

‘Innovating in ELT research’: TEC14 pre-conference event, 20 February 2014, Hyderabad, India

This one-day workshop, facilitated by Prof. Paul Gunashekar (EFL University, Hyderabad), Prof. Rama Mathew (Delhi University) and Richard Smith (University of Warwick, UK), was organized by The British Council India for teachers and teacher educators interested in engaging in ELT research, maybe for the first time. The workshop featured presentations by the first winners of British Council India’s English Language Teaching Research Partnership (ELTReP) awards and was supported by Research SIG. Congratulations to the winners of the prizes we offered to participants – Sujata Noronha and Robert Slattery – whose reflections we reproduce below:

(1) Reflections by Sujata Noronha

‘Innovating in English Language Teaching Research’ – a string of 6 words that left me both intrigued and curious to find out more. I signed up for the workshop, which was a Pre-Conference Event to the 2014 TEC (Teacher Educators Conference), organised annually by the British Council in India.

As one mentally prepares to participate in a workshop one begins to pick up soft signs of what is to come. My first sign of this being an intimate, non-threatening space came by way of an email request. The requirement was for every ELTReP Awardee to prepare a short 5–7 minute narrative on their research journey. “Ahh” I thought, “a narrative within the confines of a Research workshop. That IS innovating!”.

Research as an area of study has claimed for itself a fairly lofty position. Most ‘lay’ people believe that it is an area that must belong only to academic minds. This PCE chose to take an alternate path. It attempted, quite successfully, to debunk the idea that research is an elite preoccupation. There has been a call for all educators to engage with the idea of research, and the path chosen for this initiation with us was in the form of an introductory workshop to research methodology.

I was struck by the informal and warm atmosphere created by seating participants at tables and allowing the natural flow of conversation and introductions to overcome barriers of a new unfamiliar environment.

The innovation for language teaching research lay in the design of this workshop, which was well-organized and fluid. Listening, speaking, reading, writing – these were all there in the design of this ELT workshop and were well-facilitated.

Dr. Richard Smith began the workshop by stressing how it would be participatory and joking that participants would work while the experts watched, and this was exactly what did not happen. One of the most innovative approaches was to demonstrate how mentoring talk can support thinking through a problem into a coherent research question – with Dr. Richard Smith, Professor Rama Matthew and Professor Paul Gunashekar presenting mentoring dialogues at centre stage. Paul kept us alert by taking on the stage name ‘Richard’ while playing a teacher in the Rama Matthew High School! But, fun aside, observing this careful role play brought to the fore the process, the moments of quiet reflection, the questioning, the channelling, the scaffolding, that talking with a colleague can bring to developing a research mind.

Sessions moved quite seamlessly from a general overview of what research is to the stages in research to sharing of present research experiences by ELTReP award-winners. On reflection it is quite startling how easily we moved from research as a concept/phenomenon that happens ‘out there’ into the space of thinking of ourselves as researchers and then encouraging and supporting others to think of their research possibilities.

I will look back on this workshop as a first step, a gentle entry into the common parlour of enquiry and research in ELT for people who work within the field, knowing that there is more to learn and question and that ELT research engagement is a necessary and essential act of professional commitment to the field.

2) Reflections by Robert Slattery

The pre-conference event was great if you can ever describe a workshop as great. Great is an emotional term, maybe a motivational term. In this context I wish to reflect on the general objectives.

For me there were two objectives. The general direct objective was to convince us, if we needed convincing, that research for practitioners is not only important, but also not a big deal. The indirect objective was at least as important for me. It was that we are all companions. We are working together as researchers. We can get help from other fellow researchers. On top of this, the message also came through strong and clear that the facilitators were ready to help us. Hence the workshop was great and made me feel great.

Regarding individual sessions, after the introductory session outlining the details and with a comforting word

to us ELTReP awardees not to feel nervous in presenting the progress of our research to the group, we moved on to the activity-based learning.

