The many benefits of a research component in English language teacher education: A case study

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ABSTRACT
The benefits of research conducted by practising teachers have been comprehensively reported in recent years. They are thought to be of such value that students of ELT at many universities commonly have to study research methods as an essential part of their course. However, given the reality that most professionals in the field do not routinely carry out research, it is not easy to defend the presence of a serious research methods component. When embarking on a compulsory research methods subject, the students who are the focus of this article are not all persuaded that the methods they learn are useful, and that the project they devise and carry out in the course will benefit them or anyone else. As current or future teachers, they do not see themselves as ‘researchers’. This article offers an account of the transformation of some of these students into researchers, showing how their individual projects turned out to be not only relevant to the researchers’ professional future, but also remarkably useful to the EFL teachers (and sometimes the learners) with whom they came into contact as they pursued their enquiry.

Introduction
This article has two purposes. First, it explains how participants in a university language teacher education course learnt to appreciate the role of the teacher-as-researcher. As a result of an innovative subject that entailed not only studying research methods but also conducting projects guided by those methods and displaying their research to the world outside the classroom, the student teachers lost their scepticism or indifference towards practitioner research. Secondly, it seeks to highlight several advantages of student teachers’ research that have not been prominent so far in the literature on research in ELT. These are benefits that the students came to recognise as reinforcing the value of research work.

The inspiration for this ‘research on research’ arose from my attendance at an international ELT conference, where I had the opportunity to give a talk about the role of research and research methods in language teacher
After describing the research subject that I teach, Research Methods in Language Teaching and Learning (RMLTL), I was impressed by the degree of interest from the audience, many of whom were also struggling to make research methods relevant and appealing to their students. At least two of the delegates declared that they would try to implement in their own teacher education programs a model similar to the one I had described. It then occurred to me that I should undertake a more formal enquiry into the subject that I teach, and the ways in which it may be said to have succeeded in generating syllabus ideas that others might follow.

Data for the study presented here are drawn from the records of three annual semester-long ‘deliveries’ of the subject RMLTL, and chiefly comprise the syllabus, lecturers’ observations, and student evaluations of the subject solicited formally and confidentially by the university’s Student Feedback Service. Important evidence also comes from the students’ research projects, four examples of which are described and evaluated in this article. A total of 70 students took the subject in the period under enquiry, of whom less than 10 per cent in each year had any professional experience in language teaching. Thirty to 40 per cent of them were international students, the majority from Asian countries. The justification for referring to this research as a case study springs from second language research methodology itself, in the sense that the study is of a ‘single instance’. In this case, the instance is ‘an innovative teaching program’ (Nunan 1992: 76). Case study may also involve the intensive study of ‘the background, current status, and environmental interaction of a given social unit’ (Brown and Rodgers 2002: 21): the social unit here is the group or community of students.

**Research conducted by practising teachers**

Teachers’ research is commonly associated with action research. In general education, this mode has developed as a practicable alternative to large-scale formal research; it can be carried out by teachers seeking to resolve problems with their own teaching and their students’ learning. One of the first advocates of action research in education, Stephen Corey, reported teachers’ enthusiasm for it: they claimed that their teaching was more likely to change than it would have if they had simply read other people’s research (Corey 1953, cited in Gebhard and Oprandy 1999: 61).

In the field of language teaching, ‘intervention and change’ (Nunan 2001: 200) are among the distinguishing characteristics of action research. One further feature is its collaborative nature, the imperative that the research be carried out with others involved (Kemmis and McTaggart 1988). Burns (1999) sees a close association between the quest for change
and collegial collaboration, since action research undertaken in a collaborative spirit offers not only improvement in the practices of a given classroom but also ‘a strong framework for whole-school change’ (p 13).

RMLTL espouses no particular interpretation of action research: it merely invites participants to review the approaches to, and procedures of, action research – for example as set out by Nunan (1992: 17–20) – and be ready to defend the methodology they adopt. It is important to note that, strictly speaking, if people are not actually employed as teachers and are not investigating problems in their classroom or institution, then they are not action researchers. However, if the scale of their research and the methods they adopt are much the same as those of action research, then the model can still be followed. Moreover, participants should be able to achieve a measure of collaboration in their enquiry, even if it is not quite of the sort that Burns portrays, and have the opportunity to effect modest change in the environments they investigate. The ways in which participants collaborate with one another and bring about change will become apparent later in this article.

