Teacher Research

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Key Points

- Defines teacher research to include current understandings of the topic in language teaching
- Provides a summary and discussion of the most common types of language teacher research
- Discusses common elements and similarities between these types of research
- Identifies the key benefits, challenges and criticisms of teacher research

Abstract

This article provides a concise introduction to the topic of teacher research. It offers an inclusive definition that encompasses most practices regularly discussed as teacher research. It discusses six types of research commonly engaged in by language teachers, noting areas of key similarity and difference among these. The article also identifies key benefits of language teacher research as well as the most commonly discussed challenges experienced during teacher research projects and some of the criticisms leveled at teacher research. It concludes that teacher research can be a useful, productive and potentially transformative element in teacher professional development programs.

Introduction

Teacher research (TR) may be defined as systematic inquiry conducted wholly or primarily by teachers on topics of relevance to their own practice. By defining it thus, this article seeks to be as inclusive as possible of the widest possible range of activities that are typically characterized as TR in both language teaching and general education (see Hopkins, 2014; Lytle & Cochran-Smith, 1990; Smith & Rebolledo, 2018). It is important to acknowledge that more specific definitions of TR exist, some of which exclude some of the activities discussed below and/or argue that dissemination of findings is an additional prerequisite for inquiry-oriented practices to be considered examples of TR (e.g., Borg, 2013; Borg & Sanchez, 2015). TR may be contrasted with academic research, which, in educational linguistics, is typically conducted primarily by academics or university research students on aspects of teaching, education or curriculum content. It should also be noted that there is an important 'gray area' between these where participatory research - involving varying degrees of meaningful collaboration between teachers and academics on research projects - takes place (see Anderson, 2023a). While there is general consensus in the literature that TR projects should be led and conducted primarily by the teacher, they are often supported by 'mentors,' who themselves may be either experienced teacher-researchers or academics acting in a supportive, facilitative role (see Smith, 2020).

While academics have long argued for the need to bridge the often perceived gap between teachers/practitioners and researchers/academics/scholars (see Sato & Loewen, 2022), a number of recent initiatives have attempted both to increase collaboration between researchers and teachers (e.g., the Partnership Research initiative in the journal *System*; Hennebry-Leung et al., 2024) and to engage teachers in research (e.g., https://tesolgraphics.com). It is notable that these initiatives are typically led by scholars and invariably draw upon scholarly understandings of what research is (i.e., an issue of definition), and what should be done with it (e.g., dissemination beyond one's immediate context), two questions that this article also addresses. When 'research' is defined according to teachers' immediate needs, it can be argued that (effective) teachers have always done research, and that they do not necessarily need to collaborate with scholars to do it (Anderson, 2023b).

There is consistent evidence that TR is an important, potentially transformative, yet underutilized continuing professional development (CPD) activity from both language teaching and wider educational literatures. For example, a large scale study (OECD, 2009) found that TR was simultaneously the most impactful (p. 75), yet one of the most infrequent (p. 57) types of CPD activity in OECD countries. This TR 'paradox,' as Borg (2013) puts it, likely results from the complex interplay between the challenges of

conducting TR, and the opportunities and commitment — investment even — required for teachers to conduct research successfully, both of which are discussed further below.

The history of TR is well documented (e.g., Burns, 1999), thus covered only briefly here. Many sources identify Kurt Lewin as the originator of action research in the 1940s, and the important work of Lawrence Stenhouse in developing a theoretical basis for TR in the 1970s. In language teaching, early work by Dick Allwright and Kathleen Bailey (e.g., 1991) and David Nunan (e.g., 1989) were important in demonstrating both the feasibility and utility of TR. Anne Burns (e.g., 1999) has developed useful and influential models, particularly for action research approaches.

Types of Teacher Research

TR projects are almost as diverse as those of academics, albeit typically oriented toward a teacher's primary context of work (i.e., rarely multi-site, except through collaboration). Dadds and Hart (2001) provide useful examples of TR projects that adopt innovative methodologies. However, in practice a smaller number of methodologies and project types tend to dominate discussion of TR in language teaching, as summarized in **Table 1**.

It can be observed that there are, in reality, overlaps and shared practices between all of these types of TR, depending on exactly how they are done and which elements are emphasized. For example, while the four-stage cycle depicted in **Fig. 1** is typically seen as a distinguishing feature of action research, it is also present in some models and procedures for reflective practice, such as David A. Kolb's reflective cycle (1984). The activities of planning, acting, observing and reflecting are also present, usually in the same order, for lesson study, exploratory practice and many evaluative research projects.

