

Reflections on 'Teachers Research! Chile 2016'

Laura Aza, Débora Izé Balsemão Oss and Richard Smith

Laura Aza from Argentina and Débora Oss from Brazil, who both won scholarships from IATEFL Research SIG to attend the Teachers Research! conference on 18 March 2016 in Santiago de Chile, reflect here on their experiences. Their reflections are introduced by Richard Smith, the originator and lead organizer of the event.



Introduction (Richard Smith)

Teacher-research – that is, research initiated and carried out by teachers into issues of importance to them in their own work – is increasingly seen as a powerful means of continuing professional development (CPD) for English language teachers. As part of its overall support for teacher-research over the last five years or so, IATEFL Research SIG has been organizing events which place teacher-research – and teachers themselves – at centre stage (see the book [Teachers Research!](#) (eds. Bullock and Smith, 2015) for more on the concept, and spirit, of these events). Following a successful conference in Turkey last year, the 'Teachers Research!' conference concept was tried out in Chile in March 2016, for what, it was hoped, would be the First Annual Latin American Conference for Teacher-research in ELT. This time the conference was supported, though not organized, by the Research SIG.

The '[Teachers Research! Chile 2016](#)' event, held at the Universidad San Sebastian in Santiago on 19 March 2016, was co-organized by the British Council Chile and the [Red de Investigadores Chilenos en ELT](#) (RICELT), an emerging network of Chilean ELT researchers which IATEFL Research SIG helped get off the ground a few years ago.

IATEFL Research SIG showed its support by publicising the call for papers via social media, organising an [online pre-conference discussion](#), and offering two scholarships to help teachers from outside Chile to attend. British Council Aptis was the main sponsor of the event, enabling participation by two special guests (see below) and six teachers under its Latin American Action Research Award Scheme, set up in 2014 (see <https://www.britishcouncil.cl/en/programmes/education/aptis-teachers>).

Under the slogan, 'Presentations of research *by* teachers across Latin America *for* other teachers' the conference attracted around 120 participants, with presenters coming from Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia and Uruguay. The event programme placed teachers at centre-stage from the beginning to the last. The first plenary session was by four teachers on the British Council Chile / Ministry of Education Chile Champion Teachers project, two of whom were represented in the book [Champion Teachers: stories of exploratory action research](#) published just the previous day, when a workshop was held to launch the fourth year of the programme. The second plenary session, after lunch, showcased five Aptis Action Research Award projects in Argentina, Chile and Uruguay, ranging in topic from blended learning in secondary schools to curriculum redesign at tertiary level. The reports of these projects are currently being edited for publication by the British Council. Between plenary sessions there were two sets of parallel sessions in four rooms, featuring four to five projects in each room. Each presenter talked in front of their poster for up to five minutes and this was followed by interaction around posters ('gallery-style') and a round-up discussion.

The day was rounded off by a general discussion which saw teachers invited to the front to share their impressions and visions, following brief comments by two special guests: Melba Libia Cárdenas, well-known for her work editing the [Profile](#) journal in Colombia and Inés K. Miller, equally well-known for her work with [Exploratory Practice](#) in Brazil. Feedback was extremely positive overall – participants reported finding the event friendly, stimulating and an excellent learning opportunity. There are currently plans to organise a similar conference every year, in a different Latin American country each time. The next conference, it has been confirmed, will be in Buenos Aires in late April or early May 2017, again to be organized primarily by the British Council in cooperation with a local association. Further details will appear on the ARAS website (<http://bit.ly/2dgwVgR>), along with photographs and video of the Santiago conference. Many thanks are due to British Council Chile, especially Deborah Sepulveda, and RICELT, in particular Paula Rebolledo, for their work co-organizing Teachers Research! Chile 2016 (!)



