

## *Introduction: Teacher research as a paradox*

The origins of this book can be traced back to 2003 and a short article called *Research in the lives of TESOL professionals* (Borg, 2003a). What stimulated (or provoked rather) this article was an item (Jarvis, 2001) in a newsletter of a leading language teaching organization which was dismissive, in a fairly unconstructive manner, of action research. My response (and two further pieces that followed in the series – Borg, 2003b, 2003c) initiated for me the process of exploring the notion of the teacher as researcher. I found of particular interest the paradox that teacher research constituted, through being potentially of huge value to teachers yet at the same time so underwhelmingly in evidence, globally speaking, in the field of language teaching. Despite much theoretical advocacy as well as practical guidance in the form of research methods manuals for language teachers, it was clear from my reading and work in a range of international contexts that, for most teachers, teacher research remained a foreign concept, or at least an unfeasible one (a point also made by Allwright, 1997). It was thus a question of either consigning teacher research to the conceptual scrapheap (as some had done) or seeking to develop a deeper understanding of what precisely the challenges were. I took the latter course.

My early contributions to this field were largely theoretical (as opposed to empirical) and it was not until 2005 that I initiated the body of research that this book is based on. There were a number of factors which motivated me in pursuing this line of inquiry. One was that the study of teacher research provided an intellectual space in which I was able to combine my existing interests in teacher education, research methods, and teacher cognition. This final interest had a particularly strong influence on the direction my investigations of teacher research took. I had since the mid 1990s been very involved in the study of language teachers' knowledge and beliefs, and a growing body of work in this area had, over a decade, established very clearly that teachers' conceptions of their work were a powerful influence on their actions. My own early work had focused on the teaching of grammar (e.g. Borg, 1998), but studies in other areas of language teaching had also shown that teachers' decisions about whether to

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engage in particular pedagogical practices were shaped by the cognitions they had in relation to them (a review of this material is presented in Borg, 2006). Teacher cognition research thus provided me with a framework for thinking about the paradox highlighted above between the potential value and actual uptake of teacher research in language teaching. It became clear to me, at that point, that in order to better understand this paradox we needed to develop a deeper appreciation, from teachers' perspectives, of what 'research' meant and of the role teachers felt that doing research could and might play in their professional lives.

My thinking and research were also powerfully influenced by debates about the role of research in educational practice which took place in the UK from the mid 1990s (Hammersley, 2007 brings together a number of key contributions to this debate). A key argument in these debates related to the need for teaching to be evidence based, i.e. for teachers to be able use available evidence, as well as to systematically generate their own, for the purposes of more effective instructional decision making. *Teacher research engagement* became part of the discourse of evidence-based practice in education and I adopted this term to describe the focus of my unfolding programme of research.

Promoting evidence-based practice became educational policy in the UK, and one consequence of this was that significant funding was made available to support teachers in engaging both with and in research; the scale of the investment and the range of initiatives and resources that followed strongly enhanced my sense of how limited, in language teaching, attempts to understand and support teacher research engagement had been. The occasional small study examining teachers' views about research (e.g. McDonough & McDonough, 1990) was available but the theme did not feature, even in the most remote sense, a research agenda for the field.

This book represents my attempts to redress this situation. Here I draw on a programme of research and professional activity that took place over six years. The research component consists of a series of four studies involving over 1,700 language teaching professionals – both teachers and managers – from around the world. These studies address in a consistent manner a series of themes which provide the organizational framework for the book and which I outline the below. This strong empirical dimension is complemented by insights from my professional involvement in designing and facilitating teacher research projects.

Following this introduction, the book is organized into nine chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the theme of teachers and research

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by establishing a definition for teacher research and providing a brief overview of its origins. Different conceptualizations of teacher research are discussed, together with an analysis of both its benefits and critiques. This chapter also reviews the current status of teacher research in language teaching.

As noted above, the empirical core of this book draws on a programme of research into language teacher research engagement. Chapter 2 introduces the methodology for this work by describing in turn the four studies through which data were collected. In each case, the research questions addressed are defined, together with the contexts and participants involved and the manner in which data were collected and analyzed. For each study, I also comment briefly on particular methodological challenges that were encountered. Examples of the instruments used in the various studies are included in the appendices to the book. One consistent methodological element across the studies I describe here was the use of questionnaires; in concluding the chapter, then, I draw on my experience to present a framework which can guide the design and conduct of questionnaire-based research.

