

Teachers and Research

As an English language teacher, what is your relationship with research? Do you read it, ignore it, or simply dismiss it? Would you do it? Many readers will answer *no* to this last question. The purpose of this book is to get you to say *yes*, or at the very least, *maybe*. All teachers should engage in classroom research from time to time. This book is a guide for novice teacher-researchers.

This chapter will seek answers to these questions:

- Why should English language teachers conduct classroom research?
- What will English language teachers learn from this book?

A Passion for Teaching

Teachers know how demanding classroom teaching is. Typically, novice teachers struggle simply to get through each lesson. There is just so much to know and learn. Students look to you to guide them, and secretly you might feel unsure about your teaching ability in the first few years while you operate in survival mode. Soon, however, you will develop a toolkit of techniques and favoured tasks to draw from. Your confidence will surely increase as you gain teaching experience.

At the point where you can easily manage the basics of classroom practice, your level of anxiety will decrease. It is at this learning plateau that some teachers begin to coast a bit. Sooner or later, most teachers will stop making progress. At this point, their satisfaction with their knowledge about the practice of teaching decreases. They realize once

again that there is much more to learn to become a better classroom teacher. When you begin to feel like your teaching practice is stagnating, how can you renew it and regain satisfaction in the classroom?

Once you move beyond the novice teacher's survival mode and gain control over the basics of teaching practice, you create space within your professional practice that allows you to begin to see new things about your teaching, your students, and the language content. Increased control gives you the confidence to do certain tasks without excessive planning and anxiety over implementation. This confidence opens up the space needed for inquiry. You will begin to wonder, for example, why certain lessons did or did not go well or why some students have trouble with a particular aspect of grammar. The source of such questions is your instinct to know more about your practice.

Generally, teachers simply want to focus on teaching. Over time, however, puzzling aspects of teaching and learning accumulate. These unresolved issues present you with a choice. You can push these nagging questions aside and focus on doing your best at your current level of knowledge, or you can decide to dig deeper into your passion for teaching through classroom research.

Teaching in the 21st Century

Besides a natural curiosity fuelled by a love of teaching, there are other pressing reasons why teachers should engage in classroom research. The climate in the field of English language education has changed. Foreign language teachers today generally enter the field with a higher level of expertise than previously expected. Many institutions seek candidates with graduate degrees. In addition, organizations such as the TESOL International Association are professionalizing the field as never before. If language teachers wish to be treated like professionals in other fields, then they must engage in a broader array of professional activity. Classroom research opens the door to many new and valuable professional practices.

Despite there being many reasons for teachers to engage in research, some readers will doubt their ability to do classroom research. Perhaps they think research is something done by college professors, but the English language education field needs more classroom research by classroom teachers to better understand the complex

processes of teaching and learning (Stewart, 2006a). It is no exaggeration to say that the future of the profession, including organizations like TESOL International Association, largely depends on the active involvement of classroom teachers. A fundamental benefit for teachers of engaging in classroom research is that it forces them to think more deeply about the major issues in the field. This represents a deeper process of professional engagement that serves to reposition teachers by requiring them to articulate their experiences. The activity of articulating experience, in turn, validates the authority of teachers as experts in their field. Having more teachers who can speak articulately and authoritatively about teaching is vital for the direction of educational reform.

The following claim has been made often and continues to reverberate: *Much published research in English language education is not useful to classroom teachers.* There is another claim that echoes loudly in the field of English language teaching: *Teachers cannot do research.* These two claims are treated by many teachers as common knowledge, so they linger unchallenged. Of course, the two statements are linked. A lot of teachers are dissatisfied with many of the studies published in the field because the studies lack clear practical applications. On the other hand, those very same teachers who have the insights to explain the practical applications of theory are afraid to start doing classroom research. Naturally, people fear things that they do not understand. Many classroom teachers obviously do not understand the research process. The purpose of this book is to demystify classroom research and show teachers that they can and should start researching their teaching. Once the process is transparent, English language teachers embrace classroom research because of the empowering energy that it generates (Werbner, 2004).

Classroom research is interesting, exciting, and very rewarding. This book aims to help novice teacher-researchers work their way through a classroom research project from the conception of a research idea to the publication of results. In the following three chapters, you will learn

- how to find classroom research topics (Chapter 2),
- how to write research questions (Chapter 2),

- how to plan a classroom research project (Chapter 3),
- how to implement a classroom research project and collect data (Chapter 3), and
- how to publish your results (Chapter 4).

Are you ready to get started? Turn the page to begin your journey as a teacher-researcher.