Reflective report (Laura Aza)

When I first heard about *Teachers Research!* I was immediately drawn to it because I felt it was somehow different to other conferences I had attended. To begin with, its seemingly oxymoronic name (yes, in some places, the concept of teaching runs contrary to the idea of doing research) suggested innovation. I saw this as a great opportunity to learn more about Action Research in the hope that I could share this knowledge with my colleagues on my return. The fact that the conference was being held in a Latin American country and that I would have the chance to meet colleagues from other countries also appealed to me. Needless to say, when I learnt I had been granted a scholarship by the IATEFL Research SIG to share my work and learn more about teacher-research, I was absolutely thrilled.

On the evening before the event, I met some of the other presenters coming from abroad outside the conference venue and we went for dinner together. While we received recommendations to try some of the delicious local food, the friendly small talk slowly flowed into a more stimulating discussion about teacher-research. I had the honour to sit near well-known professionals in the field like Melba Cárdenas, Richard Smith and Inés Miller. We explored a wide range of topics, such as the relevance of teacher research, the reasons why teachers do not carry out action research in many Latin American countries, what can be done to encourage action research among teachers, and so on.

These topics were further developed the following day in an equally friendly and relaxed fashion. While in more traditional conferences the keynote speakers clearly stand out from the rest, in this case, speakers mingled freely with the audience, because, after all, in most cases, speakers *were* the audience and vice versa. There was no doubt that the conference was '*by teachers for teachers*'. This was further emphasized in the plenaries, delivered by Chilean Champion Teachers and Aptis Action Research Award recipients, where teachers played the leading role. These teachers were highly *motivated* because they had done research on issues that were of direct concern to them and that they thought were worth researching. Their talks were *inspirational* because they showed fellow teachers that research is not only limited to academia. Their research decisions were *informed* because they were not based on stories but on information that had been systematically collected and analysed in a professional way, and which therefore had a direct impact on their teaching and on their professional development.



As a presenter, I felt relaxed and at ease with my co-presenters and audience. We were expected to explain briefly what our action research project was about, standing in front of our posters. My presentation, titled 'Implementing a Recreational Reading Project in the Secondary School Classroom' was about a project I carried out in a multi-cultural secondary school in Buenos Aires. I encouraged students to select their own books and gave them some guidance, as well as introducing discussion activities relating to the books, to help them acquire the habit of reading for pleasure. On the basis of students' journals, a small-scale survey, and my field notes, it was apparent that motivation to read and greater autonomy were developed.

I felt confident talking about my project – was it because I was comfortable with a topic which had been self-selected? Was it because I had conducted the research myself, in my own classroom, with my own students? Was it the informal structure of the presentation? Once our five minute account was over, our colleagues approached us and asked us questions, which was, to my mind, the most enriching part. It was at this point that you learnt that your project was interesting to other colleagues too, that you had inspired other teachers to try your project out with their own students, or that your research could be improved on, for example by incorporating peer observation into the project. By the end of the presentation, the poster seemed to be too small for all the ideas that had come up during the presentation.

The discussion panel at the end revealed the hard work behind the organization of the event and the effort of those who had travelled long distances to attend the conference without any type of financial help. Some of the ideas highlighted at this closing session were the importance of viewing teachers as agents of change, and teacher research as the engine of a change coming from within rather than imposed on teachers. Finally, there was general agreement that there should be follow-up work done to keep encouraging teacher research. Teacher Associations, research journals, research networks and certainly conferences like this one play a key role in this respect.

The conference came to an end, but it was only the beginning for new connections – exchanging of contact details with colleagues, sharing the findings of our projects via e-mail, future arrangements to meet in our home towns, and the hope that the conference could be held yearly in other Latin American countries.



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It was now time to go back home and as my plane flew across the Andes mountains, my thoughts were somewhere up in the clouds. I was thinking about the endless topics that could be researched in the classroom and the boundless potential for teacher-research. I was still miles away from Buenos Aires, but, at that point, I felt the sky was the limit.