For practising teachers carrying out action research, the rewards are clear, especially if the research focuses on one’s own class of students or other aspects of the immediate teaching and learning environment. Small-scale or action research, consuming of time and energy as it may be, is a manageable enterprise of professional development for some teachers, and enlightened academic administrations tend to encourage it. In the past decade or so, a plethora of books and articles have appeared on this type of research and how to conduct it, all of them emphasising its advantages. Gebhard (1999: 59), for example, claims that action research ‘provides a way of looking that helps us reflect on our teaching’. It involves, he says, both problem solving and problem posing, which together fit into the view of teaching as exploration and discovery (p 59). According to Burns (1999), the ‘problem’ for research comes out in everyday teaching, and the process of solving the problem through research is relevant because ‘it is grounded in the social context of the classroom and the teaching institution’ (p 17). Her catalogue of the benefits of action research, as reported by a group of 20 ESL teachers in Australia, includes: the opportunity for personal and professional growth and self-awareness; reflection on the nature of decision making in class; understanding curriculum change; and, on a more political level, an increased sensitivity to the demands that the ESL industry makes on students and teachers (p 15).

Thus, in this account of the advantages of teachers’ research the teacher is viewed not merely as one who consumes or applies other people’s theories
(Nunan 1992: xii; Edge 2001: 6; Richards 2001: 217), but rather as one who, on the basis of critical reflection, is capable of creating both theory out of practice and a new understanding of the things that happen in a particular teaching and learning environment.

**Student teachers’ views of teacher-initiated research**

The manifold advantages of research by language teachers justify the inclusion of research methods and practice in teacher education. Teacher-educators would like their students to be autonomous teachers, rather than to be always in the thrall of other people’s theories, and to experience as many of the benefits of teacher research cited by Burns as possible. Further, they intend their students to develop the knowledge, skills and disposition to undertake research in their present or future workplace, thereby fulfilling part of the definition of a professional in the field. McDonough (1997) underlines the ‘enabling function’ of research methods in teacher education: that the student will acquire skills in reading and evaluating research in general, be able to undertake empirical research in a dissertation and extend his or her professional profile. Thus, in postgraduate coursework in TESOL a research component is a common feature, and in many universities it is a compulsory unit. It may entail either pure research methodology or methodology plus project and is considered a crucial part of the student teacher’s preparation.

Yet, from the student teachers’ point of view, the advantages of research methods and a research project may be less clear. The great majority of these students hope to be teachers in public or private institutions at home or abroad, have modest goals and few ‘academic’ pretensions. They do not (at least not yet) intend to pursue higher degrees for which research skills are essential. Judging from the ‘Student Profile’ records (questionnaires completed by the students at the start of semester) gathered from RMLTL over its three years of delivery, such a description certainly fits the great majority of students who have studied this subject. Many of those who have had more than a glimpse of the reality of EFL or ESL teaching know that they are going to be busy classroom teachers with virtually no time to spare for research. ‘Look’, wrote one student as feedback for the subject in 2002, ‘I love research but I struggled to see its relevance to a busy TESOL teacher’.

Indeed, when the students look around the environment of practising professionals in language centres they see little evidence of the action or other small-scale research so strongly advocated by their lecturers, and not much institutional support for it either. According to McDonough’s (1997) small survey of in-service student teachers, ten of the 21 respondents did not believe that they would have the opportunity for research in their workplaces. The
best opportunities, unsurprisingly, were thought to be in the tertiary sector. It may be added that if graduates ever found the need to engage in research once they are working, they should be able to develop the requisite skills with help from the plethora of books on research methodology.

Expressed in these terms, the argument against a research component for students of ELT is attractive. Yet, in common no doubt with many teacher educators, I believe that research projects and the acquisition of the skills needed to carry them out impart tangible benefits to students, even those who seek only the basic skills and knowledge required for their first job. If we hold that such projects and skills are genuinely important in a modern university ELT course, then we should ensure that they appear as interesting as possible to the participants and clearly relevant to their professional future. From the evidence collected over three years of delivery, it would appear that the subject RMLTL, with its culmination in a research display, goes a long way towards succeeding in this respect. It also generates benefits for students, the whole TESOL Program and the teaching of languages at the university.

