

Teacher Research in Language Teaching

A critical analysis

SIMON BORG

Cambridge University Press, 2013

REVIEWED BY PHILIP CHAPPELL

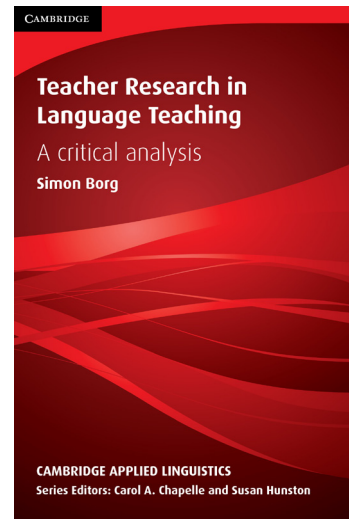
Teacher Research in Language Teaching explores the paradox of the documented evidence of the value of language teachers conducting their own research, versus the low numbers of those actually doing it. Simon Borg has approached this through a combination of theory and practice, by examining the challenges facing the development of the professional language teacher as someone who should be engaged in research. As he explains in his introduction, the attraction for him of combining his interests in teacher education, research methods, and teacher cognition was enough to motivate his six-year study of 1,700 language teachers and managers practising ELT around the world. This book, then, is an extensive account of this major study of what teachers and managers believe about teacher research, how they go about doing it, and how they engage with others' research when reading it. The conclusions and implications are of serious concern for all involved in the field of ELT.

The idea of language teachers conducting their own research, often in their own classrooms, is not a new one, and its positive benefits have driven investigations by many teacher educators in many areas of the world (Allwright, 2005; Burns, 2010; Farrell, 2007; Freeman, 1998; Richards & Farrell, 2005, to name just a few). Borg's contribution to the field is his systematic, critical analysis of language teacher research (henceforth referred to as LTR), developed across several key themes, ranging from definitions and the current status of LTR, teachers engaging with and in research (by reading it and doing it), the relationship between LTR and teaching quality, teachers' and managers' beliefs and attitudes toward LTR, and finally, supporting LTR projects and teachers' engagement with LTR.

Borg sets the scene by defining LTR as the systematic investigation by teachers of their own professional practice in order to have a positive impact on their students' learning. Early in the book, he reports on what language teachers and managers consider to comprise research (using a range of scenarios), and also what they consider to be good research. A striking finding here is that although most have a fairly traditional view of what constitutes research, there was great variance in actual definitions. This suggests the need for greater understanding of the nature of research and its usefulness for teachers and managers. The suggestion 'to discuss and clarify their understandings of what research is and how its worth can be judged' (p. 71) is undoubtedly a worthwhile undertaking. Academic managers should heed this advice, perhaps in a collaborative venture with their staff.

The next chapter deals with the kinds of research teachers read, how often, and what impact they feel it has on their practice. Unsurprisingly, there is found to be a disconnect between the research and teaching communities, with teachers looking for, but often not finding tangible take-outs from what they read. Indeed, the relationship between research knowledge and teaching is, as Borg notes, complex, and an area that several other educators have puzzled over, for example, Freeman and Johnson (1996) and Spada (2013). Fortunately, Borg pursues this conundrum and reports on several initiatives designed to increase teachers' engagement with research in mainstream education, for example by making it more directly relevant and the discourse more accessible. However, these initiatives are yet to be seen in ELT, which is a significant opportunity for both the research and the teaching communities. As Borg concludes, we have a lot of work to do in understanding the research–language teacher relationship, and it is incumbent upon both communities to undertake this work. There are many good ideas offered to get the ball rolling.

Moving on to teachers actually doing research, Borg offers plenty of useful data on the extent of and reasons for engaging in research activity, and reasons for not doing so. Reporting on the kinds of LTR done by those language teachers who claim to be engaged with research, Borg draws the reader into the teachers' professional lives with an abundance of quotes from these teachers. We are offered insights into the teachers' perspectives of the research they do, which is largely 'private, reflective, pedagogical, evaluative, informal' (p. 123). This contrasts with earlier findings that



research was viewed more traditionally, suggesting that teachers may not recognise that the work they are doing is valuable LTR activity, or at the very least valuable professional development activity. The majority who do not engage in LTR activity remain unconvinced of the feasibility of doing so. Borg reports many reasons for these feelings, which is useful information for academic managers and teachers alike to reflect upon in their own contexts.

