

## An invitation to Teacher Association Research

*Kuchah Kuchah and Richard Smith*

### Introduction

In a previous article (Smith and Kuchah 2016), we defined 'Teacher Association Research' – henceforth 'TA-research' – by analogy with individual or small group teacher-research, as

systematic inquiry which is derived from members' expressed priorities and officially endorsed by a TA, and which engages members as active participants in what they see as a collective project to improve understanding and practice. (p. 215)

The idea of TA-research was first developed in the context of the CAMELTA (Cameroon English Language and Literature Teachers Association) conference in 2013, and is continuing to be developed within that association (see Harry Kuchah's April 2017 presentation on '[Teacher association research in Cameroon: recent developments](#)' at the 51st IATEFL conference). We have previously described the genesis and initial development of the notion of TA-research, in a [2016 article in \*ELT Journal\*](#) (Smith and Kuchah 2016). In the present contribution we wish to achieve three things: (1) provide an update on some TA-research activities which have been undertaken in CAMELTA since those reported in our 2016 article; (2) highlight in a relatively practical way some steps that other TAs could take if they wish to engage in TA-research; and (3) explicitly invite other TAs to join us in further exploration of the potential of TA-research. Thus, the present article constitutes a report on 'work-in-progress' and will serve, we hope, as a stimulus to further action. We also hope that the basic, preliminary set of suggested procedures we present below ('A checklist of possible TA-research activities') will be revisited, expanded and improved into a genuine 'toolkit' in future years, on the basis of further experience and experimentation within various TAs.

### Background

The notion of TA-research emerged from a range of problems, needs and opportunities that became apparent in interactions with teachers during CAMELTA's 12th Annual Conference and TESOL Symposium in August 2013 in Yaoundé, Cameroon. These interactions revealed that classroom realities, especially within public education, in Cameroon presented teachers with a

wide range of challenges that were not often addressed by policy recommendations or the pedagogic principles promoted by Ministry of Education inspectors. What is more, teachers were often too busy coping with challenges such as very large, multi-lingual and multi-grade classes, lack of textbooks and other teaching and learning resources, multiple 'sequential' assessments, and other socio-cultural and economic factors affecting school processes, to a point where it had been impossible for CAMELTA, despite several attempts, to institute systematic action research. Based on an awareness of these emerging issues, Richard Smith significantly changed his planned plenary presentation and focused on eliciting what teachers' challenges were as well as exploring how they themselves could contribute, collectively, to addressing these issues.

The project, as initiated during this plenary session, involved 170 CAMELTA members writing down what they considered their major challenges as well as up to three research questions which could be investigated to help them address the challenges raised. Following consultation with the CAMELTA Vice-President for Research and Projects, a three-item open-ended questionnaire was then designed and administered to members at regional workshops across the country. The questionnaire sought to elicit narratives around teachers' classroom challenges and how they had attempted to deal with these, as well as stories of, and reflections on, successful lessons they had taught. The research questions as well as teachers' narratives were collated and uploaded to the CAMELTA website: <https://camelta-cameroon.weebly.com/resources--useful-links.html>. The questionnaire data revealed a range of strategies used by teachers to deal with different challenges in their classrooms. Some of these include strategies for student motivation; classroom management strategies; group work/peer support/peer feedback; selecting relevant and familiar materials and teacher and student creativity (for details, see Kuchah 2015). More importantly, the large number of responses obtained (from 504 teachers), as well as respondents' feedback on the questionnaire design, confirmed the value of TA-research to members of the association. Members felt that the

open-ended nature of the questionnaire not only gave them the freedom to express themselves fully, but that the entire process of encouraging them to share their experiences helped them reflect on their practices and gain motivation as they reflected on their successes. Besides, there was a sense of ownership emanating from the fact that, in responding to the questionnaire, members were actually addressing some of the research questions they themselves – or fellow members – had identified (for details, see Smith and Kuchah 2016).

