Teacher to Teacher Research in the ESL Classroom

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In recent years, a not-so-quiet revolution has been taking place in the educational research community. Teachers are getting more involved in research (Allwright & Bailey, 1991; Goswamie & Stillman, 1987; Nunan, 1992). In explaining how this has come about, Houser (1990) defines—from the teacher's perspective—three models of educational research, viewing the process both historically and hierarchically. Although Houser's terms differ from those of other authors, her parameters essentially incorporate their definitions.

Houser's first model embodies traditional research in which teachers in the research process are "minimally informed" or even reluctant participants who ignore researchers as much as researchers ignore them. In this model, researchers formulate their questions, observe classroom practices to collect the data, and exit the classroom to analyze and interpret the data. The teacher is a passive non-participant in the research process. Researchers, typically professors at the university level, research, while teachers—at any level—teach. The separation is profound, and as Eisner (1984) notes, this kind of research has had little impact on classroom practice. In fact, in Eisner's sweeping survey of educators and the research-to-practice connection, few teachers or researchers could mention specific examples of how research literature had changed their teaching.

Houser's (1990) second model of educational research considers teachers to be collaborators in the research process. In this model teachers are empowered as co-researchers to a limited extent, sometimes helping to form the questions but mainly functioning as collectors of data. The "expert" researchers, however, retain control of theory generation and data analysis. Rarely are teachers in this model invited to participate in the analysis and interpretation of the study. Teachers are more informed than in the first model but are still minimally involved, and, therefore, their practices seldom change because of such studies.

The third model in Houser's (1990) hierarchy places teachers at the center of the research process. In this model, referred to as praxis by Freire (1970) or action research by Houser and others (e.g., Allwright & Bailey, 1991; Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988; Nunan, 1992; Strickland, 1988), the teacher is researcher, teacher, and analyst—all at the same time. The teacher names the problems, poses the questions, gathers the data, and

draws the conclusions: conclusions which often directly change classroom practice. This process is both pragmatic and liberating. As Houser (1990) claims, by putting teachers at the heart of the research process, doing research in their own classrooms, teachers become experts capable of shaping their lives and profession. Those teachers who conduct their own research, suggest Berthoff (1987), Martin (1987), and Swart (1990), no longer give away their power to researchers distant from the conditions of the classroom. Furthermore, according to Shor and Freire (1987), teachers who do research are able to extract valuable knowledge about students and how they learn.

A fourth model of research not referred to by Houser (1990), but suggested by our own experiences and alluded to by Allwright and Bailey (1991) and by Faneslow (1988) is what we call the teacher-to-teacher research model. Our model involves action research with a twist. Teachers enter colleagues' classrooms for the purpose of answering both theoretical and pragmatic questions, sharing both the research experience and the outcome. We uncovered this model somewhat serendipitously in the process of completing our doctoral studies. As students, we were required to do research in each others' classrooms, using the traditional models that Houser (1990) described. But, as university ESL (English as a second language) teachers during the same time period, a funny thing happened on the way to the dissertation. We discovered that the unintended consequences of our teacher-to-teacher research had far greater impact on our teaching than did the studies themselves. That is, the studies were intended to teach us research methodology as well as answer specific research questions—and they did. But, more important to us, we gained insight into our own teaching practices, developed stronger collegiality, and experienced a sense of empowerment.

Changes in Teaching Practices

Our experience suggests that teacher-to-teacher research can result in meaningful changes in instructional practices. For instance, one of our studies was to determine a university ESL teacher's philosophy of reading and whether her classroom practice reflected her philosophy. What began as traditional research, involving the teacher minimally, became teacher-to-teacher research as the teacher assumed co-ownership of the project. Prior to being observed, the teacher was asked to articulate her reading philosophy by selecting from among a set of prepared statements (see Konopak, Readence, & Wilson, 1994). She was also interviewed about her practice after each classroom observation. Having defined her philosophy, however, the teacher began to question her own practices and subsequently made significant changes in her lessons. Specifically, a planned lecture on stems and affixes was changed to a small group activity in which students coined new words based on their knowledge and use of the text. Because of the research study in which she was participating, the teacher recognized that her philosophy

of active student involvement was not being reflected in her practice; with this change, it was.

Not only did the observed teacher make changes based on this experience, but so did the researcher as she saw her own practices reflected in the teacher she observed. For example, after transcribing a so-called classroom discussion in which the teacher solicited only one- or two-word responses from the students, the researcher realized she often did the same. The next day in her own class, the researcher overcame her tendency to control the discussion by taking a seat in the back of the room while the students discussed and outlined essays in small groups. Her students began to experience real discussion, not a question and answer drill trying to pass for one.

