

Practitioner Research

In this regular feature or 'space' in the newsletter we invite teachers, academics and postgraduate students alike to get involved in research into their own practice and to share their experiences, reflections and views on research they have done in their own classrooms. The following piece has been contributed by Wayne Trotman of Izmir Katip Çelebi University, who reflects here on how – and why – he engaged a group of teachers in teacher-research in his institution. Wayne looks forward to the 27-28 June ReSIG-supported conference 'Teacher-Researchers in Action', which was being organized at Gediz University, Izmir, Turkey at the time he wrote this. A report of the conference itself appears later in this issue of ELT Research under 'Conference Reports', and at the end of this piece Wayne provides his own updated reflections, following the conference.

The Road to Gediz

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Having been involved in ELT in Turkey for over thirty years, the last twelve of which had been in the higher education EAP arena and during which period I had completed my doctoral studies at the University of Warwick (UK), I yearned to organise a research conference for language teachers in the Aegean region. I was initially put off by the obvious amount of work involved and the likelihood of not being able to find enough speakers. My enthusiasm decreased further when our School of Foreign Languages was moved fifty kilometres outside the city – a barren location to which not many would wish to journey on even a sunny day. In 2012 I left that post, preferring instead a nearer location at a newly-opened state university where – thanks to the PhD – I was appointed as an Assistant Professor responsible for teacher-education.

A year into the new post, and after serendipitously bumping into an ELT colleague at Istanbul airport, I learned there was a conference for language teacher researchers planned at the nearby privately funded Gediz University and organized by Kenan Dikilitaş, then in the process of completing his own doctoral studies. Along with several other colleagues, on the day of the conference we met and I congratulated him on the event, especially when I learned this would be the second ELT research conference he had helped set up and this time inviting attendance from 'outsiders'. I was instantly envious, and at the same time curious to learn how he had done this. Kenan was at that time having problems with completing his thesis and requested a meeting with me on this. Alarm bells began to ring in my

ears. Dealing with one's own thesis is tough enough; helping out with those written by others was something I had warned myself never to do.

After the briefest of chats about cleft sentences – Kenan's doctoral topic - I realised I had missed working on doctoral research matters, and we began to meet on a regular basis over the course of one winter while Kenan completed his data analysis. Our discussions began to be less about his thesis, however, and more about the upcoming third Gediz University research conference, scheduled for the summer of 2013. I began thinking that if Kenan could combine a full time job as trainer at Gediz University with organising a research conference there, then why couldn't I?

I invited myself along to Kenan's office for an afternoon of feedback on participants' intended research presentations, individual tutorials at which IATEFL Research SIG Coordinator Richard Smith was present to provide further feedback. While Kenan and Richard discussed the possibility of combining the fourth Gediz conference with an IATEFL Research SIG conference in Izmir in June 2014, an idea formed in my mind that teachers from my own institution might like to present work there. 'Anything Kenan could do, so could I' was my motto.

Back at work – at Izmir Katip Çelebi University – I put out initial feelers, inviting colleagues to a brief meeting to mull over the possibilities and degrees of interest in setting up and carrying out their own research projects. Nine colleagues attended the first meeting at which I outlined how full support for research would be available from at least me. Motivation soared when I explained at the second meeting that there was a possibility of presenting at the by then confirmed Gediz / IATEFL Research SIG conference in June 2014. Meetings over the summer of 2013 continued at which proposals were refined; they were later attended by Kenan, who provided valuable input concerning researching EAP in the higher education sector in Turkey. Currently proposals range from the benefits to teachers of peer-observation to raising students' intercultural awareness by using poetry in the classroom.

So you see, a little bit of luck – or, rather, an event or forum like the Gediz conference stimulating interest and initial impetus -- is all it takes to create an in-house research community. The current nine colleagues involved in working towards presenting at the conference now see themselves as not only language teachers. As one commented only recently, "I feel like my workplace sees the value in my investigating my classroom instead of just providing me with a weekly schedule and telling me to get on with that". Time will tell whether the nine are accepted as speakers, but I'm optimistic, and in research that's the way to be.

Update:

I wrote the above piece in late 2013, by which time research studies were well underway. As I type this, in late August 2014, I'm in the process of organising our very own first ELT Research conference at Izmir Katip Çelebi University; but more on that later. Of the 'nine colleagues' referred to earlier, six researchers saw things through to the end; two pulled out early on, quite rightly prioritising their doctoral studies, while another failed to get over the final hurdle, realising that research can at times be a tough gig.

Each of the six presented their studies at the ReSIG-supported conference here in Izmir in May 2014 attended by over a hundred participants from across Turkey and beyond. Some were thrilled to have invited plenary speakers Anne Burns or Dick Allwright sitting in on their sessions. That the six were able to get this far was down to their efforts over the winter and into the spring, often with busy teaching and admin loads, not to mention their own youngsters. During this time, apart from scheduled individual weekly tutorials with me concerning the ethics of data generation and analysis, Kenan Dikilitaş kindly gave up several afternoons to enable our "super six" to get a very much appreciated second opinion on their work. All it cost from the 'Research Budget' (aka 'my own pocket') was the price of tea and digestive biscuits.

As a group, we were also lucky to be invited to the nearby Gediz University to listen in on Kenan's own tutorials with potential first and second-time presenters. I guess the key words thus far are 'mutual respect', 'communication' and 'co-operation'. Kenan and I have come a long way since we met two years ago. The initial politeness has hardened to hurling research related barbed comments at each other, but we're still talking, still planning future conferences. Having a sense of humour is vital when you're constantly delving into often murky data.

Success breeds success: all six were recently sent news that articles they'd written up on their studies have been accepted for publication in a forthcoming ReSIG Teacher Research book.¹ Before that comes out, they will all be speaking at our own first local conference which is scheduled for September 24th 2014. Meanwhile, research never sleeps, and I'm already in their ears over their next research study, with some wishing not only to carry out their own, but also mentor other first timers. As Simon Borg said to his audience when presenting in Izmir recently, "Teacher development is contagious." Try it, and you'll see.

¹ [Ed. Note] Papers from the Gediz conference are being edited to appear in a forthcoming ReSIG book.