

Possible Challenges of Teacher Research for Teacher Professional Development

Utami Widiati

Abstract: Teacher research (i.e. action research) has gained acceptance as a tool for teacher professional development. In spite of its increasing popularity in language classrooms, concerns have been raised in the implementation of teacher research, such as issues of quality, sustainability, the development of standards, and accessibility. In the Indonesian context, the unprofessional working conditions and the education background of most teachers have made it difficult for teachers to sustain and access research. Since changing the former appears beyond the aim of this article, it is suggested that teacher education institutions focus on the latter, revisiting the curriculum of teacher education to provide more research components.

Keywords: teacher research, teacher professional development, teacher-education curriculum revisited.

The different social worlds of non-university, teachers and university researchers seem to be distancing teachers from the research world since teachers require and seek to develop practical knowledge; researchers endeavor to advance technical knowledge (Crookes, 1998; Ellis, 1998). A number of models have been suggested as a solution to narrowing the distance, for example, less formal connections of researchers and practitioners (Huberman, 1990 in Crookes, 1998), very small-scale partnerships (Branscombe & Thomas, 1992 in Crookes, 1998), or teacher research,

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the seemingly most ideal alternative to strengthen the connection as this type of research makes teachers and researchers the same people (Crookes, 1998).

Since teacher research (i.e. action research) was introduced in 1980s as a new theoretical research model, it has gained acceptance as a tool for teacher professional development. It is seen as a way of improving teaching and as a way of overcoming the dysfunctions of the theory/practice discourse (Ellis, 1998). Teacher research has made it possible for teachers to critically analyze and evaluate their teaching practice. In spite of its increasing popularity in language classrooms, conflicting issues have arisen concerning the implementation of teacher research, such as issues of quality, sustainability, the development of standards, and accessibility.

This paper is then intended to address the issues related to teacher research, referring more specifically to the Indonesian context. The paper begins with a brief overview of what teacher research is and how it relates to teacher professional development. Following this, some challenges of implementing teacher research, particularly in the Indonesian context, will be addressed. Finally, the paper calls for a revisit of the curriculum of teacher education, the institution responsible for preparing teachers.

TEACHER RESEARCH AND TEACHER PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

In the act of teaching, teachers rely to a large extent on their practical knowledge (Calderhead, 1988 in Ellis, 1998). Since practical knowledge seems to be implicit and intuitive, individuals are generally not aware of what they practically know, "practical knowledge is acquired through actual experience by means of procedures that are poorly understood" (Ellis, 1998:40). Even though most of teachers' daily teaching activities in fact reflect research components, i.e. finding answers to questions about daily phenomena, many of them have little awareness of their actions and thus might find it difficult to explain them to others. The actions are fully understood only when teachers are in action.

Much reliance on intuitive knowledge might lead to teaching as a routine activity, and no time for reflection, whereas reflective attitude is needed in teacher professional development. Most papers have revealed that in order for teachers to develop professionally, they need to con-

tinuously analyze and evaluate critically their teaching practice, suggesting problem-solving models of professional development. Teacher research (i.e. action research) has been introduced as a new theoretical research model in understanding classrooms and learners -a tool of investigation into any classroom issue that puzzles teachers- advocated in ESOL by prominent figures such as Ellis, Long, Nunan, van Lier, Wallace (Crookes, 1998). Teacher research appears to be an ideal alternative to strengthen teachers-and-research connections as this research model makes teachers take responsibility for identifying and analyzing their own research questions and carrying out their own investigations. In other words, teacher research refers to a systematic means of solving problems, integrating pedagogy and research.

Teacher research goes in the form of continuous cycles, each of which is made up of these four stages: planning, implementing, observing, and reflecting. In the planning stage, researchers establish a set of procedures for the research by integrating theoretical knowledge and the results of careful analysis of the research problems which call for immediate actions. The observing stage often takes place at the same time as the implementing stage, in which the researchers monitor the implementation of the research procedures already established. In the reflecting stage, the researchers evaluate the effectiveness of the investigation, which is then used as the basis for considerations of the next cycle of the research. Following Kemmis and McTaggart's model (1988), the cycles of action research can be illustrated as follows:

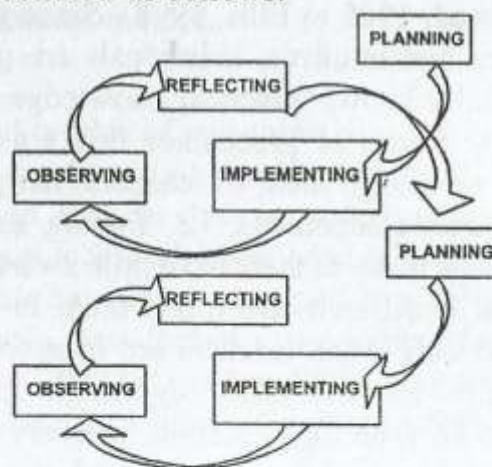


Figure 1 Stages in Cycles of Action Research
(Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988)

The diagram illustrates that the planning is always based on the results of reflection and evaluation. Such continuous cycles imply time for reflection, a key element in the growth of teacher professional development, encouraging a better awareness and a better understanding of teaching activities. Better understandings of what happens in classrooms will also help teachers to avoid carrying out teaching merely based on intuitive knowledge and will prevent teachers from considering teaching activities as routines. When teaching becomes routine, the problem of 'attrition' might potentially occur, i.e. teachers' proficiency is decreasing since they are repeatedly doing the same actions year in and year out.

