IATEFL RESEARCH SIG

Article Discussion Week ONE: **Language teacher research engagement**

Date: 12-16 December 2011
Article: 'Language teacher research engagement', by Simon Borg
Reference: Borg, S. (2010). Language teacher research engagement.
Language Teaching, 43(4), 391-429.
Guest moderator: Simon Borg
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Many thanks to Simon Borg, the contributors, Glen Hill, Margot McCamley,
Kay Bentley, Margaurina, Yasmin Dar, Ed Russell, Akeel Ahmed and Steven
Graham, and all the readers.

Prompts for discussion:

1. Are there any claims in the study which either support or contradict
   your personal experience and/or beliefs?
2. In your context, is it reasonable to expect teachers who are not
   engaged in formal study to engage with language teaching
   research? Why or why not?
3. How do you feel about the notion of teachers as consumers of
   published research?
4. In your context, is it reasonable to expect teachers who are not doing
   a course (e.g. an MA or Delta) to engage in language teaching
   research? Why or why not? To what extent do the barriers listed in
   Table 2 pertain? Are there any others in your context?
5. The article argues that inquiry which is not made public should not be
   called research. What are your views on this?
6. The literature raises concerns about the quality of the classroom-
   oriented inquiries that practising teachers often undertake. Is it fair to
   assess such research using the criteria that apply to research more
   generally?
7. What role can school leaders or departmental heads play in
   promoting research engagement in their schools? Do you have any
   positive or negative experience to cite in this respect?
8. What kinds of initiatives in language teaching might increase the
   extent to which teachers read and do published research? How might
   associations such as IATEFL contribute to such initiatives?
9. To what extent do the private EFL sector and the state EFL sector face
   similar challenges in enabling teachers to engage in and with
   research? Much less evidence exists about the state sector.
10. Respond, in an open-ended manner, to any others issues in the paper
    which stimulate a reaction in you.

On being research engaged

From my experience, I found keeping a journal of my day's events in the
classroom was the best way to be reflective and critical of what happened
and how problems could have been better resolved. (Margaurina)

I couldn't have carried out my own classroom research without the support of a colleague who enabled me to do peer teaching. (Kay Bentley)

I have always been careful not to suggest that teachers SHOULD be research engaged; it is, rather, a professional development option for those whose working context makes it feasible. (Simon Borg)

Do I want to engage in research for academic reasons or for professional development? I think it's for both. (Yasmin Dar)

We read so many books written by people who are not working in the classroom, who are academics. Nothing wrong with that, except to say that whatever is decided as the 'next best thing' should be trialled, but not to be believed as being the next best thing because so and so said so. It should not be decided by academics at the higher level or management to across the board install that new methodology into the classroom. If it is trailed appropriately, then training is provided then classroom methodologies can be implemented into the classroom. But teachers need to be involved. (Margot McCamley)

As Simon pointed out in his article, many people want presentations or articles to tell them how to go back to their classes and improve things. Nothing wrong with that. I do it. However, if the basis for the new teaching strategies lacks a good foundation (as is the case in many), it's wasted effort. So, I strive to find things to improve pedagogy, but I read about the theoretical foundations, too. (Glen Hill)

On the barriers to teacher engagement with research

Glen also raised the issue of time, which is a common reason cited by teachers for not engaging in research. There are no easy solutions here - doing research will always involve some extra time commitment - but of course feasibility and sustainability are key issues to think about. Teachers often bite off more than they can chew, in research terms, and result invariably is that the project is never completed. Yasmin has referred to exploratory practice (EP) and one its helpful principles is that teacher inquiry should minimize the extra burden on teachers; another principle which can guide us is that teacher research should be as far as possible integrated with and make use of teachers' regular classroom or professional activities. There will always be some extra commitment of time, but these principles can make the undertaking more feasible. Collaborative research among teachers can also ease the burden on individual teachers. (Simon Borg)

On the nature of teacher research

In terms of its general processes, I agree that teacher research shares some common ground with research more broadly in other disciplines, but it is important to recognize the particular nature of teacher research and to assess it accordingly. For example, statistical proof (and indeed proof of any

kind) is not a realistic goal in the research teachers do. It is more feasible for teachers to seek through their research a deeper understanding of particular aspects of their work. This should of course be achieved systematically, but the local purpose and flexible nature of such inquiry does distinguish it from research in the sciences. When I work with teachers we always start by exploring such issues and once teachers understand that they are not expected to do large-scale statistical work leading to generalizable knowledge communicated through an academic article, teacher research becomes a much more feasible goal. Teacher research is not an attempt to make teachers academics but a strategy to help them develop, through systematic inquiry, deeper understandings of their work. (Simon Borg)

