



Reflective Practice as Teacher Research

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Abstract

In the past, most language teachers assumed that the word “Research” (big “R”) did not apply to them or their teaching as so-called “experts” (usually academics) would “do” the research that they would ultimately consume. Unfortunately, most of the “Research” that comes out of academic institutions is driven by academic interests and not informed by practicing teachers. More recently, in reaction, language teachers have been encouraged to become “teacher researchers” to bridge this gap between theoretical research and actual classroom practices. However, this move to encourage practicing language teachers to engage in teacher research, although noble in itself, has created some stress for the teachers in that they wonder how they can accomplish this while engaging in their main role, teaching. In this paper that was part of my keynote address, I outline and discuss a reflective practice as teacher research approach *by* teachers and *for* teachers so that they can become the best that they can be for their students.

1. Introduction

Firstly, I am so honored to have been invited to give a keynote presentation at the “Teacher Researchers and Researcher Teachers: Bridging the Research-Practice Gap at University Language Centers” conference at the Free University of Bozen-Bolzano, Italy in October 2024. When the word “research” is used with the word “teacher” these days it is assumed that the practicing teachers must and should conduct research while doing their work. Having worked as a language teacher for many years in a real classroom, I can attest to the fact that teachers are very tired just doing their job: teaching. Not only do they not want to do research, but they do also not even have time to read

any research about teaching given the many distractions they must attend to each day. I am annoyed myself with academics coopting this idea that teachers should research their practices given many of these academics have not really set foot in a real classroom to teach a language class and experience that reality. Teachers simply have no extra time to do research and if they did have any time, they need to rest up for the next class. Indeed, reading research or doing research is not part of a teacher's job description, but teaching and marking are. There is also a lack of clarity involved regarding the application of any of this research to a teacher's particular practice because most of the research is published in academic journals with academese type language (indeed, I wonder whether practicing language teachers will read this chapter or these conference proceedings?). So, you may ask, what is the problem?

Well, there are two separate sides to the issue of teachers researching; on the one side you have the stepping back to do the research and having the time to think about the results of the research. On the other side, is a dynamic way of life full of action in a classroom where teachers actually teach. I see two different priorities here: researchers research (i.e. think), teachers teach (i.e. act) and as a result one side wants to tell the other what to do based on their *research*. Indeed, this result has set up a situation in the teaching profession where what teachers *know* about practice is too often defined *for them* by others (i.e. researchers). This is not a good state of affairs as teachers' voices are absent as the research is usually carried out on teachers by academics for academics and not usually passed on to the teachers who were a part of the research. So, how can we include teachers' voices and conduct research *with* teachers, *for* teachers and *by* teachers to bridge this gap? My answer is to encourage teachers to engage in their *own* reflections on *their* practice (Farrell, 1999, 2015a).

2. Reflective Practice As Teacher Research

Reflective practice is where teachers subject their own beliefs about their practices to some kind of scrutiny so that they can decide if what they are doing is what they really want to do in their teaching (Farrell, 2015b). So, I will keep this idea simple by encouraging teaches to seek answers to these

questions: *What do I do? How do I do it? Why do I do it? What is the result? Will I change anything?*

2.1 What Do I Do?

This first question may seem simple to many teachers to answer but I caution that there is a difference between knowing what you think you do and what you actually do. To start here is to consider how you will go about knowing what you do from getting some evidence rather than thinking about what you did which can be selective in your memory. One way of beginning this reflection is to think of a recent unplanned experience that occurred in your classroom that caused the made you stop and think about your practice for a moment or longer. Perhaps you designed a lesson plan that did not go according to plan because one student did not participate or the like. Or something went much better than you initially anticipated and you continued with this one activity until the end of the class and dismissed all your other plans as a result. By describing this event in great detail and analyzing what happened before, during, and after it, teachers can begin to explore their deeper held beliefs and assumptions about effective teaching practices based on real evidence about what occurred in their classroom. This to me is *real* teacher research by *the* teacher, and *for* the teacher. In order to reflect in such a manner and do this research, the following steps may help teachers (from Farrell, 2015b):

Describe any one event that occurred in your teaching that you would be interested in exploring further. This may be something that goes well or not so well in your lesson.

- Why did you choose this to focus on?
- Now describe the issue in as much detail as you can.
- Describe how the issue relates to your own teaching beliefs and values.

2.2 How Do I Do It?

I already talked above about the idea of a teacher collecting evidence about their reflections rather than just thinking about what happened in their lessons (or navel gazing). I write a lot in my journal about my practices and I also

record my lessons when I want to know more about how I do what I do. Writing in a journal is a useful way to engage in some self-reflection because this written record of various aspects of their practice provides some evidence we may forget soon after the lesson. The very act of writing means that the teacher must slow his or her thoughts and step back for a moment to think about his or her practice. In other words, writing has a build-in reflective mechanism and this can help teachers gain a deeper understanding of their work (Farrell, 2022). Teachers can start writing to such prompts as what did you notice in your classes today or this week? And/or what professional issues are of interest to you today or this week? After writing about issues, patterns emerge that can help decide a further focus for their reflections (Farrell, 2013). In addition, the internet these days offers more scope for teachers to share their teaching journals on a wider scale by keeping *on-line teaching journals* and *Blogs* and many more new emerging technologies including ChatGPT.

