

**From the basement of the ivory tower:
English teachers as collaborative researchers**

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ABSTRACT: This article reports on both writers' experiences as participants in a collaborative action research project in Hong Kong. The article draws a distinction between teachers as research consumers and teachers as research producers. The authors suggest that active teacher agency in research is a positive element in the professional development of English teachers. Teachers primarily become research producers through involvement in some form of action research project. Although action research is increasingly recognized as a teacher competency in Hong Kong, it is nevertheless difficult for teachers to initiate and conduct when research is not seen as a core professional activity by their school with subsequent limited support. The authors view collaboration with professional researchers as a positive way for teachers to be apprenticed into the research process. The article ends by suggesting possible strategies that would support and encourage teachers to undertake research.

KEYWORDS: Collaborative research, action research, research consumers, research producers, teacher-researchers.

INTRODUCTION

In this article we argue that teachers are mediators of educational change at the nexus of actual practice and, as such teacher research can be a significant engine room for innovation and change in schools. We develop the discussion through specific reference to Hong Kong and to our involvement in a collaborative research project with a university carried out in 2004 that aimed to improve students' writing through the use of a genre approach. English is historically situated in Hong Kong as an "auxiliary language" as opposed to a second language, and is a Key Learning Area in all Hong Kong secondary schools and a medium of instruction in some elite schools (Luke & Richards, 1982; Bolton, 2000; Tsui & Burton, 2000). In Hong Kong much of the reform of the English curriculum is based on practices taken from mainly Western pedagogical contexts and applied to this Asian context, with little or no adaptation to the needs of the local situation (Luke, Freebody, Lau & Gopinathan, 2004; Bray, 2003; Wong, 2002). This problem is explicitly outlined in the quote below.

Many of the educational problems cannot find their lineage or analytical repairs from educational systems in the U.S., U.K., Australia and Europe, which face their own issues. These are products of distinctive histories of schooling, social problems and political economies, however these are taken as global, globalizing or universal in the educational research literature (Luke et al., 2005, p. 6).

It is our position that English teachers in Hong Kong should be both encouraged and supported to research pedagogical practices that are “imported” into the system and comment on their relevance and adaptability to the Hong Kong educational context. In short, English teachers as researchers are well positioned to combine both research evidence and practical experience together, while also accounting for variations in pedagogical practice within the particular contexts in which they teach and the individual needs of their students. Drawing from our experiences in a collaborative research project as “teacher researchers”, we discuss the extent to which we believe teacher research is viewed as a serious institutional concern by schools and education authorities in Hong Kong. We conclude the article by outlining some conditions we feel are necessary to support the development of teachers as researchers.

THE INSTITUTIONAL POSITIONING OF TEACHER RESEARCHERS

English teachers in Hong Kong are mainly situated as users rather than producers of research and therefore positioned as needing the products of research to reform their teaching practice (Gore & Gitlin, 2004). As research consumers, a significant concern for teachers is the accessibility, practicality and, in their perception, credibility of the research (Gore & Gitlin, 2004; Howes, Frankham, Ainscow & Farrell, 2004). In this sense, credibility for practitioners does not only equate with the validity of the research findings, but also with the applicability of the research to their own pedagogical situation (Thornley, Parker, Read & Eason, 2004, Gore & Gitlin, 2004).

The issue of research accessibility has become a key concern for us as English teachers, as there is an assumption by the educational authorities in Hong Kong that teachers will base instructional innovation on English language teaching research and there is a move towards evidence based pedagogical practice. However, the English teachers at our school do not have ready access to journals or clearing-houses, which disseminate research findings. In addition, the academic libraries where the research journals reside in Hong Kong are predominantly closed access. Moreover, when the school or educational authorities disseminate research, it tends to have a corrective orientation on some aspects of teacher behaviour or is linked to some immanent educational reform.

Yet, despite this problem of access, Gore & Gitlin (2004) suggest that academic educational research maintains a clear position of authority over teacher research. In a sense, it is pragmatically inevitable that this imbalance will occur, as academics are positioned to produce research as one of their core professional activities, whereas for teachers, research is an “optional extra” (Thornley et al., 2004). Burns & Knox (2005) point out the difficulties in assuming the generalisability of educational research to educational practice and the difficulties teachers encounter when their context does not support the changes educational researchers expect. In their research, aimed at finding out how teachers undertaking masters-degree-level study actually applied research knowledge about Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) (Halliday, 1994) in their classrooms, Burns & Knox were surprised by the difficulties posed by the “contexts”

within which the teachers worked and the subsequent barriers teachers faced in the real world of teaching.

