

Chapter 20

Teacher Research as a Form of Critical Praxis: A Path to Professional Development

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this chapter is to provide TESOL practitioners, undergraduate, and graduate students in language teacher training programs with both a conceptual framework of teacher research (TR) as a form of critical praxis and a practical guide on how to implement it in language education settings. Subsequent to the description of what TR consists of and how it relates—or it does not—to other forms of research endeavors undertaken by TESOL teachers, the chapter continues with an outline of the procedures and practices to be implemented in TR and concludes with some key recommendations as to the promotion and dissemination of it for a full and effective exploitation of its transformative power.

INTRODUCTION

‘Critical Praxis’ (CP hereafter), which can be defined as the amalgamation of theory and practice and reflection and action (McLaren et al., 2010), has its roots in the ‘critical theory’ (CT). CT is characterized by its strong criticism of ‘traditional theory’ (TT) which strictly divides between theory and practice and between the ‘researcher’ and the ‘researched’ to ensure and exercise objectivity. While TT is the gatekeeper of the status quo and attempts to bring explanations about the world as it is, CT is aimed at questioning and transforming existing conditions through reflection and action. Horkheimer (1982) argues that only this act of reflection and action could liberate human beings from the oppressing conditions surrounding them.

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Freire (2000) calls for the need of a CP in education. According to him, it is imperative for educators to be cognizant of the fact that we are subjects of our lives. Action and reflection, as he maintains, are the nexus of this sort of awareness to bring about social change. In a similar vein, Arnold et al. (2012) postulate that CP emerges when “self-reflective consciousness” and “emancipatory action” are brought together and “seeks to move beyond the constraints of formal teaching, knowledge and curriculum and instead encourages communities, teachers and students to work together in producing new understandings and practices for the public good” (p.281). One of the paths to the enactment of such self-reflection and reflective action is *teacher research* (TR) which has great potential to nurture teacher growth, to bridge the divide between theory and practice and to bring about transformative change.

Educational research has been often criticized for its being not generalizable, having results independent from contexts, providing insufficient solutions for teachers’ problems, and lack of enough support for teachers to develop CP. Accordingly, the need for teacher research in which teachers can deal with their own problems in their unique contexts becomes inevitable. In this way, as Nguyen (2020) states, they have the chance of finding first-hand solutions to their contextual problems, strengthening their teaching performance and maximizing students’ learning with the opportunities they create through research results. To promote teacher-oriented research, academy-based researchers, teacher trainers and other relevant parties who are aware of the complicated nature of classrooms would provide support for teachers on ‘what’ and ‘how’ issues through either several resources or active engagement during the research processes.

There seems to be a consensus on the fact that “teaching is not a purely technical activity where the end goal is re-determined and achieved by applying precise methods” (Anwaruddin, 2019, p. 10). Therefore, teachers, either by themselves or by a third party, are urged to question the quality of their teaching, since the performance of any teaching methods varies in different contexts where individual differences are also at play. This questioning never ends, and teachers find themselves in continuous and ever-growing reflective practices. Farrell (2018) states that teachers with a reflective perspective not only look back on their previous performances in the classroom but also look at motivation, actions, experiences, emotions with a conscious mind to increase their level of understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the classroom reality. Put differently, teachers as questioners start this long journey named ‘teacher inquiry’ or ‘teacher research’ (TR) in many diverse forms and with a wide range of purposes to increase their level of professional expertise. During this journey, they need some guidance regarding the processes and perspectives required for a research project.

The aim of this chapter is thus to provide both a conceptual framework of teacher research and a practical guide on how to implement it in diverse settings in the field of English language teaching. In the pages that follow, the undergraduate and graduate students in language teacher training programs, novice and/or experienced in-service teachers, more specifically TESOL practitioners, or any educational specialists who are interested in teacher/action research are targeted. In order to provide them with a better position to engage in research and also to improve and fine-tune their practices as teacher-researchers, the chapter is organized to answer the following questions:

- What is teacher research (TR) and what is in common with other forms of research (action research (AR), reflective practice (RP), exploratory practice (EP), and so on)?
- When is teacher research needed? Identification of a research topic/questions/hypotheses?
- What methods are employed in TR? How are they chosen and justified?
- What are the main data collection tools?

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