Language Teacher Research in the Middle East

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Teachers in the Middle East, as in other parts of the world, are expected to engage in professional development (PD) activities and to build on and develop their skills as educators. What constitutes good PD for teachers? In the past decade, educators have developed a vision of good PD that focuses on issues teachers deem important in their daily work, that respects and builds on their knowledge and skills, and that nurtures and supports teachers' intellectual leadership capacity (Corcoran, 1995; Little, 1993). An increasingly common activity that potentially addresses all three of these criteria is teacher research. Teacher research is a form of inquiry that involves teachers in developing their own research questions and investigating their own classroom practices. Teacher research can be broadly defined as "systematic and intentional inquiry carried out by teachers" (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1990, p. 3). It is a process of actively engaging teachers in the reflective investigation and critical evaluation of their own practice (Stenhouse, 1975).

In the field of foreign and second language education, teachers have traditionally been seen as subjects or consumers of research done by others. Teacher research involves teachers directly in the selection of immediate, compelling, and meaningful topics as they explore their own practice. It is the teachers themselves who carry out the research on their own work to improve what they do. Therefore, in teacher research, teachers participate actively in directing their own work and, ultimately, their own professional development.
Advocates of teacher research cite its many advantages and describe it as a valuable form of professional development. Zeichner (1999) espoused teacher research because it allows teachers to become better at what they do. In addition, it helps teachers become more flexible and open to new ideas. A third advantage is that it narrows the gap between teachers' aspirations and realization. Zeichner went on to state that teacher inquiry heightens the quality of student learning and stimulates positive changes in the culture and productivity of schools. Teacher research also raises the status of the teaching profession in society. A final advantage Zeichner noted is that teacher research produces knowledge about teaching and learning that is useful to teachers, policy makers, academic researchers, and teacher educators.

Practitioner inquiry provides abundant opportunities for teaching faculty to collaborate with peers, make critical instructional decisions, and implement these strategies in their own classrooms. The literature clearly shows that teachers who have carried out research often report significant changes to their understanding of teaching (Richards & Farrell, 2005). Studies also have found that teachers who engaged in research have experienced professional and personal growth and a decrease in feelings of frustration and isolation (Goswami & Stillman, 1987; Maloy & Jones, 1987; Noffske, 1997; Oja & Pine, 1987). Research by Boudah and Knight (1996) reported positive effects from participation in teacher research in terms of improved teacher attitudes toward research, increased feelings of self-efficacy related to low-achieving students, and increases in positive interactions with students. Finally, teacher research processes may also help to create a positive school culture—one that supports teacher reflection and experimentation (Francis, Hirsch, & Rowland, 1994).

The goal of this volume is to improve teaching and learning in the English language classroom, and the studies were conducted during the process of regular classroom teaching. Most were small-scale in nature and were intended to solve problems rather than simply do research for research's sake. They were carried out by teachers either individually or collaboratively. The classroom research studies began from a specific issue or classroom problem arising from the profession. The teacher researcher then set out a systematic process for formulating an inquiry, collecting information or data, critically reflecting on it, and taking corrective action if warranted.

The teacher researchers followed different research methodologies. Several of the chapters focus on controversial aspects of education in the Middle East and Arabian Gulf. What all of the studies have in common is that the research questions they attempted to answer originated in the classroom.

Margaret Agbalizu's chapter, "How Does Language Anxiety Affect Performance in the English Language Classroom?" discusses the effect of foreign language anxiety on the speaking and writing performances of female high school students. The study divided students into two academic groups, or streams:
science, typically high achievers, and arts, usually poor performers. Agbalizu’s results show that speaking and writing activities were identified as provoking anxiety because the two language skills are product oriented and often exam based. The anxiety caused by these two factors can restrict students’ speaking abilities and reduce the volume and quality of their writing.

In the chapter “L2 Learners and Student Evaluations of Teaching: Issues of Language Comprehension,” Ahmad Al-Issa and Hana Sulieman outline the steps they took to measure students’ understanding of what they read on their university’s Teaching Evaluation Form. The results of their study show that only 17% of the total sample of second language (L2) learners was able to comprehend all seven questions of the survey. In their reflections, the authors suggest ways of making the evaluation form more understandable for English as a foreign language (EFL) students.

Next, Maher Bahloul’s chapter, “Spelling Errors of Arab Learners: Evidence for Intergraphemic Mapping,” analyzes the spelling errors of 88 male adult Saudi EFL learners to gain an understanding of how these students construe and misconstrue the graphemic structure of their second language. He argues that the students’ first language, Arabic, accounts for almost one third of the learners’ spelling errors.

