Teacher engagement in research: Published resources for teacher researchers

Books from regional locations


Books from governmental initiatives


Books from international contexts

Comparative Book Review

Teacher engagement in research: Published resources for teacher researchers

Anne Burns Aston University, Birmingham, UK
a.burns@aston.ac.uk

Books from regional locations

Books from governmental initiatives

Books from international contexts
1. Introduction

Over the last twenty years the concept of the teacher as researcher – a movement initiated in mainstream education (Stenhouse 1975; Goswami & Stillman 1987; Strickland 1988; Kincheloe 1991) – has also permeated the field of language teaching (e.g. Nunan 1989; van Lier 1994). Arguments for the inclusion of teachers in the enterprise of research range across the democratisation of research, the empowerment of teachers, the need to develop theories of pedagogy from the perspectives of teachers, the expansion of the role of teachers in the production of knowledge about teaching, the professionalisation of teachers, and the relevance of practitioner-based principles for practice. Countervailing arguments include doubts about the philosophical and empirical foundations for practitioner research, teachers’ lack of research skills and training, impediments of time, resources and academic referents, the rigour, validity and generalisability of teacher research findings, and the paucity of teacher research genres and literature (see Simon Borg’s state-of-the-art review in this issue for more detailed development of these points).

While interest in teacher engagement in classroom research grew gradually in the language teaching field over the 1990s and several books advocating and delineating such research were published (e.g. Allwright & Bailey 1991; Freeman 1998; Wallace 1998; Burns 1999), there were few book-length publications offering teachers actual examples of research by other teachers (exceptions were Edge & Richards 1993; the series Teachers’ voices edited by Burns & Hood, and then by Burns & de Silva Joyce, from 1995 to 2005; Field et al. 1997; Edge 2001). This situation has changed quite substantially.

The present review considers a number of books focusing on teacher research that have been produced since the early 2000s. For this review, unlike previous comparative book reviews published in Language Teaching, I have selected some volumes that have been published as a series, as well as individual books that have contributed to this literature. In doing so, I hope to provide a picture of some of the volumes currently available to teachers and teacher educators wishing to find published examples of teacher research, and to outline what kinds of models, both methodologically and for publication purposes, they offer teacher researchers.

The books selected for review have different geneses and fall into three different categories related to temporal and locational dimensions. In the first category (Tinker Sachs 2002; Hadley 2003) are single volumes published soon after Edge’s volume and edited from a particular regional location; in the second (two volumes edited by Borg, one by Warn et al. and one by Gallagher & Bashir) are later volumes which are the result of continuing collaborative educational initiatives with governmental institutions located in specific countries. In the third category, and the more recently published, are six volumes in an edited series (edited respectively by Borg, Farrell, Coombe & Barlow, McGarrell, Burns & Burton and Makalela) that situate accounts by teacher researchers in different continents.

2. Comparative summaries and evaluations

2.1 Teacher research engagement in regional locations

The two volumes edited by Tinker Sachs and Hadley, respectively, contain samples of research from teachers in the South-East Asian region (with the exception of one from Brazil in
Tinker Sachs’ edited volume is located in Hong Kong. It is the outcome of a funded research project, ‘Fostering and furthering effective practices in the teaching of English’, which aimed to enhance teacher professional development through collaborative practitioner research facilitated by the editor. The volume contains an interesting chapter by Tinker Sachs, outlining the challenging processes of getting the project going and then maintaining it, and reflecting on her experience of working with secondary school teachers as they grappled with the highs and lows of engaging in research. In doing so, she situates the status of action research in Hong Kong and provides a critique of why ‘a developmental perspective to teachers’ professional growth’ (p. 47) was so important at a time when the government and the press were attacking teachers’ competence and language proficiency, and arguing that teacher language testing was the most effective way to enhance teacher development. She also raises issues to do with ethical accountability in relation to the experimentation on learners that is integral to forms of teacher classroom research, as well as the tensions that arise for the research facilitator between the potential appropriation of teacher research agendas by someone external to the context, and the opportunity their involvement creates for teachers’ voices to be heard in educational decision-making (see also Tinker Sachs 2000).