Reflective report (Débora Izé Balsemão Oss)

Teachers Research! Chile 2016 first called my attention for its exclamation mark as part of the title of the conference. Exclamation marks usually convey strong feelings and enthusiasm – and I am fond of that. As I learned about the Red de Investigadores Chilenos en ELT (RICELT), joint organizers of the conference, I became curious about the concept behind the name – “*What’s in a name?*”. A network of Chilean English language teachers researching their practices was definitely a venture I would like to learn more about.

Believing I might have missed the deadline for registering made most of my hopes vanish and the chance of perhaps sharing what my students had been guiding me through fade away. Nonetheless, as strong feelings and enthusiasm are not that feeble, it turned out that my work was granted with one of the IATEFL Research SIG scholarships.

Once I was selected as the only Brazilian English language teacher to present a paper, I felt the responsibility had become even greater. Although there are some (like the teachers working with Inés Miller in Rio de Janeiro), not many practitioners are ready to take on all the challenges that ELT in Brazil imposes, and that includes sharing findings we practitioners unveil by investigating our classrooms.

There are many aspects of the conference that could be mentioned. Particularly impressive for me were the four Chilean Champion Teachers who gave the first plenary, Daniela Gajardo, María Elena Gutiérrez, Leyla Nuñez and Rosa Rodríguez, faithful as they were to the voices of many English language teachers in Latin America who struggle to find ways of prioritising their students, every day. Paula Rebolledo not only introduced these practitioners' research stories, she also presented us with her own genuine personal practical knowledge. And that was how our day started.

Right after a fruitful coffee break, when participants were still eager to learn more about the reports we had just applauded, the first presentation session started. I was a participant in the room where Tom Connelly introduced research on ICT, citizenship and literacy in secondary education. We heard from and interacted around posters by July Rincon Ortega on Community Based Pedagogy in Colombia, by Yanilis Romero and Milton Pájaro on Citizenship Competence and English Language Learning, also from Colombia, as well as by my new Argentinian friend Laura Giacomini on [‘A creative writing lesson which combines art, social network and fun!’](#) (with an exclamation mark).

After we came back from lunch, Richard Smith chaired a plenary of research stories from ARAS teachers. Argentina was represented by Mariana Serra and Silvia Maria Severino, while Chile brought Natacha Pardo Contreras. Maria Ines Barasain (by video), Cecilia Prieto Outerelo, Laura Flores and Serrana Echenagusia also shared their research, conducted in Uruguay.

Right after that, in the room of parallel sessions moderated by Tom Connelly there were presentations from Argentina, Brazil and Chile which covered reading, vocabulary and curriculum at secondary levels. Laura Aza, my fellow IATEFL Research SIG scholarship winner reported on her work in Argentina (see her own report above), while Gabriel Morales and Erick Aravena’s ‘Second Language Acquisition Theory and Analysis of the English Curriculum’ and Aydelina Medina Gajardo’s ‘Encouraging Knowledge and Uses of Everyday Classroom Commands and Everyday Language’ represented the quality of research that is being developed in Chile these days. Finally, this was the session where I also presented my poster, on ‘Learning to Read: a Collaborative Endeavour’. For this teacher-research project I instructed learners in reading strategies and encouraged them to take an active part in deciding on what we would learn in class, helping weaker learners, and contributing to the research report, among other collaborative tasks. As I reported at the conference, the outcomes were very positive, both for English language learning as well as collaboration among and with my students.



Needless to say, Inés K. Miller's and Melba Libia Cárdenas's closing words touched our hearts. Inés praised the way teachers had been the 'stars of the event', due to the way it was organised, and in our presentations we had come across as the real agents of what we were doing (she noted that 'bigger authors' weren't really present in most of what we were saying, and also that we had learned to listen to our learners more). Melba called it a 'wonderful and inspiring day' and highlighted what we could gain through continued networking and development of a culture of sharing. Melba's and Inés' own commitment and achievements in Latin America are the proof that research *by* teachers *for* teachers is a way to develop and to eventually reach recognition of practitioners' knowledge.