I think what teachers are trying to achieve when they do research (and I use research with purpose, since it indicates that the teacher is undertaking a set of steps which they have thought about, observed and designed, and then trialled) is to improve the learning opportunities of students. Not all teachers will write an academic paper that corresponds to their findings but will continue to apply their outcomes in a variety of classrooms to improve student outcomes. I believe it is imperative that if this research has proven valid outcomes, then it should be aired in a more public forum, be that at a conference or in journals or in INSETT. Remembering that this is classroom research, often undertaken in discreet language learning environments and not in a wider academic field of study, and thus may not be undertaken with an academic research focus. It is then up to those participating in the uptake of that information to assess this. If it is undertaken by someone who is required to meet the academic requirement of three papers a year, then it is imperative that the stringent academic criteria be applied, in which case the research being undertaken would surely need to meet academic validity. (Margaurina)

On the need to publish

I do believe that research needs to be shared in some way, but the belief that research needs to result in an academic article is another factor that often puts teachers off. The question for us then is to identify feasible but systematic ways of enabling teachers to disseminate their work. A range of oral and written options exist. Social media have a role to play here, though we need to be aware that our ability to critically assess research findings communicated via, for example, Twitter, will be limited. (Simon Borg)

The "publish or perish" focus of higher education does nothing to improve teaching (though does do uni research rankings a favour) and discredits the power of the spoken word. Perhaps institutionally this could be amended so a conference presentation is valued equally to a written paper. What has the bigger impact? Particularly as more and more teacher education sessions are videoed and viewed asynchronously... (Ed Russell)

Ever read "unpublished data" or "personal communication" in journal articles? Any inquiry is research, whether it makes it to print or not. Some people have no time to write (while some look at the 12-18 months needed to get an article published as too long to wait), while others may be incapable (for

many reasons) of writing well enough to suit editors' requirements. Still others may opt not to write for the sake of just doing. (Glen Hill)

On sharing and publishing

It is common misconception that 'making public' must involve academic writing of some kind and this is often a barrier to teacher engagement in research. Private inquiry need not be called research - it is not available for public scrutiny and no one else can learn from it. This does not mean that private study has no value - far from it - but we can call it self study or reflective practice rather than research. (Simon Borg)

On action research or teacher research

For me, teacher research is the umbrella term (see my definition in the article we are discussing); action research follows a particular cyclical methodology with a focus on improving practice. Action research, when conducted by teachers in their classrooms, is also teacher research but not all teacher research is action research. (Simon Borg)

On school leaders or departmental heads and research engagement in schools

It would be great if members of staff, as well as department heads, shared their knowledge and experience of research. In both of my teaching contexts, a minority of staff and even less department heads seem to be engaged in language classroom research. (Yasmin Dar)

I believe strongly that research should be at the heart of any aspiring college's vision and that, as a manager, I should encourage my team to 'build a relationship' with relevant educational research. (Akeel Ahmed)

On formats for research sharing

I am interested in reading about other teachers' language classroom research to see if I can relate to the themes and issues that they have chosen to investigate. I would like see more research being made public in oral and visual formats such as online videos, podcasts. (Yasmin Dar)

On quality of research

There have also been various comments on the quality of the research that teachers do. Without attention to quality, research of any kind is pointless and it is troubling that so much effort goes into activities which purport to be research where there is a distinct lack of quality. This takes us back to the issues of training and mentoring. I don't think teachers do poor quality research on purpose - it's often a combination of need (e.g. for promotion),

uninformed enthusiasm, and lack of awareness (by individuals and departments) of the importance of quality and how to achieve it. It is important not to associate quality with any particular form of research though - there are generic criteria, such as purposefulness and systemacity, which can be used to assess the quality of research irrespective of its orientation. (Simon Borg)

On feedback on research presentations and future work of ReSIG

One very useful practical idea to come out of this is that of creating mechanisms through which teachers can get feedback on their presentations, either at a conference itself, or in advance, by putting a rehearsal on-line for others to view and give feedback on. I am sure this is something ReSIG will look further into. (Simon Borg)

… the importance of feedback on research presentations. When was the last time anyone asked an audience for feedback on their (research) presentation at a conference? It could be something that takes a few minutes, a questionnaire or something, and a valuable tool in a presenter's development as a presenter of their research. Likewise, I think the "pay to share" policy at conferences is prohibitive. I understand that conferences may have to cost but if you are presenting, why should you pay to share, if the event is learning / development focused? (Ed Russell)

On the article discussion week

For me, the process of speaking or writing in order to communicate, although not research per se, does offer an opportunity for teacher development. So here I am developing before your very eyes. (Ed Russell)

Even though I haven't had the time to add anything to these discussions, I would like to say how interesting it has been to follow what has been going on and I would like to say thanks to everyone for taking part. I feel this is a great form of professional development and I am sure that there are many like me who would like to have contributed something but only sat on the sidelines reading what everyone else had to say. (Steven Graham)

I liked the opportunity mostly because, in many cases you have to attend a conference, or pay for journals, or only get glimpses of an argument, this was like being in a PD session at your workplace where you could make comment, instead of just reading. So much more can be gleaned from insightful comment. (Margot McCamley)

Suggestions for improving the article discussion week

It would be helpful if there were only two or three days of questions so that there was a little more time for reflection and response. (Kay Bentley)

Some additional material of relevance that has been written since the article appeared (provided by Simon Borg)

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