While claims are made by both the author and the teachers that the research resulted in greater professional competence and status, they do not shy away from revealing the complexities and difficulties of teacher research engagement. The volume offers a ‘warts and all’ account of the processes of the research and its realities for both the facilitator and for the six teachers whose accounts conclude the volume. The teachers’ accounts are diverse in their style, in the topics and questions investigated, and in the methods selected for data collection. What is so engaging about these accounts is that rather than offering pat and streamlined summaries, the teacher researchers tell their stories with an individualistic honesty and sense of classroom realism that is not often found. ‘Is process writing a total failure?’ asks Pheon Ng (p. 124) after attempting to introduce this approach with other colleagues and finding that in practice it was very difficult for them to implement. Although Nancy Chan says she gained from researching active reading, this was ‘despite increased workload, frustration, failure and despair’ (p. 182), while Joan Chan, who investigated interactive grammar lessons, declares ‘Although my research is not as “successful” as I would have liked it to be, I believe it is something worthwhile’ (p. 238).

*Action research in action*, edited by Hadley, puts a different spin on teacher research. Part of the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization (SEAMEO) Regional Language Centre (RELC) Portfolio Series (edited by Willy A. Rendandya & Jack C. Richards), it is a ‘tiny’ (Hadley, personal communication, March 2009) volume stimulated by Hadley’s ‘discovery’ of action research during his experience of teaching in a professionally-underdeveloped Asian teaching location. Taking the perspective that research engagement is a professionally-oriented teacher’s proactive response to problems, and one that will deepen teaching insights, it describes the positive research experiences of the contributors ‘with the hope that their stories will inspire you to consider using action research the next time you encounter a challenge in your classroom’ (iv). Unlike the Tinker Sachs volume, it is not based on collaborative funded research but on the reflections of individuals, several of them university-based researchers, from the countries around the region that RELC serves. Among them are Japan (David Mayo), Thailand (Richard Watson Todd), the Philippines (Isabel Peficanco Martin), and Singapore (Thomas S. C. Farrell & Lee Fong Ting). The eight accounts adopt...
a consistent format that structures each chapter – setting, focus, investigation, response and reflections – followed by two tasks for reader reflection and mini-projects. Topics include researching oral communication skills (Sabrina Almeida Ribeiro, Chapter 1), learners’ pragmatic competence (Nicola Helen Green, Chapter 4), learners’ perceptions of homework (Matthew Warwick & David Jeffrey, Chapter 5), and learners’ use of academic strategies (Gregory Hadley, Chapter 8).

For teachers completely new to research, the accounts are certain to be appealing; they contain numerous examples of the use of research instruments such as learning diary formats, feedback questionnaires, teacher journal entries, learner attitude surveys and analyses, and offer tasks to promote reader reflection. They are straightforward, eminently practical and written in a teacher-oriented style. As a stimulus to initial research engagement they offer short, but basically sound, ideas about research processes and good models for writing up brief accounts of research. While they would certainly be useful for teacher educators involved in initial professional development or introductory level language teacher qualifications, they do not provide sufficient substance for more experienced teachers wishing to publish in a journal or undertaking more advanced teacher education assignments.

2.2 Collaborative initiatives with governmental institutions

The volumes by Warne et al. and Gallagher & Bashir-Ali form books 1 and 2 in the Higher Colleges of Technology (HTC) Teacher Education Series, published by HTC in the United Arab Emirates. They are the product of initiatives of HTC, which at the time of the Warne publication had twelve campuses across the UAE, to strengthen teacher education in line with recent Ministry of Education policies. The four-year Bachelor of Education (BEd) program – Teaching English to Young Learners/English Teaching in Schools degree – was developed in collaboration with, and certified by, the University of Melbourne. The teacher accounts contained in these two volumes are founded on teachers’ research assignments conducted during a ten-week practical in their final year. The teacher educators involved in the degree, who are also the editors of these volumes, take a perspective on teacher education that ‘places a strong emphasis on the dialectical relationship between ongoing school-based experience and theoretical knowledge’ (O’Brien, series editor, in Gallagher & Bashir-Ali: p. 3). The engagement of teachers in action research projects in their final year is seen as the culmination of an approach where intense practical experience in schools and what is taught and tested at college mutually inform each other during the entire course.