### Update

As reported by Smith and Kuchah (2016), a significant development in the CAMELTA-research initiative by the end of 2013 was the shift in focus from individual teacher-research to a collective approach. Nevertheless, as Ekembe and Fonjong (2018) report, a critical issue has continued to be teacher identity, or sense of self-worth – teachers perceiving themselves as having little to contribute to either local or global ELT. Thus, in September 2016, in order to demonstrate to teachers that examples of their current practice could generate pedagogical reflections relevant both locally and globally, a new research group was formed within CAMELTA to take the collective endeavour forward. This group consisted of 34 volunteers, most of whom were relatively novice teachers with up to five years' teaching experience. They were initially guided and supported by a more experienced teacher and researcher, Eric Ekembe. By means of a WhatsApp group forum, they started out by identifying – from the database of research questions which had been collected, categorised and prioritised earlier in the project (see Smith and Kuchah 2014, 2016) – those questions that resonated most with their own classroom experiences. The research questions that were selected from this process covered themes such as learner motivation, lack of resources, low proficiency of learners, and reading and writing skills. Since learner motivation ranked most highly, the group decided to make this their focus for the coming year (Ekembe and Fonjong 2018). Having decided on a theme, the group continued their bi-weekly WhatsApp meetings, now focusing on possible *strategies* to foster learner motivation. Meetings also included discussions around the topic of motivation and learner autonomy, based on short articles. At the end of each discussion, a summary of the main ideas raised by group members was posted both in the WhatsApp group and on the group Facebook page. At the same

time, the teachers within the group planned and delivered lessons incorporating these strategies, and kept a record of their experiences. With funding from the University of Bath and the US Embassy in Cameroon, the group were then able to hold a series of monthly face-to-face meetings where they could share their experiences and begin to generate ideas for good practice. In total there were five meetings; during each one, three different teachers shared their lesson plans and stories, and, each time, Q & A sessions and discussion enabled group members to reflect on the different classroom experiences and to identify useful motivational strategies which could be shared with the wider TA membership.

A significant outcome arising from the face-to-face meetings was the way in which the members of the research group, that is, the teachers themselves, began to identify and voice their needs. They appeared to more clearly recognise the value of reflecting on their own practice, the potential of classroom-based research and the extent and significance of the information that could be collected. They themselves suggested compiling an inventory of activities or ideas for motivating learners. They also explored and suggested how they could gather feedback on their lessons from learners as well as other teachers, and considered how they might use questionnaires, checklists and peer observation. Up to this point, it could be argued that the TA-research agenda was largely driven and led by the commitment of a few individuals within the TA leadership. Now, as a result of the research group's experience of TA-research, it was beginning to be directed and steered by the teachers themselves.

This 'turning-point' was accompanied by an apparent surge of energy and motivation within the research group, and a renewed spate of TA-research activity ensued. The first new development was the 'mobility scheme'. This involved group members pairing up to carry out peer observation: using notes and video clips taken with mobile phones, teachers reflected on each other's lessons, reported back to the research group via weekly WhatsApp meetings, and prepared lessons together. Making use of checklists and open-ended questionnaires, they also gathered student feedback. Not surprisingly, as research activity increased, some members of the group began to express a need for more formal training in research methods, and the idea of action research workshops emerged. Initially, two workshops were set up on the topic of learner motivation. Participants were asked to read a selection of relevant articles on the topic and hold

a discussion. An action research workshop was also eventually organised in March 2017, being sponsored by the US Embassy and led by Peggy Kang, a US English Language Fellow in Cameroon.

Possibly the greatest success of TA-research activities during this period has been the shift in identity and sense of self-worth for those teachers who have become actively involved in the CAMELTA Research Group. Feedback from the WhatsApp forum indicates that members perceive themselves as informed practitioners who do have something to contribute, who can support and coach their colleagues, and who can empower others (see Ekembe and Fonjong 2018 for details). They are able to describe, with confidence and in detail, the steps they have taken to reflect on and research teaching and learning in their classrooms. They also acknowledge the benefits of researching collaboratively and this has led to greater confidence. In short, they recognise that being part of the CAMELTA Research Group has enabled them to grow professionally.

In addition to these benefits for those involved, there are other significant outcomes of the CAMELTA Research Group activity from this period of the project which deserve a mention. Firstly, members of the group are beginning to present papers at local conferences and workshops, and write for publication. The fact that some of these papers are for international publications supports the growing belief among TA members that they do have something to contribute to global as well as local ELT. On a national level, four group members were invited to run training workshops and give demonstration lessons to pre-service teachers at the College of Education of the University of Yaoundé – an unprecedented development in ELT in Cameroon.