The subject and its students

RMLTL is one of a suite of subjects in the TESOL Program and is a compulsory unit of study. The program itself, like those at other Australian universities, consists of a Graduate Diploma and a higher-level MA: students with little or no ELT experience or academic background in TESOL or a related field take the Graduate Diploma and have the option of a further year of Master’s studies if they wish; students in the MA have previous academic study in TESOL and/or some years of professional experience as EFL or ESL teachers. Typically, the majority of participants in RMLTL do not intend to go beyond the Graduate Diploma, which is one year in duration for those attending full-time. The students in the program range widely in age and are a mixture of native and non-native English speakers. The heterogeneity of the group typifies the variety of teachers that ELT is attracting these days, and the mixture of cultural and language backgrounds makes for lively interaction.

The structure of the subject, which runs for 15 weeks, is relatively simple. The first five or six weeks are devoted to the study of research methods for action or small-scale research. This broadly follows the sort of knowledge and skills and examples proposed by Nunan, Burns, Edge and others through reading, discussion and written or oral tasks. As in the major texts on teacher-initiated research, and given the modest aims and duration of the course, the emphasis rests heavily on qualitative rather than quantitative
methods. This early phase of the subject would be in danger of appearing dry and tedious to students, even with the most energetic of lecturers, if there was no palpable and inspiring application of what they had learnt. At the beginning of the subject the participants, like the student quoted above who "struggled to see its relevance", would inevitably ask, "Why are we doing this?" To circumvent such questions, they should be encouraged to look forward to what occupies the rest of the semester, namely the conduct of a supervised research project that includes a public presentation of it. They also have to perceive that their project is going to be interesting and worthwhile, for it is this project that gives life to the subject.

**THE RESEARCH PROJECT**

From the very start of classes, participants know they have to undertake a project of small-scale research on a topic of their choosing. By week 4, while still developing their methodological skills, they should have settled on a topic. The lecturers offer guidance on the choice and refinement of topic, but there is no coercion. Highly significant for the students’ continuing commitment to the project is the strong encouragement given to them to select topics that will be useful to their current or future professional practice. For example, a participant from the local region who is a volunteer part-time teacher of ESL to migrants and refugees may conduct a needs-analysis survey at her language centre. Similarly, a Bangladeshi may observe university EFL classes and interview fellow Bangladeshi international students to generate culturally acceptable ideas for reform of EFL classroom practice in her home country.

The projects undertaken must be feasible within the timeframe: thus, no ambitious experiments or grand longitudinal studies are possible. All projects will take students into real-life teaching and learning settings either at the university or outside of it. By week 7, the room where the participants meet for formal classes on research methods has become a busy and informal (but not chaotic) place. Although, for the sake of reliability of assessment, participants work individually on their projects, they do collaborate in tangible ways that help them to learn. Because the research display and research report are complex and challenging tasks, the participants naturally seek guidance from one another: for example, they show each other drafts, compare results, ask for advice on the aesthetics of their display, and talk about their frustrations. But, most importantly, with deliberate encouragement from the lecturers they form small groups on the basis of categories in learning and teaching that accommodate their topics: thus, for example, those working on topics to do with ESL for migrants
meet regularly, as do those concerned with ‘interaction and participation’ (usually the most popular category), ‘learning styles, motivation and attitudes’, ‘the macroskills’ and so on. Those whose projects do not fit into any shared category will join together as an ‘independent’ group. The groups may meet in the original classroom or anywhere else they choose.

**THE RESEARCH DISPLAY**

The assessable goal of the project is not the display but the report, a writing-up of the research. In most cases, this proceeds through the standard phases of introduction, rationale, conceptual background or literature review, method, data analysis, discussion and conclusion. I believe that students would have less enthusiasm and spirit to complete a conventional, and for some perhaps a rather dull, academic exercise, if they did not have the momentum of investigations in the field, the amicably cooperative workshops and, above all, the research display.

