

BOOK REVIEW

Review of *Horizontes 1: ELT Teacher-research in Latin America*, edited by Darío Luis Banegas, Magdalena De Stefani, Paula Rebolledo, Carlos Rico Troncoso and Richard Smith (2020). IATEFL in association with British Council, 212pp. ISBN 978-1-912588-30-5. Online:

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Horizontes 1 is more of a compendium than simply an edited volume: it includes a short guide to Action Research (AR), provides a wealth of resources for those interested in this type of inquiry, contains six Action Research accounts from four Latin American countries and concludes with two reflective reports on the *Teachers Research!* conference held in Santiago de Chile in 2016.

The main focus is, however, on the Action Research reports coming from different local contexts in Argentina, Chile, Brazil and Uruguay. The authors are teachers who had won the 2015–16 awards in the Action Research Award Scheme (ARAS) sponsored by the British Council. They were mentored by teacher-research mentors from Argentina, Chile, Colombia and Uruguay and, judging by the quality of the papers, the mentors have done an outstanding job. They provided scaffolding for their mentees' research projects instead of trying to push them down the dead-end of yet another applied linguistics research article with a mile-long literature review and the usual 'limitations' section that hedges the content to such an extent that there can be no guidance found for any practising classroom teacher. This does not imply that the research projects lack scientific rigour. They just belong to a different *genre*, not claiming generalizability beyond the authors' experience but, surprisingly, it is exactly the rich description associated with a certain kind of (narrative) qualitative research that lends these 'stories' credibility (validity) and, by extension, applicability, at least in a Latin American context.

As mentioned above, the volume begins with a short introduction to Action Research, namely, a handy guide that was originally written by Julian Edge and the scheme mentors for the ARAS participants. It now serves as the background for the six reports and also contains some of the themes that were then successfully brought together with a related strand (Exploratory Action Research) at the Santiago conference referred to above. The volume published by Smith and

Rebolledo (2018) titled *A Handbook for Exploratory Action Research* has since become an essential resource for the setting up and managing of similar projects.

Let us now have a look at the reports and provide enough information to serve as an appetiser for those who might be interested in how Action Research in English Language Teaching (ELT) has come of age in Latin America. Serrana Echenagusía, Laura Flores and Cecilia Prieto looked at how meaningful learning can potentially lead to improvement in students' written work. The intervention was based on genre theory and systemic-functional linguistics, which to an ordinary mortal means that the process started with examining authentic texts, analysing the social context (with a real purpose in mind) and providing explicit grammatical and textual explanations (pp. 40–41). The project was carried out in three 'loops', with the writing tasks increasing in complexity in each round. An especially valuable feature of the project is the fact that the theoretical foundations, which guided the teaching practice, were linked to the syllabus based on CEFR criteria and the students' output was evaluated by external CEFR experts. These external advisors confirmed that the students' language use in writing corresponded to the level that they were aiming for, namely, A2. However, the final placement test showed mixed results and this means that there might be room for a potential new cycle of Action Research: Does the placement test measure efficiently students' use of English in terms of the CEFR descriptors?

Silvia Severino designed an AR project that looked at whether blended learning (BL) can improve students' language skills and make them more empowered and autonomous learners in the process. The students at Silvia's technical school in Buenos Aires can specialize in becoming automotive technicians or computer service technicians. From the point of English language acquisition, Silvia's context contained many of the

features of what we call ‘difficult circumstances’: large heterogeneous classes, few contact hours, limited resources, unreliable or non-existent Internet service, low expectations and apathy (pp. 71–72). Two crucial factors helped Silvia improve the situation: she found another teacher, Maria to work with her (co-teaching) and, as a result, she was able to split the class in which she conducted the project into two groups according to the students’ proficiency levels, learning styles and attitudes. It needs to be pointed out that blended learning in this case did not involve a combination of face-to-face classes with technology at home but the integration of technology into the classes *in spite of the lack of Internet access* in the classroom “by using mobile phones to record role plays and netbooks to show power point presentations and videos, as well as multimedia projects” (p. 97). Silvia stresses that even though students enhanced their knowledge, it did not happen to the extent that Maria and she originally expected, and one of the reasons could be the students’ low level of motivation. Nevertheless, these two teachers did far more than could have been expected of them with much of the planning and reflection taking place in their free time. Silvia already knows what she would like to research next: What drives students’ motivation and commitment?