In “What Makes a Good Teacher? Investigating the Native-Nonnative Speaker Issue in the Arabian Gulf,” Christine Coombe and Mashael Al-Hamly report on a study they conducted to investigate EFL students’ attitudes toward native-English-speaking teachers (NESTs) and nonnative-English-speaking teachers (NNESTs) in tertiary institutions in Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates. Their study concludes that their students had a definite preference for NESTs, with 47.7% favoring NESTs, 17% favoring NNESTs, and 35.3% stating no preference. In their reflection, Coombe and Al-Hamly express the need to try to effect change and make students aware of the special attributes that all teachers bring to the classroom.

In the chapter titled “Multicultural, Coeducational Group Work Experiences: Creative Collaboration or Problematic Partnership?” Cindy Gunn outlines the process she went through to determine how she could continue to incorporate group work with male and female students productively into her classes and at the same time better meet the sociocultural needs and concerns of her students. Gunn concludes that the results of her research were not decisive, but she does suggest that fellow teachers should be cognizant of student concerns regarding mixed-gender collaborative activities.

In “To Mediate or Not to Mediate: Surviving in an Exam-Based EFL Context,” Naziha Ali Jafri reports on the results of an investigation into the awareness and practice of facilitated EFL learning at a Pakistani community school in the United Arab Emirates. Jafri surmises that although teachers perceived the importance of mediation in L2 learning, they found that time constraints, large
class size, and an exam-driven curriculum did not allow for facilitated learning. Her conclusions also show that students felt teachers were ignoring their need to communicate in English in authentic occupational contexts.

Paul MacLeod's chapter, "The Effectiveness of Learning Contracts With Arab Learners of English," outlines the author's research into the use of learning contracts with students who were frustrated in their repeated attempts to score 500 on the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), which is a university-required benchmark. MacLeod's aim in integrating learning contracts into the course was to keep students optimistically focused on their goal of reaching a TOEFL 500. He found that his students rose to the challenge of taking more responsibility for their learning and were motivated to learn more.

In the next chapter, "Six Hats for Discussion and Writing," David Palfreyman and Fran Turner attempt to integrate de Bono's Six Thinking Hats model into their classroom to help develop students' thinking, discussion, and writing skills. Although both authors found the use of the model enriched their own teaching and raised their awareness of students' thinking skills and essay writing, they also questioned the practicality of the use of the model because of the existing curriculum and the time constraints they teach under each semester.

Next, Ali H. Raddaoui's chapter, "Teacher and Student Perceptions of Best Practices in Teaching," profiles what constitutes a good teacher and what constitutes a bad teacher in the eyes of students and teachers of English. Raddaoui finds that although students and teachers agreed on many aspects of what makes a good teacher—such as preplanned, organized lessons with a measure of improvisation—they disagreed on several points. Students' responses were sometimes surprising and contrary to what one would expect from students who will be entering a world of continual change.

Ali Shehadeh's chapter, "The Effect of Group and Individual Peer Feedback on Student Writing in an EFL Gulf Context," investigates the impact that feedback from a group of students had on students' writing as compared to the more commonly used technique of individual student feedback. Shehadeh's findings suggest that group feedback can provide students with a valuable tool to improve accuracy. In addition, he also proposes four practical advantages of group feedback for the writing classroom.

In the chapter, "Negotiating With Multiple Repeaters," Salah Troudi seeks ways to assist multiple repeaters in their English language achievement. To this end, he argues that an understanding of their educational and linguistic needs is crucial. The author also attempts to critically challenge common stereotypes used to label multiple repeaters. Troudi surmises that the students' confidence and interest in learning English increased when he involved them in negotiating preferred teaching styles and learning activities. He was also pleased to report that a surprisingly high number, 70%, of his multiple-repeater class passed his course during this teacher research project.
In the closing chapter, “Moodling in the Middle East,” Jason M. Ward reports on research undertaken to determine how effective Moodle, the open-source course management system (CMS), is with his first-year writing class. According to students queried, 90% enjoyed using Moodle and thought it was useful for the course; a further 77% thought that they read or wrote more as a result of this CMS. Ward concludes that Moodle did enhance the learning environment by providing the students and faculty with more communicative, student-centered, and motivating activities in a much bigger world than the classroom.

The contributions to this volume support the view that teaching is a profession and that teachers, like all professionals, need to be constantly reflecting on what they are doing so as to improve their practice (Misson, 2006). To be an effective English language teaching professional, teachers must constantly upgrade their knowledge and understanding of language and language learning. But this is not enough; they should also develop as professionals. One way teachers can do this is by engaging in teacher research to develop a deeper understanding of what goes on in their classrooms. Teachers need to have the capacity for discovering and analyzing their students’ needs and how as teachers they might best meet those needs. This means that every teacher must be a researcher.

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