

## TEACHERS AS RESEARCHERS

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Teacher research is the 'form of research in which teachers do research in their own classrooms for the purpose of improving practice'. It is 'not only a research approach that is grounded in the reality of classroom culture, but one that is under the control of teachers', suggested Stenhouse (Hopkins, 1993:41). It is important to know what a difference a good teacher makes. Not just how he can open doors to learning but also give students confidence in themselves and their abilities, whose inspiration stays with them long after they have left their classroom.

Teachers' place is in the classroom, but their role is not just teaching mechanically in the way designed by others such as education authorities, professional researchers and experts who are not doing the teaching in the classroom. Neither should teachers be confined to a role having nothing to do with research concerning their teaching. Teachers are not merely artisans, but more importantly they are or should be artists with their own vision and originality together with conceptualising and theorising power. The thing is that they need to be given a chance to do so and be empowered by the access to the means of classroom research and the theory underlining it. 'Teacher as researcher' is intended, in Stenhouse's concept, to emancipate

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teachers 'from the control position they so often find themselves in' (Hopkins, 1993:4). It is not advisable for teachers simply to follow a curriculum or a certain methodological approach without digestion and critical judgement as to the feasibility of the curriculum or the approach to be applied to the teaching in a classroom within a particular context. In Hopkins' (1993:4) words, 'such curriculum proposals and teaching specifications are probably intelligent but not necessarily correct, and their effectiveness should therefore be monitored by teachers in the classroom.' A teacher as a researcher does not weaken the responsibility as a teacher but on the contrary it gives the teacher more chance to make better contribution to gaining more insights into and deal with what is actually involved in the teaching and learning process in the classroom and know how best research findings can be better interpreted and applied in actual teaching to the best interest of the learner. Therefore, it seems reasonable to suggest that teachers play a role in classroom research so that they are 'engaged not only in a meaningful professional development activity, but also engaged in a process of refining, and becoming more autonomous in professional judgement' (Stenhouse, 1984:69).<sup>1</sup> It is these elements that constitute Stenhouse's idea of 'good teachers'. Being autonomous in professional judgement, good teachers are independent in their professional practice where they have their own say. They do appreciate ideas, advice and suggestions from experts outside the classroom. They need and welcome support by different means from various sources. But they realise that 'ideas and people are not of much real use until they are digested to the point where they are subject to the teacher's own judgement' (idem). Good teachers therefore should work as the master of their own house. This paper will discuss two major issues:

- (a) The necessity of research by teachers
- (b) The feasibility and quality of research by teachers

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<sup>1</sup> cited in Hopkins (1993:34).

## **THE NECESSITY OF RESEARCH BY TEACHERS**

### **The Gap Between Theory and Practice**

There seems always a gap between theory and practice in the field of language teaching and learning. In theory, the importance of a link between the two is teaching and learning. The importance of the link is recognised but it is not useful in practice. People tend to associate research work and theorising with established academic researchers in higher institutions with authority not to be challenged and regard practice as the only property of teachers who are supposed to carry out practical routine duties in accordance with plans and theories given from above. This existing gap does a disservice to the educational development in schools in that research findings are not given enough chance to be fully tried, tested, refined and applied in actual teaching practice. One way to bridge this gap is research by teachers training programme.

### **The Teacher's Role in the Application of Classroom Research Findings**

The ultimate of any research done in the field of language teaching and learning is to serve the language teachers in their efforts to improve language teaching through renovation and innovation promoted by new research findings. However, the proof of the pudding is in the eating. Whether new theories and approaches to language teaching are feasible or not is subject to test in practice. The task obviously falls upon the shoulders of language teachers. How language teachers understand, interpret and practice an innovative theory or strategy seems vital to its effectiveness in use. It is the teacher who is responsible for translating the theory from words on paper into deeds in performance. And it is again the teacher who is in actuality tasting the sweetness of success or the bitterness of failure in trying out the ideas of a certain approach. Confronted with success or especially failure, should teachers simply wait for the experts and researchers to come and investigate, observe, hypothesise, plan, experiment, monitor, conclude and eventually

either confirm the success of certain aspects of an approach or provide a way to remedy its weaknesses? This is practically a time-consuming process. The feedback comes a long way before it reaches the teacher and it takes even longer time for students to enjoy the possible benefit of expert help. Besides, during this time many things can happen; new problems may arise. Students cannot afford to wait in their thirst to learn efficiently. Neither can the teachers in their want of professional development and their effort to make more contribution to the development of language education as a whole.

### **The Importance of Context**

The success of language teaching depends largely on the effective and successful use of suitable approaches. Yet, no approach can claim to be a panacea to all the problems language teachers and learners face. There simply exist so many variables in the language classrooms in different educational contexts. An approach that works perfectly well under one context may not be able to achieve the same effect in another. One man's meat may not be another man's delicacy and can even be his poison. Who is in better command of knowledge of such variables in classroom context? It is the teacher.

