

Yıl/Year: 4, Sayı/Issue: 8, Mayıs/May, 2023, s. 88-101

Yayın Geliř Tarihi / Article Arrival Date

Yayın Geliř Tarihi:15-07-2022

Yayımlanma Tarihi / The Publication Date

Yayımlanma Tarihi:21-05-2023

ISSN: 2757-6000

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PERCEPTIONS AND REFLECTIONS ON RESEARCH A CASE STUDY ON RESEARCH¹

Abstract

The pace the world is changing today has brought about new realities and it is teachers' primary and foremost duty to adapt to it and take provisions to overcome difficulties for themselves and be prepared to help students to overcome them. Challenges have to be faced for qualitative educational approaches.

In our ever-changing culture, teachers' participation in applied research is critical. They must overcome a variety of obstacles in order to provide their students with a high-quality education. Action research is a useful tool at teachers' advantage for detecting problems, investigating on their solution by gathering and analyzing data.

The paper aims at the presentation of data and analyses of the students' perceptions and attitude towards research the need and opportunities they have to conduct research,, mainly action research in their working educational environment.

A questionnaire of both open ended and closed ended questions was handed out to students of the second year of the Teacher Education Master Program, during the period of October 2021-January 2022.

Their answers provided data that showed students' awareness of the need of the necessary skills and involvement in research for the sake of change and improvement. Findings showed that action research is vital to EFL teacher students' ongoing professional growth.

They acknowledge the fact that the course has completely revolutionised the perception on research. and on the acquisition of practical skills. They suggest that small scale projects be conducted, with real effects in the

¹ This article is extended version of the proceeding which was presented at International Communication and Art Symposium 2.

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high schools where they are going to teach. The paper concludes with some implications for further research in this field.

Key words: research, educational environment, acquisition of practical skills, questionnaire, participants

ARAŞTIRMAYA İLİŞKİN ALGILAR VE YANSIMALAR: ARAŞTIRMA ÜZERİNE BİR ÖRNEK İNCELEME

Özet

Bugün dünyanın değişme hızı yeni gerçekleri beraberinde getirmiştir ve buna uyum sağlamak, zorlukları kendileri için aşmak ve öğrencilerin üstesinden gelmelerine yardımcı olmak için hazırlıklı olmak öğretmenlerin birincil ve en önemli görevidir. Nitel eğitim yaklaşımları için zorluklarla karşılaşmaktadır. Sürekli değişen kültürümüzde, öğretmenlerin uygulamalı araştırmalara katılımı çok önemlidir. Öğrencilerine kaliteli bir eğitim verebilmek için çeşitli engelleri aşmaları gerekmektedir. Eylem araştırması, öğretmenlerin sorunları tespit etmek, veri toplayarak ve analiz ederek çözümlerini araştırmak için yararlı bir araçtır.

Bu makale, öğrencilerin çalışma ortamlarında eylem araştırması olmak üzere araştırma yapmak için sahip oldukları ihtiyaç ve fırsatlara yönelik algı ve tutumlarına ilişkin verilerin ve analizlerin sunulmasını amaçlamaktadır.

Ekim 2021- Ocak 2022 döneminde Öğretmen Eğitimi Yüksek Lisans Programı 2. sınıf öğrencilerine hem açık uçlu hem de kapalı uçlu sorulardan oluşan bir anket dağıtılmıştır. Verdikleri cevaplar, öğrencilerin değişim ve gelişim adına gerekli becerilere ve araştırmaya dahil olma ihtiyacının farkındalığına sahip olduklarını gösteren veriler sağlamıştır. Bulgular, eylem araştırmasının İngilizce öğretmeni adayı öğrencilerin devam eden mesleki gelişimi için hayati önem taşıdığını göstermiştir. Katılımcılar kursun araştırma algısında tamamen devrim yarattığını ve pratik becerilerin kazanılması üzerine etkilerini kabul etmiştir. Katılımcılar ayrıca küçük ölçekli projelerin, bu alanda daha fazla araştırma için bazı çıkarımlarla sonuçlanacak makalelere dönüşmesini önermiştir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Araştırma, Eğitsel Çevre, Pratik Yeteneklerin Gerekliği, Anket, Katılımcılar.