Chapters 3–7 focus on specific themes in the study of language teacher research engagement. Chapter 3 examines the conceptions of research – and of good quality research – held by teachers and managers. As I argued above, an important element in promoting teacher research engagement needs to be an understanding of how the term ‘research’ is conceptualized. The chapter provides insights into this issue by exploring the kinds of activities which respondents recognize as research and the criteria they refer to in making judgements about the quality of research.

Teacher research engagement, as defined above, has two dimensions: using research, mainly through reading publications, and doing research. Chapters 4 and 5 focus in turn on these two issues. Chapter 4 begins with a review of literature on the issue of teachers reading research, then presents results from my studies which shed light on how frequently language teachers say they read research, what they read (if they do, and if they do not, why), and on the impact this reading has on their practice. In Chapter 5, the focus is on the frequency with which teachers say they do research, their reasons for doing or not doing so, and the impact their research has on their work. Together, Chapters 4 and 5 provide a picture of the extent to which the language teachers in my studies were research engaged, together with insights into the factors which shaped this engagement.

Chapter 6 focuses more holistically on the views held by teachers and managers about the relationship between teacher research

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engagement and teaching quality. Theoretically, a link between the two has been posited and my goal here was to examine practitioners' perspectives on the nature of this link. A range of positions are highlighted here, both supportive of the contribution that research engagement can make to teaching quality as well as less positive. The arguments articulated by respondents in making their case provide further insights into the ways in which they conceive of 'research'.

The final empirical chapter in this book is Chapter 7. The theme addressed here is research cultures, and findings are reported about the extent to which participants in my studies felt that their working contexts were conducive to research engagement. The perspectives of teachers and managers are contrasted and in both cases the participants make a number of suggestions for changes in their working environments which would make research engagement more feasible.

My concerns in this book are not solely theoretical and I am committed to the idea that research should contribute to the improvement of educational practice. Chapter 8 reflects these pragmatic concerns by focusing on the facilitation of language teacher research projects. I first review evidence from a number of such projects described in the literature to highlight conditions that both facilitate and hinder their effectiveness. This is followed by a detailed analysis of two teacher research projects I have facilitated and which I consider to have been successful. The purpose of this analysis, which also draws on participant feedback, is to identify a set of conditions which give teacher research projects a greater chance of having a positive impact on teachers and their work. In this chapter I also provide some reflections on the pedagogy of teacher research courses and projects – an issue that has not been well documented and which the field of language teaching would benefit from studying more closely.

The book concludes, in Chapter 9, with a review of the key findings to emerge from the previous chapters and a discussion of practical responses to them. A list of suggestions for enhancing research cultures in language schools is presented (informed by ideas suggested earlier by teachers and managers) and a checklist is provided which can be used to assess the feasibility of teacher research projects. Some suggestions for ways of engaging teachers with research, through reading, are also provided. The chapter ends with some methodological reflections on my programme of research and outlines themes relevant to teacher research engagement which provide interesting foci for continuing study. Busy readers may want to read this chapter first before working through the detailed earlier chapters at more leisure; it has been written to provide, in a fairly standalone manner, a statement of the key messages in the book and of their implications for practice.

One point I emphasize from the outset of this book is that my argument here is not a prescriptive one – I am not suggesting that all teachers *should* be engaged in reading and doing research (although I am obviously positively disposed towards this idea). Rather, my aim here is to provide theoretical and practical insights which can inform decisions both about whether teacher research engagement is desirable and feasible in particular contexts and, if it is considered to be, how to promote it effectively. It is my sincere hope too, that this book will stimulate the kind of concrete action in our field which can begin to address the paradox which provided the stimulus for this work.

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# 1 *Research and teachers*

## 1.1 Introduction

To avoid any misunderstandings about my purposes in writing this book, I will begin with two assertions. The first is that teacher research has the potential to be a powerful transformative force in the professional development of language teachers. The second is that teacher research remains a minority activity in the field of language teaching. The motivation for this book thus stems from the tension between these two assertions and my goal here is to explore the gap between what is theoretically possible and the contemporary status of teacher research in language teaching. One of my key goals here is to provide insight into the reasons for this gap and the strategy I adopt in doing so is to draw on a substantial volume of data from language teaching contexts globally which illustrate the conceptions of research held by professionals in this field. Before I start to examine the empirical data which is core to this book, I will in this chapter provide an introductory discussion of key issues relevant to the theme of teachers and research.