As researchers we were struck by the enormity of the assumptions we had made about the uptake by teachers of the SFL grammar component of the course. As these were enthusiastic teachers and two of the top students in the class who had shown in-depth undertaking in their class assignments, we had assumed that they would “naturally” take up the pedagogical implications with no difficulty (Burns & Knox, 2005, p. 255).

In attempting to bring about educational change, Burns & Knox recognized “context” as a complex but integral part of pedagogical practice, leading them to introduce a “problem-based approach” to support teachers in the application of a SFL-based pedagogy in their specific contexts of teaching (Burns & Knox, 2005, p. 256).

In our view, changing or introducing a new pedagogical practice means also understanding and, if necessary, reforming the “institutional habitus” within which the practice occurs and recruiting teachers as active agents in the process of change, through building networks of collaboration (Bourdieu, 1991; Firkins & Forey, 2005; Thomas, 2002, p. 431). Institutional habitus can be taken to be the complex interaction between personal and organizational practices surrounding pedagogy, evident in the school (Firkins & Forey, 2005). Firkins & Forey (2005) argue that in any process of pedagogical change at the classroom level, it is equally important to change the “habitus of practice” in which the pedagogy will be used, as it is to focus on the practice of individual teachers. They further argue that the institutional habitus is constructed from both internal and external influences that impact on pedagogical practice and suggest that teacher-researchers using action research can play an integral role in identifying and accounting for these influences in any research project.

THE STATUS OF TEACHER RESEARCH IN HONG KONG

Teachers become researchers for various reasons. Firstly, in the context of the Hong Kong education system, teachers take up research as components of their undergraduate teacher training or as part of postgraduate courses in English, education or applied linguistics. In undertaking postgraduate projects, the teacher receives some form of supervision and advice from their respective academic supervisor and consequently access to the relevant literature. Secondly, teachers are often requested to participate in large-scale, externally initiated research projects by the school. As an example, our school has been involved in several, health-promotion-focused projects, with the consent of all stake-holders who have perceived some form of benefit in participating. Finally, teachers are under increasing pressure to initiate some form of action research, which informs their own practice, or initiate projects as a group of teachers concerned with a context-based, pedagogical problem (Catelli, Padovano & Costello, 2000). In Hong Kong, action research forms a component of the teacher’s compulsory professional development and has become a criterion in the school’s appraisal of the teacher’s competency. In addition, it has also become a significant feature in the school’s accountability to the central educational authority. So, increasingly, action research in

Hong Kong has become a desirable element of school practice (Advisory Committee on Teacher Education and Qualifications, 2003) despite the absence of the necessary support mechanisms that allow teachers to conduct it.

In advocating for teacher research, we want to clearly separate the notions “teachers as researchers” from “teachers as the researched”. We believe the difference between these two ideas is the active agency of the teacher in the former as opposed to the later. Teachers are often the target of endless questionnaires, requests to observe lessons, comments on practice, demands to view samples of students’ work, evaluations and surveys. Although this may serve the wider objectives of educational research from the perspective of a tertiary institution, it is often unclear to the teacher participant what the objective of the research is, the reasons why it has been initiated, what it seeks to answer and who will benefit from the results (Greenwood & Levin, 2003). In addition, as recipients of this type of research we have rarely been informed of the project’s findings, its implications for policy and outcomes for students or teachers by the tertiary institution concerned. In a sense, we personally see this style of research as particularly exploitative, and the “researched on”, namely the teacher and by extension the students, are not active stakeholders in the project. In contrast, it has been our experiences that given the opportunity, English teachers welcome the opportunity to be active participants in action research, which contributes to their professional development and has a perceived benefit for their students.

BARRIERS TO TEACHER-INITIATED RESEARCH

Despite advocating for teacher-initiated research, we continue to see significant barriers for individual teachers who wish to undertake research projects that are larger in nature than a more individual reflection and change to their own teaching practice. In the context of our school and the education system in Hong Kong generally, many of these issues stem from the marginal place teacher research occupies. Where research is not seen by the school to be a core institutional activity of teaching, it is not given high priority. This in turn is tied to the level of resources allocated to schools. Unfortunately the English teachers at our school have limited access to the material elements that enable a research process to take place. These limitations include the following:

- limited access to the relevant literature through databases and journals;¹
- limited access to assistance with research methodology/design;
- limited help with data analysis/decision-making;
- limited knowledge about the dissemination of findings;
- limited knowledge about how to build collaboration with colleges and outside organizations;
- limited class release time to conduct literature reviews, enable data analysis or write reports.