Teachers can also record (audio and/or video) their lessons so that they can have a real view of what actually happened during a lesson given that our personal recall can be very selective. This recording can also be a valuable type of research for practice teachers to see what *they* are interested in looking at in their *own* practice such as how much teacher-talk they engage in or the like. As part of their own classroom research, they can compare this evidence from the recordings to their lesson objectives to see if they have met their own objectives. If not, then they have evidence to make a change for the following lesson. In addition, teachers can use the recordings to explore how many questions they ask, what type of questions they ask and favor, what instructions they give, how they give them and their students' reactions to these instructions, and how they give feedback and their students' reactions to such feedback. Video recorders can show a teacher's action zone (who the teacher interacts with most and where the teacher usually stands/sits in class) as well as show what the students are doing in the class. In fact, the list of what teachers can review from a recording (audio and video) is endless. All of these are difficult to monitor while a teacher is teaching a class but can be reviewed later for reflection.

2.3 Why Do I Do It?

The answer to this particular question will depend a lot on what teachers believe in regarding teaching and learning a second language, or their beliefs about how and when language should be instructed. Teachers can reflect by considering the following questions (adapted from Richards & Lockhart, 1994) about their beliefs and practices:

- What are my beliefs about teaching and learning?
- How do these beliefs influence my teaching?
- Where do my beliefs come from?
- What way do I actually teach in the classroom and how do I know?
- What do my learners believe about learning?
- What do my learners believe about my teaching?
- How do these beliefs influence their approach to learning?
- What learning strategies do my learners adopt?
- What learning styles do my learners favor?
- What is my role as a language teacher?
- How does this role contribute to my teaching style?
- What do my learners perceive as my role as teacher?

Once teachers have articulated their beliefs, as part of their *own* teacher research, they examine their classroom practices (i.e. from their recording discussed above) to see if these beliefs are reflected or not in their classroom lessons and thus remain valid, or if they want to modify or change their practices in light of their articulated beliefs, or indeed, if they want to modify or change their beliefs to be more compatible with classroom practices they may deem either appropriate or necessary given the unique issues a teacher may face in day-to-day teaching. Teachers can also consider how others address similar issues (i.e. read what other teachers have done in terms of appropriate research that they can make use of) and if this has an impact on what they will implement in their classrooms in the future.

2.4 What Is The Result?

We teach with the hope that our students learn something from us. So, after we have examined a specific issue related to our practices, we can ask questions such as:

- What happened that was expected or surprising?
- What theories about teaching or personal experiences with learning are revealed in the data I have collected?
- How do these theories relate to my stated beliefs and attitudes?
- What are the consequences of my actions?
- What exactly are my students learning?

In other words, what is the result addresses *our* practices with *our* students rather than the result of the research which is more what academics would be looking at. The whole idea is that we are trying to make a difference with our teaching and not necessarily our research, which some people within our profession think is more important.

2.5 Will I Change Anything?

The final question a teacher can ask within a reflective practice as evidence-based teacher research cycle I outline in this paper concerns action, What I have noticed over the years is that research by academics *on* teachers rarely gets back to the teacher and so no action results. In a reflective practice approach to teacher research teachers look at all the evidence they collect and decide if any action is appropriate or necessary to provide more student learning. For example, a simple reflective practice teacher research project that I facilitated many years ago was where a Canadian English teacher wanted to discover what her students learned in her classes, so she decided to give them a brief questionnaire at the end of each class that consisted of three questions: What was class about? What did you learn? What was difficult? After a few classes they began to open up and most said that they could not understand her pronunciation, and although somewhat surprised, the teacher used this information in a positive way; she said: "It was actually comforting to read that because they brought something to my attention that I had not realized and I decided to change my pronunciation."

3. Conclusion

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, p.11) has 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 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 as such should be the subject rather than the object of their reflections. In this paper I have attempted to outline and discuss a simple *reflective practice as teacher research* approach that puts the individual teacher full center of *their own* research in order to get the best results possible that is appropriate for that teacher’s context and students. Such a practical approach to so-called teacher research can actually help individual teachers provide as many learning opportunities as possible for their particular students and in such a manner these teachers can be the best that they can be. Some time ago I was commissioned to review 2 books on teacher research for *ELT Journal*, and as part of my own “research” for this review I decided to contact each of the authors from each book who were practicing teachers. One teacher sent me a cautionary comment related to academia and teacher research that I think all of us academics should reflect on (Farrell, 2016, p. 355):

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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