Natacha Pardo Contreras works in a technical high school in Chile; after secondary school, more than 40% of students go on to study at these educational institutions running vocational programmes. English is taught as a Foreign Language and students seldom reach the required A2-B1 CEFR level with the limited number of classes (two per week). Natacha, using the relative freedom that she had to make changes in the curriculum, decided she would focus on the students’ post-school needs (p. 106) by introducing an English for Specific Purposes element. Her genre-based approach led to a well-thought out and diligently accomplished needs analysis phase after which four EFL teachers from two technical high schools and Natacha decided to design a 4-lesson sequence that dealt with reading and understanding technical manuals and instructions, namely, teaching skills that were required in order to perform tasks in the students’ chemistry and electronics courses. These lessons were carefully constructed so that the students could understand the purpose of the manuals (meaning making) and learnt some reading strategies as well as recognised discourse features and parts of these specialized technical texts. The recognition of grammatical features was only introduced in Lesson 3 while Lesson 4 dealt with

the communicative purposes of technical manuals (pp. 116–117). Both students and teachers appreciated the experience, but the teachers mentioned a couple of challenges, too. They said that students don’t even know how to analyse texts in their L1 let alone in a foreign language and, as language teachers, they were concerned about the amount of technical vocabulary that they might be expected to learn in order to teach it. Once again, teachers mentioned how time-consuming it was to comprehend the genre analysis model (Lago & Lloret, 2012) and design the ESP material. Altogether, however, the author and the four teachers found the experience rewarding and realised that the EFL curriculum actually gave them sufficient flexibility to experiment.

Mariana Serra and Carina Mariel Grisolia’s case study is an example of a meticulously designed and methodically carried out piece of research that uses a simple but powerful theoretical framework and blends it with a humanistic stance. It looks at the effect of how teachers’ written feedback can scaffold EFL learners’ rewrites using the Praise-Question-Encourage technique. Somewhat similarly to genre theory, in the initial stages P-Q-E is concerned with content and organization rather than sentence-level errors (p. 130). This approach allows teachers to praise content (ideas), pose further questions for clarification and encourage students to create higher quality versions of their original writing. Formative feedback then leads to evaluative feedback, a final stage that the authors do not shy away from. The five students whose writing the authors provided feedback on did not much like writing activities before, because they felt “the emphasis had been on *form* rather than *content*, and on *product* rather than *process*” (p. 139). During the implementation phase, the students were taken through the process of designing a sales leaflet, which started with planning and writing two drafts before the final product was born. The five students were also asked to write entries in their writing journals in which they reacted to the teachers P-Q-E style feedback. Not only were the students able to create “adequate sales leaflets” (pp. 150–151) but they also felt that the teacher’s feedback was “motivating and helpful”, and the comments “helped them feel more confident about their writings” (p. 154). Mariana and Carina’s action research case study represents the best qualities of teacher research and could aptly be called a fully-fledged applied research article – with a heart.

Maria Ines Berasain had a problem: for a number of years before she decided to ‘intervene’

as Head of the English Department at a bilingual Jesuit school in Montevideo, students' exam results had shown no improvement and 'achievement standards' stagnated at 75%. Some (evidently not all) teachers acknowledged that previous Continuing Professional Development actions did not seem to have an effect, so Maria Ines decided to encourage teachers to reflect, namely, "to look at the possible gap between what they believe they should do in the classroom and what they actually do" (p. 167). The chosen way forward was establishing a space for collaborative teacher learning by creating a professional learning community (p. 169). The three teachers involved in the project decided to implement a full CLIL approach to teaching History, including making the lesson plans and designing the materials together, then observing each other's classes and reflecting on the experience. They were supposed to be writing a reflective journal as well, but they hardly ever wrote in them. One explanation for this was that the teachers thought they could share their observations in the upcoming meetings, but I suspect that the other reason, highlighted by Teacher A, played a bigger role: "I felt I had to think about the words I was going to write ... not to make mistakes... to use sophisticated language. ... it was stressful." If the book review writer (who is also a non-native speaker and is likewise struggling with her reflective mentoring journal in English) is allowed to make a comment, I would say that those journals could have been written in L1, which may have led to more data and deeper insights.