While their respective bodies of literature often appear distinct, there are areas of common interest between reflective practice, narrative inquiry and autoethnography, so much so that the latter two are lumped together in **Table 1**. All offer systematic means of "stepping back" (Johnson & Golombek, 2001, p. 6) from one's own practice through the use of personal data collection tools (e.g., journals) to examine it, usually critically, and with the goal of greater self-understanding. While reflective practice often focuses more on the practices themselves, through, for example, analysis of problems and critical incidents, narrative inquiry and autoethnography typically involve longer-term 'storied' inquiry into "meaning in action" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1986, p. 295), either through longitudinal investigations or retrospective accounts linked together to shed light on who we are as teachers, our

Table 1 Common types of (language) teacher research.

Type	*Brief description*	*Useful text(s)*
Action research	Typically involves the systematic introduction and observation of an innovation or change in the classroom, through a four-stage model of planning, doing, observing and reflecting. Variations include collaborative action research, exploratory action research and participatory action research.	Burns (1999), Smith and Rebolledo (2018)
Reflective practice	Typically involves the teacher systematically examining (aspects of) their own practice critically. It is often mediated by reflective writing or dialogic reflection with a peer, and sometimes includes adjustments or experiments that then lead to further critical reflection.	Farrell (2015), Mann and Walsh (2017)
Exploratory practice	Typically involves the teacher working with their learners to investigate a puzzle of some sort through classroom activities, with an aim to achieve increased understanding and improved quality of life for all in the classroom. Largely restricted to language teaching.	Hanks (2017)
Lesson study	Typically involves a group of teachers working to develop and improve either a lesson or curriculum component through cycles of collaborative planning, teaching the lesson (with peer observation), subsequent analysis and reflection.	Dudley (2014)
Auto-ethnography and narrative (self-)inquiry	Typically involve a teacher conducting a longitudinal or retrospective personal inquiry into their own experiences through the use of journal writing, storytelling, visualization, metaphor and critical interpretation to increase understanding of their context, community, practices and identity. Auto-ethnography has a stronger biographical focus; narrative inquiry is more varied in focus.	Johnson and Golombek (2001), Barkhuizen (2007)
Evaluative research	Research in which teachers work individually or collaboratively to evaluate specific methods, materials or course changes. It may make use of learner surveys and interviews, observations of learner engagement, formative and summative assessment to determine the efficacy of the focus of evaluation. It varies in its degree of formality and systematicity.	Borg (2013)

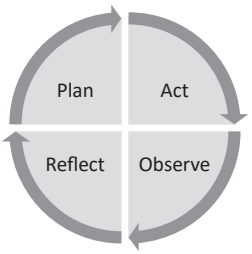

Fig. 1 The archetypal four-stage framework for conducting action research.

backgrounds and identity as a result (e.g., Fallas-Escobar, 2023). While some researchers may view such approaches as too personal or subjective, lacking the "systematicity and public dimension" (Borg, 2013, p. 124) to constitute legitimate research, others argue that "it is precisely this integration of the personal and professional that can inform in authentic ways", especially when conveyed through "language [that teachers] feel comfortable using" (Johnson & Golombek, 2001, p. 7), rather than the sanitized, sometimes inaccessible language of academia, which may often be forced upon teachers during formal dissemination processes.

While the majority of the TR activities described in **Table 1** are regularly conducted by teachers of all subjects, two have evolved specifically within language teaching and deserve special mention as such. Exploratory practice emerged from concerns that action research was too demanding for busy teachers and thereby having a negative impact on their teaching and wellbeing (see Allwright, 2005). In exploratory practice, data is collected with the learners as part of normal classroom activities. This contrasts with the typical action research model in which teachers are expected to engage in the collection of data 'from' the classroom (i.e., to be analyzed separately and subsequently by the teacher). Exploratory practice activities typically involve learners and teacher practicing 'target' language (e.g., English) use while also learning about themselves, their peers and their context in ways that are likely to enhance wellbeing and engagement for all (Hanks, 2017). Drawing in part on exploratory practice, exploratory action research aims to combine initial exploration, particularly of context, with subsequent action research in a two-phase process that provides the opportunity for teachers to ensure deeper understanding before action is taken, as depicted in **Fig. 2** (e.g., Smith & Rebolledo, 2018).

