

Inquiry and Research Skills for Language Teachers

K. Dikilitaş and A. Bostancıoğlu

Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, 180 pp., €51.99

ISBN 978 3 030 21137 0

Reflective inquiry has nowadays become an essential skill for educators, tutors, and prospective teachers. An educator's concern inside the class includes observing their classroom reality, identifying issues, proposing solutions, and reflecting on the lessons. Therefore, research training needs to become an essential part of pre-service teachers' academic life, not only from a theoretical viewpoint but as a reflective approach, too. In their book, Dikilitaş and Bostancıoğlu highlight the importance of research training and inquiry skills as invaluable knowledge for pre-service teachers.

Currently, there is a growing number of publications that contain reports on action research in ELT, such as Bullock and Smith (2015), Mackay, Birello, and Xerri (2018) and Banegas *et al.* (2020). Most of these were produced by in-service teachers, but there is a lack of systematically laid out handbooks that focus on training pre-service teachers in research skills or provide activities to help them develop these skills. This volume comes as a response to the need that prospective language teachers have for learning inductive reflection and the basics of research.

The authors' principal focus is on Exploratory Practice (EP), which perceives reflective skills and inductive thinking as its basis when analyzing the data gathered from in-class interactions with students and other teachers. The authors suggest that learning to reflect through EP leads pre-service teachers to 'think deeper, further, and more critically' (p. vii) and that the process can lead to gaining a wider perspective on the issues they encounter in their teaching practicum.

As university students of ELT degrees, and later on as EFL teachers, we have encountered many difficulties with planning, designing, and conducting research. We thought that learning about doing research was something that was only needed for writing our final projects, without having much use for our future everyday teaching. Over the years, we have come to realise that as teachers, we need to be curious and reflective about what we see around us and take advantage of the opportunity to utilize the data that evolve from our students' activities. As Richards and Lockhart point out, 'in every lesson and in every classroom, events occur which the teacher can use to develop a deeper understanding of teaching' (1996, p. 6). What is important is that teachers should

learn to use and exploit these events. Dikilitaş and Bostancıoğlu provide an easy-to-follow and extensive guide on how to do exactly that.

The research guidelines described in the book are intended not only for prospective language teachers but also serve as a model for teacher educators and teacher trainers. Chapter 1 offers an overview of research, helping readers to differentiate between academic research and pre-service teacher research. Unlike the first, the latter allows researchers to exploit more personal and contextual issues and helps them have a clearer understanding of their own teaching and learning process. The authors present various research paradigms and the kind of knowledge that pre-service teachers can discover in their teaching practicum. This chapter also discusses the research process from the perspective of pre-service teachers' reality and the importance of developing inquiry and reflection skills in prospective language teachers. However, our perception as readers is that this theoretical introduction, which includes abstract research concepts, would have benefitted from more infographics or graphic organizers in order to facilitate comprehension, especially because its content is intended to introduce pre-service teachers to research in language education.

In the next chapter, Dikilitaş and Bostancıoğlu dwell on the familiar 'research problem' term and transform it into a different concept by calling it a 'puzzle' and the process of researching itself 'puzzling'. They point out that the word 'problem' refers to 'difficulty', which has a negative connotation and is more focused on trying to find a solution to the problem. As opposed to this, by contemplating a puzzle, the principal aim is exploring, understanding, and reflecting upon the experience of the teaching practicum. The authors divide puzzles into two groups: puzzles about the self and puzzles about others, with the latter leading to observing not only what happens in the classroom but in its surroundings as well. This chapter highlights the importance of creating the conditions to guide pre-service teachers in the process of defining their puzzles through collaborative activities that encourage them to formulate higher-order thinking questions. The authors suggest specific steps to identify and develop the 'puzzle', as well as highlighting other issues, such as ethics and costs. Also, sample cases on the process of puzzlement in real classroom situations are described.

The Pedagogically Exploitable Pedagogic-Research Activities (PEPRAs), proposed and discussed by the authors in chapter 3 form a guide to design and prepare activities to help pre-service teachers

who already have access to actual class settings to get started with their research. Many classroom research tools, such as surveys, observations, and checklists, can be included in the teaching-learning process; these can also support the training of pre-service teachers to do research. This chapter focuses on established research tools: observations, questionnaires, and interviews. It provides information on these tools and how to incorporate them into the teaching and learning process through activities oriented towards solving puzzles. The authors include detailed suggestions on how to design these instruments and self-reflection activities that encourage pre-service teachers to think critically.

The process of data generation is paramount in any research work and, as the authors stress in chapter 4, 'it needs to contribute to understanding the puzzles' (p. 76). Without well-considered data collection, all work might be in vain. Therefore, in order to generate valid and trustworthy data, various methods and activities are proposed. The authors connect PEPRAs to the appropriate process of data gathering. They provide a step-by-step guide to connect the puzzles to PEPRAs, a guide that can be used during the data generation activities in class. The authors claim that generating data through PEPRAs can increase teachers' and learners' involvement in EP and can bring about several benefits, such as igniting curiosity, better cognitive understanding of issues, self-discovery, and reflection.

