

## **Research Methods as part of English Language Teacher Education?**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper discusses three general issues arising out of the local problems of incorporating research methods training in a particular syllabus with a fair amount, but not entirety, of choice of modules by the students electing a particular course title. The three issues are the appropriacy of such training at all for EL teachers, the choice of topics within such a training module, and the vexed question of the perceived centrality of research methods and skills for a professional in the field. The issues are illuminated by reference to a small scale poll by questionnaire of a group of students taking such a course. Their responses in turn raise a number of questions about the role of research methods training for ELT and about course design parameters for professional higher education.*

### **Introduction**

This paper is about research methods in education for English language teachers. In particular, it concerns the relevance of a component on research methods in a taught course at higher degree level in ELT, what topics would be appropriate on such a component given the likely utility of the material, and whether such a component should be compulsory and thereby part of the institution's definition of ELT education at this level, or one among many options. Underlying the question is the issue of whether English language teachers see themselves as needing research skills, and if they do, why this should be so. The question arises from the development of a particular course at a particular University (Essex), but the local details are only

important in so far as every course in the country is organized in different ways and therefore has different specifications of what is considered central and peripheral and how that is expressed.

### **The module**

The module at the basis of the discussion is usually taught jointly by teachers who have long been interested in the question of attitudes to research among English language teachers (McDonough and McDonough 1990) and appropriate kinds of research in the subject itself. The 10 week teaching unit is part of a modular MA structure in which students have a small set of prescribed modules and a much larger set of optional ones.

### **The participants**

In what follows, all three issues are explored in turn and some evidence of student opinion is given on the basis of a poll. The questionnaire, given in the penultimate week, was returned by 15 students, 11 registered for an MA in ELT, 3 in Applied Linguistics and 1 for PhD. The total number in the class had varied between 25 and 30 students. There were 6 British and 8 other nationalities represented, speaking 5 languages other than English. 60% had been teaching between 2 and 5 years, 40% for 5 years or more, in a total of 12 different countries, mainly in secondary and tertiary and adult education, but three had primary experience.

### **Research methods on an MA in ELT**

It is worth exploring why a post-experience Masters course in ELT should contain a module on research methods at all. Such a module is to some extent more an enabling course than a content course; it would compete for candidate's attention with courses with a more obviously professional orientation (such as ESP, teaching young learners, language teaching, materials/syllabus design, testing), and with other

relevant background topics (such as second language acquisition, grammar and phonology of English, sociolinguistics, discourse analysis). The justification for including such a course - leaving aside the question of its status as compulsory or optional for the moment - is two-fold: what it enables people to do, first, within the context of the course, and second, outside in their future careers.

Within the course, students may need such a module to help them understand the research literature they encounter on other modules (J.D.Brown (1988) gives this as the main reason for teachers to read his book on *Understanding research in second language learning*, not to prepare them to do their own research). Having an understanding of research design and methods of data analysis, even of statistical treatments, should enable a reader to tackle primary research literature as well as to evaluate secondary sources critically. The sample of students polled confirmed this point: 9 out of the 15 (60%) answered yes, they did find it helped their understanding of material on other modules.

However, the most compelling internal enabling function is the transfer of new skills to the dissertation. In many institutions' courses, students have to write a dissertation which contributes some significant proportion of the assessment. Students are usually encouraged to include a small scale piece of empirical research in their dissertation, although dissertations based on library search or teaching materials preparation and other sources are acceptable.

These internal arguments beg the related questions of how important the research literature actually is for English language teachers, and how closely a 10,000 or 16,000 word dissertation or project completed in two and a half to 5 months can approximate 'research' in the normal sense of higher degree (MPhil or PhD) research. Many language teachers studying for Masters in Applied linguistics and latterly in

ELT or TEFL have expressed their negative views on the value or relevance to their professional lives of empirical research on language acquisition over the years; and while it is characteristic of the 'Applied Science' (Wallace 1991:55) view of the subject that teacher education transmits the new knowledge established by empirical research to practitioners who go and apply it in their classrooms, it is not a popular view among our customers nor, any longer, among course providers.

It is, of course, questionable how much empirical research a candidate can include in the dissertation part of a taught course, both because they have so little time, and because full timers usually do not have an immediately available teaching situation in which to develop some research relevant to their own teaching. Access to other people's teaching contexts cannot be guaranteed, since it is dependent on availability and goodwill. For these and other reasons, the transfer of newly learnt research skills to the dissertation cannot be expected to be large or universal. The point of a dissertation component in post-graduate training has been questioned by Allwright (1995) drawing on data from outside our field; how it can form part of realistic research training needs some further consideration.

