

## Classroom research and the whole teacher

Alan Pulverness, *TransformELT*

*In the process of enlightenment, there can be only participants.*

Jürgen Habermas *Theory and Practice* (1974)

It is only through self-knowledge that we may hope to know others, and it is only through a commitment to professional development that we can hope to improve the quality of education in our own classrooms.

Jean McNiff *Action Research: Principles and Practice* (1988)

Classroom research offers the teacher not simply a set of techniques for monitoring and improving the quality of their practice, but a way of understanding the complex nature of that practice and a way of *being* as a teacher. I believe that classroom research is a humanistic way of *doing* teacher development that can reconcile the needs of teachers with those of learners.

Humanism in foreign language teaching-and-learning is a loosely defined concept that has variously been associated with notions such as self-actualisation, person-centredness, multiple intelligences and learner autonomy. So-called ‘humanistic’ *approaches*, however much they may differ, seem to share certain common factors: respect for the learner and what they bring to the classroom; an acknowledgement that learners are individuals, with different experiences, different expectations and different capacities; and a view of education as a process of realising individual potential. In terms of teacher preparation, this has meant a shift away from teacher *training* towards teacher *education*; away from a static, technique-driven approach to teaching towards more open and variable, client-centred approaches.

The effects of this shift on the roles of teachers and learners are well-known. Stevick (1976) describes it, in terms taken from transactional analysis, as a move away from a parent-child relationship towards an adult-adult relationship: the paternal and assertive teacher becomes more fraternal and permissive; the dispenser of knowledge is transformed into a consultant or resource; instead of fostering dependence, the teacher prepares learners for independence; the students, previously passive recipients with no responsibility for their learning, become active participants who assume that responsibility; no longer submissive and seeking approval, they become involved in processes of decision-making and negotiation, and are secure enough to do this without overt approval.

Barnes (1976) identifies two countervailing tendencies in teaching, which he terms *transmission teaching* and *interpretation teaching*. The teacher who tends towards the transmission style believes in the integrity of the subject, believes that there is a body of content to be learned and tested, and that the teacher's role is to pass on knowledge and evaluate the performance of the learner, who is seen as a *tabula rasa* and must conform to the fixed standards of the subject. The interpretation teacher, on the other hand, sees knowledge in terms of process rather than content – as the ability to think analytically, to interpret information and to act on that interpretation – sees the teacher as being responsible for providing frameworks for learners who already know things and who possess the

capacity to extend and elaborate their knowledge.

Barnes's categories echo the dialectic described by Freire (1972) between what he calls a *banking* concept of education and problem-posing or *dialogic* education. Freire's banking metaphor sees education as "an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor. Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiqués and 'makes deposits', which the students patiently receive, memorize and repeat." (1972: 45). In the problem-solving model, however, "[t]hrough dialogue, the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with students-teachers. The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in their turn while being taught also teach. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow." (ibid)

This kind of joint enterprise, where the hierarchical relationship between teacher and learners is replaced by a kind of learning partnership, where the classroom is transformed into a forum in which teacher and learners are also learner and teachers, seems to be informed by some of the essential qualities of humanism for all concerned. But all the constraints imposed by national curricula, school administrations, parental expectations, imperfect textbooks, hectic timetables and inadequate resources would seem to militate against such a profound change in the politics of the classroom. We may be able, within the system, to recognise the affective, as well as the cognitive needs of learners; we may be able to offer students appropriate guidance so that they can become more effective learners; we may even be able to cater for different learning styles; but it seems unlikely that we can ever really change the way we *are* as teachers.

It seems to me that one unintended consequence of the humanistic concern with client-centredness has been a separation of focus on teacher and learner. When we talk about teachers providing optimum conditions for learning to take place, it still seems as though there exists a set of ideal teaching practices, which, however diverse and variable they might be, would be *the* perfect recipe. The problem with a 'recipe' view of language teaching is that at worst, it idealises classrooms, and at best generalises about them. The exciting thing about teaching is its unpredictability, the uniqueness of every encounter between teacher and learners. But it is these very qualities which make it difficult for teachers to reflect adequately on their practice.