¹ One of the positive aspects of journals such as *English Teaching: Practice and Critique* is its easy accessibility to practitioners.

OUR ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT

Our action research project was carried out in 2004 and was a collaborative project between the English teachers at TWGHs Mr. and Mrs Kwong Sik Kwan College, Hong Kong, and English researchers from the Polytechnic University of Hong Kong. The project aimed to address the problem of teaching writing to ESL students who also had a Specific Learning Disability (Firkins, 2004; Firkins, Forey & Sengupta, forthcoming). In the pedagogical context of our secondary school, where there is a large representation of these students, and taking account of the exam-orientated nature of the Hong Kong system, the teaching of writing was seen as a small but significant problem faced by all the English teachers.

The project grew from a concern, jointly identified by English teachers, parents, students and the school principal, that students had difficulty with planning and organizational aspects of writing. At our school the majority of teachers had been trained in “research oriented” practices, which are usually used to conduct evaluative activities such as peer reviews, school reviews and student performance reviews. In this sense English teachers at our school were already undertaking some of the characteristics of research. For our project, we found that seeking collaboration with an external partner, such as a university department or an academic-researcher, was a useful way of overcoming some of the barriers to research we identify in this article. Our collaboration was established through largely informal networks; without these it would have been difficult to establish the project (Howes et al., 2004). In addition, the four English teachers involved in the project, including ourselves, were undertaking graduate courses at local universities and it was relatively easy to initiate a collaborative, action research project with a local university in an attempt to find practical solutions, which could be directly applied to the classroom. At the end of the project, we interviewed two teachers and the two university researchers and asked them to reflect on the benefits and difficulties of the collaboration process.

Q1. What were the benefits of conducting the research collaboratively?

It provided me with an avenue to the classroom. Although I teach many classes, they are mainly at an undergraduate and post-graduate level. This project allowed me to return to the secondary classroom. It provided the opportunity to go back and revisit theories which I frequently discuss in a masters-degree classroom with post-graduate student” (University Researcher 1).

I got a chance to work with a real group of practitioners and understood the more practical concerns that I had overlooked as a university researcher. The practitioner perspective helped make this project situated in the realities of the school. I as a teacher educator, did have school experience, but schools are changing rapidly and thus participation in this project allowed me to rethink my understanding as well as reflect on the challenges of teaching English within the lower-ability banding context (University Researcher 2).

I felt I was challenged to think of new ways and approaches in running the teaching sessions for students. I also felt I understand more about literacy and also research methods, which after university I haven't used that often (English Teacher 1).

The project helped me see the differences in how students can learn from the ways we have been approaching things in our regular English lessons. I felt we had a great deal more support to try out new things than would otherwise be the case in our regular classes. I also appreciated learning about action research. Of course I learnt this at university, but never really tried it, which I can continue to use (English Teacher 2).

Q2. What were the problems or disadvantages of inter-institutional collaboration?

There were some practical disadvantages of meeting up, traveling to the school, etc. and this is a learning experience for us. I realized that much of the recent research within the university context that I have been involved with has little relevance for the school context – especially for special needs (University Researcher 1).

Lack of time is a major problem, as I feel that I should have perhaps been more involved in a “hands-on” kind of way. But this wasn't possible. I really wish I had more time to devote to research and to participate in a fuller manner in the study (University Researcher 2).

When the university became less visible in the research process and more of the work was carried out “behind the scenes”, the interest of other teachers and the school in continuing became a problem. The project became like a regular teaching session. Other teachers couldn't see the difference (English Teacher 1).

The parents only saw the project as being worthwhile because of the university's involvement. So I think “status” had much to do with the support we received. I don't think we would have got such a good response without their support and this might be a difficulty in undertaking similar projects in the future without their support (English Teacher 2).

Q3. What added value was gained from the collaborative relationship?

It allowed the team to develop ideas using both current research in the area and practical knowledge about the classroom. It made the application of the theory more real. Also, I think when we discussed theoretical principles, even directly with my Masters students, it allows me to go back to the work I was involved in, which perhaps gives the theory under discussion more currency with Hong Kong university students (University Researcher 1).

It provided some interesting research findings, which I have been able to share with the wider academic community through journals and conference papers. Also, working on resources for children with special educational needs is something I have not done before and this was particularly interesting (University Researcher 2).

I think all our English teachers gained some useful research skills, and the students were able to receive a programme we would otherwise not be able to carry out in the same way. The principal and parents were very pleased with the results (English Teacher 1).

The use of the theory would have been difficult as I was unsure what to do without a great deal of discussion with the university researchers. We have been able to use some of the approaches in our regular writing classes, but of course not everything, as we don't have the same resources all the time. But we have been able to use and further develop the resources, which were prepared from the programme (English Teacher 2).