The first volume, edited by Warne et al., stresses the intended contribution of the volume as ‘the first steps of developing a nascent educational research community in the UAE’ (Warne: p. 7). In order to further this argument in relation to the BEd course, the volume intersperses teacher accounts with faculty papers discussing the synergistic links between reflective practice and action research as the foundation for effective teaching and the furthering of teacher reasoning, inquiry and reflection (Clarke); the essential dimensions and connections between action research and reflective practice, and professional teaching activity, the power to contextualise teacher practice, and the imperative for educational change (Gallagher); issues and concerns experienced by teachers as they enter the territory
of research, such as getting started, moving to the next stages, taking action and considering validity, reliability and generalisation (Thorne); and the ways in which critical reflection and action research can contribute to addressing the ‘dysfunction’ of ‘the growing gap between research and teaching’ (Syed: p. 115) through praxis and informed pedagogy. These chapters would certainly be of interest to teacher educators in similar programs. The six teacher accounts reflect a range of interests, including using picture books to teach thematic vocabulary to students in Grade 4 classrooms (Al Shehhi), teaching phonics to Grade 1 students (Al Mehairi), involving learners in establishing an interactive classroom in a Grade 4 literacy classroom (Al Saeedi), and using the mother tongue in group work at Grade 3 level (Ali).

As might be expected among any cohort of students undertaking an initial teaching qualification, the accounts vary in quality and depth. Some accounts are rather programmatic in that they include numerous dot pointed comments that are not always woven skilfully together into substantive accounts. Others are more sophisticated, providing coordinated papers which place the research in its wider national context, undertake well-founded if brief literature reviews, provide adequate accounts of methodologies and research procedures, and go beyond description of findings to draw out larger teaching implications.

Gallagher & Ali-Bashir, the second volume, contains twelve teacher accounts. The difference here is that there is just one paper by faculty, in the form of the editors’ introduction to the volume. It appears that, this time, precedence was given to teacher accounts, perhaps with the assumption that the first volume would be read in conjunction with the second. The editors’ focus is on what they term ‘the practice turn’, which encompasses the redefinition of teacher education in the UAE and the desire to ‘challenge the status quo of teaching English in this country, and provide new insights and approaches into contemporary pedagogical imperatives’ (p. 10). Again, the range of topics and methodologies selected is varied, investigating the use of pair work strategies in teaching oral communication skills through observation, surveys and interviews (Abdulla), grammatical consciousness-raising through pre- and post-test, teacher notes and student self-assessment (Al Nuaim) and vocabulary enhancement through observations, field-notes and parent interviews (Obaid).

One noticeable feature in this volume is that the format for the research chapters is more consistent and they provide more developed and rounded accounts by the teachers than the first. Although it is not stated, this is possibly attributable to the growing experience of the teacher educators involved, who were therefore able to provide more intensive and informed guidance to teachers in writing up their accounts. The accounts also offer deeper reflection and more critical insights on the part of the teachers, in some cases projecting into how the research experience will shape their teaching into the future (e.g. Al Zaabi). In this respect they are a departure from the shorter, more descriptive versions in the first volume and demonstrate a higher quality, both methodologically and in terms of the writing of the reports.

In both volumes the accounts not only provide interesting insights into the kinds of issues that become important teaching challenges for novice teachers, but also how teachers with similar interests might address them through research. There is something in these two volumes not only for educators facilitating teacher research and experienced teacher researchers, but also for novice researchers at similar stages in their careers as the teacher researchers whose accounts are featured. Nevertheless, teachers and teacher educators
drawing on these accounts will need to be selective in relation to the kind of written genres they wish to aspire to.