What may account for effective teaching-and-learning is not necessarily to be found at the macro-level of approach or methodology, but rather at the micro-level of behavioural and interpersonal factors (both among students and between students and teacher). But these decisive factors are fleeting and fugitive: they may depend on the physical arrangement of the classroom; on the deployment of resources; on things said, or things left unspoken; on the teacher's distribution of attention to different members of the group; on the teacher's failure to hear (or to interpret) a student's question; on eye contact, or facial expression, or tone of voice – in short on a myriad of transitory aspects of classroom dynamics and interpersonal chemistry.

A lesson unfolds in real time and consists of hundreds of moments of decision-making – moments where the teacher is faced with two – or more – alternative courses of action: branching paths which could take the lesson off in a series of different directions. *Should I deal with this student's question now, or tell him to ask me again later? Should I allow this*

*phase of group work to continue and drop the next activity I had planned, or should I stop them now and move on? Should I get feedback from the whole class, or should I ask them to check the answers in pairs?* One practical response to this kind of self-questioning is to say that in most cases what matters is being decisive – whichever path you choose will be valid and what counts is that you take a decision. In the heat of the moment, this argument continues, the teacher is simply not able to evaluate all the potential consequences of different courses of action, and based on experience, intuition will prompt the appropriate decision, or at least a decision that works.

In William Golding's novel *Free Fall*, the narrator has an overwhelming sense of no longer being free but is unable to determine the precise moment in his life when he lost his freedom. At the beginning of the novel, he recalls a childhood incident that epitomises the feeling of freedom that he once had:

*When did I lose my freedom? For once, I was free. I had power to choose. The mechanics of cause and effect is statistical probability yet surely sometimes we operate below or beyond that threshold. Free-will cannot be debated but only experienced, like a colour or the taste of potatoes. I remember one such experience. I was very small and I was sitting on the stone surround of the pool and fountain in the centre of the park. There was bright sunlight, banks of red and blue flowers, green lawn. There was no guilt but only the splash and splatter of the fountain at the centre. I had bathed and drunk and now I was sitting on the warm stone edge placidly considering what I should do next. The gravelled paths of the park radiated from me: and all at once I was overcome by a new knowledge. I could take whichever I would of these paths. There was nothing to draw me down one more than the other. I danced down one for joy in the taste of potatoes. I was free. I had chosen. [...] I put the day in the park first in my story, not because I was young, a baby almost; but because freedom has become more and more precious to me as I taste the potato less and less often.*

It seems to me that one of the most disabling features of our training as teachers is that we are schooled in “the mechanics of cause and effect”: we accumulate a repertoire of techniques and behaviours – some thoroughly principled, some merely pragmatic – which are designed to produce certain well-defined results. In a sense, the more we learn about the mechanics of teaching, the more likely it is that our teaching becomes fossilised and we fail to recognise the constantly changing texture of our classes from lesson to lesson, and from moment to moment within each lesson. We “taste the potato less and less often”. We have all had the experience of emerging from the classroom, saying *That lesson went really well* or *That was a terrible lesson*. If we rationalise such instinctive judgements, we tend to give the credit or the blame to technical success or failure – *My timing was good today* or *The material was just right for them* – or to physiological or affective factors beyond our control – *I was too tired* or *They didn't want to learn anything today*. If we attempt to go any further with our understanding of what has taken place, we may well find it difficult to identify the significant factors, since we seem to lack any way of properly evaluating an experience that we have been so intimately involved in. Yet it is precisely those people who are involved in

the classroom – the teacher and the learners – who are in the best position to understand what goes on there. Doing classroom research, the teacher adopts the role of a kind of social anthropologist, conducting an ethnographic study of the culture of his/her own immediate environment. The teacher becomes a participant-observer, involved in and committed to what is going on, but at the same time standing outside it. Conventional wisdom is that “the onlooker sees more of the game”, but in classroom research, the players, too, may be in that privileged position.

A distinction needs to be drawn between *action research* and *classroom research*. Teachers who reflect informally on their practice and make changes as a result of their enquiry are already doing a kind of classroom research. However, according to McNiff, Lomax and Whitehead (1996) “To be action research, there must be praxis rather than practice. Praxis is informed, committed action rather than just successful action. It is informed because other people’s views are taken into account. It is committed and intentional in terms of values that have been examined and can be argued. It leads to knowledge from and about educational practice.” Consequently, action research tends to be associated with a particular model which has evolved since the late 1940s out of the work of the social psychologist, Kurt Lewin.