INTRODUCTION

We live in a world that is changing every day at a very fast pace. People need to adapt and learn new ways of operating in the world today. In every field of life there are innovations and rising demands, which require researchers to find solutions to them. It is the education institutions that educate the future citizens that primarily conduct research and advance today's achievements. Schools are the temples of education where they improve their knowledge, analytical and problem - solving skills.

Our schools will successfully carry out their task when teachers are able to analyze the individual learning needs of students, reflect and consider them with the aim of improving their knowledge and performance to meet the society needs. This cyclic and ongoing process arises the need and makes teachers involve in research. They identify problems in their teaching

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environment, observe carefully, reflect and act. They base their decision on relevant literature and their empirical experience. Ary (2010) p.19 states that “*Educational research is the application of the scientific approach to the study of educational problems. Educational research is the way in which people acquire dependable and useful information about the educative process.*”

Creswell (2002) elaborates the steps of educational research by defining it as ‘*A cyclical process of steps that typically begins with identifying a research problem or issue of study. It then involves reviewing the literature, specifying a purpose for the study, collecting and analyzing data, and forming an interpretation of information. This process culminates in a report, disseminated to audiences, that is evaluated and used in the educational community*’

Dudley Reynolds, the 51st President of TESOL International Association, (Xerri, D., & Pioquinto, C. (Eds.), 2018, p. 3, defines teachers’ research ‘as heuristic, as a way of problem solving that is systematic, measured, analytic, that is grounded in the notion that it has to be relevant to a larger context, that it has to be connected, and that it is a process which has to give back, “and that it is ‘something which is within any teacher’s capacity to undertake’”. Nunan sees teachers research the one carried out by teachers themselves in their own context, alone or in collaboration with others. (Nunan & Richards, 2015)

Brown (2015, p.15), states that teachers are research literate in language teaching and learning if they:

- Understand strategies for gathering data.
- Recognize research questions that have been well formulated for different research methods.
- Know how data can be analyzed.
- Recognize research interpretations that are justified by research results.
- Understand the difference between sound and unsound research, read critically.
- Communicate effectively with others about research results they have read.
- Use research and research results to maximize the effectiveness of language teaching and learning.

So, teachers know how to conduct research when they are able to read the relevant literature critically.

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There are many reasons why teachers should be engaged in research. According to Creswell (2002) research helps teachers to improve their practice from verified experience; it adds to *what we know about how people learn and what we can do to help facilitate the learning process. It can address areas in which little is known, can expand our knowledge, it can act as a test to verify previous findings. Research can add an important perspective for different learning types.*

Teacher education programs teach research skills to students. They prepare students to be teachers and research teachers. When student teachers are involved in research, they develop critical thinking expertise, as well as effective analytical research, and communication skills “Many pre-service teacher-education programs do not prepare teachers to think of themselves as researchers and do not necessarily provide protocols or a structure for answering classroom questions. Unfortunately, what these programs communicate is that research is not a process but something that you’re supposed to know. What that really means is that you’re supposed to know all the latest findings that are being published in all the journals you don’t have time to read. It’s a very disempowering understanding of research.” (Dudley Reynolds in Xerri, D., & Pioquinto, C. (Eds.). (2018)

Action Research

Action research has been defined in a number of ways but, as Nunan (1992) points out, it typically has three major characteristics: It is carried out by practitioners (i.e., classroom teachers), it is collaborative, and it is aimed at changing things. Burns (1999) based on these characteristics writes that action research exemplifies the following features:

- Action research is contextual, small-scale, and localized—it identifies and investigates problems within a specific situation.
- It is evaluative and reflective as it aims to bring about change and improvement in practice.
- It is participatory as it provides for collaborative investigation by teams of colleagues, practitioners, and researchers.
- . Changes in practice are based on the collection of information or data which provides the impetus for change.

Nunan explains the steps of action research process are as follows:

1. Identify a problem or puzzle.

2. Think of a possible solution.
3. Decide on an intervention.
4. Collect some data so you have a baseline for comparison.
5. Implement the intervention.
6. Collect post-intervention data and compare it with the baseline data.
7. Reflect on the process and decide on whether to implement a second round of research.
8. Share your experience with others. Publishing, i.e., ‘going public’, opens your research up to scrutiny and comment by others, and fulfills one of the defining criteria for research. It is this final step that differentiates action research from reflective teaching. (Nunan in Xerri, D., & Pioquinto, C. (Eds.). (2018)

