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Insights

'Beyond monolithic thinking and practices in ELT': Daniel Xerri on teacher research

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*Daniel Xerri's engaging plenary, **Supporting teacher-researchers through the development of research literacy**, at the 34th Annual ETAS Conference and AGM in*

Zofingen left a lasting impression on many in the audience. This interview delves deeper into the alluring idea of teachers positioning themselves as researchers.

What exactly do we mean by research literacy and why is it so important for English teachers?

Research literacy is defined in different ways by different researchers, though it consists of a number of key components. These include the technical competence to actually do research, that is, the knowledge and skills you require to collect data, to analyse it, and to write it up. But research literacy goes beyond that. It also involves the attitudes and beliefs of the individual with respect to research, so the conception of research is very, very important. If you don't have a conception of research that is sufficiently broad, then you're going to merely look at it in the way that some people define it; for example, in the way that academics define it. This might not be the most appropriate definition of research for your purposes as a language teacher. So, I think that research literacy involves the knowledge and skills with respect to doing research, but it also involves a set of attitudes and beliefs that allow you to see yourself as someone who is capable of doing research, and considers research as part of their identity.

In your plenary, you mentioned that the understanding of the term *research* is the main obstacle preventing many teachers from engaging with and in research. What are some common beliefs and misconceptions surrounding it?

In my plenary, I featured a quote by Christine Coombe that comes from an interview published in the Winter 2017 issue of ETAS Journal. Research, for her, is basically finding things out, finding things that you are interested in learning more about. However, the misconceptions that arise and which some teachers might sometimes have when it comes to research are related to the fact that they might see it as something that needs to involve a hypothesis or statistics, or something that necessarily entails a very difficult process of analysis. Other teachers might think of research as something that is solely numeric in nature – a conception much more aligned with quantitative research. They might see it as an activity that is only done by people who work in universities.

All of these misconceptions are ultimately based on a very narrow definition of research, a narrow perspective of what research entails. This stops teachers from actually seeing themselves as capable of doing research. So, if you feel that numbers are not your forte, that statistics is something you're afraid of, then you're going to feel and think that research is something that's alien to you. If you feel that research can tell you nothing new about what you do in the classroom because experience is the most important thing of all, then that is also going to distance you from any attempt to do research.

There are many such factors that discourage teachers from doing research. And here I'm not saying that all teachers should do research. I think it's very important that whenever we look at professional development, it should be something that you willingly choose to do and you have the option of choosing whichever approach to professional development works for you or appeals to you. So, what we're trying to do is to enable teachers to consider research as an alternative. Once they've considered it, they might realise that it is something that they want to do and that they are capable of doing. But they might also realise that it's not for them. It's very important to highlight the fact that doing research is meant to be voluntary.

One of the other reasons why teachers might not do research is a lack of time. What would you say to teachers who could be concerned about this?

Time has long been mentioned as one of the main obstacles to teachers doing research. All of us working in the teaching profession know that time is an issue. However, when we define research more broadly, what we are saying is that some of the things that you already do as a teacher are part of the research process. So, if you are concerned about an issue that your students might have with writing and you set them a writing task which is meant to help you learn more about that particular concern, you are collecting a form of data about what they can and can't do. Now there, you are engaging in the role of a teacher: you are teaching and assessing your students. But you are also learning more about them and their needs. Hence, you are also engaging in the role of a researcher.

Essentially, you're combining the two roles together. The amount of time required for teaching purposes, can also be used for research purposes. This means that

research isn't necessarily a supplement when it comes to time. It can also be something incorporated into your pedagogy. The common misconception is that research is an add-on, whereas what I'm saying is that research might already form part of what most teachers do. Therefore you don't need to make a lot of extra time for it. You just need to change your perception of what you're doing as a teacher, and use your practices not solely for pedagogical purposes but also for research purposes.

So, in actual fact, without fully realising it we already engage in some form of research whenever we ask ourselves why certain things occur in our lessons. What else is required of teachers in order to become sufficiently research literate and what advice can you give us to further develop these necessary skills?

Well, there are various skills involved when we do research. I think it all starts with asking a question, or else thinking of an issue that you'd like to explore further, and knowing how to explore that issue in such a way that you come up with answers that are valid to your approach. One of the basic skills involved in research is the ability to pose questions that you're able to answer. In the kind of research we conduct in academia, we call those research questions. So, that's one of the basic skills. What kind of questions do we ask? How do we write those questions? How do we pose those questions? Then we move on to the skills we require in order for us to find the best way of answering those questions. This is where we look at, for example, research methods. Should I interview people? Should I distribute a questionnaire? Should I observe a class? Should I observe myself? Should I take field notes? What is the best means by which I can answer my questions?

All of those different methods involve separate skills. Obviously, some of those skills overlap, but these methods involve a set of skills that enable us to answer our questions or else attempt to – when using a more traditional approach to research – prove or disprove a hypothesis. Those are some of the skills involved in collecting data. Then we eventually move on to analysing that data and trying to identify patterns and come up with findings that enable us to answer the questions that we would have asked at the beginning of our research.

Other skills are related to disseminating our research, if we so wish. Whether it's via writing or oral presentations, dissemination involves another set of skills. Not to mention the skills involved in reflecting on the findings that we come up with, and seeing how those findings might enable us to change or validate our practices, depending on the approach we are using.

