research because I think it's an insult. It's just a beautiful way of saying "What are you thinking?" But you can't say that apparently; it's not academic enough. If you ask a teacher what they believe, they have a very hard time explaining it. So it has to go through a kind of recursive type of existence.

First, ask teachers what their beliefs are, then examine their behaviours in the classroom, and then try to extract teachers' beliefs again. A teacher can say that they believe one thing this minute and they change their belief the next minute. Beliefs are very hard to pin down. When this research is published, it's a freeze frame of a particular time in which you talked to that teacher and it might no longer be relevant. This is especially the case when it's not connected to classroom work as well. So research should be an examination of beliefs and practices, and beliefs again.

You seem to imply that the academics who study teacher research are merely writing for an academic audience and their work doesn't really reach the teachers themselves. But is there any value in teachers engaging in research?

Yes, there is. But I would say in small bites and you don't even have to call it research. If they reflect on their practice, they're doing research. It only takes one particular item of your class that you're interested in to change the whole dynamic of that class. For example, wait time. Many teachers are not fully aware of what's going on in their classroom. If you want to call this kind of thing research then you could just say that the centre of inquiry entails becoming more aware of what's happening in your classroom to make you a better teacher. You don't even have to use the word 'research'. This kind of thing is relevant to every teacher.

But some academics would dispute your views. They would argue that you can't call that kind of thing research since research has to be conducted in a systematic manner. How would you reply to that?

I would say that if a teacher were to reflect on any aspect of their work, then that is very systematic as well. If as a teacher you're interested in looking at your instructions, then you can systematically collect evidence about that. You need retrievable data. So what do you do? You record your class. It could be video or audio. Then you transcribe it and analyse it. Then you interpret it.

Am I right in thinking that you're asking people to broaden their conceptions of research?

Yes! Look at who is gaining from the research. In what I've described, it's the teacher who is gaining from the research. The person working with the teacher, whether it's an academic, a facilitator or a mirror, can also benefit from the research. Both parties stand to gain. But if one is going to fight for what's acceptable for the academy, not necessarily the academics but the academy, then it's going to be irrelevant to the teachers.

Challenges of teacher research

Within your broad definition of research, which seems to go beyond how some people define it in academia, what are the challenges of teachers engaging in research?

The first challenge is the sense of helplessness a teacher probably has at the beginning. They might not know what to look at. So a facilitator could help a teacher focus on some aspect of his or her teaching, or even on the self, which is outside the teaching, so to speak. I think it's very important that if you're going to help a teacher, you help the teacher to focus on some aspect of their work that they might be interested in looking more into. What I've done in my own work and what I've encouraged other teachers to do is to start with the self. Write a journal and keep writing for a month or so about your teaching. After every class, write down something. I guarantee you, and it's never failed, a teacher will begin to see patterns develop in the writing. You can write anything you like. I myself started that way even though I doubted the whole process. That's how I started my reflective process and I continue to write like that too. You will find a pattern and you will find a focus on what you can begin looking at.

Aren't you assuming that writing reflectively is something easy for teachers to do?

I wouldn't say "writing reflectively". I would just say "write". Writing as a stream of consciousness. Just write about your class. There is no correct method. You don't even have to write full sentences. You can even draw pictures if you like. Anything that gets your thoughts out. The reason I've mentioned writing is that there is a built-in reflective mechanism in writing. That's why I don't want to say "reflective writing". You must stop to think. You must shape your thought process to think about what to write. Once it's written, you can see the written word and you can see your thoughts. They may or may not reflect exactly what's going on. But you can rewrite it if need be. A lot of teachers are afraid of writing and that's why I wouldn't use the term 'reflective writing'. I suggest that if you want to help a teacher reflect on their practices, writing is a good way to start the whole process.

In your experience, are there cultural issues involved in whether teachers engage in this kind of research or not?

Yes, especially if you want to ask them to reflect with other teachers in particular cultures. There's a whole new dynamic there. If one person is senior or junior to the other person, what they'll reveal and what they're allowed to reveal may not really reflect what they're thinking. But then again, individual teachers have to take responsibility on themselves.

What I worry about with the teacher research aspect is that the responsibility remains outside the teacher. It's with the academic or whoever is running the show, so to speak. The teacher never fully takes the responsibility on himself or herself. Some teachers are happy to ask, "What should I do?" And academics are more than happy to tell them what to do. When teachers ask me, "What should I do?" I tell them, "I don't know. What would you like to do?" I never deviate from that. If you're supervising a teacher and you tell them what to do, you're generating a sense of learned helplessness. That's not going to help the teacher. If the teacher says, "I don't know what to look at", then you leave it alone until the teacher finds out what they want to look at.