The final activity included in **Table 1** above — evaluative research — is likely to be unfamiliar as a term to many readers. This type of TR is under-researched despite being common. It was first identified by Simon Borg in his investigations into language teacher engagement with research (2013). Borg found that a large number of his respondent teachers' reports of research were referring to the often informal, yet still systematic, introduction, monitoring and evaluation of changes in practices, materials and methods in their classrooms on an ongoing basis: "The research I do all the time is constant assessment of student achievement for the purpose of improving my teaching in the future" (respondent in Borg, 2013, p. 119). Invoking his more restricted definition of TR, Borg argues that such "inquiry is better characterized not as research … but as a systematic process of seeking and responding to student evaluations of learning activities" (p. 111). Yet such practices fall under the more inclusive definition of research adopted in this article, even if they are often carried out informally and rarely shared beyond immediate communities of practice. Anderson (2023b, p. 3) has used the term "research-in-practice" to describe such evaluative research. He argues that the use of varied types of formative assessment (informal and formal) are key elements of the research process (as noted by the above respondent) alongside learner evaluation. He notes that the understanding gained from research-in-practice is likely to be cumulative to a practitioner's individual expertise. It can further be argued that evaluative research offers an important, two-way bridge or 'mid-ground' between

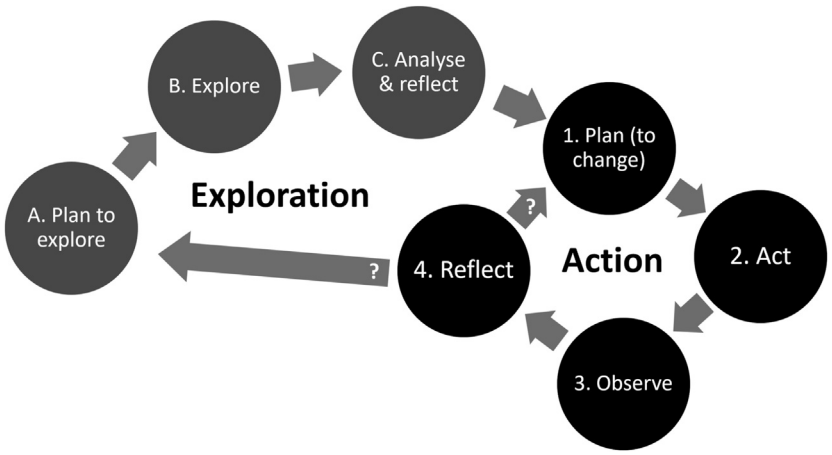

Fig. 2 The stages in exploratory action research. Adapted from Smith and Rebolledo (2018).

more and less formal research practices; it not only enables teachers to see a link between what they do and what more formal research does (and therefore how to do the latter), but also a feasible, realistic means for teachers to instill a research-oriented mindset into their everyday practices.

For all of the above types of TR, teacher-researchers will invariably benefit from the help of a mentor of some sort. This may be a colleague who themselves have previously conducted research, an academic researcher supporting a specific project, a departmental leader with broader mentoring experience (many of the skills involved are transferrable) or even a peer at a similar stage of professional development with whom challenges and questions can be discussed. While the literature in this area is still fairly limited, Smith (2020) offers a useful guide for language teacher research mentors and other accounts of the experiences and challenges of mentoring also exist (e.g., Dikilitaş & Wyatt, 2018) for those interested in taking on the role.

The Potential Benefits and Challenges of Teacher Research

The benefits of TR are multiple, complex and inter-related. The most commonly discussed ones are presented here, based on a range of sources (e.g., Borg, 2013; contributions to Borg & Sanchez, 2015; Burns, 1999, 2009; Edwards & Burns, 2016; Smith, 2014, 2020; Van Katwijk et al., 2023; Wyatt & Dikilitaş, 2016) and also the author's own experience in researching and evaluating TR projects for third party organizations:

1. Teachers feeling increased confidence and self-efficacy in their own teaching and renewed motivation in their work;
2. Teachers experiencing greater connection and rapport with their learners;
3. Teachers enjoying praise, respect and increased status among their peers;
4. Teachers reporting a sustained, transformative impact to a new teacher-researcher identity;
5. Teachers gaining greater autonomy through an improved ability to manage and solve problems and puzzles in their classrooms;
6. Teachers learning about the utility and impact of new teaching approaches and techniques;
7. Teachers gaining new skills that they could make use of in the future (e.g., in conducting research, conducting assessment or presentation skills);
8. Teachers becoming more systematic in their ability to problematize practice, collect data and reflect critically on that data;
9. Teachers reporting an increased interest in academic research, commensurate with an improved ability to read, understand and critically evaluate formal research, resulting in part from their increased academic literacy and understanding of research processes;
10. Greater collaboration and rapport among teachers as a result of working together on TR projects;
11. Increased interest in TR among non-participant colleagues, with a resultant positive impact on staff room discussions;
12. Teachers having more positive attitudes toward CPD;
13. Teachers benefitting from associated qualifications when TR is part of a formal qualification program (e.g., on postgraduate courses);
14. Teachers feeling greater empowerment and control of their own destiny, as a cumulative result of the above advantages;
15. Mentors of teacher-researchers reporting pride in their own mentoring achievements, greater rapport with teachers, awareness of the needs and challenges of teachers and enhanced knowledge and skills for conducting research.