The display is an afternoon event that takes place in the penultimate week of semester, in which participants mount an exhibition of their accomplishments summarised and presented in the form of colourful posters, panels or even PowerPoint slides. Food, drink and background music from different cultures make the occasion less austerely academic. Interested staff and students from the whole university, and some teachers in linguistics and languages from a neighbouring university, are invited to attend. Special invitations go out to teachers and students who helped with or were subjects in the projects, and they come in their scores to see what has finally been made of their contributions. The most interested visitors are the practising EFL teachers, at all levels, who draw from the results of the projects both a deeper understanding of their learners and possibly a new perspective on their teaching. Whereas a pile of student research reports would not be likely to catch the attention of these busy teachers, the display offers accessible and efficient summaries of research and a chance to talk to the researchers themselves. The teachers and other visitors often ask for a copy of a specific research report as result of attending the event.

It is impossible to assess a research presentation of this type objectively. Thus, in the first two deliveries of the subject, no marks were offered for the displays. However, in the third year, responding to student feedback, lecturers offered a mark out of 10 per cent to individual contributors. The assessment was made in consultation with three colleagues from the university’s Academic Skills Program, all of whom had language teaching qualifications. Even so, a mark out of ten is relatively little in return for the appreciable amount of work required for the display. What, then, are the rewards for the designers of these
elaborate, multicoloured and sometimes rather gaudy exhibits? Generally, the participants value the public event, which occurs a week before submission of the research report, as an occasion to reach a much wider audience than just their classmates and lecturer. This is, after all, the audience that has the power to validate their endeavours. Referring to the display and all the work in the subject that went into it, individual students anonymously confirmed their enthusiasm in comments recorded in evaluations over the three years. The following represent a sample of such comments:

- Fun. Allowed us to interact with the School as a whole.
- Forced me to come to conclusions; clarified thought processes; opportunity for networking; mutual respect from academics was very encouraging.
- Helped clarify my results and discussion.
- I had the chance to preview other students’ results and compare them to mine. Talk to the other academic staff and English language students that participated in my project.
- Working as a group.
- A very cooperative spirit amongst the group.
- Poster work was a crystallising process, enjoyable and worthwhile.
- I received valuable feedback and enjoyed discussing my research with interested parties.

Negative comments were inevitable. A few students each year thought that the work for the display was very time consuming, and one person in 2002 wrote that it was ‘a waste of time’. In 2003, when a grade for the individual displays was introduced, two students commented, ‘Not enough marks’.

One of the participants at the conference in Thailand where I made my presentation on the RMLTL subject wrote to me appreciatively after he had implemented some of these ideas in a subject called ‘Seminar in TESL’ for a Master’s program at a Thai university. He reported that ‘having students do small-scale research projects and presenting them informally at a poster presentation party provided structure and direction for the course’. The students were able to present their work ‘with great pride and skill’; further, they emerged from the course with workable ideas for the thesis, which was to be the next step in their studies. ‘Everything is perfect in this class’, wrote one student in an evaluation of the subject (Graeme Ritchie, personal communication, May 2004).

RMLTL is supposed to turn student teachers into teacher-researchers, but arguably it is the research display that makes the transformation sincere.
and effective. It has proved to be an imaginative way of guiding students towards the goals of the subject.

**Examples of research conducted in the subject**

Since I make substantial claims about the benefits of the subject both to the education of novice teacher-researchers and to the language-learning environments in which they carry out their projects, it is important to offer some illustrations of their accomplishments. What follows is an account of a sample of four projects, which are typical in most respects to those that were carried out as part of the subject. Each description is accompanied by a comment on the usefulness of the work.\(^2\)

**EXAMPLE 1**

*Do Thai students really want to improve their English or are they only interested in having fun?*  
by Songpon Intasian

This research was provoked by an evaluation of the Thai language learning style that had been posted on the Internet by a native English speaker who used to teach English in Bangkok. In it he suggested that Thai students were a ‘fun-loving bunch’ who had almost no desire to improve their English. Disturbed by such an evaluation, the researcher, Songpon Intasian, sought to find out if the allegation was well founded. He observed EFL classes at an Australian university attended by Thais, distributed questionnaires among Thai learners and interviewed their teachers. The response, however, was not a simple ‘true’ or ‘false’ statement. The sample of 32 Thai participants in the survey tended to the view that their Thai teachers were ‘strict’ and focused mainly on grammar exercises; meanwhile, they regarded their native English-speaking teachers (NESTs) as ‘fun’, ‘kind-hearted’ but ‘serious in teaching’, who offered more communicativeness in class. In classes with NESTs, the learners were released from the obligation to show the degree of respect they commonly accorded their Thai teachers. This does not mean, however, that they only wanted to have a good time: rather, they wanted to study but liked humour in the classroom. The researcher decided upon the term ‘serious fun’ to describe the Thais’ ideal atmosphere for learning.