A common question that may arise is: ‘Why should I do research?’ It is well known that teachers are overwhelmed with work, they have to prepare for the lesson, check students’ work, fill in a lot of paperwork and deal with behavioral problems in the class. On the other hand, teachers want to give the best to their students and support them in their journey of acquiring knowledge and skills. They are concerned with their students’ wellbeing and share these concerns with colleagues. This shows as Nunan (2018) puts it ‘*Wanting to understand and wanting to help are not mutually exclusive, and in most cases needing to understand is a necessary precursor to wanting to help.*’ Nunan in Xerri, D., & Pioquinto, C. (Eds.), (2018) University provides the students with the necessary knowledge and skills. The first step starts with their beliefs about the role of the teacher in schools, their role and the necessity of doing research. If they are not aware of this necessity, they will not realize the importance that research has for the professional development and for the progress of their students.

Benefits of Research

Research helps participants to reflect of their own practice, to gain understanding and knowledge of fields of interest. It also can help teachers

- find solutions to problems arising in the classroom or school
- consolidate knowledge, skills and understanding
- join networks of professional support
- understand purposes, processes, and priorities

- improve understanding of your professional and policy context

-contribute to professional knowledge

Opportunities and Challenges

My colleague and I teach the Research in ELT module and module evaluation is part of our responsibility not only as tutors but also as the program coordinators. In the paragraphs that follow will be presented the student-teachers' voices, collected through group discussions and written questionnaires throughout the academic year, as well as my own, mainly based on my professional diary. Without intending it to be a rigorous thematic analysis, Table 1 condenses the student-teachers' perceptions on the impact of the module in terms of opportunities and challenges. The student-teachers' perceptions and assessment of the research module bears resemblance with those perceptions reflected in our journals as the module tutors. Table 2 summarises the constant concerns and topics contained in our journal entries.

Category Extracts: We learn a lot of vocabulary and examples of reported language learning speech together with research. Through research it's like we're integrating what we've learnt in other modules for example, Didactics or Grammar. "I don't know if I'll be able to do research once, I get my first teaching post, but this module has shown us that we can also be researchers. Teaching is whatever happens in the classroom, and out too. We feel like we are developing other areas of the teaching profession and we can choose where we want to go.

Collaborative work: We have learnt a lot together – working with other peers, with experienced teachers, and with students in the practicum. This is learning with others for real.

Reflection: Due to collaborative work (there are others working with us) and the data obtained, the research helped me reflect on what we were doing and enabled us to swallow the pride and accept criticism or feedback. We are more critical and more reflective now. It is not easy, but it pays off.

Challenges: Academic writing: Everything goes relatively smooth until you need to write. That's when we panic because we need to think, organise our ideas, use structures and words we're not used to using, and write in English. You feel you haven't learnt anything. It's like learning a new type of English.

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Time constraints: We could have done something better if we had had more time. But then there's always something that slows us down. And we have the constant pressure of submitting the report. (Table 1: Student-teachers' perceptions)

Both tables show that benefits appear to be more prominent than challenges in teacher research literacy through an ELT research module. Among the benefits, it is worth stressing the relevance given to learning content and language in tandem, an approach that appears to be a motivating factor not only with the student-teachers but also with the tutor. Such integration is also translated to the focus on collaboration, an asset detected by both student-teachers and tutor. Both content and language integration and collaboration signal the importance of synergistic opportunities as they help expand our experiences and knowledge. Collaboration may also be associated with reflection, either individual or collegial. Conversely, the main challenge encountered is that of academic writing. It is possible that the student-teachers' issues with critical thinking skills development are linked to their ability to write critically in English. In other words, the issue may be that the student-teachers have not developed their academic English to a proficiency level that enables them to express their critical views in writing. Conclusion: In this article we have shared a modest account of how teacher research literacy can be promoted through initial teacher-education programs. The implementation of the modules described above is possible because they are part of a program that has been inter-institutionally developed and is the result of higher educational policies of the Ministry of Education. In the context of this experience, teacher research literacy is a top-down (Table 2: Tutor's perceptions Category Extracts Opportunities)

Methodology

Language teacher education master programs last two years and are made of 120 Credits. As part of the curriculum there is a course, Research methods in education, of 6 credits. At the end of the course the students will have the following learning outcomes:

They will be able:

- 1) to critically read and analyze published research related to EFL;
- 2) to read and understand several authors' theories;
- 3) to understand the various stages in the process of carrying out research on SL learning and teaching;

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- 4) to know how to design research instruments;
- 5) to understand the different ways in which data are collected, described, and analysed;
- 6) to know how to write a research proposal;
- 7) to write up research reports/papers/articles;
- 8) to use presentation software and tools such as PowerPoint to report research results.