After collecting the data, the most frequently asked questions are 'How do we present the findings?' and 'What is the next step I should take?' It is at this point that researchers sometimes find it difficult to make sense of all the data they have gathered, and this stage can be demotivating. Certainly, introducing the basics of qualitative and quantitative approaches, as chapter 5 does, can help avoid the mental block that beginning researchers can experience at this point. We, as teacher researchers and as speakers of English as a second language, have experienced this kind of mental block when writing our research papers and fully understand the challenges that academic writing in a foreign language entails. Pre-service teachers as well as current practitioners will find this chapter truly engaging as it goes straight to the concepts that are relevant for processing data.

Chapter 6 is presented in two sections. First, it tackles the importance of evaluating the data and the real contexts where these were obtained. Pre-service teachers will also find a guide with suggestions on how to write an academic article by 'merging the picture' (p. 107) and connecting the data to the

puzzles of their research. The second section details the benefits of conducting research, which we find motivating for beginning researchers who want to start exploring classroom issues. The reflection tasks proposed in the chapter will empower pre-service teachers and prepare them for the teaching and learning experiences that they can expect to face in real-life settings.

Chapter 7 focuses on exploiting reflective writing as a means of developing critical reflection practices in pre-service language teachers. The authors make the point that reflective writing involves analyzing the teaching experience from different angles and writing about it using critical thinking. They also highlight the role of reflective writing in the learning process as a way of expressing practitioners' feelings and perceptions. The chapter describes the importance of including reflective logs and collaborative writing activities to accompany the pre-service teachers' writing process. These activities, oriented towards reflecting on the exploratory research, can easily be integrated into the pre-service practicum.

The final chapter contains a compendium of research course designs from different educational contexts across the globe, where experiences from countries such as Argentina, Brazil, Japan, Pakistan, and Turkey are presented and analyzed to provide a general overview on research courses for pre-service teachers. These research programs and courses, including their designs and contents, are listed so that they provide sufficient information about the different approaches implemented in each educational context. We believe that this information is of great value for teacher trainers and tutors for the development of contextualized research courses for their own students. One account that stands out is the Research Language Teaching course conducted by Darío Banegas in Argentina. Banegas designed and implemented an online course that simultaneously taught students to carry out a research project and helped them develop their reflection skills, awakening their curiosity about their teaching practice. What we consider valuable in this experience is the way his instruction evolved in each round based on the feedback he received from his students. One challenge encountered by Banegas' students was learning how to write in academic English. This is a common problem we, as beginning authors, can relate to, as we have said above.

In general, the contribution to research instruction made by Dikilitaş and Bostancıoğlu should drive readers to think deeper about possible research issues and consider new puzzles and reflective tasks. The

well-thought-out structure with the explanations, practice assignments (in chapters 2–6), and self-assessment checklists make this volume useful as didactic material for ELT degrees at colleges and universities. We highly recommend it as a companion for research courses for prospective language teachers with the hope that introducing pre-service teachers to classroom research will become standard practice with ongoing reflection and puzzling.

References

- Banegas, D., M. De Stefani, P. Rebolledo, C. Troncoso, and R. Smith.** 2020. *Horizontes 1. ELT Teacher-Research in Latin America*. Kent: IATEFL. Available at http://resig.weebly.com/uploads/2/6/3/6/26368747/horizontes_ebook.pdf. Accessed 10 December 2020.
- Bullock, D., and R. Smith.** 2015. *Teachers and Research*. Faversham: IATEFL. Available at http://resig.weebly.com/uploads/2/6/3/6/26368747/teachers_research_online_version.pdf. Accessed 10 December 2020.
- Mackay, J., M. Birello, and D. Xerri.** 2020. *ELT Research in Action: Bringing Together Two Communities of Practice*. Faversham: IATEFL. Available at <https://www.danielxerri.com/uploads/4/5/3/0/4530212/eltria.pdf>. Accessed 10 December 2020.

Richards, J. C., and C. Lockhart. 1996. *Reflective Teaching in Second Language Classrooms*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

The reviewers

Valeria Chumbi is an EFL teacher at Universidad Nacional de Educación in Ecuador. She has taught in U.S. Embassy Programs such as Access and College Horizons and worked in many public and private institutions. Her main research interests are motivation and learning, classroom management, language teaching techniques, and online learning environments. Email: valeria.chumbi@unae.edu.ec

Carmen Morales has been teaching English as a Foreign Language for the past 15 years in private and public schools in Ecuador. She is currently working as a teacher researcher for the National University of Education in Ecuador (UNAE). Her research and teaching interests are in cooperative learning, foreign language teaching, and Action Research. Having participated in the Teaching Excellence and Achievement Program in 2013 at Chico State University, she is now a member of the U.S. Alumni. Email: carmen.morales@unae.edu.ec
doi:10.1093/elt/ccab005