Certain aspect of classroom environment is only accessible to the teacher and students in that particular classroom. Such information is not equally accessible to researchers from outside unless they carry out long-term participant observation. This is vividly illustrated by the 'Strawberries' example presented by Walker and Adelman (1976:138) who were concerned in their study about 'the inherent complexity of the meanings communicated by talk' in teacher-student interaction in the classroom (Idem, 137). This is a joke quoted from their observation of a class. The teacher was commenting on a pupil's written work, obviously showing dissatisfaction when the rest of the class echoed with 'Strawberries, strawberries' to be followed by laughter. The joke was beyond the comprehension of the observers until they were informed that this resulted from the fact that the teacher was fond of drawing an analogy between his

pupils' work and strawberries which in his opinion were good as far as they went, but they did not last long enough (Walker and Adelman, 1976:139). At face value, this is only a joke, but it reveals 'the underlying means of social control in this class' (idem.). This was the pupils' particular way of telling their teacher that they understood what was required of them in their work. The use and understanding of such a joke was accessible to the teacher and his pupils who shared this contextual knowledge. While such understanding was immediate between the teacher and his pupils, it took a long while before researchers from outside the classroom could come to realise its real significance. Therefore, we can assume that once becoming a teacher researcher, the teacher enjoys an advantage ensured by his/her knowledge of the classroom context and is in a position to make unique contribution to the understanding of classroom research findings as well as to the development of further research. As long as he remains a teacher, such knowledge stays and accumulates and therefore his contribution in this respect is likewise available, increases and lasts if he commits himself to being a teacher researcher.

### **The Need to Test Research Findings in Individual Contexts**

The necessity of research by teachers is further emphasised by Lawrence Stenhouse (1979:71-11)<sup>2</sup> who gave an account of the bewilderment experienced by a teacher of social studies. This teacher is making a choice between Strategy A and Strategy B to be used in teaching about race relations. The former strategy requires him of a neutral attitude towards racism in his teaching; the latter allows him to express freely his personal opinion — one which is against racism. Both strategies have been experimented in a number of different schools by professional researchers. Unable to decide for himself, he seeks help from research findings appertaining to the two strategies. To his surprise, the research findings leave him in great puzzlement.

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<sup>2</sup>cited in Hopkins (1993:22-31).

While showing the overall situation of racism in the schools in general and suggesting that Strategy A be the possible better solution, the same research data, being presented in a different way to describe various situations in individual schools, presents a complicated picture far from being helpful. Neither Strategy A nor Strategy B seems to be a definite better choice for all schools. There is simply no convincing result to show that one is definitely better than the other in all instances. It seems only true that Strategy A works well for some schools while Strategy B is suitable for some others. What is more, in some schools, neither seems desirable in use. Though the findings are the result of scientific experiment and research, the use of such results is still subject to further testing and try-outs in practice under individual contexts — the particular situation of a school and its classrooms, its teachers and students, the environments and its usual practice, etc. In the end, this teacher makes up his own mind. 'I've clearly got to think things out for myself' and find 'ways of fitting action to situation and perhaps even to individuals in that situation' (Hopkins, 1993:27).

This, however, does not mean to underestimate or even disregard the value of research but to look at research in a more realistic and creative way. In other words, teachers are advised to use research findings critically, applying their autonomous judgement. 'The results of research need testing in local conditions' (Hopkins, 1993:30). What this teacher finally sets out to do is to try different strategies to test the research findings which remain hypotheses until they are further evidenced to be suitable to the particular context of his particular classroom. It is obvious now that he needs to commit himself to a classroom research as a teacher researcher. To his delight, he realises that he has a good laboratory — a real classroom for him to carry out his endeavour and explore the possibilities for making use of research done by others as well as by himself. The need to use research leads to the need to undertake further research on the part of the teacher.

## **THE FEASIBILITY AND QUALITY OF RESEARCH BY TEACHERS**

### **The Difficulties in the Way of Teachers Researchers**

While encouraging and promoting teacher research, we should not neglect the difficulties and constraints teachers are likely to experience once they venture out to do their own research. One of the constraints can be accounted for by the fundamental duty of a teacher which, without any doubt, is to teach. And teaching virtually involves teachers in a great number of practical routine work and activities. Under normal circumstances, no extra times, money or other forms of support is available to enable teachers to arrange any research work apart from their routine duties that already keep them busy enough. One important reason for the lack of availability of such help is that research does not fall into the category of a teacher's work in the usual sense.

On the other hand, teachers themselves may find doing research quite beyond them since they are usually not trained, and, are prepared for this in either their pre-service and in-service education due to the reason mentioned above. Consequently, the current research literature and methods involved are not within the scope of their knowledge let alone practice.

In the meantime, research by teachers tends to be 'contextualised, descriptive, applied', 'anecdotal in style' (Burton and Mickan, 1993:115) and limited in scope of practice and application, and as a result, easily incurs criticism for not being as reliable and valid as professional research.

