The Call for Teachers' Classroom Action Research

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Abstract

The setting and nature of research appropriate for classroom teachers of English is described. Arguments in favor of teachers' research as a form of continuing professional development is reviewed, as well as rising demand from employers for publication. There is a need for a journal publishing English teachers' classroom research, particularly with an aim to mentoring teachers who hold limited research/publication experience and lack research resources. Mentorship of less-experienced researchers is needed both in research development and at the publication stages.

Keywords: classroom research; teacher research; action research; exploratory action research; participatory; ELT; classroom investigations

Introduction

All teachers research. Such a provocative statement can be substantiated by re-examining how we define "research" and considering more deeply what teachers do as part of their regular duties. As this theme of teachers' classroom research is the focus of the new *ELT Classroom Research Journal*, it seems appropriate to open the first issue with a discussion of what it is that follows. Particularly since a fair number of articles have been published suggesting that many teachers do not "engage" in research, either reading published research or conducting their own (Borg, 2009).

At the simplest level, before we dive deeply into the substance of this discussion, we might consider the elements of "research" under "Big R" and "little r" classifications. Such Big/little delineation, while an unscientific and perhaps false dichotomy, is often used in the education sphere to distinguish perspectives on a subject field, such as for study of culture, where "Big C" ("high culture," or visible artefacts and behaviors) is contrasted with "little c" ("common culture" or invisible/intangible underlying attributes of a society (see e.g., Kramsch, 2013; Herron et al., 2013; Munandar & Ulwiyah, 2012)), or similarly in creativity (see Beghetto & Sriraman, 2017; Merrotsy, 2013). For our purposes here, "Big R" research refers to the classic "scientific method" of investigation, along with scholarly publication of such studies according to the academic norms of the time. Contrast that with "little r" research (Walsh & Mann, 2015), which we will discuss further, but I can loosely describe as "investigations that fail to meet the contemporaneous standards of 'Big R' studies." It is also fair to note here that the standards for "Big R" vary by scientific fields: an article on Shakespearean sonnets will look nothing like a paper discussing recent findings in medicine or mathematics. The differences are more than superficial, but relate to the underlying investigations' methodologies and aims, along with the length and form of published reports. Furthermore, it would be appropriate to include reflective practice in its diverse forms under the umbrella of "little r" teacher research (Sowa, 2009; Walsh & Mann, 2015).

More than 20 years ago Dick Allwright "apologized" for his past work in teacher research, explaining that he had previously "unintentionally made classroom research so demanding that teachers would not be able to do it unless they had extra time and extra support" (2003, 116) and that "it was hopelessly impractical to expect such highly competent classroom teachers to become my sort of classroom researcher" (118). Similarly, advocates for teacher research can disagree on the expectations of what should be considered quality teacher research, or how to apply such standards (see, for example, Borg, 2016). The term "action research" and its many variants further complicates discussions.

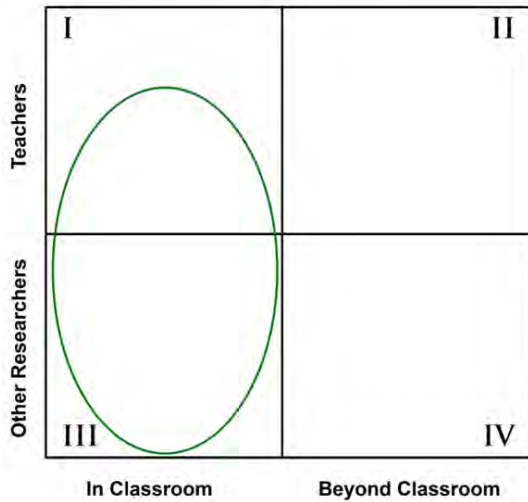## Teacher Research, Classroom Research and Action Research