A further success of the CAMELTA-research project has been its ability to attract funding. As Smith and Kuchah (2016: 219) previously reported, as a project officially instigated and sanctioned by a TA, the CAMELTA Research committee was able in 2015 to apply for and win external funding (the IATEFL Teacher Association Project Award). This project was essentially developed around one of the research questions identified from the 2013 database, that is, 'How can CAMELTA support early career teachers isolated in rural parts of the country?'. Since then, the research group has again been successful in obtaining sponsorship and funding from two external agencies (the US embassy and the University of Bath), allowing it to hold

meetings and workshops, both of which have proved key to the development of the project.

One of the main challenges still facing the CAMELTA-research project is how to transcribe and organise the wealth of data collected from peer observation and learner feedback during this period of activity. What is more, it is yet to be determined how such data can be disseminated effectively to the wider TA membership and used to address the key issue of learner motivation in Cameroonian classrooms. Indeed, one of the advantages initially envisaged of such a large-scale, collective TA-research project – that findings could be used to influence educational policy from the bottom up (that is, rather than teachers being the 'victims' of inappropriate top-down policies) – has not yet been realised either. Additionally, the fact that the research group is, at the moment made up of teachers in only one of the ten regions of the country means that the realities of teachers in other parts of the country are not yet being investigated.

Another challenge is the lack of institutional incentive for developmental projects such as the one the group is involved in. CAMELTA Research Group members work during their weekends, sometimes squeezing in meetings between piles of essays to mark. It is possible that without any formal institutional recognition of the efforts of these teachers, they may eventually experience burn out and lose motivation. While professional development is a personal trajectory, the recognition of, and support for teacher development initiatives can be a powerful incentive (Focho 2018).

The developments we have described so far, coming on top of those previously shared in Smith and Kuchah (2016), indicate that there is definite value in encouraging collaborative teacher inquiry amongst TA members on their shared concerns, especially in contexts where professional development opportunities are rare (Focho 2018) and where participation in a teacher association might offer the only opportunity for teachers to share good practices and develop their professional identities and abilities (Gnawali 2016).

Early in 2017 in Athens, the TESOL International Association organised a Summit on the future of the TESOL profession in which we both participated. Independently, we noted that our experience and ideas regarding TA-research seemed to fit very well with the notions of professional inquiry and collective empowerment which were highlighted as important in Summit presentations and discussions. One of the speakers

under the thematic area of 'the profession as change agent', Misty Adoniou, argued that

Professional teachers associations have an important role to play in curating and disseminating new knowledge.

Teachers associations also provide a space for teachers to speak with one another, to share their experiences and their expertise. This not only builds collegiality, but importantly it builds a common message, synchronizing voices so that they can speak clearly to those at both the meso and macro level and say: *This is who we are and this is what we know, this is what we do and this is how we make a difference.*

Adoniou (2017)

The notion of TA-research, which we ourselves thought would be very fitting as a complement to the discussions, was not explicitly referred to by other participants. However, a couple of months later, at Harry Kuchah's above-mentioned presentation at IATEFL 2017, Sarah Sahr of TESOL International Association encouraged us to develop a toolkit which could be of benefit to other teacher associations. Below, we therefore present a version of such a toolkit in preliminary 'checklist' form. We hope to develop this further, in collaboration with other teacher associations over the next year or two.

### A checklist of possible TA-research activities

Below we detail the steps we ourselves went through and/or imagined taking, together with our reflections, to possibly benefit other teacher associations which might take the ideas up. Although the steps are presented in a logical order, they didn't necessarily happen in this order, nor do they have to follow this order – or all be carried out – in another TA's practice. Instead of numbering them, we've placed a check-box next to each possible action, to encourage other teacher associations to consider which ones might be feasible in their own context. Please check / tick those that are! Of course, as a new form of research currently being developed, the processes of engaging in TA-research may vary in different parts of the world depending on the specific needs and abilities of each teacher association. It is our hope that teacher members and leaders who find the idea attractive will be able to try some of the ideas/procedures presented here, develop TA-practices of their own, and share their challenges and successes with us and with other TAs.