Lewin described action research as “analysis, fact-finding, conceptualisation, planning execution, more fact-finding or evaluation; and then a repetition of this whole circle of activities; indeed a spiral of such circles”. This model of ‘iterative cycles’ – spiralling circles of reflection ⇒ action ⇒ observation ⇒ reflection ⇒ revised action and so on – was very quickly taken up by educationalists and though it has been refined in successive versions, Lewin’s basic structure remains the model.

Whether the process is represented in the form of a flowchart, or in the form of a “spiral of circles”, the principles are the same: defining the problem; examining the nature of the situation; hypothesising and selecting appropriate action(s); implementing those actions; observing and evaluating the effects of the actions; reflecting, explaining and understanding the effects; redefining the problem in the light of this experience; revising hypotheses and actions, and so on....

This rigorous model offers a sound foundation to the teacher-researcher. However, I prefer to use the term ‘classroom research’ (see Hopkins 1985; 1993), as I feel it can embrace much of the action research model without appearing to insist on a particular prescriptive framework or the acquisition of particular skills and techniques.

Three common-sense principles in deciding to undertake classroom research are **viability** – “Don’t tackle issues that you can’t do anything about”; **discreteness** – “Only take on small-scale and relatively limited topics”; and **intrinsic interest** – “Choose a topic that is important to you and your students, or one that you have to be involved with anyway in the course of your normal school activities”.

The data required by the teacher-researcher can be gathered using a wide variety of means, each with attendant advantages and disadvantages.

- **Field notes** – informal and impressionistic notes made by the teacher during, or as soon as possible after the lesson – are the simplest kind of ongoing record of events, which can capture essential aspects before they fade from memory. They can form

the basis for more reflective **teacher diaries** and are a fairly reliable source of immediate responses and impressions. They may, however, be too subjective; the time needed after a lesson may simply not be available; they work better with a small group than with a large class; and they cannot capture the flow of classroom interaction.

- **Audio recording** is easy to arrange, inconspicuous and will provide a full record of verbal interaction, but the data is indiscriminate, it is only verbal and transcription will tend to be extremely tedious and time-consuming.
- **Video recording** offers a comprehensive record of verbal and non-verbal interaction, can easily be reviewed and highlights easily selected, but it may be difficult to arrange, it can be inhibiting (for both teacher and students) and highly conspicuous, and while the record is comprehensive, it is always selective.
- **Learner diaries** involve students, providing personal, individual feedback, which can help to identify individual problems, but students – especially if they are younger – may find it difficult to adopt the habit of written reflection and even if they can, their responses will inevitably be highly subjective.
- **Interviews** have the advantage of direct contact with individual students or small groups; teachers can use directed questioning to focus on required aspects; and the teacher is able to follow up events while they are still fresh in everybody's minds. But (as with learner diaries) some students may find it difficult to articulate their thoughts and feelings; responses will again be highly subjective and may even be designed to please the teacher. Interviews may also need to be recorded, with all the practical disadvantages which that entails.
- **Questionnaires** are easy to administer, providing quantifiable data. But it is difficult to design effective questions, time-consuming to analyse results, and (as with interviews) students may try to produce what they think are the desired answers.
- In addition to all these methods of data collection, teachers may also make use of **sociometry** and **still photography**, both of which provide particular kinds of information, but have obvious limitations, as well as **documentary evidence** and **case studies**, which can be highly informative, but may be time-consuming to collect/ produce.
- Perhaps the most powerful source of data will come from **observation**, whether by a colleague or by students given the role of observers. If there is no tradition within the school of teachers observing each other's classes, this may be difficult to organise and may at first seem threatening. But there are two essential principles which can help to put observation on the right footing and ensure that it takes place in the right spirit. First, the purpose of the observation must be well defined and clear to all parties; the observer must have a clear focus and a well-directed instrument (checklist, task sheet or questionnaire) to carry out the observation task; and secondly, the observation should be planned and followed up, with meetings held before and after the class.

It is clear that no one of these data collection methods will work on its own, and it is for this reason that the principle of **triangulation** is so important. This simply means that rather than relying on any one method, with all its potential disadvantages, the teacher makes use of two or more sources of data, which are mutually compensatory. Ideally, as the term suggests, the data should come from three points of view – those of the teacher, the students and an outside observer, though the principle may be extended to any contrasting sources of information.