The fields of teacher and classroom research are wide-ranging: duration, location, methodology, and even number of students and classrooms engaged in the study. These parameters may range from a 20-minute session with a small-sized group of students to a several months project involving several instructors and possibly reaching beyond the campus. Furthermore, these fields of research (unsurprisingly) overlap: classroom research may often include outside researchers investigating the practices of one or many teachers, or various groups of learners in classrooms; teacher research may extend beyond a single classroom, including family members and life experiences. In any case, rather than exploring a "gap in the literature" as preferred by scholars, teacher-driven investigations typically start from "inquiry" (Freeman, 1998). Burns (1999) suggests teachers "'feel their way' into the research question" (p. 36). I'll suggest that most teacher-led research starts from a perceived "problem" in the classroom. Experimentation in a classroom can be as simple as gently exploring the effects of adding "stickers" or "gold stars" for participation, to a multi-class Suggestopedia-influenced classroom study involving a number of collaborating teachers (for the latter, see Dickey, 2003). A current approach gaining in popularity is Exploratory Action Research (see more below).

The specific nature and process of Action Research are beyond the parameters of this introductory paper, let's simply say that there are literally dozens of manuals and hundreds of scholarly papers describing action research and similar/related approaches in English language teaching, such as exploratory action research (Smith, 2015), collaborative action research (Burns, 1999), participative action research (Ordem, 2021), participative exploratory practice (Allwright, 2003), practitioner research (Allwright, 2003), and others. Common amongst these varieties of action research are a focus on creating and evaluating change through a cyclical approach based on a question (a "real-life issue"), a planned and executed intervention, analyzing the results of the intervention, and applying the analysis to future teaching. Both teacher research and classroom research can be conducted through the various action research designs.

Who and where.
Who is researching, where, is one of the critical elements when discussing teacher and classroom research. While the label "teacher" is often merely a term of convenience, including instructors, tutors, professors, and others, here I would emphasize a "teacherly" role and concern for in-class activities (including homework) and the impact of outside activities (such as viewing English movies) on in-class performance. Teacher research does not exclude the participation of additional researchers or the students (as in participatory studies), but points to the teacher as "chief researcher" who controls the focus of the study. We may display the distinctions between classroom research, teacher research, and classroom-based teacher research through a quadrants design, such as in Figures 1-3. In this discussion of "who" we are not including the subject(s) of investigation, i.e., students.

Figure 3 suggests that teachers' classroom research is *conducted by the teacher* about matters that impact *inside the classroom* (the "what"). This is not to suggest that external matters, such as a student's family issues, are not important, nor does it indicate that research by external researchers in a teacher's classroom are irrelevant – we simply narrow the scope to what a typical teacher could do within the bounds of their normal classroom without extensive outside support.

Figure 1.
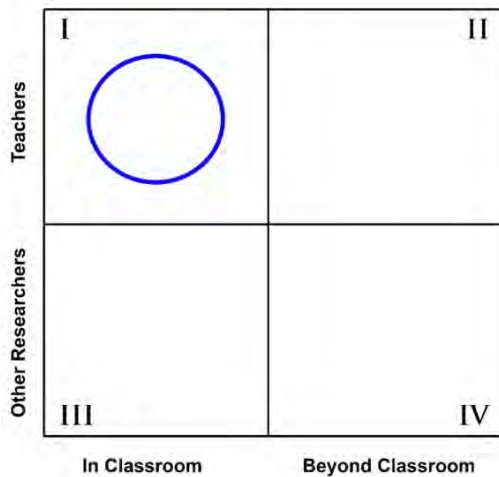**Research paradigms – Classroom research**
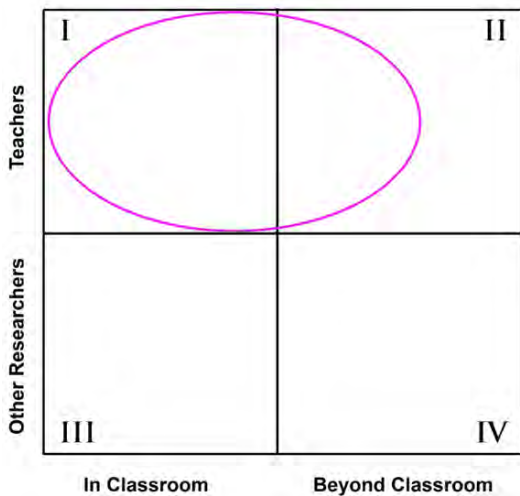
Figure 2.
Research paradigms – Teacher research

What and how.