In a different study, an ESL teacher-researcher observed the composition class of another university ESL teacher. While the focus of the study was on the students' perceptions of dialogue journals, the observer incidentally noticed that the teacher introduced each type of formal writing with a concrete example. For instance, writing directions was not a theoretical exercise for the teacher's eyes only; students were each given a "treasure" to hide and then asked to write directions so that another student could find it (Holmes & Moulton, 1994c). The observer returned to her own classroom and began to include more specific examples of her own, using an origami demonstration, in one case, to introduce the process speech.

In each of these studies, teachers entered each others' classrooms with specific research goals to accomplish but left with more than they had bargained for. Not only had research goals been met, but teaching practices had changed. Teachers had learned from each other. As Faneslow (1988) opined, ". . . as I look at you with my lens, I consider you a mirror; I hope to see myself in you and through your teaching . . . Seeing you allows me to see myself differently and to explore variables we both use" (p. 115).

Collegiality

A second unintended consequence of teacher-to-teacher research is the sharing and camaraderie that develop between teachers who enter each others' classrooms to explore pedagogical issues. For example, the ESL teacher whose class was the focus for the study on dialogue journals originally had great misgivings about having the researcher in her class for an entire semester. Her doubts were soon allayed as she discovered she could discuss students and class activities with the researcher, someone who really knew what had taken place. While the two had certainly been friends prior to the study, they developed a greater trust because of their shared experience in the classroom.

A similar feeling of collegiality developed between the two teachers in the study on reading philosophy and practice. Prior to the study, the two teachers had not known each other very well. The project called for the researcher to interview the teacher after each classroom observation, and during the course of these daily interviews, the two teachers became friends who began to share teaching ideas. The relationship extended beyond the initial research project to shared visitations in each others' classrooms as a means of gleaning even more ideas from each other.

Another study, involving a grant to publish ESL student writing, resulted in collegiality among a number of faculty members. While they didn't observe each others' classes, they read and delighted in the work of each others' students. It was only one teacher's research project, but all pitched in to edit student papers and actually publish an ESL anthology. In the process, teachers shared their philosophies about teaching writing, which created a bond among them.

Sharing classroom experiences usually enhances teaching, but in our experience, the teacher-to-teacher research was the catalyst that allowed such sharing to take place. The collegiality and our interest in each others' teaching philosophies and practices even led to regular planned discussions based on research in second language issues.

Empowerment

The final unanticipated consequence of our teacher-to-teacher research is the sense of empowerment we have experienced from conducting research in each others' classrooms. For example, the research grant for publishing ESL student writing resulted in a presentation at a national conference and the publication of an article in a national journal (Holmes & Moulton, 1994a). We did not set out to present or publish in the initial stages of our research, but increased confidence in ourselves as researchers encouraged us to share our findings with a broader audience.

Another study, which examined ESL students' cartoons as a measure of their knowledge of the writing process, also led to teacher empowerment. It began as Houser's (1990) third model, action research, but sharing the data with another ESL instructor changed it to a teacher-to-teacher study. This interaction led both teachers to alter their in-class pre-writing activities and to publish an article about it (Holmes & Moulton, 1994b). While the original teacher had gained useful information on her own, it was not until she joined forces with her colleague that she became empowered to write about it.

The study on dialogue journals had a similar outcome. As a dissertation topic, the research followed Houser's (1990) second model: The researcher formulated the theory, designed the research, and observed the teacher's class; the teacher collected part of the

data while the researcher analyzed it. With the dissertation's completion, however, the two teachers revisited the data together, forming a new theory which resulted in two articles on dialogue journal writing (Holmes & Moulton, 1994; Homes & Moulton, 1995). The teachers' collaboration empowered them to reach for new insights in interpreting the data.

Adding Teachers' Voices

Our experience as teachers doing research in each others' classrooms demystified the research process for us. It gave us deeper understanding of our own philosophies about teaching and learning and how they relate to our classroom practice. It engendered collegiality among our faculty and empowered us to share our new-found understandings with a wider audience than our immediate peers. Teacher-to-teacher research has changed us both as learners and as teachers.

While it was our doctoral work that propelled us into researching, teachers need not wait for a formal program to begin doing teacher-to-teacher research. In fact, we have often speculated on how much more we might have discovered about teaching and learning had we begun this process earlier in our teaching careers. We wish we had taken to heart the advice of Piaget (1973), who argued that teachers must begin classroom research as soon as they begin teaching because it brings to consciousness the creative tension between educational theory and classroom practice.

Classroom research need not be the province of a small elite group of university professors (Kincheloe, 1991). Because Swart (1990), in her survey of major educational journals, found a preponderance of articles written by professor-researchers but only a handful by teachers, she urged teachers to take control of their profession by sharing their expert knowledge. We agree. We realize that teachers have myriad responsibilities that go beyond the classroom itself, but teaching schedules can have some flexibility that will allow for our kind of research. More teachers must add their voices to the not-so-quiet revolution; teacher-to-teacher research is a satisfying means to that end.

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