The module seeks to introduce student-teachers to basic concepts of research and to provide them with theoretical and practical tools to design a research project and carry it out. In addition to their introduction to the concepts of research, student-teachers do a lot of relevant academic reading and writing. The course is a combination of lectures (30) and seminars (30). In the seminars they design research tools such as questionnaires, interviews, engage and present projects and present papers on literature review or research, train on classroom research, action research, case studies, and qualitative research with a particular focus on interviews, observations, and discourse analysis. They learn by doing. In the seminars the research projects they do, focus on topics of interest for English teachers such as content analysis of materials, materials development, teaching strategies, learning strategies, teaching language skills, lesson planning, motivation, class management, assessment etc. This course prepares them for the writing of the final thesis.

In order to find out what the situation is like in relation to research, a questionnaire consisting of open ended and closed ended questions was used as an instrument of data collection. The questionnaire items aimed at giving information on students' knowledge about professional development activities, topics that need to be addressed or researched, and self - evaluation of their research skills.

The questionnaire was handed to 130 students that take this course. Out of 130 questionnaires, 95 were filled in or 73% of the students participated. The survey was conducted from October 2021 to January 2022. The aim of the survey was twofold. First, it would inform us to improve and update the syllabus of Research Methods taught in the EFL Teacher Education Master Program and second, it would equip both teacher educators and teacher students with useful research skills.

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The questionnaire was handed out at the beginning of the course and at the end of the course to observe their beliefs about the importance of being involved in research. The second questionnaire was delivered to the students that filled in the first one.

The participants are students of the second year of the Master program. Their age ranges from 22 to 27 with an average of 22.5 years old. Only 20 % have had teaching experience, mainly in private language courses. The author of the presentation delivers lectures to the students and conducts seminars with them.

Data Analysis

The data gathered from the questionnaire at the beginning of the course highlighted two important things: First what the beliefs of students about research in education are and second what experience and ability they have in conducting research.

No	Activities a teacher should participate for professional development	%
1	Courses/workshops	100%
2	In-service training courses in schools	80%
3	In-service training courses in non-governmental organizations	60 %
4	Education conferences or seminars	50%
5	Observation visits to other schools	45%
6	Observation visits to public organisations	30%
7	Joining professional blogs	25%
8	Doing research	20%

Table 1. Activities a teacher should participate for professional development

Out of a list of activities which help teachers professionally they rank courses and workshops the most important followed by in-service training courses in schools. Joining blogs and doing research were ranked the lowest, by 25 of the students. This shows that they think that you may become a good teacher if you take courses and are trained, without being aware of the importance of being an active participant in reflecting and changing their practice through research.

In reply to the question regarding their participation in training events, namely qualification programs, networks of teachers formed specifically for the professional

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development of teachers, individual or collaborative research on a topic of interest to them professionally and peer observation, none of them had attended any of such activities.

They were asked to mention some topics they think may be subjects of research in education and foreign language teaching. The following topics were mentioned by them. Class management mentioned by 100 % of the participants, followed by Use of technology 95 %, Grammar (85%), Language skills (70%), Learning strategies (69 %), Teaching strategies (68 %) and Motivation (66%).

Another question wanted them to indicate in what areas they currently need professional development by ticking ‘No need at present’, ‘Low level of need’, ‘Moderate level of need’ and ‘High level of need’.

No	Areas you currently need professional development	No need at present	Low level of need	Moderate level of need	High level of need
1	Knowledge and understanding of my subject field(s)	-	40	35	25
2	Pedagogical competencies in teaching English	-	10	45	45
3	Knowledge of the curriculum	-	20	70	10
4	Student evaluation and assessment practice	-	10	30	60
5	Student behaviour and classroom management	-	-	60	40
6	School management and administration	-	20	60	20
7	Approaches to individualised learning	-	10	70	20
8	Teaching students with special needs	-	-	40	60
9	Teaching in a multicultural or multilingual setting	-	-	-	100
10	Teaching cross-curricular skills (e.g. problem solving)	-		30	70
11	ICT skills for teaching	-	-	40	60

Table 2. Areas in which students currently need professional development

As it is seen from Table 2, students feel they need to develop professionally in various areas of teaching, which in fact are topics of further research by the teachers. They need more training and practice in teaching in a multicultural or multilingual setting, Teaching cross-

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curricular skills (e.g. problem solving), evaluation and assessment practice and ICT skills for teaching

Students rated their research skills by circling Very Poor, Poor, So-so, Satisfactory and Very Satisfactory, to show their ability level of their research skills. From the data shown in table 3 it is seen that they mostly rate their research skills as So-So or satisfactory.