In group C, Meganathan, Mathuse, Degamber and I presented where we were. Richard – the real Richard, and not Paul as Richard – was invaluable in giving feedback. I was eager to make my presentation and get help. I really believe that my topic ‘Teaching of English Grammar in Hindi-medium secondary schools’ is very important for our students. Research can support English-medium education and a better chance for pupils to get good jobs. Why can’t we get our Hindi-medium students to a good standard of English and also a chance for a good job? One objective of the session was to help us awardees and certainly in our group the objective was fulfilled.

The afternoon was devoted to helping the future researchers in groups to present their possible research project within a framework of stating the problem, forming research questions, outlining methods for getting information to help answer the questions, and a time frame. Before the group work, role-plays on how to mentor were given by Richard, Rama and Paul. Then we, awardees, became the monitors for the future researchers. It was interesting for me to see that most of the time was spent in defining what the research problem was! Making a poster, learning about the projects of the other posters, reflecting, and sticking suggestions on the posters was a real learning exercise. So what did I learn today? First of all, not to be too ambitious, good advice but not easy to follow! Secondly, that there is a large research team of other researchers to advise and guide me!

What else could we have done? Started earlier to give us more time; spent some time on the use of research tools such as how to design a good questionnaires, interview techniques, and so on.

And finally, what is my next step? Probably I will try to look for more literature connected with my topic, while conducting interviews with the teachers of English in my focus group. Any class observation is not possible as from now till April as there will be exams and holidays. Of course I will also surely be in contact with some of my companion researchers. Great!

IATEFL ReSIG Pre-Conference Event 'Teachers Research!' 1 April 2014, Harrogate

(1) Background - Richard Smith

'Teachers Research!' was a special participant-centred day dedicated to research *by* teachers *for* teachers. The day was structured around short presentations by poster followed by informal discussion, in combination with commentary and open discussion sessions involving Dick Allwright, Anne Burns and Donald Freeman as guest commentators. With the permission of all participants, we have made [videos and photos of the day](#) available on the Research SIG website.

The title 'Teachers Research!' echoes the title of the 'Teachers Develop Teachers Research' (TDTR) series of conferences, started off in 1992 at Aston University, UK. Organized jointly by IATEFL's Research and Teacher Development SIGs, the last of these conferences, to our knowledge, took place in Chile in the early 2000s. We hoped that this 2014 Pre-Conference Event would revive the spirit of TDTR as expressed by Julian Edge in 1991 - 'there is one main criterion which a participant presentation should meet: it must be in the nature of a report on the speaker's experience of carrying out some investigation into his/her own teaching context, along with a statement of outcomes in terms of personal and/or professional development' (*Research News - The Newsletter of the IATEFL Research SIG No. 1 June 1991*: 17). For the philosophy underlying the 'participant-centred' design of the day, see Barfield, A. & Smith, R. (1999). [Teacher-learner autonomy: the role of conference and workshop design](#). In *Proceedings of Teachers Develop Teachers Research (TDTR) 4* (CD-ROM). Whitstable, Kent: IATEFL.

We hoped that there would be opportunities to present, discuss, listen, learn and get feedback for: people completely new to teacher-research (TR), but interested in it; people doing TR who'd like the opportunity to present informally and get some feedback (e.g. in a group, talking next to a poster to a few people); people working with teachers who'd like to introduce them to TR, and who would like to discuss this in an informal atmosphere with others; teacher educators already supporting teachers in TR and wishing to share ideas and experience and get feedback; and people with ideas they want to discuss about what TR 'should' be like.

(2) Report of the Day – Ana Inés Salvi

Introduction to the day and first morning session

Richard Smith and Sarah Brewer (Coordinator and Events Coordinator of the Research SIG, respectively) introduced the event, before asking participants to write down their own questions and expectations for the day. These queries were rich and varied, including how to do teacher research, what methodology best suits teacher research, how to ensure that students benefit from teacher research, how to support teacher research, what the difference is between academic and teacher research, whether and how teacher research should influence policy, how teacher research has developed in the last twenty years around the world, and where to publish and access teacher research accounts. (A complete list of participants' questions and expectations, and a video of this session are accessible on the Research SIG website).