### **The Feasibility of Research by Teachers**

However, strenuous efforts have been made by both teacher educators and teachers to justify the usefulness and importance of teachers' research as serious and real research though different in characteristics from conventional research. Wallace (1991), while recognising real problems related to doing research

properly such as the requirement of 'special expertise' a lot of time, financial resources and even perhaps particular personality traits (Wallace, 1991:56) such as a talent for academic work, etc., regards teacher research as a possible means of bridging the gap between theory and practice. He considers 'action research' — generally considered a type of research by teachers — a kind of research more relevant to the classroom and more under the control of teachers and possibly attractive to teachers for two reasons.

- (a) It can be a specific and immediate outcome which can be directly related to practice in the teacher's own context.
- (b) The 'findings' of such research might be primarily specific, *i.e.* it is not claimed that they are necessarily of general application, and therefore the methods might be more free-ranging than those of conventional research.

He goes further to argue that 'Research' of this kind is simply an extension of the normal reflective practice of many teachers, but it is slightly more rigorous and might conceivably lead to more effective outcomes (Wallace, 1991:56-57).

Nunan (1993:42) states his definition of research as 'a systematic process of inquiry consisting of three elements or components: (1) a question, problem, or hypothesis, (2) data, (3) analysis and interpretation of data'. On the basis of this definition, he argues to the effect that, incorporating these elements, action research is qualified as 'real research' (*idem.*). Nunan (1993:44) also cites Allright and Bailey (1991) in their proposal of 'an alternative purpose for research' which is 'to try and understand and deal with immediate practical problems facing teachers and learners'. This purpose of research is shared by action research which, in turn, should be considered qualified as serious research.

### **The Quality of Teachers Research**

If proper training is provided and basic conditions are set up for teachers with collaborative efforts of all, that is, teacher



educators, professional researchers, educational institutions, schools where teachers work and indeed teachers themselves, research by teachers is not only possible but also fruitful and can effect lasting innovation as a result of such research.

A good example of this is found in a languages in-service programme for teachers (LIPT) organised annually between 1988-1991 in South Australia.<sup>3</sup> This in-service programme enabled the teachers 'to refine their areas of concern, to prioritise action, to be realistic in their aims, and to go from intuitively held beliefs about important areas to develop or research to explicitly expressed, specific goals for action' (Burton and Mickan, 1993:116).

One inspiring aspect of the programme is that the teachers were involved in the composition of their action research report for publication. Not only were their research findings recognised in a formal way, but more significantly, this writing process helped them to clarify their ideas and set up new objectives for future action research and professional development. This valuable experience also aroused great interest among the teachers in reading about research findings of others. Their writings and reading skills in research literature were improved to a great extent as well. A subsequent survey (Burton and Mickan 1993) indicated that many of those teachers had incorporated their gains from the in-service programme into their normal working routines, a promising sign for lasting innovation as a result of the teacher's continuing efforts devoted to classroom research individually and collaboratively.

Examples of individual efforts made by teachers in action research are cited by Richards and Lockhart (1994) under the title 'Action research case study'.<sup>4</sup> All the examples share something in common and at the same time present their own characteristics: the teacher researchers start as teachers and are glad of a chance to carry out their own research; though

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<sup>3</sup>Nunan (1993:45-46), Burton and Mickan (1993:16-21)

<sup>4</sup>Action research case study (pp. 69, 91, 110, 126, 157, 178 and 200).

burdened by extra work, they find their efforts worth paying; they all express the wish to carry on with their research on a more ambitious basis if possible; they begin with their small-scale research addressing a particular problem in the particular context of their own classroom with a particular group of pupils and enjoy a certain degree of success; they try different strategies and test to find the best way to deal with a particular issue such as a very large English class of 44 students in Case Study 4 (p. 126) and a class of mixed abilities in Case Study 5 (p. 157); all of them more or less go through a process of **initial reflection, planning, action, observation and reflection**, a reflective cycle which can be repeated if needed be; they choose their different techniques to suit their action research purposes such as tape recording, peer observation, interview, learner and teacher journals and negotiation with students to find out their needs, etc.

The case studies presented in Hopkins (1993:10-31) also serve to exemplify the beneficial result of teacher research. In the first case, for instance, the new teacher, after her first successful attempt, became so encouraged that she expected to take a large-scale project involving more teacher researchers and hope to become a confident teacher researcher herself. In case studies 3 and 4 (pp. 17-22), both teacher researchers emphasise the benefit of establishing co-operative partnership between peer teachers.

## CONCLUSION

Research by teachers is advocated with reasonable backing. The teachers, with their expertise enriched by their classroom practice and experience and their academic potential for carrying out research, should not be underestimated. In fact, their rich knowledge about the classroom and their students is a valuable contribution to better interpretation of research findings by experts and professionals as well as to the use of more effective approaches and strategies in future research efforts. Teachers' involvement in classroom research can serve to narrow the gap between theory and practice. Empowered by the knowledge and strategies for research, together with their internal motivation for

professional renewal and advancement, teacher researchers can hopefully develop their means and improve the quality of researching which in turn will bring great benefit to classroom teaching and learning. When they manage to creatively combine the classroom research strategies and professional improvement efforts into their routine work, lasting innovation of teachers' research is not beyond imagination.

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