CHALLENGES OF IMPLEMENTING TEACHER RESEARCH

Since the idea of teacher research was introduced in language classrooms, conflicting issues of implementing the research model have been encountered especially concerning the demands of quality and of sustainability (Allwright, 1997), the development of standards against which to evaluate such research (Nunan, 1997), and the accessibility problem (Crookes, 1998).

Experts have raised concerns on the quality of teacher research. Teacher research, as Allwright (1997) points out, seems to constitute a way of getting research done badly. It is very difficult to require teachers to devote much of their time to the research while at the same time they have to full-time teach and meet the teaching standards. The problem then lies on the fact that demanding the quality of teacher research will result in teachers' early abandonment, while making the research less demanding tends to pose problems of quality. Therefore, as Allwright (1997) further suggests, research conducted by teachers should not be evaluated in the way of academic standards. Implied in this suggestion is that making research part of teachers' life without posing a sense of burden is much more important than requiring more thorough investigation. What is needed is a perspective that teacher research is a more systematic means for local understandings rather than for generalizations. In other words, how the research effects can satisfy the local needs is more fruitful.

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carrying out the research. They want to get back to the normal life of teaching without having to do any more research. What they were doing in the research terms is often not implemented anymore once the research is over. In other words, research has not yet become "part of the cyclical process of course evaluation and program improvement" (Crookes, 1998:8).

Aside from the issues of quality and sustainability, Nunan (1997) argues that criteria against which to evaluate teacher research need to be developed. Otherwise, criticism such as 'it might result in more effective practice, but is it really research?' (Nunan, 1997:366) might be raised. According to him, teacher research should be evaluated against the same criteria that are applied to any other kind of research. In addition, it must meet the ethical standards and standards of applicability. The collection of the data should be done rigorously and the limitations of the research should be acknowledged. Nunan also suggests that the research be reported openly and fully so that it is open for critique and replication. In short, Nunan emphasizes that even when the quality of research can be highly contextualized, it should meet the evaluative standards that are applied to research in general.

Crookes (1998) points out another potential problem of teacher research, i.e. accessibility problem. The problem refers to the fact that teacher-research activities are not always published and thus cannot be consumed by other teachers. (In fact, according to Crookes, it is not necessary for every piece of teacher research to be published since its effects are to be felt at the site to which it most applies). And when the teacher research really gets published, it is not always easy for other teachers to understand. A piece of published research which is apparently separate from the others are in fact not separate at all. They are likely to be related to a possibly decade-long discourse. Therefore, understanding what is being presented can be quite difficult for teachers. Additionally, some teachers might not be familiar with research genres in spite of the fact that most research problems deal with matters that are very close to teachers, such as language, teaching, and learning.

Of the problems discussed above, accessibility and sustainability will be addressed in depth referring to the Indonesian context. These two issues have been deliberately given priority here because of two reasons. First, accessibility is crucial due to the fact that once teacher research

is meant for the consumption of its primary audience (perhaps colleagues or collaborators), it eventually has to be accessible for broader community. Second, following Allwright's suggestion (1997), sustainability is for the time being placed over quality, without really abandoning quality since according to Nunan (1997) every piece of research is to meet evaluative standards.

Crookes (1998) claims that it is teachers' working conditions that usually limit research accessibility. This claim seems to apply to the Indonesian context. The working conditions of most teachers make it difficult for them to be 'close' to research, either to access or to carry out research. In Indonesia, the teaching load of the majority of teachers ranges from 20 to 30 student-contact hours a week, or even more. Because they are generally not well paid, they often have to work extra in the afternoon to cover their living expenses. The job of correcting students' works is also burdensome due to the big classes teachers have to handle - 45 to 50 students in one class. In addition, teachers are often expected to do additional administrative tasks assigned by the school and to be voluntarily involved in social organizations in the society. Although financially not rewarding, teaching is considered to be one of respectable professions by Indonesian society, especially in village communities. Many teachers are in charge of social organizations, such as religious clubs, housewife clubs, etc. These many responsibilities that most teachers have to take have been distancing themselves from the research world, and thus accessibility problem emerges. Most teachers then do not have time for reflection. This all means that most teachers are financially and professionally not in a good condition to narrow the teachers-research gap.