**COMMENT**

The researcher was a young Thai university lecturer in English who was anxious to dispose of the stereotype of the ‘fun-loving’, non-serious Thai learner. Anecdotal evidence early in his research suggested that some NESTs at the university might, consciously or not, accept this stereotype. The
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research took Songpon quite deeply into the beliefs of Thai learners and his data allowed him to challenge the stereotype. However, along the way he also raised provocative questions about the differences between non-NESTs and NESTs, questions which then became part of a discussion in teaching methodology and other postgraduate subjects where linguistic imperialism appeared as a topic.

**EXAMPLE 2**

To what extent do Chinese students at the university take advantage of the English language environment beyond the classroom to enhance their knowledge of English? by Susan Prentice

Noticing that Chinese students at the university tended to spend much of their time together, and suspecting that cultural factors might be inhibiting their social interaction with native speakers of English, the researcher, Susan Prentice, explored the extent to which these students take advantage of the English-speaking environment to improve their linguistic knowledge and skills. She assumed that exposure to the target language outside the classroom contributes significantly to the mastery of that language and, moreover, that a sound command of English is essential for the success of any further study that these students wanted to undertake. Through semi-structured interviews with ten Chinese students both from EFL and mainstream courses, Susan found, among other things, that, despite their efforts, the students had few opportunities for rich social interaction with the Australian community, and that most opportunities were limited to functional encounters – for example, when shopping or in the library. She concluded that an important reason for the lack of contact between the Chinese students and local Australians was not because of a profound cultural distance, but rather a difference of leisure interests between the two groups. For instance, the Chinese enjoyed playing cards, Chinese chess, basketball, table tennis and soccer, none of which are the most popular of pastimes in Australia.

**COMMENT**

The researcher was both a native English speaker and a speaker of Mandarin as a foreign language. Intending to teach English in China, she was concerned about Chinese learning styles and the sense in which the culture itself, as Tian Fang (Example 4 below) argues, may impede learning. But what she found was that the students, although willing to engage with local native speakers, reported that the lack of common interests was more of an obstacle than their cultural backgrounds. EFL teachers at the university showed surprise at this finding, and recognised that there was little they
could do to bridge this particular gap. Susan, meanwhile, will go to China knowing that, in education, the cultural divide is not necessarily as formidable as many people think.

**EXAMPLE 3**

*Parents' influence on their children's acquisition of English as a foreign language*

by Lee Young-sook

This is a study of the origins of students’ pursuit of English throughout their lives. According to the researcher, Lee Young-sook, a large number of parents, especially in Asian countries, want their children to be bilingual or at least highly proficient in English. Is this pressure benign or harmful? Most of us would suspect that such parental pressure, although guided by the best of intentions, might be counterproductive. By means of a questionnaire and interviews, the researcher surveyed 47 students from Confucian-heritage countries studying both in EFL and mainstream courses. The questions addressed the subjects’ language background, home environment, degree of parental pressure and the parents’ proficiency in English. The results showed that subjects overwhelmingly viewed their parents’ pressure on them to study English as positive. No-one responded that such an influence was unhelpful or too strong. It turned out that the great majority of parents never spoke English with their children at home, no matter how proficient they were. In fact, stronger pressure came from the students’ teachers and the educational system.