From the above quotes, we suggest that the collaboration built between the teachers and professional researchers in our project was mutually beneficial in pooling knowledge, defining objectives, and assisting with ethical concerns. From each stakeholder's perspective, universities are looking for industry partners and schools value the prestige of some form of close association with a university. In addition, the parents who gave permission for their child to participate, saw that university involvement added additional value to the project. From the English teachers perspective, the collaboration gave an opportunity for teachers to be apprenticed into the activity of research, through close association with expert researchers. Most importantly, the collaboration gave official, institutional sanction to the pedagogical space we called "research", allowing the teachers time to engage in the activity of research.

APPRENTICING TEACHERS TO DO RESEARCH

From our involvement in the project, we view action research (Burns, 1999) in an English-teaching, educational context, as a research method which integrates action and reflection in a way in which the knowledge gained directly contributes to improve the quality of pedagogy and leads to concrete outcomes for all the stake-holders involved. We found that the action research approach had the following advantages for the professional development of the four English teachers involved,

- It focused the teacher on a solution-focused pedagogical paradigm through a cycle of identifying problems and trialing solutions.
- It placed an emphasis on teacher action and reflection, and was largely teacher initiated. Therefore, the agency of the teacher was central and teachers were active participants in, rather than passive consumers of, research.
- It de-automatized the everyday inertia of practice, making it possible for the teacher to observe change at the point of intervention.
- As the research was contextually or situationally based, the teacher could make adaptations and changes where necessary.
- It freed the teacher from the constraints of the regular curriculum, through the creation of a *pedagogical space* that allowed for pedagogical innovation and creativity.

The "apprenticing" we received into the action research process was only possible through the university/school collaboration. Looking at it from a teacher perspective, our research project demonstrated characteristics of the following elements of partnership, with each of the following terms describing the interfacing between the English teachers and academics:

- Consultative (Catelli et al., 2000);
- Collaborative (Burns, 1999; Catelli et al., 2000);
- Co-generative (Greenwood & Levin, 2003).

Our project was consultative in that the university partners were available for the teachers to discuss ideas and problems at different forums, and via e-mail and telephone. In addition, the academics provided several workshops for the teachers on research methodologies and approaches to writing. This was crucial at the initial phase of the project to identify starting points, issues of ethics and teaching methodologies. Consultation recognized that the university collaborators had a firmer understanding of the research process and the teachers had a greater understanding of the students and logistical problems of organising the programme. Collaboration occurred through the sharing of common objectives as well as through the identification of research questions and research methodology. The project took on characteristics of co-generative research when the teachers and academics began to evaluate progress, analyze data and make decisions regarding the direction of the programme. Co-generative action research describes a process of stakeholder-centred collaboration, not simply institutional collaboration (Greenwood & Levin, 2003). At each of these stages, the English teachers, including ourselves, were active partners in the process.

It would be wrong of us to give the impression that our project was without problems, as many accounts of collaborative action research tend to tidy up the messy reflective reality (Howes et al., 2004). Many of the problems were related to differing productivity and outcome measures imposed on teachers and academics by their perspective institutions, and differing time pressures as the school and university term proceeded. However, three issues stand out as being important. Firstly there is a need to conduct the project within the set time and not let it go for too long, as other priorities tend to get in the way. Secondly there is the problem of generating more data than the partners have the capacity to analyze. Thirdly, there is a need to officially finalize the project for all stakeholders so that there is a sense of completion. This includes writing to parents and informing them of the outcome of the project, providing some form of report to the principal, and disseminating information to teachers who may not have participated in the project.

Finally, we would like to offer some suggestions as to how teachers could be supported and apprenticed into undertaking research. Informal networking has been a significant theme throughout this article and such a process can be aided through teacher attendance at conferences. Educational authorities need to establish efficient methods for teachers to receive research results by way of awareness bulletins, and teachers need to have access to databases and journals in order to be able to conduct literature reviews. The notion of supervision needs to be expanded to include the capacity to provide advice and support to teachers who wish to undertake research. Here, there may be an expanded place for academics to provide this type of consultation or, alternatively, for education authorities to facilitate some forms of peer supervision by expert practitioners. Research needs to be recognized as a core professional activity of teachers, and educational authorities need to allocate resources to schools by way of time and funds. With additional support, teacher researchers have the potential to make a significant contribution to organizational change and contribute to the development of innovative pedagogy. The challenge for academics and teachers is not to maintain a research practice divide but to take all necessary steps to bridge it.

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