When *teachers* first hear that classroom research involves reflecting on what happens in classrooms and trying out different courses of action to try to improve a particular situation, they often tend to react with a kind of verbal shrug, saying *But isn't that just what good teachers do all the time?* Of course, good teachers do constantly reflect on and seek to improve their practice – but classroom research provides a principled framework for what Stenhouse (1980) memorably called “systematic enquiry made public”: ‘systematic’ because it is planned, monitored and recorded; data is collected from a number of different sources through a number of different channels (the process of triangulation); ‘made public’ because the research records are available for anyone who is interested to see. As McNiff (1988) puts it, “...action research raises to a conscious level much of what is already being done by good teachers on an intuitive level”. The literature on action research offers a variety of formulations that attempt to locate the particular quality of the process:

- “...aims to contribute...to the **practical** concerns of people in an immediate **problematic** situation...” (Rapoport 1970) Here the key words are ‘practical’ and ‘problematic’ – practical because this is research grounded in everyday practice and problematic because it focuses on some aspect of practice that has been problematised – viewed as an issue where change or improvement is seen as desirable.
- “...is about the **systematic** study of attempts to improve educational practice by groups of participants by means of their own **reflection upon the effects of those actions.**” (Ebbutt 1985) The key word here is ‘systematic’ – the reflection is more organised and rigorous than the normal kind of internal dialogue that the teacher might conduct with him/herself after a lesson.
- “...is the study of a social situation with a view to **improving the quality of action** within it.” (Elliott 1991) This acknowledges the constantly provisional nature of the process, suggesting a process not of finding definitive solutions to problems, but rather of amelioration, of finding ways to develop and improve.
- “...is the way **groups of people** can organise the conditions under which they can **learn from their own experience.**” (Kemmis 1983) It is often difficult to maintain commitment to classroom research without the support and/or involvement of sympathetic colleagues.
- “...is **trying out an idea in practice** with a view to **improving or changing something, trying to have real effect on the situation.**” (Kemmis 1983) This is perhaps the most direct and explicit description of what classroom research

means, emphasising the experimental nature of the process, as well as the idea of an outcome that is practical and tied to a specific context.

- Finally, a definition that summarises both ethos and praxis, and hints at a potentially larger scale of improvement. "...is a form of **self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants**...in order **to improve the rationality and justice** of (a) their own practices, (b) their understanding of these practices and (c) the situations in which the practices are carried out." (Carr & Kemmis 1986)

When academic researchers hear that classroom research constructs theory out of the observation of classroom practice, they often tend to react sceptically, saying *That's all very well, but it's a misnomer to call it research*. For academics working in a positivist tradition the word *research* is controversial because it suggests a certain kind of scientific methodology, in which the properties of phenomena are rigorously checked through a process of pre-testing, control groups, experimental procedures, statistical analysis of data and post-testing. For researchers concerned with the properties of genetically enhanced vegetables or fire-resistant textiles, it makes very good sense to apply a research methodology which makes standardised assessments, to be able to say, *If we add this chemical or If we use this manufacturing process, the product will exhibit these characteristics*. But it is a category error to treat the subjects of educational research – teachers and students and classrooms – as if they are stable and constant, and will react in utterly predictable ways, which can be evaluated with standardised instruments.

Professional researchers also tend to challenge the validity of classroom research and to question its generative power. *Well, OK, they say, your results may be significant in your classroom on this occasion, but what kind of validity is that? How is it possible to generalise from a unique experience?* The response given by Lomax (1986) is that "as action researchers we do not claim to find the final answer to a question, but we do claim to improve (and change) educational practice through the educational development of practitioners. [...] The validity of what we claim would seem to be the degree to which it was useful (relevant) in guiding practice for particular teachers and its power to inform and precipitate debate about improving practice in the wider professional community". Classroom research can be validated by teachers themselves, through the very attempt to address a problem which they have recognised, and through the processes of critical reflection and disciplined enquiry; it can be validated by colleagues if the results are shared; and, perhaps most importantly, it can be validated by the learners if the teacher shares with them the evidence of diaries, written feedback and audio or video recordings from which they can observe significant development and progress. As for generalisability, although your findings may prove valuable to colleagues, it is a mistake to assume that classroom research will uncover truths about teaching-and-learning that will necessarily be transferable to anyone else's classroom. The whole idea of classroom research has to do with understanding and ameliorating your *own* situation and what is generalisable is the way of understanding.