Before proceeding, though, there are two additional points I would like to stress, again to ensure that there is no doubt about my purposes here. The first is that in saying that teacher research is a minority activity I am not being critical of language teachers. Similar observations have been made about teachers in other subject areas (see, for example, Hancock, 2001). Additionally, readers familiar with my work will know that it focuses on understanding teachers and deploying this understanding in the support of teacher learning and professional development. My goals here are no different; this book aims to impact on the awareness and understandings of a readership – researchers, academics, policy makers, head teachers, directors, curriculum developers, teacher educators – who can be influential in making teacher research a more feasible and productive activity. The second point to clarify here is that I do not want to be prescriptive in arguing that teachers *should* be research engaged. I am very committed to the idea of teacher research and believe in its potential; however, I recognize that there are many professional development

options available to language teachers (see, for example, Richards & Farrell, 2005) and that teacher research is but one of these. My argument, then, is not that teachers should be required to do research; it is that if we can understand why the relationship between teachers and research in our field is problematic, we will then be in a stronger position to promote and support teacher research, if that is considered to be a desirable activity (and there is growing evidence that this is the case). Although decisions about what is desirable can only be made locally, this book provides material which can inform this decision-making process.

The discussion that follows covers foundational issues relevant to teacher research: what it is, its origins, different conceptualizations of teacher research, an overview of the current status of teacher research in language teaching, the potential benefits of teacher research, and critiques of it. These issues collectively provide a framework against which the empirical data presented in this book can be discussed.

## 1.2 Defining teacher research

Various labels have been applied to the research teachers do in classrooms and schools. Roulston et al. (2005), for example, list the following: action research, practitioner research, collaborative inquiry, critical inquiry, self study, and teacher research. It is the latter term that I will use here in discussing teacher engagement in research.

The work on teacher research of Cochran-Smith & Lytle, has been very influential in education generally, particularly in North America (e.g. Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1990, 1993; Lytle & Cochran-Smith, 1990, 1994). They see teacher research as ‘all forms of practitioner inquiry that involve systematic, intentional, and self-critical inquiry about one’s work ... This definition ... does not necessarily include reflection or other terms that refer to being thoughtful about one’s educational work in ways that are not necessarily systematic or intentional’ (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999: 22). In the UK, and writing in the context of school improvement, Carter & Halsall (1998: 73–74) suggest that teacher research has the following ‘essential characteristics’: it involves systematic and purposeful data collection; it is conducted by teachers, alone or with the support of ‘external critical friends’; its focus is teachers’ professional work; and its purpose is to bring about beneficial change, ultimately, in student learning. One final definition we can consider here comes from Lankshear & Knobel (2004: 9), who define teacher researchers as ‘classroom practitioners at *any* level, from preschool to tertiary, who are involved individually or collaboratively in self-motivated and self-generated systematic and

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informed inquiry undertaken with a view to enhancing their vocation as professional educators’.

What these and other definitions of teacher research have in common is that they refer to inquiry conducted by teachers in their own professional contexts; and, influenced by the work of Stenhouse (1975), these definitions also typically characterize such inquiry as being systematic. Lankshear & Knobel’s definition stresses the self-initiated nature of teacher research (i.e. teachers themselves must want to do it and must have some control over its focus and conduct) and suggests it may be collaborative, while Cochran-Smith & Lytle distinguish, helpfully I feel, between reflection and teacher research: while teacher research is necessarily reflective, reflecting on one’s practice does not automatically constitute teacher research. This is a theme I return to in several places in this book.

Returning to terms commonly associated with teacher research, practitioner research is similar in purpose and conduct to teacher research (and is often used as a synonym for it). It refers to systematic inquiry by professionals in any discipline who are investigating their own practices (so the practitioners may be, for example, nurses). Action research is a form of practitioner research which is characterized by particular procedures which broadly involve the introduction and evaluation of new practices, typically through a number of investigative cycles (in language teaching, see Burns, 2005b, 2010a; Wallace, 1998). Some definitions of action research (e.g. Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988) also stipulate that it should be collective or collaborative. Teacher research is thus a broader term than action research – while action research (when conducted by teachers) will also be teacher research, not all teacher research follows the procedures which define action research. Classroom research, a third term often mentioned in the context of teacher research, is simply systematic inquiry which is conducted in classrooms; much teacher research is classroom research, but not all classroom research is teacher research (e.g. academics may visit schools to collect data for their research). In her analysis of the relationship between teacher research, action research, and classroom research in language teaching, Bailey (2001: 491) concludes that ‘the term *classroom research* refers to the location and focus of the study. *Teacher research* refers to the agents who conduct the study. *Action research* denotes a particular approach ...’ I would extend the definition of teacher research provided here to refer to the purpose and context of the inquiry; not all research done by teachers is teacher research – it needs to be conducted in teachers’ own professional context and with the purpose of enhancing their understanding of some aspect of their work.