**COMMENT**

The researcher disclosed to the class at the start of her project that she had been stimulated to do the research because she was alarmed at the attitude of parents to their children’s English language learning in her native Korea. They seemed to be determined that their children devote themselves to the goal of success in language study, and so sent them off to long hours of extra English classes each week. She felt that this pressure might be harmful. Thus, in a sense, the results were a relief, suggesting as they did that the pressure was benign. However, references in the data to stress caused by the heavy demands of the schools shifted her concern to the education system itself, which she thought was where the more harmful influences were to be found, in particular in the menacing examination system and with the teachers themselves. Some EFL teachers at the university also showed surprise at the results since they, like the researcher, had been inclined to believe that the lack of motivation they saw in several of their learners might have been, in part, a reaction to years of parental pressure to study English and to succeed at it at all costs.
EXAMPLE 4

An investigation of Chinese students’ participation in tutorials by Tian Fang

This project originated from the perception, supported by anecdotal evidence from university teachers and the students themselves, that Chinese international students were reluctant to participate in tutorial discussion. The goal of the research was to help teachers understand the reasons for their students’ behaviour and to encourage them to develop strategies for increasing participation in class. By means of observation of mainstream classrooms and conducting interviews with 22 Chinese students, the researcher, Tian Fang, witnessed her subjects’ reticence and was able to report that an alarming 70 per cent of them confessed they had no desire to be active in class. The reasons for this reticence were identified as being an inadequate proficiency in speaking, an inability to accept new ways of learning, anxiety, a reluctance to take risks and a poor comprehension of the tutors’ language. Fang argued that the preparatory English courses in Australia did not have a strong impact on students’ learning style and advised EFL teachers to give explicit attention to the skills of tutorial participation in their syllabuses.

COMMENT

A teacher of English in China herself, the researcher saw the relevance of the project to her own professional practice: the behaviour of the sample here might be that of her own former students, who, like huge numbers of others in China today, aspire to study in Western countries. In order to conduct the project, she had to talk to EFL teachers and get out into the university community, attend mainstream classes and interview both students and tutors. Her conclusions are most useful, not only for her own teaching in China but also for EFL teachers on the very campus where she conducted the research. These teachers were especially struck by the implication that they were not doing enough to prepare their students for the ‘culture’ of the tutorial or small-group discussion.

Further benefits

From the above descriptions of four projects one is able to see how the participants would regard their work as relevant to their future professional practice, even taking into account the limitations of small-scale research – in particular, the difficulty of making any strong claim of internal or external validity (Nunan 1992: 18–20). In addition, I would like to advance further benefits which may flow from their research:
1 Participants get training in collegiality; they collaborate with one another, solicit advice, and give to, and receive help from, colleagues. They experience something of the teamwork and collegial solidarity that are present in healthy teaching environments. ‘Working with others’ is one of the so-called ‘generic skills’, the acquisition of which Australian universities are trying to foster.

2 Participants consult extensively with, and learn from, practising teachers who assist in, or are subjects of, the research. These teachers help them to reflect critically on aspects of the project. This short ‘mentoring’ phase is especially helpful, and possibly inspiring, to novices or those with relatively little teaching experience.

3 Participants gain the satisfaction of seeing, through the display of their research, how the results of their project can have an immediate impact on a local learning and teaching environment; they become aware that practising teachers value their work as researchers and can be changed by it.

4 In carrying out their projects participants make use of what they have learnt, or are learning, in other parts of the program. Their reading, discussions and empirical enquiry enable them to refer, for example, to methodology, linguistics or second language acquisition, and to make connections between such components of the program that they may not otherwise have been able to see.

**Conclusion**

In a course component of research methods and practice such as this one, a bottom-up approach to teacher education can be embraced vividly and imaginatively, in ways not always possible in other areas of a TESOL program. The participants create the content of their learning from their own developing experience; they themselves ‘construct’ their knowledge. Although they pay explicit attention to published research and theory, they are ultimately not dependent on non-teaching experts, on a ‘top-down imposition of ideas’ (Widdowson 1993: 267). Whether they remain as teacher-researchers or not, this intellectual independence, acquired through formal and elaborate reflection on teaching and learning, should stay with the participants throughout their professional lives.

Earlier in this article, I quoted the doubts that one student had about the subject in the initial stages of participation: ‘Look, I love research but I struggled to see its relevance to a busy TESOL teacher’. But this was not the whole quotation. The student added, ‘In the end I did’.
NOTES
2 The four researchers named have given permission for their names to be included.

REFERENCES