A stronger justification for English language teachers to have a good grounding in appropriate research methods is that many candidates see research skills as an extension of their professional profile. A minority head on to doctoral research or a research-based section of the profession, and it is still usual in many institutions that a high aggregate mark on an MA assessment indicates research potential. Still more may, especially in the present climate, be hoping to be able to do some research in their own teaching contexts, or at least adopt a more informal 'research stance' in their future classrooms. However, many also maintain some skepticism about these aspirations, since the opportunities for research available are believed to be relatively limited. Research skills may only be important for those aiming at University posts, at some contract expatriate posts, eg. Overseas Development posts, usually involving

programme evaluation, and although the motivation for teacher-research and action research may be strong, the opportunity in many ELT contexts is low, and the benefits in terms of encouragement or acceptance by local authorities likewise. The sample of candidates polled were split down the middle on whether the teaching contexts they had worked in afforded opportunities for research: 6 said no, 7 said yes, and 2 had worked in situations with such an opportunity and others without. The following table plots the mentions of contexts in which research opportunities existed for the participants, the totals adding to more than the people because several, all British, had worked in more than one context.

***“Do you think you would have the opportunity for research in the context(s) you have worked in?”***

		No	Yes
<b>Experience</b>	Primary	2	1
	Secondary	6	4
	Tertiary	2	6

So the best opportunities were seen to exist in the tertiary sector.

Asked if the authorities in those contexts would accept teachers’ research as the basis for change, 60% said yes and 40% no. By and large, this perception went with opportunity: where the opportunity was perceived, so was the putative acceptance by the authorities. A student from Turkey claimed that the authorities would accept the results but there was no opportunity, and two people working in Universities in Korea disagreed with each other, the negative answer however modified by a

footnote to the effect that if the teacher research threw up sufficient common ground across the whole educational system, it probably would be accepted - an interesting comment on the value of generalization.

### **Appropriate research methods**

Whatever the justification for a module on research methods, there are interesting questions about what to include within the constraints of 10 sessions of two nominal hours each. One guiding principle, if the argument above about utility after the course is accepted, has to be the feasibility of use by a teacher individually or in collaboration, working usually in one or a small number of classes. So factor analysis with a cast of thousands is out! Traditionally in optional courses of this kind, numerical analysis and discussions of experimentation and survey work have dominated, perhaps because of a belief that empirical work in the field should proceed on a psycho-linguistic model, but slowly other research cultures have gained ground, perhaps as the influence of developments in education and sociology has become apparent. Here, the comparative frequency of action research projects in general education compared to ELT has pointed up a vacuum in the teacher preparation programmes for ELT. These issues are discussed in detail in McDonough and McDonough (1997).

The research methods module under discussion was developed jointly to provide adequate coverage of techniques which teachers could actually use themselves as part of their work, responding partly to a perceived need for such immediacy in calls for such teacher-initiated and -executed research, and partly to a wish to stimulate relevant research by practitioners. The questionnaire asked the participants to put in

rank order of interest and utility nine of the major topics treated on the course. The question was ambiguous as between personal interest and feasibility of actual use, in the possibly erroneous belief that people would be most interested in what they could see themselves doing. The rank order of the mean rankings came out as follows:

1. Classroom observation
2. Diary studies
3. Questionnaires
4. Ethnography
5. Case studies
6. Action research
7. The reflective approach
8. Numerical methods
9. Experimentation

Without being able to distinguish local influences such as the success of particular classes or particular presentation methods during the course from deeper questions of appropriacy, degree of understanding, amount of reading, or principled decisions about what a teacher needs to know, this list nonetheless shows some interesting features.

a) Statistics and experimentation were bottom of the list. This might have been because such topics are traditionally thought of as being difficult, but may equally reflect the view that decontextualized information expressed in figures is almost impossible to relate to a particular teaching situation.

b) Action research was more favourably regarded than those, but from other comments students thought of this as exceedingly time consuming and demanding,

and therefore unlikely to be feasible. The 'action research spiral' (Hopkins, 1993: Chap 4), perhaps surprisingly, is a difficult concept to relate to in terms of a busy working EFL teacher's normal life - especially given the variety of course length which is typical of the profession.

c) It is interesting to find case study research in the pivotal 5th rank position. It is tempting, but lacking in further justification from the data, to see in this a recognition both of the interest and relevance of case studies, and of the inherent difficulties of validity and generalizability which descriptions of learners or programmes in other contexts manifest. Case studies require explicit boundaries and a focus, but do not entail the complications of the action research spiral nor the rigour of the controls and counterbalances of experimentation.

d) The position of ethnography may reflect a satisfaction with some of the ethnographic research work encountered on the course, as well as its intrinsic interest, but may also conversely reflect a wish to discuss more of this kind of work in the ELT context than traditionally has been the case in the local context.

e) It is easy to speculate why the top three topics were the most popular. Questionnaires and diary studies are a familiar part of the scene in ELT in various guises, to do with evaluation, language learning, and language teaching materials; their use as research tools raises considerable problems, but they are problems to which this audience has immediate access from experience. Classroom observation, although not a single method of research, was probably the most popular topic because of the intrinsic interest of the debates surrounding the various observation techniques, and because discussion of this on the module had involved a practical, live, classroom observation task, and perhaps also because few other modules on this type of course typically allow participating teachers the chance to argue about the interpretation of classroom data.