Another definitional issue to consider here relates to whether teacher research needs to be made public. One argument for doing so is that dissemination is a basic characteristic of all research. Stenhouse's definition of research – 'systematic inquiry made public' (1975: 142) makes this position clear; he also notes that 'private research for our purpose does not count as research' (1981: 111). Support for this position is also evident in language teaching. Brumfit & Mitchell (1989: 7) argue that all research, including teacher research, should be 'public because it needs to be distinguished from simply improving one's own private understanding; it is not another name for personal study', while Crookes (1993: 137, drawing on Stern, 1983) says that 'research is not research unless communicated'.

From a different perspective, Allwright & Hanks (2009) also focus on the benefits of making language teacher research public; for example, they note that findings which are public can inform educational decision making. More generally I would add that the dissemination of teacher research creates greater potential for the knowledge generated by teachers through their inquiries to have influence beyond the contexts in which this knowledge originates. Conversely, as Barkhuizen (2009: 124) explains, a failure to make teacher research public 'would mean missing the opportunity and ignoring the responsibility to contribute to discussions and debates in the field of language education'. Freeman (1996: 105) similarly expresses concerns that if language teacher research is not made public, the knowledge it generates will 'dissipate in the recesses of private conversations, staff rooms, or schools'. The need for teacher research to be made public does not imply that private inquiry is not beneficial. Given its private nature though, such inquiry need not appropriate the term 'research'. It is important to stress that the argument that teacher research cannot remain a private activity is not motivated by a desire to see it as an approximation of academic research. Bartels (2003) suggests that imposing academic notions of dissemination on teacher research in this way would be 'colonialist'. Bartels' concerns are justified if formal research reports are seen as the only acceptable way of making teacher research public. My position is to promote a broad view of dissemination which directs teachers to the many varied formats, oral and written, formal and less formal, formative and summative, through which they can make their work available for public scrutiny. This stance, I believe, is in no way colonialist, and it is illustrated in the many excellent suggestions for sharing teacher research contained in texts, such as, for example, Burns (1999) and Altrichter et al. (2008).

One final element to consider briefly in defining teacher research is the data collection strategies it utilizes. Teacher research is more

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commonly associated with qualitative forms of inquiry and investigative strategies which are accessible to teachers, though in theory there are no limitations on the strategies that teacher researchers can deploy (and quantitative techniques are sometimes used). The many different data collection methods available to language teacher researchers are illustrated in, for example, Burns (1999), Edwards (2005) and Freeman (1998).

On the basis of the above analysis, I have defined teacher research as

systematic inquiry, qualitative and/or quantitative, conducted by teachers in their own professional contexts, individually or collaboratively (with other teachers and/or external collaborators), and which aims to enhance teachers' understandings of some aspect of their work, is made public, has the potential to contribute to better quality teaching and learning in individual classrooms and which may also inform institutional improvement and educational policy more broadly.

(Borg, 2010: 395)

### 1.3 Origins of teacher research

The history of teacher research has been well documented (e.g. Burns, 1999; Crookes, 1993; Elliott, 1991; Hammersley, 2004a; Hollingsworth & Sockett, 1994; McNiff & Whitehead, 2002; Noffke, 2002; Olson, 1990; Zeichner & Noffke, 2001). Action research is seen as its ancestor and accounts of the origins of teacher research thus typically begin with reference to the work of Kurt Lewin in the USA in the 1940s. Another early source was Corey (1953) though, despite this work, action research virtually disappeared from the educational landscape in the USA in the 1950s and 1960s. The more recent emergence of teacher research is traced to parallel efforts in the UK and the USA which took place in the 1970s. These efforts shared a concern for educational reform, in particular for democratizing education and making it a more participatory process. In the UK, the teacher research movement emerged in the context of curriculum reform initiatives and is most closely associated with the work of Stenhouse (1975) and Elliott (see Elliott, 1990 for brief history). In the USA, it is Schön's (1983) work on reflective practice which is seen as critical to a renewed interest in teacher research; his argument that professionals were not unthinking technicians but reflective practitioners provided impetus for initiatives which placed teachers in the role of autonomous investigators of their work. Teacher research with a strong reflective element was thus seen as an ideal way for professionals to explore and develop their own understandings of their practices.