#### Present the idea of TA-research to association leaders

Perhaps reading our *ELT Journal* article (Smith and Kuchah 2016) might persuade some association

leaders to give TA-research a try. We also hope that the present article and checklist will help to persuade or at least give some food for thought to TA leaders who can see the value of their TA promoting inquiry-based collaborative professional development and – potentially – effecting wider change on this basis. As more TAs get involved and report on their experiences, such further reports might also be persuasive.

#### Establish a small research committee to take the idea forward

Assuming TA leaders approve of the general idea, a small group of interested members could be formed as a research committee to take the project forward. Potentially, this could form the starting-point for the formation of a Research Group or even, later, a Special Interest Group.

In the case of CAMELTA, a research committee made up of four members and headed by a Vice President in charge of research and projects had been formed, prior to this project (in 2009). The role of this committee was to enable CAMELTA to bridge the gap between pedagogic policy rhetoric and the actual classroom experiences of teachers by promoting Action Research amongst its members. Between 2009 and 2013, only one action research project by a CAMELTA member (see Focho 2011) had been successfully carried out and reported. However, the existence of, and acknowledgement of the important role of this committee meant that the association was already pre-disposed to developing research ideas.

#### Present the idea of TA-research to members of the association

As we have described above, the idea of TA-research was first presented to CAMELTA members via a plenary presentation at the annual conference, and this can be a good place for immediately getting feedback – and some members' own research questions (see next stage below). However, it could also occur via an article in the association's newsletter (where there is one), perhaps associated with an online questionnaire.

The plenary or article could be called something like 'The potential of [name of your association] research'. You can establish reasons why TA-research could be a good thing, perhaps repeating arguments from our *ELT Journal* article (Smith and Kuchah 2016). Suggest that the association could select some questions of general importance to the membership and could then mobilize collectively to gather data from across the membership. Advantages of this could include:

- gathering a large amount of data if the Association as a whole can be mobilized
- persuasiveness of the research to those in authority due to large sample size
- sharing appropriate possible local solutions to problems, if successes as well as problems can be shared
- collective development of research skills
- increased confidence of participants in their own ideas, serving as a preparatory basis for future projects, including, perhaps, more individual or small-group research.

**Elicit research topics / questions from the membership**

Introduce the notion of a 'research question' (all research needs to begin with a question or questions). Participants in the plenary session write their perceptions of the overall TA-research idea and also write suggested topics for research and/or associated research questions on slips of paper distributed during the plenary session. This could alternatively (or perhaps additionally) be done via questionnaire sent to all members but the response might be relatively disappointing. Perhaps an electronic questionnaire could be set up (e.g. via SurveyMonkey), together with an article / blog like the one described above.

For example, in August 2013 during the CAMELTA annual conference, 170 conference participants each wrote down research questions of particular relevance to them during a plenary session led by Richard Smith. The session, entitled 'In your circumstances, the potential of CAMELTA research' gave participants the opportunity to highlight some of their problems and to explore ways through which the association could tap into successful experiences within the membership to solve generally perceived problems. Research questions written by teachers were collated and typed out by the Vice-President for research and projects of the association and then shared with members of the research committee. Here are two examples of research questions from CAMELTA members:

1. How can you make students interact actively in English during English language lessons?
2. How can teachers cope with the lack of textbooks on the part of learners?

**Categorize topics / research questions into 'research priority areas'**

Grouping research questions into thematic areas can help highlight those areas of concern which are most prevalent – hence the term 'priority areas' – among the individual research questions collected. These will serve as a resource and encouragement for TA members to pursue their own inquiries on topics which reflect members' priorities. It will also help committee members identify where members need the most help and potentially identify speakers at subsequent conferences with expertise in these areas. It is important, however, to ensure that these do in fact reflect priorities as stated, not simply the committee's view as to what should get prioritized.

In the case of CAMELTA, research questions collected from members were later categorised into 'research priority areas' by a team of CAMELTA members working in collaboration with volunteers from the IATEFL Research Special Interest Group. For example, in the list of questions below, the first two were categorised as 'promoting student participation', questions 3 and 4 as 'dealing with low resources' and questions 5 and 6 as 'approaches to teaching and managing large and multigrade classes.' See also Ekembe and Fonjong (2018) for further examples of categorization of research questions.