The paradoxes introduced earlier in the book come to light in the chapter reporting teachers' and managers' perceptions of the value of LTR for improving teaching quality. Of 100 teachers surveyed in one organisation with schools in many countries, 72% agreed that 'teachers who read and do research also teach more effectively in the classroom' (p. 127), yet as we learned earlier, few of them engage in their own LTR. A far smaller percentage of managers agreed with this statement (54%), and almost half of the managers (49.6%) stated they thought teachers doing research was unimportant or only slightly important (p. 134). Borg systematically reports on the positive, neutral and negative perspectives of both teachers and managers, again making good use of illustrative quotes, concluding that greater understanding of the scope of both research activities and professional development activities is needed in order to take LTR engagement forward to levels that can sustain language teacher development. Misconceptions abound, as reported in earlier chapters, and Borg cautions against the restrictions these misconceptions can place on the language teaching profession. While he has argued that he is not privileging LTR over other professional development activity, it is clear that LTR has the potential to have a dramatic positive impact on the profession.

Of course, many teachers and managers will argue that despite all the perceived benefits of LTR, the day-to-day demands of college life prevent any meaningful teacher development activity from taking place (Chappell & Benson, 2013). The final empirical chapter of the book deals with this issue, and in doing so, underscores the harsh reality of the challenges of engaging time-poor and often hourly paid teachers in additional work. Managers were reported in a brighter light, seeing the creation of stronger research cultures as positive, while teachers' beliefs and attitudes toward research were seen as a hindrance. Borg concludes that ELT faces a noteworthy challenge in order to develop research cultures within its teaching institutions. This is a challenge that we all need to take ownership of in order to facilitate greater LTR in schools and colleges. Borg outlines several key initiatives outside the confines of formal study, such as the NCELTR and AMEP research programs in Australia, the English Australia Action Research in ELICOS Program (see Burns' article in this issue), and several others. He concludes the book with a chapter bringing the various themes together and offers concrete strategies for promoting LTR engagement. This final

chapter is a well-crafted conclusion and recommendations section to end the book with a positive voice, and some starting points for those wishing to take things further. All in all, Borg has offered the ELT and TESOL teaching and research community a theoretically robust, empirically rich, yet highly practical account of not only his own research in the area of LTR, but, as each chapter provides a literature review of its respective theme, also a comprehensive landscape of the state of play in LTR. I highly recommend the book for professional language teachers, academic managers working in ELT, language teacher trainers, academic researchers, and senior school administrators, each of whom would do well to suspend their own beliefs and attitudes toward LTR while engaging with this captivating book. We are all implicated in the need to further professionalise language teaching in our own contexts, in our own small way. There is now plentiful evidence that supporting language teacher research is a positive step in that direction.

REFERENCES

- Allwright, D. (2005). Developing principles for practitioner research: The case of exploratory practice, *The Modern Language Journal*, 89(3), pp. 353-66.
- Burns, A. (2010). *Doing Action Research in English Language Teaching: A guide for practitioners*. New York: Routledge.
- Chappell, P. J. & Benson, K. (2013). A sustainable, collaborative teacher-focused professional learning program for English language colleges. *English Australia Journal*, 28(2), pp. 3-20.
- Farrell, T. S. C. (2007). *Reflective language teaching: From research to practice*. New York: Continuum.
- Freeman, D. (1998). *Doing teacher research*. Boston: Heinle and Heinle.
- Freeman, D. & Johnson, K. E. (1998). Reconceptualizing the knowledge-base of language teacher education. *TESOL Quarterly*, 32(3), pp. 397-417.
- Richards, J.C. & Farrell, T. S. C. (2005). *Professional development for language teachers: Strategies for teacher learning*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Spada, N. (2013). SLA research and L2 pedagogy: Misapplications and questions of relevance. *Language Teaching*, pp. 1-13

Phil Chappell convenes the Postgraduate Certificate of TESOL at Macquarie University and conducts research in the areas of classroom discourse, language teacher cognition and language teaching methodology. He supervises research students at master's and PhD level in related areas.

philip.chappell@mq.edu.au

Twitter: @TESOLatMQ

Keep in touch with ELICOS PD news & opportunities



Want to keep in touch with ELICOS professional development news and opportunities?

If you work for an English Australia member college and have an institutional email address, sign up for regular English Australia 'PD Updates'.

If you work elsewhere, join English Australia as a Professional Affiliate to receive the 'PD Updates' plus an annual subscription to the *English Australia Journal*.

Please visit www.englishaustralia.com.au/professional-affiliate-program or contact easec@englishaustralia.com.au for more information.