The two volumes in this group of government initiatives edited by Borg are similarly the products of a BA TESOL program initiated in Oman through the University of Leeds. Evolving from similar governmental aspirations to enhance the country’s teacher qualifications and teaching quality, in this case for the teaching of English, Borg edited the dissertations written by the twenty contributors to produce abbreviated versions for these volumes. In the process, the organisation and layout were standardised (Introduction, Topic including literature review, Method, Findings, Discussion, Conclusion) and the space devoted to the literature review substantially reduced. An aim of the editing was ‘to retain as much as possible the account of the research procedures’ (p. x), presumably so that other teacher researchers could draw on them.

In contrast to the HCT volumes, the contributions in each volume are thematised across various focus areas. In the 2006 volume, the first seven papers focus on facets of classroom discourse, such as the impact of wait-time on learner participation (Al-Balushii), the next eight on reading and writing, including writing difficulties of secondary students (Al-Abri), while the final five chapters cover a range of curricular areas, such as the use of self-assessment (Al-Jardani) and the impact on learning of strategies for presenting vocabulary (Al-Azri). According to Borg, the papers in the 2008 volume are more diverse than those in the first, reflecting ‘changing concerns in ELT in Oman’ (p. xi). Themes cover the use of L1 (Chapters 1–3), pair and group work (Chapters 4–6), aspects of assessment (Chapters 7–9), the use of stories (Chapters 10–12), the teaching of speaking, reading and writing (Chapters 13–17) and motivation, mediation theory and vocabulary learning strategies, respectively (Chapters 18–20).

As examples of academically-oriented research accounts, the papers in both volumes work well. They are written in a clear style using a systematic and conventional academic structure, where the main concern seems to be on ensuring that the design of the research is adequately and robustly represented. What is missing from most of them, however, is a flavour of a teacher addressing other teachers, which would show how teacher research engagement inspired critical reflection and the teacher’s own sense of their professional growth. This was a feature well highlighted in the HCT faculty papers and reiterated in several of the teachers’ own accounts. It also characterised the accounts in Tinker Sachs. In this sense, the Borg examples are less likely to excite other teachers to similarly engage in research in their classrooms. As a basis for dissertation writing, they would need mediation by teacher educators to show how these reduced accounts should be fleshed out. Borg does indicate, in his introduction to the 2008 volume, that readers wanting to replicate the studies would need to contact the Ministry of Education in Oman. Although replicating research studies located in their very specific classroom contexts could be said to be difficult (some would argue impossible) to achieve, the full versions could serve as useful inputs into dissertation writing in other contexts.

2.3 Teacher research in international contexts

While the previous category related to teacher research reports required as part of educational courses, the contributions in the third category resulted from calls for submissions from
teacher researchers internationally. Published by TESOL, a leader as a professional English language teaching association in producing publications to inform teacher development, The Language Teacher Research in ... series, edited by Thomas S. C. Farrell, provides a recent and substantial contribution to the field of teacher engagement in research. In evaluating this series, I need first to declare my interest as a co-editor of one of these volumes. Thus, in reviewing the contributions in this series, those in the Burns and Burton volume are excluded. However, my intention in this section of the review is not to present a fine-grained critique of each of these volumes but to outline and evaluate this series as a whole.

The series editor himself, Farrell, provided a preface to the chronologically first-published volume, in which he comments on the aims of the series. These include highlighting the role language teachers play as ‘generators of knowledge’ and developers of communities of language teaching professionals ‘who will share these important experiences’ (p. vii). The role of systematic reflection and an inquiry stance towards practice are thus foregrounded as a major aim of this collection. They are further engendered by the template systematising each chapter – Issue, Background Literature, Procedures, Results, Reflection – a structure that also facilitates cross-case reading of the volumes. Each subsequent volume in this series also includes this preface.