What might have felt even more troubling is that in spite of the teachers' feeling that their students were motivated and their language skills improved, the exam results were actually poorer than before the AR project. Acknowledging this takes courage (see Banegas, 2020). Maria Ines writes at length about how the teachers felt they benefitted from working together, but the only comment she makes on the exam results is, in fact, a question: "... is it realistic to expect to see results in such a short period?" Something to explore in the next cycle of AR...

While in some of the Latin American countries where the authors come from there is some flexibility in the curriculum (Chile) and in others there is a drive to improve the teaching of English as an International Language (Uruguay), Fernanda Gonçalves faced an uphill struggle. She says that the Ministry of Education decided that "...communicative competence was unnecessary for Brazilian students because they would not require it in their own social contexts" (p. 186).

The skill to be acquired is, apparently, reading comprehension since that is what is required for further education. Rather than intending to resolve the issues that might have gotten in the way of implementing communicative activities (few timetabled English lessons, large classes, teachers' low proficiency levels, resources reduced to chalk and book – p. 186) three of the four language skills have been declared redundant. Interestingly, middle-class and upper-class Brazilians think otherwise: they enrol their children in private English language schools for them to acquire the missing three.

Fernanda had the whole system to fight, but this did not seem to deter her as she was driven by her sense of social justice and the belief that successful language learning has effective communication at its core. Since teachers in the northeastern part of Brazil (where she started teaching) have anything between 30-50 contact hours to teach, there is not much time left for lesson planning and professional development. Fernanda herself had to wait until she started having fewer contact hours in her new job at a technical high school and was able to call on the help of a colleague, Roberto França, and start a Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) programme for seven brave teachers. None of them quit the project and later carried on participating in further teacher training activities. Fernanda provides a detailed account of the sessions that took place between February and September 2016. Often she refers to fairly well known communicative activities, at other times she only tells us the number of the joke, for example: "The teaching techniques numbered 6, 7 and 8 from the book *Aula Nota 10* (Lemov, 2011) were presented to the teachers..." (p. 193). It does not matter. What matters is that the teachers were asked to reflect on the activities, try them out in their classes, tweak them if necessary and report back in the following session. They wrote their reflective *teaching journals* in Portuguese and they were also asked to write a *learning journal*. I am assuming that was in Portuguese, too.

With the amount of work and dedication that had gone into the project, Fernanda's findings are not really surprising: both the seven teachers and their students claimed that they had become more motivated and, as a result, "more effective and contextualized learning occurred" (p. 195). Being motivated in this manner meant that the teachers (and their students) began to worry about classes that were often missed owing to staff meetings, power cuts or lack of water. You can lament this state of affairs in the developing world, but

Fernanda and her teachers decided otherwise: "... the participants realized that ... they had to try and make the most of the classes that were left" (p. 197). And with the help of the practical toolkit that they were introduced to over an eight-month period, they did exactly that.

In March 2016 the authors of *Horizontes 1* all had the opportunity to present their projects at the conference I mentioned above ("Teachers Research! Chile 2016"). The volume ends with two reflective reports by Laura Aza and Débora Izé Balsemão Oss. Laura says that she enjoyed the collegial atmosphere, namely, the fact that 'the speakers mingled freely with the audience' (p. 207), but this was owing to the fact that the 'speakers *were* the audience and vice versa' (p. 207). In her report, Débora talks about the joy of experience sharing and her belief that "research *by* teachers *for* teachers' could become a truly powerful means of professional development in Latin America, too.

However, let us close this review with Fernanda Gonçalves' words:

Although teachers alone do not have the power to change the whole educational system, they still have the power to change their own pedagogical practices and that is what the participants in this project decided to do, because they were motivated to do so. (p. 198)

And so were all the other authors of *Horizontes 1*. I look forward to reading *Horizontes II*.*

*The editing of *Horizontes II* is under way and will contain seven chapters written by subsequent participants in the ARAS scheme.

References

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