1. How can you make students interact actively in English during English language lessons?
2. What strategies can be used to engage students in English lessons in a multilingual society?
3. How can teachers cope with the lack of textbooks on the part of learners?
4. How can teachers produce materials to bridge the gap created by inadequate materials?
5. What methods of teaching are appropriate in teaching a multi-grade class?
6. How can students in a large class be managed, motivated, taught and assessed effectively?

**Prepare a questionnaire to gather data relating to selected topics / questions from across the TA membership.**

This can be either very focused on one or two of the issues revealed via the above process or it can be open in nature, to be as inclusive as possible. For example, in order for this first phase of research to be as broad-based and constructive as possible, a simple open-ended questionnaire can be designed to collect relatively extensive accounts of practice that might help provide deeper insights

into the general question of ‘What are teachers’ pedagogic challenges and successes overall?’.

The questionnaire might also include an initial section for personal information and a final section for comments about the questionnaire itself, as in the case of the CAMELTA questionnaire.

After a series of deliberations, in the CAMELTA case a questionnaire was designed which aimed to capture information about local realities such as different types of schools as well as socio-economic and geographical locations of the schools in which members worked. Open-ended items in the questionnaire aimed to elicit extensive accounts that could help capture multi-layered and nuanced understandings of teachers’ classroom experiences. Thus, a set of three open-ended questions was framed:

1. Please tell the story of a recent successful experience in your teaching.

What was successful and what made it successful, do you think?

2. What are the major problems you face in your teaching situation? What is problematic and why?

3. Please describe anything you have done to address (some of) the problems in (2) above. Was this successful? Why/Why not?

 **Administer questionnaire to members**

You may want to consider distributing the questionnaire at a conference or at local TA events where as many members as possible are attending, to ensure maximum participation. Give a dedicated slot on the timetable for teachers to complete the questionnaire during the events themselves. Where possible, the questionnaire could also be distributed via an online platform so that members who are unable to attend the event are able to respond as well.

CAMELTA’s regional chapters organise at least three regional seminars and workshops every year. It was during these regional events that the questionnaire was distributed to participants across the country. This was made possible by the fact that chapters specifically dedicated space in their seminar timetable for teachers to write their responses. Chapter heads were responsible for gathering completed questionnaires.

 **Return questionnaires to research committee.**

Where questionnaires are administered at regional level, these will need to be returned to the research committee. In the case of CAMELTA, regional

leaders returned all completed questionnaires to the research committee by post or in person.

In all, a total of 504 questionnaires from the 10 regional chapters were returned by post to CAMELTA’s VP for Research and Projects.

 **Transcribe/collate and analyse questionnaire findings**

Where, as in the case with CAMELTA, the responses are hand written, these will then need to be typed out in electronic form for easy access by whoever is responsible for analysing the data. It might also be useful to collate responses to each of the three questions into a database for future exploitation and analysis.

With the help of seed-funding from IATEFL’s ReSIG, all responses were typed out and saved electronically. These were then sent to a team of volunteer analysts made up of both CAMELTA and IATEFL ReSIG members and also stored (and later uploaded to CAMELTA’s website) for future exploitation.

 **Prepare and carry out interviews about selected research questions**

During the preliminary analysis, identify respondents with interesting insights which might need to be further explored. Prepare and carry out further individual interviews with these questionnaire respondents, to develop further both their stories of success and their reflections on these. These may then constitute longer narratives which could be put together in a volume and published online or in hard copies and distributed to the wider membership (see, for example Smith, Padwad and Bullock 2017).

 **Report findings to members**

The committee shares an overview of responses with the wider membership in a report, as a basis for reflection on contextually appropriate forms of pedagogy. For example, at the following year’s conference and subsequent conferences, ensure that a plenary session is devoted to reporting back to the membership about project developments. This can be followed by a workshop in which participants look at excerpts from the data and discuss ideas arising which might benefit their own future teaching or individual research.

The team of volunteer analysts from CAMELTA and IATEFL ReSIG produced preliminary findings from a small set of responses, and these were put together as a report in the Research SIG newsletter (see Kuchah 2015) as well as being shared with the CAMELTA membership through the association's group mail. At the annual conference in 2015 Kuchah Kuchah's plenary session focused on the theme of professional development through collective research, and highlighted some of the principles and practices emerging from the stories of success which had been gathered. The written report was the subject of a follow-up workshop during the 2015 annual conference. The workshop served both as a forum for further reflection on, and refinement of the findings and as an opportunity for dissemination of good practice generated from amongst CAMELTA members.