What (perhaps "who" when the focus is language learners) is at the heart of any study, but can be central when differentiating between teacher research and classroom research. "What" is the research question, the problem under investigation. Teacher research might investigate mastery of language elements, but that would probably include data from beyond a typical classroom, and (arguably) addresses a concern that isn't specific to students of a particular classroom. More important for most teachers is the "how," deriving from the "what" – data collection and analysis. Teacher research tends to reflect teachers' limitations of

time, know-how, and resources in data collection and quantitative or deep qualitative analysis. Of course a teacher engaged with a scholar, such as through a joint research project or amaster's degree program, might be better prepared for intensive data manipulation. Classroom studies led by or strongly supported by expert researchers do not suffer such shortages. Action research schemes tend to encourage classroom teachers to take smaller steps in data, based on immediate classroom concerns.

Figure 3.
Research Paradigms – Teachers' classroom research

Exploratory Action Research

The Exploratory Action Research design presented by Smith (2015) and others provides an even softer start for teachers' classroom research, as it allows for preliminary exploring ("inquiry") prior to formalizing a planned action research design. One of the underlying elements of exploratory action research, indeed, was to "de-academize or 'democratize' research" (Smith, 2015, p. 39). Smith argues that Exploratory AR can be characterized as a gradualist approach, useful for teacher-research in difficult circumstances, where teachers are encouraged to engage in research-based exploration of issues arising in their classrooms through processes that do not interfere with their everyday teaching. Student discussions of their learning challenges, such as stress, can be the launching point for action research plans. Literature surveys take place later, if at all, and teacher-researchers can rely on their past studies and collegial advice in the development of their methodology. Research mentors can be particularly helpful in this setting.

Mentoring

Few classroom teachers outside the university setting are ready to conduct research and prepare it for formal presentation. For that matter many college and university instructors are overworked and lack the resources to conduct "scholarly" research, particularly those who have not taken research methodology courses and done research at the PhD level. Even worse, various discussions have suggested that not many classroom teachers at the pre-school through high school levels read scholarly publications often or at all (Borg, 2009; Gaál, 2001; Mehrani & Behzadnia, 2013), some have never written an academic paper since completing their college studies. It is therefore not surprising that few teachers feel prepared to publish their classroom investigations, or formalize their research.

Short reports in teacher newsletters and poster displays or talks at professional gatherings are important steps, and more published collections of reports of teacher research are becoming available (e.g., Banegas et al., 2020); Gnawali et al., 2021; Menglieva et. al., 2022; Rebolledo & Bullock, 2021; Rebolledo, Okoth, & Simiyu, 2023; Rebolledo, Smith, & Bullock, 2016; Smith et al. 2014). The ultimate step in presenting research would be presenting in a more permanent and widely-accessible forum, such as a scholarly (or "teacherly") journal. Frankly, few SSCI- or Scopus-listed journals are willing to seriously consider manuscripts lacking solid methodological rigor and the approved scholarly tone of presentation. And while various research "methodology" mentoring opportunities may be available through local colleges, professional groups, or friendly colleagues; mentorship for writing to peer-reviewed journals appears far less common.