Eight presenters then introduced their posters to the audience in three minutes each, after which participants moved around the room approaching the posters of their interest and engaging in a dialogue with presenters and other participants alike. **Christina Gkonou** talked about 'Research in Action: teaching reading strategies for IELTS'; **Katie Moran**, 'First experience of Exploratory Action Research: Improving Oral Presentations'; **Becky Steven & Jessica Cobley**, 'Researching ways to guide our students to develop their speaking fluency'; **Esma Asuman Eray**, 'Using online articles to improve learners' vocabulary storage'; **Jayne Pearson**, 'Action Research on Participation and Control in EAP Writing Assessment'; **Bushra Ahmed Khurram**, 'Promoting Learner Involvement in a Large university-level-ESL Class held in Difficult Circumstances'; and **Elena Oncevska**, 'Outside the comfort zone: An experiment in group argumentative writing'. (The abstracts, pictures, and video-recorded oral introductions of these poster presentations can be found on the website). The session was closed by a 10-minute commentary on these posters by Dick Allwright, Anne Burns and Donald Freeman (also on the website).

Second morning session

With refreshing coffee and biscuits, the second morning session kicked off. In the same manner as the previous session, nine presenters introduced their posters before engaging in conversation with members of the audience who wanted to know more about their topics. **Clare Fielder** discussed 'Action Research on Learner-Directed Feedback in essay writing courses'; **Yasmin Dar**, 'An Exploratory Practice Classroom Research Project'; **Angie (Akile) Nazim & Emily Mason**, 'Preparing Students for an Academic Presentation Maximising Class Time'; **Oriana Onate**, 'Attributions to Success and Failure at Learning English at Universidad de La Frontera, Temuco, South of Chile'; **Martin Dutton &**

Arizio Sweeting, 'Improving Awareness of Connected Speech for the Cambridge Teaching Knowledge Test: Knowledge About Language (English)'; **Ana Inés Salvi**, 'Issues in classroom-based Practitioner Research'; and **Cynthia James**, 'Creativity in the Language Classroom'. (The abstracts, pictures, and video-recorded oral introductions are all on the website).

Afternoon session

Immediately after lunch we had a lively general discussion of issues in teacher-research. Originally this was planned as a Q & A session with Dick Allwright, Anne Burns and Donald Freeman but it became more participant-centred than that. Forty minutes long and not to be missed! (Again, you can access it via our website).

After this engaging general discussion, five poster presentations on supporting teacher research were introduced and participants were invited to look at them and talk to their presenters. **Harry Kuchah & Richard Smith** discussed 'A CAMELTA Teacher Association Research project'; **Inés Miller**, together with some of her inspiring Brazilian students, 'Exploratory Practice in initial teacher education: teacher educator and teacher-learner voices'; **Judith Hanks**, 'Teachers working with Exploratory Practice (EP) in an EAP context'; **Daniel Xerri & Odette Vassallo**, 'Enhancing Teachers' Research Engagement through Learner Corpora Analysis'; and **Paula Rebolledo & Tom Connelly**, 'Supporting Teacher Research in China' (see website!).

Final reflections

At the end of the day, participants in 'Teachers Research!' were asked to write down their reflections, and invited to hand them in if they had no objections to them being shared more widely. More specifically, they were asked to reflect on 1) highlights of the day, 2) what they had learned, and 3) what they were planning to do from now. Regarding the first question, many participants highlighted the free-flow, participatory nature of the event, the opportunity to talk to our three commentators, and the varied and creative poster presentations, among other aspects. In response to the second question, participants reported having learned ways of engaging in teacher research; alternative, perhaps relatively informal, ways of sharing teacher research; and that teacher research is tightly intertwined with teaching and learning, among other things. Answers to the third question varied from humorous ones such as 'What's next? Going to the pub', to plans to share what had been learned in this event with colleagues, to start doing research, and to explore what has been learned in the last twenty years or so about teacher research (and all participants' reflections are accessible through our website).