No	Research skills	Very poor %	Poor %	SO-SO %	Satisfactory %	Very Satisfactory %
1	Critical thinking	-	-	-	80	20
2	Organizing ideas			35	55	10
3	Searching for information			24	45	31
4	Writing skills			26	54	20
5	Taking notes			45	45	10
6	Reading skills			14	35	51
7	Attention to detail		14	22	46	18
8	Oral communication skills		10	34	34	22
9	Ability to ask questions				76	24
10	Problem-solving			27	63	10
11	Time management		25	59	16	-
12	Finding information off the internet			37	46	17
13	Ability to work in groups				78	12
14	Citing			34	56	10
15	Resource management			65	24	11
16	Critically evaluate information sources			76	24	10
17	Methodology skills		45	55		

Table 3. Students' research skills

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The answers to open ended questions show that students have little knowledge of data collection. The answer to the open- ended question “What is literature review?” is answered by most of the students that, it is reading of the relevant literature without further elaborating on it. Whereas the answer to the question “Why the course is important to you?” was answered, mainly because it is part of the curriculum, “I need to have a good grade” or “Research is important in today’s world”, without giving detailed and convincing information of their opinion on research and why it is beneficial to them.

The second questionnaire was handed out at the end of the term. In addition to discussing on the lectures the students worked in groups and presented a paper on Action Research, made up and discussed a Questionnaire, presented a Case study and during a one- week period kept a journal on “Research learning and teaching”

These tasks were designed and carried out as a hands-on practice and aimed at enabling students at designing their research tools (questionnaire, case study, journal, interview) or use the approach of action research about a topic of concern.

The students also formulated and presented different research questions. As *Dudley Reynolds* puts it: “It’s about helping them (teachers), to see that the questions they have, are really the beginning of the research process “(Xerri, D., & Pioquinto, C. (Eds.). (2018).

The final questionnaire required them to write what the course taught them and what they think of research.

They write that they think differently of their learning experience and teaching experience.

They know how to collect data by building reliable and suitable instruments for both quantitative and qualitative data and how to analyse data. They know and they understand the difference between decision made on the go because of intuition, and decision made from relevant information. Reading research literature has given them skills to find and evaluate information sources both from the internet and off the net. Some of them write that the course has helped them to improve and sharpen many skills that they already had. The course has contributed to the arrangement of the previous language and information mastered and their application in practice.

The students of this course have to work on and present a thesis at the end of the academic year. They have already decided on the topic. More than 40% of the students that participated in the study have chosen topics related to use of technology in language teaching

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and learning. About 25% have chosen topics on motivation, 15 % have chosen topics on teaching and learning strategies and the rest language skills. The majority (65 %) have chosen technology and motivation, because they had to cope with many problems during the years the lesson was conducted online. Their choice shows that they are able to identify the main issues of education today and especially those related to foreign language learning.

Problems Encountered

As students have pointed out, they would learn more if they were involved in real research, not just mock presentation in the class. They suggest being involved in small scale projects about teaching in the university or high schools together with the lecturers. This has not been able for two reasons mainly, lack of funds for this kind of research and lack of time.

Another way to encourage students to conduct research is to organize and invite them to participate in research conferences, where students will have the possibility to share their modest research work with a wider public than that of the class. These activities would make them learn more and improve skills such as speaking, presenting, discussing, and asking questions about topics of interest.

CONCLUSIONS

The course Research Methods in Education is valuable. It equips students with theoretical and practical skills related to ways of conducting research, but more practice and more possibilities must be provided for them. Despite the difficulties that teaching and learning, like most of the other activities all over the world are facing during these times, opportunities for students are many. For example, if they become members of a blog with their faculty they will engage willingly in research. This is beneficial not only for students but for the faculty, too. Once the students start to engage in such activities the net extends further on, and the ideas abound.

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