Each volume begins with a chapter by its respective editor(s), introducing readers to the volume and summarising each chapter. Each set of editors makes some effort to locate the research in its educational context, although comments vary from the very briefest of mentions to quite extensive summaries of teacher research and its antecedents and achievements in those locations. They also extol the virtues, benefits and advantages of teacher research to teachers individually and to the teaching profession more generally. However, the editors’ arguments on teacher research engagement tend to be rather repetitive across the six volumes, in general citing similar literature. Only one (McGarrell) notes the practical impediments to teacher research and suggest reasons why research by teachers has been limited (see Borg’s state-of-the-art review in this issue), while another (Makalela) comments on why teacher research is particularly needed at this time in her location of the African continent. The larger proportion of the editors’ introductions is taken up with sequenced descriptions of the contents of each chapter.

While these brief overviews are quite useful, they tend to be somewhat ‘technicist’, simply summarising the research in a rather factual way. In my view, it would have been more interesting for readers (and especially for teacher educators), if the editors had been given freer rein to draw out critical themes illuminating the reasons why the topics and research designs chosen by the teacher researchers resonate with educational, practical, theoretical and policy issues in the specific location. What, for example, are the reasons and the implications of the fact that four (five, if one counts sentence-level lexical gap filling) of the eight chapters in the volume on Africa (Makalela) focus on writing development? What current language teaching conditions in Asia (Farrell), lead to the concern in six of the thirteen papers with greater learner independence and autonomy? In what ways does the theme of teacher education reflected in four of the thirteen contributions from Europe (Borg) contribute to and broaden the notion of teacher research (see Bartels 2005)? And how do the highly examination-oriented curriculum constraints of the Middle East (Coombe & Thorne) impact on the selections of the chapters in this volume. What do they have to say to similar examination-based educational systems? There seems to be a missed opportunity in these chapters to go beyond mere summary and
to critically position the current status of teacher research and its trends in different world regions.

As in the previous volumes evaluated in this review, the range of research areas highlighted across chapters is wide. The McGarrell volume, for example, contains investigations of the testing of reading and writing (Fraser & Fox), students’ ethnographic analyses of academic interactions (Dantas-Whitney), incidental low frequency vocabulary acquisition (Gurkin), dual learner identity (Kuck), and service learning in a TEFL course (McInery). The studies are widely located across the Americas from Canada to Jamaica to Brazil, and range from elementary to adult learners. Qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods are found in these investigations, although the majority deploy qualitative methods of recording, observation, journals, classroom evaluations, interviews and student written texts. Quantitative approaches typically make use of descriptive statistical procedures rather than experimental design (Springer in the McGarrell volume, using a quasi-experimental design is one exception; Al-Issa & Sulieman, and Shehadeh in the Coombe & Barlow volume also using experimental designs). The variety exhibited in the McGarrell volume is replicated in the other five volumes in the series.

As is perhaps to be expected given the emergent nature of the qualitative research methodologies used in the majority of the chapters, authors comment, sometimes quite extensively, on the research process, as well as on the more factual details of the actual design. In this respect, the series explicitly encouraged critical reflection on the part of authors on the challenges and pressures as well as the achievements and successes of doing research in one’s own workplace context. An example is this comment from a contributor who began by struggling to collect recorded and observational data and had eventually to seek out other methods:

Because obtaining first-order data recordings and observations was largely unsuccessful, I proceeded with collecting second-order data. In addition to my own perceptions chronicled in my teaching journal, I triangulated the data by consulting Ying [a friend] and the students themselves. (Jennifer Weathers, in the Farrell volume, p. 176)

Making transparent the messy process of research is a positive and appealing feature of the accounts in this series and likely to be reassuring for novice researchers, who can easily get the impression from much of the ELT research literature that conducting research is a linear and unproblematic procedure.