This prodigious list of benefits offers clear evidence of the power of TR to make an impact on who teachers are, what they know and can do, their relationships with others and how they feel about their work. In addition to this, large-scale research on pre-service TR from Holland (Van Katwijk et al., 2023), where it is a compulsory element of teacher preparation, has found a positive relationship between quality of research and quality of teaching among trainees (although no causative relationship was established).

Given these wide and varied advantages, it is no surprise that TR is regularly reported as having the impact cited in the introduction to this article (OECD, 2009). However, it is important to caution that TR is no magic bullet or panacea, either for teacher professional development or for research. There are frequent examples of difficulties with, and negative impacts of, TR, particularly when it is made a compulsory/required element of CPD programs or pre-service teacher preparation. The following list of challenges is compiled from a range of sources (e.g., Borg, 2013; contributions to Borg & Sanchez, 2015; Burns, 1999, 2009; Dikilitaş & Wyatt, 2018; Edwards & Burns, 2016; Smith, 2014, 2020; Wyatt & Dikilitaş, 2016), as well as the author's own experience:

1. Extensive time and effort required to conduct TR, reported most frequently for more formal types of TR, such as action research;
2. Communication challenges between teacher-researchers and assigned mentors, particularly when mentoring support was provided remotely (e.g., online);
3. Teachers feeling overwhelmed, confused, demotivated or disoriented by unfamiliar aspects of research, particularly data collection and analysis;
4. Teachers having difficulty during data collection and analysis, and, as a result, reporting findings that are distorted, inaccurate or even erroneous;
5. Unsupportive environments, including line mangers, colleagues and administrators who may obstruct attempts to collect data;
6. Frustrations experienced when trying to engage more directly with the academic research community (e.g., accessing literature, publishing reports, communicating with academics);

7. Difficulties experienced by research mentors relating to their own time management, interpersonal skills and knowledge of aspects of research and pedagogy.

A further concern from the author's personal experience also merits mention. It is sometimes the case that attempts by well-intentioned academics to engage teachers in formal research may inadvertently disempower, rather than empower teachers. This is because teachers are rarely experts on conducting formal research (yet academics invariably are experts in this area), meaning they often become dependent on academics to guide them through the process. If not sensitively managed, such relationships may lead to a new type of subservience in which teachers are still being told what to do by academics, albeit with regard to research methodology rather than teaching methodology.

TR has also received criticism concerning the quality of the research produced. Borg (2013) collates a number of critical sources, many of which argue that standards of reliability, validity and generalizability that apply to academic research should also apply to TR. Whether they should or not is a complex, open question, the answer to which depends on issues both of epistemology (what counts as legitimate knowledge) and methodology (to what extent common methodological requirements and criteria should apply in both types of research), as Borg also observes. If the expectation is that TR findings are to be disseminated beyond the immediate context of the teacher(s) involved, such requirements are arguably important to ensure that erroneous or uncertain findings do not have negative impacts on peers, policy or knowledge about teaching. However, if the definition of research presented at the start of this article is adopted, then, particularly when the focus is on investigating questions or puzzles of interest primarily to one's own practice, any attempt to do this with a degree of systematicity is likely to lead to more useful and more reliable findings than would otherwise be the case (Hopkins, 2014). As such, it is important to ensure that both the educational context and research procedures involved in any research project are made transparent in dissemination outputs (e.g., publications, presentations, posters, etc.) to enable others, particularly teachers, to judge the validity of the findings for their own contexts (see, e.g., Burns, 1999).

Conclusion

This short introduction to TR has provided a brief overview of the topic and described commonly identified types of TR found in education, with a specific focus on language teaching. It has discussed the potential benefits, frequently reported challenges and criticisms of TR discussed in the literature. Particularly the discussion of the challenges of TR above supports the suggestion (e.g., Borg, 2013; Dikilitaş & Wyatt, 2018) that TR may be most valuable and effective when offered to experienced teachers as an elective (rather than compulsory) CPD activity. Nonetheless, there is evidence that it can be integrated successfully into pre-service teacher education (e.g., Van Katwijk et al., 2023), indicating that it may be useful at any stage in a teacher's development, on condition that the appropriate time, opportunities, mentoring expertise and support structures are provided for it — these seem to be key to its success. What is largely uncontested is the important and sustained impact that TR can have on the teachers who engage in it successfully. As such, any organizations and educational systems that seek to build the capacity, competence, commitment and resilience of their practitioners would be well advised to create opportunities and time for TR within their professional development frameworks.

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