 **Reflect on / critically evaluate the above procedure, for possible improvement.**

As with every human endeavour, it might be necessary to critically evaluate the procedure at this point to see how members are responding to the research project. This can be done by eliciting feedback as well as suggestions for improvement from the general membership and/or from working parties at regional or national level.

 **Reiterate the above process (modified if necessary)**

Critical reflection on and evaluation of the process might lead to a reiteration of the above process each year – possibly addressing topics/questions previously gathered, or repeating the process of gathering concerns and topics.

 **Dedicate future conference sessions to presentations about the TA's research priorities.**

Encourage presentations from members at subsequent conferences which are explicitly based, at least in part, on the questionnaire data and/or which focus on one or more of the research priority areas. For example, as was mentioned above, Kuchah give a plenary presentation and a workshop at the annual conference in 2015

Following Kuchah's plenary presentation and workshop at the 2015 conference, mentioned above, in 2016 Kuchah and Eric Ekembe gave a joint presentation on the changes in identity of members of the CAMELTA Research Group, which had continued to meet to develop the project by looking at a selected number of research priorities.

 **Inspire at least some individual members to engage in further research of immediate relevance to TA members as a whole.**

As reported by Ekembe and Fonjong (2018), the CAMELTA Research Group is currently developing a partnership with the Yaoundé University College of Education and has already started providing in-service training workshops to students of the institution. Through this means, the group is attracting new members and intends to encourage trainees to develop their end-of-course dissertation projects around some of the research questions and to be able to share their findings with the CAMELTA wider membership at regional or national events

 **Start a Research SIG (formally or informally)**

Encourage members with an interest in inquiry to start a special interest group specifically dedicated to researching issues of practical concern to the membership. Hold regular meetings where SIG members can get together virtually (e.g., via WhatsApp) or onsite and research these issues. This group might eventually take on more and more of the above work each year and foster other forms of research, e.g. individual teacher-research. The CAMELTA Research Group is fulfilling this role at the moment and members are currently writing short articles for publication as well as planning presentations at national and regional conferences. Unfortunately, the political situation in the country over the last year has meant that it has been impossible to organise conferences.

 **Engage academics in joint research**

A very promising way forward is not only for locally appropriate research agendas to be developed and pursued within teacher associations, as in the CAMELTA experience, but for these to then inform academics' research as well as teacher-research. University-based researchers can devote time and energies to support teacher-research within teacher associations or local groups of teacher-researchers, as in the practice of teacher educators like Harry Kuchah and Eric Ekembe in Cameroon, Amol Padwad in India, Melba Libia Cárdenas in Colombia, Inés K. Miller in Brazil, Flávia Vieira in Portugal, Wang Qiang in China, and others. It is worthwhile for TA leaders to approach people like these in their contexts who have shown or who appear willing to show dedicated commitment to supporting teachers.

### Take findings to government

This has not yet occurred in the CAMELTA case but was envisaged from the beginning. Potentially, research findings which robustly reflect the experiences and views of a TA's membership can persuade policy-makers to take note of teachers' concerns (cf. Adoniou 2017).

### Conclusion and Invitation

To conclude, the steps we have presented here have mainly been inspired and guided by actual experiences from the CAMELTA-research project. Despite its relative youth and the context-specific constraints in Cameroon, the CAMELTA project continues to demonstrate how involvement of individual teachers within a collective, systematic research process has the potential not only to generate useful knowledge in the form of appropriate pedagogic principles and practices, but also to scaffold and empower teachers in a developing country context. We hope that you will find CAMELTA's example inspiring and that the checklist we have suggested above will help you develop your own ideas and procedures which you will be able to implement, refine and eventually share.

So, now, which of the above check-list activities are you willing to promote within your TA? We hope you will try out TA-research soon and let us know how you get on! Our email addresses are below – we are willing to help with advice and support, where possible, for your efforts, and eager to hear what happens!

Kuchah Kuchah <[h.k.kuchah@bath.ac.uk](mailto:h.k.kuchah@bath.ac.uk)>  
Richard Smith <[r.c.smith@warwick.ac.uk](mailto:r.c.smith@warwick.ac.uk)>

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