The series is structured to highlight teacher research from different continents. In doing so, it achieves excellent coverage of international teacher research engagement activity. However, despite the series editor’s aspirations that the series encourage sharing from classrooms around the world, the danger in organising the volumes regionally is that teacher researchers may focus only on their part of the world, thereby limiting the potential for wider international exchange. A criticism that could also be levelled at this series is that the majority of the papers are written by teacher academics working at universities, a point that is also made by Borg (see state-of-the-art review in this issue). Examples of exceptions are Thomas, in Borg (2006b); Agbalizu, in Coombe & Barlow (2007); Njoroge & Ndung’u in Makalela (2009). On the one hand, this preponderance calls into question the extent to which the series represents
research by teachers working in settings where they are not called upon to publish and where research may be actively discouraged (see Borg’s state-of-the-art review in this issue); on the other hand, it highlights the growing interest in this form of self-reflexive and pedagogically oriented research in academic environments, an orientation to research which is not always well-regarded and still very recent in most universities.

3. Summative comments and recommendations

Perhaps the greatest contribution of this body of work on teacher research engagement is the promise and encouragement it holds out to teachers – whether defined more strictly as those who work in non-university language teaching classrooms, or expanded to those who work in academic settings – to be involved in investigating their own workplaces. Not only does this corpus of teacher research studies enable teacher researchers to offer pedagogical insights and research outcomes from their own environments in ways that are more empirically sound than usual, it also provides a literature that can contribute to illuminating theoretically the nature of classroom practices and processes. Theoretical interest in knowledge about teaching and about teaching language in particular (see Freeman & Johnson 1998; Bartels 2005) is thus complemented by ‘insider’ research accounts of the kinds of issues that preoccupy teachers.

The three categories of volumes reviewed here can be seen as diverse in style and substance but also complementary. All the teacher contributions have, of course, been edited before publication, some quite extensively. Nonetheless, they provide teacher educators and researchers with different sources and genre types for writing about teacher research. Of the three sets, the TESOL Language Teacher Research in... series is likely to become the most referenced as a body of teacher researcher work. The chapter templates, and particularly the explicit inclusion of a reflection section, provide sound models in the spirit of methodologies typically used in practitioner and action research. However, the chapters in this series could also seem off-puttingly substantial for teachers just beginning to engage in research, particularly as the majority are authored by university-based researchers. The summaries in the Tinker Sachs, Gallagher & Bashir-Ali, and Warne et al. volumes are more likely to offer a sense of authenticity for teacher readers newly setting out on a research pathway. Because they are written by teacher peers, they are also likely to appear more achievable. The Borg volumes (2006a, 2008) provide accessible examples for readers wanting a more formal and technically conventional style of reporting research. For teacher educators they provide a clear and basic format that can be expanded to assist students completing theses.

The great diversity of styles, discourses and offerings across these volumes is a reflection of the still uncertain status of teacher engagement in research. Just over a decade ago, Freeman (1998) commented that genres of teacher research had not yet been established, which made problematic the issue of making teacher research public. As the range of volumes reviewed here shows, genres for producing teacher accounts are still in flux. Teacher readers, and teacher educators engaged in research with them, will need to select genres advisedly and in response to whatever styles are deemed appropriate within the contexts of their research. However, as Freeman, drawing on the work of Charles Bazerman, goes on to point out (p. 154), fluidity was also very much the case when forms of reporting scientific research
were still evolving from the 17th century. The evolution of a recognisable teacher research publication genre is a struggle that is likely to continue for a long time. The crossroads at which the reporting of teacher research stands is reflected across these volumes – should the route followed be that of established conventions for reporting research (where teacher’s work might become ‘subsidiary to existing work in these established forums’ (Freeman 1998: 154)), or that leading to the establishment of different genres from the seeds of narrative and personal reflection that characterise the accounts in several of these volumes?

Acknowledgements

My thanks go to Graeme Porte and Simon Borg for their valuable comments on an earlier draft of this review.

References


ANNE BURNS was a Professor in the Department of Linguistics and Dean of Linguistics and Psychology at Macquarie University, Australia. She is Professor in Language Education at Aston University, UK, and Honorary Professor at the University of Sydney, Australia. She has produced numerous publications on language teacher education and research, the most recent being The Cambridge guide to second language teacher education (edited with Jack Richards; Cambridge University Press, 2009) and Doing action research in English language teaching (Routledge, 2010).