I think teachers are afraid of the whole process of looking at their teaching. In the first few months after they graduate from a teacher education programme they're quite happy to talk about their teaching. That is because they've just graduated from a programme in which they had to talk and write about their teaching, and be observed teaching. But after three, four, or five years they build these metaphorical walls around themselves. If you ask a teacher four years down the road to tell you about their teaching or to share their lesson plans, they're

much more reluctant. I found that when some teachers talk about their practices it's totally unrelated to the reality of what they actually do.

Recently I discovered a new thing that I've called the third-year slump. Novice teachers, who are so eager in their first year, enter the third year and are in the slump because they are beaten down by the system, or they beat themselves down, or the students beat them down. I used to think that once you've survived the first year, you're OK. But actually you're not. As teachers gain this so-called experience, they begin to doubt themselves even more. The reason is that they haven't reflected on that experience. Experience means nothing unless you've reflected on it. I think reflective practice is the way to go for the teacher because it's not threatening. It doesn't use the word 'research'. I say 'evidence-based'. I'm even reluctant to say "collect data". I prefer to say "collect information".

Teacher development

We're doing this interview at an international conference at which there was an event on teachers' research literacy. What would you say is the role of such conferences in equipping teachers with the knowledge and skills to do research in their own contexts or to engage in reflective practice?

Conferences and workshops can be very dangerous. They can be dog-and-pony shows. On a Saturday you might be doing a workshop on how to teach writing or how to teach speaking or reading or whatever, and you tell the audience, "Here's how you should do this and this and this." On Monday, the teachers may try to implement what you've told them. But, generally speaking, what usually happens is that it doesn't work. By Wednesday they're back to doing what they usually do.

Part of the issue here is because they hear something at a conference but they're not aware of what they're doing at this particular moment to see whether it fits in or not. They think they know what they do but this might not be the same as what they actually do. A conference is good. It can be a giant reflection session. But if you ask me how best to equip teachers, I would suggest giving them a workshop on reflective practice. I would show them that the human aspect of teaching, who they are, and self-knowledge are as important as the skill of teaching reading or anything else for that matter.

Is reflective practice being given the attention it deserves at such conferences?

Not in TESOL. I think reflective practice is threatening, not only to teachers but also to academics. It's threatening to academics because they don't actually engage in reflective practice themselves. They only talk about it. It's very hard to find an MA programme leaflet or pamphlet that doesn't use the word 'reflection' somewhere. It's a term that is being constantly used and abused. It's touted by a lot of people. Yet certain sceptics within our profession call it a bandwagon. But it's not. It's not designed to replace anything else.

What it is is dangerous. It takes people out of their comfort zone and away from their routines to actually look at what is really happening in their world. The horror and beauty of reflective practice is that you don't know where it's going to lead. That said, in TESOL today there is a growing interest in research on the practices that encourage teachers to reflect. I have a new book on this, *Research on Reflective Practice in TESOL* (<https://goo.gl/Uixhwm>), coming out in early 2018.

Would you say that reflective practice is more important for teachers than developing the skills of, for example, writing a questionnaire, conducting an interview, or observing their students?

Yes! I would say it's a necessary prerequisite to that because if teachers know themselves they would automatically be brought towards that. If you bring in these research techniques outside themselves, it's too far outside the teachers. It's the 'other' for them. It's not part of them. If they reflect on who they are and who they want to be as teachers, they will automatically drift towards that and they will ask you, "How can I look at my practice in this sense? What is a good way of doing that?" If we tell them what to do from the start, it's top down. It's as if they're going back into teacher training and they're being told what to do, rather than asking and becoming curious. We should develop curious teachers who would want to ask about what they're doing.

Will this lead to the development of the skills needed to satisfy that curiosity?

It may. But again, who's calling the shots on language teacher research? The teacher or the academic? What if the teacher doesn't want to do that? I would say that's OK.

You seem to be implying that the academics we spoke about earlier are imposing their agenda on teachers and straightjacketing them into a particular approach to research.

They're co-opting it. Let me give you an example. The action-research cycle is very popular in the UK and other places. Action research is fine, but it's problem-based. Not all teaching is problem-based. The teacher as a human being is nowhere in the cycle. It's like everything is out there. You have a problem in your class that you want to fix. But it's like the academic and the teacher are looking at a problem somewhere over there. It's like watching TV. Where's the teacher? And who is deciding it's a problem in the first place? What evidence is there of the problem? They're going through the cycle of action research but the values are divorced from the methods. It's all methodological. It's outside the teacher. Who benefits really?

This interview is being published in a journal produced by a teacher association. What is the role of teacher associations in trying to foster the attitudes and skills needed to engage in this broadened conception of research?

I think a teacher association should develop curiosity within its members. It should devise talks, workshops, and events that develop this curiosity and encourage teachers to talk to each other about what they do. By means of reflective practice, teachers can be guided to develop a language to explain what they do. A lot of teachers can't explain what they do. A teacher association should develop a sense of curiosity in teachers that can lead either to a change of practices or an affirmation of current practices. But it cannot be research that is outside the teachers; that is, research outside the person who is doing the research.

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