Mentorship (or "coaching") for journals can take place prior to submission or at time of submission. Journal editors, often inundated with submissions, are often forced to take a hard stance on "desk-rejections" – and in fact many journals take pride in their "rejection rate" (more politely referred to as "acceptance rate"). Rejection notices may be cryptic, with little reference to the submission, and few or no details concerning issues in the manuscript or research methodology. Such rejections do nothing to encourage research. The alternative approach is to treat each submission that fits within the general scope of the journal as a potential published study, one that needs guidance from the journal's editorial team so that the author-researcher can bring it to a form that can be included in the journal. While the most particular concern here is at initial review (desk review), coaching can also be critical at the time a conditional acceptance is offered following peer review (see Figure 2).
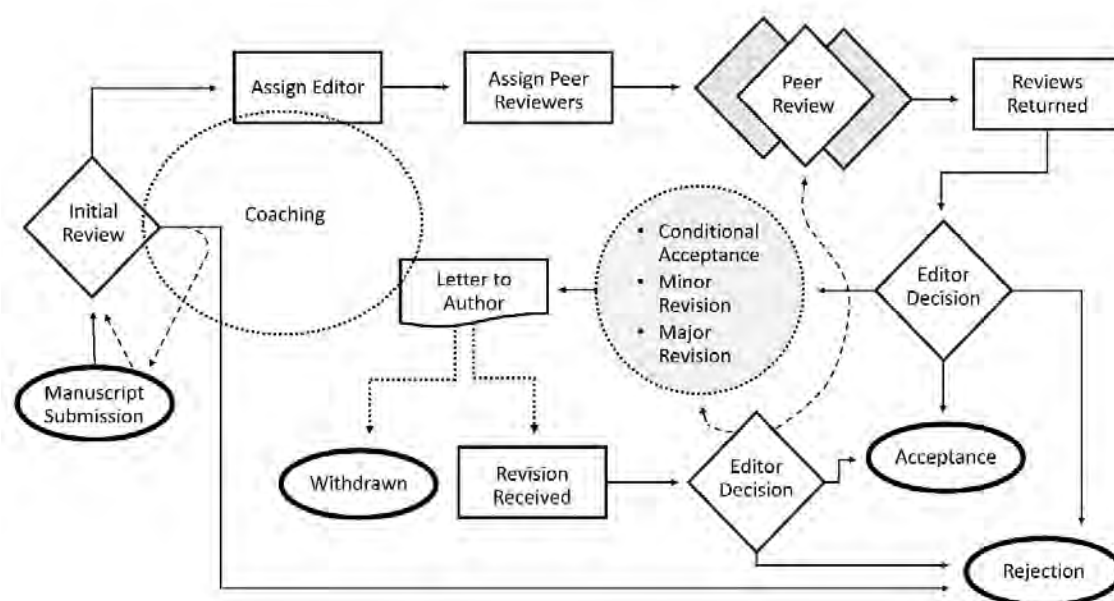
Figure 4
Mentoring (coaching) in the journal submission process

Some papers may be found to be "unpublishable" due to concerns for reliability, validity, data collection, or other methodological flaws. Is this the sole concern? It may be important to consider the other impacts of teacher research: is it replicable, does it inspire teachers to conduct similar investigations in their own classrooms, does it offer insights in the teacher-learner environment? Submissions that answer "Yes" to these deserve support from

journals, as they promote teacher engagement in research far beyond the individual researchers involved. Again, mentorship is needed both during the research process, to maximize the scholarship while reflecting the realities of a classroom teacher, and in the journal submission process.

Conclusion

Should classroom teachers be expected to do research? Research can be part of a planned portfolio of Continuing Professional Development, but more than that, some governments are demanding research publication as part of employment retention and promotion schemes for secondary school teachers. Philippines, Indonesia, and Nepal are cases in point. As discussed above, one aspect of this demand may be definitional: "Big R" research or "little r" research.

Hopefully all would agree that we seek inquisitive teachers who are concerned about the learning taking place in their classrooms, teachers who are eager to try new ways when their learners encounter challenges or when teachers feel that their own performance doesn't meet expectations. The specifics of who does what type research (method), where, when, and how is of far less importance than the practice of teacher inquiry. Teachers' classroom explorations may not always rise to the level of SSCI (Web of Science) journal publication, and workshop discussions and poster displays should be encouraged as one of many potential forms of publication. The *ELT Classroom Research Journal* provides an intermediate step for publication, one more frequent than occasional manuscript collections, more permanent than face-to-face presentations and posters. Research production is also dependent on the other forms of engagement in research: reading others' research, and discussing it (even if only within the reader's own mind). *ELT Classroom Research Journal* offers a regularly-published open-access source of professional readings for teachers, one that informs and inspires teachers to investigate and experiment in their classrooms.

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