### **Should research methods be compulsory on an MA in ELT?**

In the present context this question concerns the definition of education for English language teachers at this level, for it would normally be quite possible for a student to take the other component modules as part of another course title, which is one of the advantages of a modular system. However, inclusion of a research methods



module as part of the defining core of a subject is not uncontroversial, but also by no means an original question. It can be hoped that it offers a way out of the sterile 'theory' v 'practice' opposition. I should like look briefly at some of the arguments on both sides and then give the participants' opinion as reflected in the poll.

### ***Do include***

On this side, there are the three issues of personal and professional development; the possible contribution of a dislocated, residential Masters programme to varied individual teaching contexts; and finally the gradual development of a body of research and interpretation and of people with the skills to produce it within the ELT profession.

On the first issue, teachers getting involved in doing research themselves has been associated with involvement in innovation and change, with 'empowerment', and with both personal development, satisfaction and self-esteem from widening one's personal engagement with teaching issues, and professional development, enlarging one's range of expertise, and effectiveness as a teacher.

On the second, it is always unauthentic for a course provider in a full time residential situation such as a British University to claim that the course can give all comers, whether teaching in Colchester, Britain, Europe, or any other continent, something relevant to their own teaching situation. Despite the desires of many customers, most course providers do not in fact make such claims, and where contextual relevance is offered it is usually because staff members have particular local knowledge for a particular client group. However, a knowledge of research methods is just one possibility - a DIY kit - for giving participants the necessary background for developing contextually sensitive and hopefully appropriate innovation in their careers subsequent to taking a course. One has to beware, as Holliday (1995) points out, that in many such contexts, notions of action research and teacher empowerment

are themselves culturally loaded (for him, with 'BANA' connotations) and may cause difficulty and resentment among colleagues, even in the case that it is seen as a way of avoiding the importation of culturally inappropriate methodologies.

The third main argument concerns the development of the professionalism of the profession as a whole, through productivity not only in the classroom and traditional places for teachers' activities but also outside the classroom in making the rigorously analysed experience of teachers public. Already, a literature of such teacher-research is growing, for example Edge and Richards (1994), Burns and Hood (1995), Nunan and Bailey (1996).

***Don't include***

On the 'don't include' side, there is the obvious point that doing English teaching is not the same as doing research, so the skills required to be a good teacher are not the same as those required for being a good researcher. Equally, doing empirical research is not to everyone's taste or talents and should not be required of all the candidates for this qualification; and the argument that there are better kinds of modules for this central defining role.

It seems evident that research and teaching are different activities, at least to the extent that research draws out general statements from particular observations or manipulated events, and teaching strives to bring about the best achievement possible for individuals in learning or acquiring some given content or skill. It is precisely this opposition that gives Action Research its particular attraction, and many of its problems. This is not to deny, of course, that a 'research stance' in teaching is a desirable quality.

The individual difference argument is strong, and it can be used to deny the basis of constraining certain topics, modules, or courses, by an institutional decision as 'core' topics altogether in favour of a total 'pick'n'mix' choice by the customers. 6 of the group of students (40%) polled did say that they did not accept the institution's division of modules into 'core' and 'option'.

On the third argument, there would be many candidates for central defining components, even from staff and at least that majority of students that accepted the core/option divide.

On the questionnaire poll, four said that research methods should not be a core module, but 11 said that it should. Breaking the figures down a little further, the four 'No's' were all registered for the ELT MA, for whom it was compulsory, and the three Applied Linguistics-registered students all voted 'Yes', one adding that it should be compulsory for their course, which it wasn't. The four 'No's' were also among the six who did not agree with the institution's core/option division, the other two of this six voting yes (one an ELT and one an AL). One has to be wary in interpreting these

small numbers, but it seems safe to conclude that there existed a majority in support of the idea that learning research methods is a central part of the further professional education of English language teachers. The figures also remind us, as if we needed reminding, that the course design parameters set by institutions may be tolerated but not necessarily accepted (or perhaps understood) by the customers, the participants.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has dealt with one aspect of how English language teachers' professional aspirations may be represented in the design of appropriate higher education courses. The discussion explored issues of appropriacy of topics, transfer of skills internally to learning and externally to professional activities, and the significance of the (fairly routine) core/option distinction among components. The opinions of the participants on some aspects of these questions show some interesting confirmation and divergence. ELT is clearly perceived as a research-based discipline; the problem, for which this paper describes one solution, is how to represent that in the content and structure of academic courses which claim professional relevance.

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