*This all sounds a bit fuzzy, the professional researcher may then object. What about properly validated test results?* The kind of academic research that depends for its

credibility (and its funding grants) on statistical evidence and quantifiable results is concerned with taking snapshots of *products* at successive stages; the teacher-researcher is generally more concerned with apprehending the quality of educational *processes*. They may well make use of formal tests if it is appropriate to do so – for example, if the effect of a different approach to dealing with the acquisition of new vocabulary is being investigated, then a conventional vocabulary test may serve to demonstrate its effectiveness to teacher and learners alike. But the purpose of classroom research is, as McNiff (op cit) puts it, “to explain and enhance, rather than only describe”, and quantitative results will only ever describe a static situation. The teacher-researcher is interested in such results insofar as they may contribute to increased understanding of the ongoing process of teaching-and-learning in the classroom.

*Aha! Just as I suspected*, the professional researcher may conclude triumphantly, *your methodology lacks all objectivity*. It is perfectly true that the point of departure for classroom research will tend to be the teacher’s subjective intuition about a problematic situation, or an area of practice that they deliberately problematise. The hypotheses that are then generated, and the possible solutions that are tried out, likewise emerge from subjective intuitions. It is in the rigorous nature of the research cycle and in the sharing of data with colleagues, students – and possibly with other stakeholders (head teachers, parents) – that a measure of objectivity is attained. Having said that, it may be worth questioning this insistence on objectivity at all costs. As educators, we are the inheritors of a strong Western tradition of objectivity being an absolute desideratum; it may be, however, that we should place more faith in the validity of what Polanyi (1958) calls teachers’ tacit knowledge – the intuitive, subjective knowledge that we accumulate from our practical experience, but which is rarely acknowledged, by those in authority or by ourselves.

Then there may be practical objections from teacher trainers and from teachers themselves: *Classroom research evidently requires a tremendous investment from teachers, in terms of time and energy, on top of everything else they have to cope with – lesson-planning, marking, record-keeping, all kinds of meetings and administrative tasks, to say nothing of family commitments. And judging by your “spiral of circles”, it seems to be never-ending. It seems like yet another source of stress, rather than a way of gaining new professional skills.* Certainly it is necessary to acknowledge the limitations of classroom research – it does require commitment and determination; it can be ‘messy’ – despite the elegant simplicity of the model, the experience of actually carrying out a research project can be frustratingly chaotic – you may often find yourself barking up the wrong tree: it may often be the case that only as a result of attempting to do the research, you realise what questions you should have been asking; it does not purport to teach you new skills – it can only be a way of questioning and trying out – it does not exclude or replace the need for teacher training, but it is an essential mode of working for teacher development.

Classroom research is reflection on practice *by practitioners for practitioners*. It is a means of empowerment and self-validation. It theorises practice instead of applying theory to practice. Elliott (1991) identifies two ways in which teachers “reflectively develop their practices”:

- (i) “Reflection initiates action” – Here the teacher decides to undertake some research into a practical problem and on the basis of this research changes some aspect of their



teaching. Thus “the development of understanding precedes the decision to change teaching strategies.”

(ii) "Action initiates reflection" – Here the teacher responds to a practical problem by changing some aspect of their teaching and monitors the effects of this change. The teacher’s understanding is modified and changed through the process of evaluation.

Thus “the decision to adopt a change strategy [...] precedes the development of understanding”. Elliott goes on to suggest the first way represents a “projection of academic bias into teachers’ thinking” and that the second “may reflect the natural logic of practical thinking more accurately”. As he says, “when practical problems arise, the practitioner’s first priority is to act quickly in order to resolve it.” However, classroom research provides a principled framework within which teachers can take control of their own development. Instead of being the passive recipients of top-down curriculum decisions made by university researchers, formalised in ministry documents and administered by school principals, they become the implementers of their own change – in short, classroom research is not simply a means of tinkering with the ways that we achieve things in the classroom – it is a form of emancipation for teachers, which transforms them into the initiators of bottom-up curriculum renewal.

To conclude, two comments, the first from a Peruvian teacher –

*“Classroom research is teacher development made explicit”*  
(Maria Elena Perera de Perez, cited in Head & Taylor 1997)

and the last word from a head teacher –

*[Action research] liberates teachers from their prejudices and allows their instincts to blossom.*

(Headmaster cited by McNiff 1988)

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