'Teacher Researchers in Action', 27-28 June 2014, Gediz University, Izmir, Turkey

Obie Noe B. Madalang
(Mountain Province State Polytechnic College Bontoc, Mountain Province, Philippines)

After teaching in an exclusive university for the wealthy for nearly two decades, my homing instinct led me to my birthplace to retire and till the land my parents left me - not to teach.

But my obvious presence in our sleepy, laid back town invited offers for me to go back to teaching. I accepted to teach English for one whole year in our local public high school and decided that there was too much work to be done with too little support from the educational system especially for innovative and responsive teaching to give the children the skills they really need. I called it quits before the system would turn me into a robot devoid of emotion and conscience.

I went on to try the local college. The set-up was better for I was given the freedom to decide what was best for my less privileged students desperately dreaming of a better future and better opportunities through college education.

The working environment in the state college is highly competitive but not in terms of job performance. I had nothing to turn to in terms of professional development. I see traditional and usually futile English teaching practices all over the place with colleagues not minding if those practices and methods are yielding positive results in the students or not. Making college student speak and write in English is almost impossible with their English proficiency of a third grader—it was an uphill climb I had to brave alone.

As a desperate move, I ventured to research tools that would make my job more efficient. I wandered into cyberspace and the lucky winds swept me to the IATEFL Research SIG site, which opened the floodgates of opportunities for me for research including professional organizations and resource websites such as that of The International Research Foundation (TIRF) and finally to an international research conference in enchanting Turkey!

Never had I dreamt of setting foot in a foreign land. IATEFL made that possible. Never had I realized that teaching English could be so full of questions. The conference at Gediz University, Izmir, Turkey provided some answers, which made me see my job and my life in a completely different perspective.

The 35-hour trip to Turkey was daunting to consider but the scholarship granted to me by ReSIG and the constant encouragement from ReSIG coordinator Dr Richard Smith solidified my resolve even if it meant I had to process my travel documents at an unprecedented speed - at least by Philippine standards. The trip to Manila, where I had to apply for passport and visa, is 13 bumpy hours by bus, no plane. I had to take three round trips to complete the travel documents alone not to mention the heat, pollution, traffic and unbelievably long queues; I thought I would arrive first before dawn just to find out that many had camped out the night before.

In Izmir, I got to meet and listen to the front-liners of ELT research. All the participants coming from different nations and educational institutions were genuinely friendly, which lightened my heavy jet lag and the strange feeling of being the only Asian at the conference. I guess that is the common characteristic of English Language Teachers—being friendly and most of all open-minded.

Dr Anne Burns of Australia left me thinking of inviting my colleagues in our school to undertake a collaborative action research project on English classroom practices. I made notes on how important individual research is but how collaborative research could paint a wider, deeper and more vivid picture of an issue than one undertaken by a single person.

Well, I thought I knew everything about English teaching but I forgot to consider the importance of ‘understanding issues’ as against my usual practice of jumping in to ‘find solutions to said issues.’ It was so kind of Dr Dick Allwright from the UK to point that out in his plenary. For example, why did I not think of asking the question: “Why can’t my students converse in even simple English sentences?” rather than: “What activities shall I have my students do to make them converse in English?”

ReSIG coordinator Dr Richard Smith, in his plenary talk, reminded me that I am not alone in this world in going through difficulties in the teaching profession. There are other teachers/researchers who are even in worse conditions but are able to find ways to be effective in their teaching. Taking inspiration from others’ experiences, associating with colleagues, exploring possibilities, and other encouraging principles were things I learned which were never taught in college.

As well as the plenary talks, the teacher-researchers who presented their papers were inspiring. I came to

hear about ELF (English as a Lingua Franca) for the first time. There were even studies done about translation, achievement attribution, peer observation, communication inhibitions and anxieties, and many others. Even though I was dizzy due to the sudden change of time zone and the surreal feeling of being in a foreign land, I managed to take notes for further review under normal conditions.

To teach, get paid, grow old, retire and die -- that had been my timeline in life. After Teacher Researchers in Action, I want to reset my timeline. May I insert: “engage in English Language research more, go to Manchester for the next IATEFL conference, enrich my students’ lives, leave a legacy... and die *happy*”?

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