Accessibility problem involves not only the problem of understanding, but also financial problem. So far some teachers have come to teaching with some or little experience of research, while some others without. This happens because, first, not all teachers are graduates of college-level education and, second, even if they are university graduates, it does not necessarily guarantee that they have research experience. University students usually experience research when they are writing their thesis. In many Indonesian universities, thesis writing is an elective course. Indeed, considering the fact that a number of college students are not able to finish their study in due time because of thesis writing, many have decided

not to take the thesis track. As a result, this group of teachers lacks the research components during their study in the university and they will find it difficult later on to understand published research.

Accessibility in terms of finance refers to the fact that it is not always possible for teachers to get published research freely. In fact, when the salaries of most teachers cannot cover their living expenses yet, it would be difficult, if not impossible at all, to expect teachers to spend some amount of their income on journals. I doubt such an attitude of many teachers would change, unless there were actions to change the unprofessional conditions under which most teachers are working.

Sustainability refers to an ongoing concern for understanding and, as Allwright (1997) argues, with sustainability there is a possible opportunity that something worthwhile will take place. Based on my own experience conducting *collaborative* classroom action research with teachers of three different schools of three different levels (primary, junior secondary, and senior secondary), I would have to admit that I have always faced problems of maintaining long-term sustainability. Collaborative model actually emphasizes academicians and teachers jointly investigate classroom problems and then solve them using systematic inquiry. The academicians' theoretical and the teachers' practical experiences are expected to form a better synergy. Unfortunately, once the research is finished, the teachers do not implement what we were doing in the research terms. It seems that teachers' devotion of time and fund to teacher research is highly needed. Research has not yet become part of teaching life, and again, I doubt this condition would alter, unless there were changes in the system of teacher career promotion. If teachers are not yet expected to carry out research as one of the requirements to get promoted, as academicians already are, they would unlikely take up research in their routine work.

Finally, I would have to say that I am not in the position to change both teachers' unprofessional working conditions and the system of teacher career promotion. The changes are highly welcome to promote accessible and sustained teacher research, involving relevant authorities. However, as a person working in a teacher training institution, I feel that I have the right to suggest the need for revisiting the curriculum of teacher education, the institution responsible for preparing teachers.

TEACHER-EDUCATION CURRICULUM REVISITED

Since 1992, Indonesian government has implemented the new system of recruiting teachers. Unlike the previous system, this new one requires teacher candidates to hold at least a college diploma in order to become teachers. This fact indicates that the government has shifted from quantity-oriented paradigm to quality-oriented one.

Meanwhile, literature on teacher education has focused on the importance of providing student teachers with opportunities to develop abilities in the areas of reflection, decision-making, problem-solving, analysis, and assessment (Reichelt, 2000). Most papers have suggested many ways of developing such abilities, for example, through journals, observation, case studies, or action research to help them make sense of the theory. Although such a need of giving trainees insight into what goes on in real classrooms has been widely recognized, not all teacher-education institutions have responded to the call, much portion of the curriculum being given to theoretical components. In fact, Johnson (1996 in Reichelt, 2000) argues that in most cases the problems teachers face are not due to a lack of theoretical knowledge, but rather to the constraints imposed on them within the social, cultural, economic, and educational contexts.

Revisiting the teacher-education curriculum seems to be badly needed. Since teacher research has increasingly been accepted as a tool for teacher professional development, it would be beneficial to equip trainees with the skills of both understanding and carrying out the research. Even though teachers are not trained to become researchers, a much greater emphasis should be given on the acquisition of research techniques, under the consideration that most teachers in Indonesia do not have the privilege to further their study to MA program. Usually, much of what is inaccessible in the research world will become clearer in graduate education, in which research components are given greater prominence.

CONCLUSION

Teacher research has been introduced as one alternative for teacher professional development. Even though teacher research is intended more for locally-generated solutions to problems rather than for 'incontrovertible findings and universalistic theory' (Allwright, 1997:369), it has the po-

tentials of providing input for others, both immediate colleagues and a broader community.

Compared to more quantitative studies with their use of inferential statistics, teacher research offers less rigid structures and thus makes it more possible for teachers to implement it. However, there have been challenges among teachers in implementing teacher research. Teachers' unprofessional working conditions often distance teachers from teacher research. Therefore, changes in this condition are likely to enable teachers to get research accessible and sustainable for their professional development.

In addition, the curriculum of teacher education needs to be evaluated to examine how much breadth in the curriculum is designed for acquiring research components. Several ways of developing abilities that lead to reflection, decision-making, problem-solving, and analysis should also be included. Equipped with adequate research techniques, trainees should be aware that their own classrooms and learners are actually sources of learning. Such awareness will eventually help them to make sense of the fact that the more we know, the less we know and so the more we need to know. Sustained investigations of classrooms and learners encourage life-long professional growth.

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