For example, if we're using Action Research, we are looking to make a change to our practices. Whereas if we use some other kind of research approach, then we're trying to learn more about a particular issue that we're curious about. I would say that most teachers have a knowledge base when it comes to doing research, but they might not necessarily call them research skills or research-oriented skills. With a bit of assistance, perhaps through a mentor who might either be a peer or a professional researcher, teachers can use the knowledge and skills they already have and develop them in such a way that they can be used for research purposes, especially in order to do research within their own classrooms.

It sounds like many teachers possess a lot of these skills already. They just need to retune them so that they can also be applied to the field of research. However, in your plenary you quoted Péter Medgyes as saying that there is little reason to jump on the bandwagon of research. This suggests that teacher research could be a fad that everyone is being encouraged to do, or that there is too much research out there already. What are your thoughts on this?

I think that you can't ever really say that there is too much research. As humans, as professionals, we're constantly learning; our field is constantly evolving. Hence, research is one of the best ways of preventing ourselves from ending up in a rut and perpetuating practices and beliefs that might no longer be relevant for the present day or useful for the future. If, 30 years from now, we had to continue teaching in the way that we currently do, then most probably we would experience a number of problems. Research is a way of constantly refreshing our knowledge, and constantly developing as professionals. Professional development in itself is concerned with one's individual growth. Similarly, research is concerned with the growth of our field. Research is what thrusts us beyond monolithic thinking and practices in ELT.

One of the most powerful points in your plenary was the reference to Thomas S. C. Farrell's convincing analogy comparing teachers who lack any kind of research engagement to medical doctors who do not read or do research. The analogy is meant to make us question the extent to which we should trust such doctors and teachers. However, there might be teachers out there who might have engaged with research during their teacher training but rarely get to do so nowadays, preferring to leave it up to the experts. How would you respond to this?

I would contest the idea that research needs to be left to the 'experts' by saying that teachers are the experts. If teachers don't conceive of themselves as experts in terms of their ability to find answers to the questions that they have, then those answers won't ever be generated. Why? It's because the answers are dependent on a teacher's particular context and classroom. The best answers are never going to be derived from someone else's context. Whenever academic research is published in a journal, its findings relate to a context that might not necessarily be applicable or relevant to your specific classroom, and your students and their needs.

So, you yourself as the teacher are the best person to conduct research because you are immersed in your context. You know what questions you have and you know what answers would really help you and your students. It's unfortunate when teachers see outside researchers as being more expert in the field than themselves. This kind of thinking stops teachers from actually realising that they themselves are the experts about the classroom in which they teach.

Do you have any advice for teachers working in institutions that might not be willing to support their efforts to do research?

It's good that you've asked this question because another obstacle to teachers doing research is a lack of support coming from the institution where they work. In fact, in the Winter 2017 issue of ETAS Journal Anne Burns lists ten pieces of advice that educational managers need to follow in order for them to support teachers. However, let's imagine a situation where a teacher is not being provided with any kind of support by their institution. Ultimately, what they need to keep in mind is that they do research primarily for their own benefit and that of their students. It should not be a question of, 'I'm not being given support so I'm not going to do it. I'm not

being given extra time and money, and I'm not being recognised as a researcher. Hence, I'm not going to do it.' You opt to do research because you have questions that you'd really like answers to.

Whether you have support or not, you have to decide if those questions are worth answering. If you decide that they are worth answering, then you go ahead and do research in your own classroom. Even if you're not recognised as being a teacher-researcher and you're only expected to teach English, you can still decide to do research because you're doing it for yourself and your students. In fact, you can even ask for your students' support. They can be your co-researchers. This means that the students are not just people whom you are researching; they are also people who are enabling you to construct knowledge, doing so as co-constructors of knowledge. They are as involved in the process as you are. They are your research peers, in a way.

Teachers wishing to do research can also get support from other sources – their teacher association, online and face-to-face courses, open access publications about how to do research and accounts of teacher research, as well as collaboration with their colleagues. For example, Action Research can contain a collaborative element so that a group of colleagues work together to find answers to any questions they might have in common.

What are some of the most interesting things you learnt from editing the three Special Supplements on teacher research for *ETAS Journal*?

What's most interesting for me is how supportive all of the contributors are of the idea that we shouldn't narrow the definition of research. They all seem to believe that one of the most harmful things that can happen with respect to teacher research is when teachers are told what they need to do and how they need to do it by people who might not necessarily be in the language classroom anymore. It is very dangerous for academics to impose their definition of research on teachers and tell them that in order for them to do good quality research they need to do it in a very specific way. It's dangerous because it might lead teachers to feel alienated from research, to believe that it's something that doesn't belong to them and that doesn't form part of their identity. Teachers might come to see research as

belonging to someone else that is giving them the privilege to actually do it. I was glad to see that my colleagues from around the world seem to share the idea that research needs to be democratised further so that many more teachers come to believe that they can engage with it and in it.

What do you hope to see happening in the future with regards to teacher research?

Given that we're doing this interview for a teacher association's publication, my hope is that more teacher associations around the world consider themselves to be agents in enabling teachers to develop the necessary knowledge, skills, beliefs, and attitudes for them to do research – if they so choose. It's very important for teacher associations to see themselves as being at the forefront of any efforts to provide teachers with this kind of support. Supporting teachers should not just consist of equipping them with pedagogical skills, but it's also about furnishing them with the competences required to explore the many issues that arise in the language classroom. We need to respect teachers as thinking beings, professionals who have questions and want answers to those questions.

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Insights

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