

The Teaching-Research Nexus: A Comparative Analysis and Suggestions for Foreign Language Teachers

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Abstract

Teacher research is gathering impetus in foreign language education in México, particularly in public universities. Teachers who used to rely on pedagogical recommendations are now basing their decisions on empirical evidence about what their learners actually do with the language they are learning. For this trend to continue, teachers need to be aware of the complexities of the teaching-research nexus and the conditions that strengthen it. This paper presents a historical overview of the way in which the teaching-research nexus has been investigated in the United States and México in general and in the field of foreign language education in particular. It also discusses the nature of teacher-research and its benefits in terms of independent professional development. Finally, the paper describes a set of prerequisites for teachers to productively combine teaching and research activities in foreign language education.

Key words: Research training, teachers, higher education, foreign languages, México,

1. The teaching-research nexus in the United States and México

Combining teaching and research is the responsibility of many university teachers world-wide. The assumption behind this policy is that research contributes to teaching and teaching contributes to research. This assumption, however, has been under scrutiny by educational researchers for last forty years. In the United States researchers started analyzing the teaching-research nexus in the 1970's coming up with contradictory results. Some found that teaching and research activities were conflicting. Blackburn (1974), for example, used qualitative data and found that some university professors that conducted research felt dissatisfied with their work in the classroom because the time and energy dedicated to inquiry and publication was reduced from the time dedicated to class preparation and assessment. Sample (1972), as well as Ramsden and Moses (1992) from Australia, concluded that teaching and research are incompatible because they require different kinds of training and involve different types of activities. Later, Robertson and Bond (2001) in an interview study found that the experiences of university teachers that carried out research were varied. While some viewed that teaching and research were incompatible because of the considerable amount of time each requires, others reported that they experienced the relationship as reciprocal and positive (Durning & Jenkins, 2005). Conducting research helped them learn different aspects of their disciplines and the ways in which these aspects could be taught to their students; in teaching they found the opportunities to transfer the knowledge they acquired through research.

The relationship between teaching and research has also been examined from a quantitative research perspective in the United States. Among the variables measured in the relationship between teaching and research, are the beliefs of teachers. Marsh (1987) for example, examined teachers' beliefs about their own teaching and researching abilities. He found that those researchers that perceived themselves as capable for teaching were more motivated to be good teachers and had higher scores for teaching quality; while those that perceived themselves as good researchers were more motivated to engage in research, invested more time and resources in conducting research and had more research products. Similarly, Neumann (1992) found that those who believed that teaching and research activities are complementary carried out both activities in ways that reinforced each other. Teachers' beliefs about teaching and research, and their perceptions of their abilities to perform those activities, influence how they view the relationship and how they go about it.

In México, efforts to link teaching and research activities first appeared in the late 1970's at the *Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México* (UNAM) as a way of developing teaching and increasing the quality of students' learning in higher education (MartínezRomo, 2003). Other public universities in the country continued to work on this combination of academic activities at a much lower pace. The study of the relationship teaching-research started in the 1990's and is still on its way. Sánchez (1990) found that the relationship between teaching and research varied depending on the culture of the disciplinary community, the profile of the teachers, and the ways in which they understand and conduct research and teaching. For example, some teachers reported that they used research findings (disciplinary or pedagogical) as content for their teaching; others indicated they taught their students inquiry skills; others said they investigated what they taught (methods, contents, planning, and assessment); and still others expressed that the findings of research they read about influenced the way they taught. The relationship between teaching and research, thus, is a complex one.

2. The teaching-research nexus in foreign language education

In the field of foreign language education, the link between teaching and research was studied until the 1990's in the United States. Although in the 1980's a variety of quantitative studies were made to compare the impact of different teaching methods, researchers were not teachers; they were mainly psychologists who asked language teachers to collaborate in their research projects (Pica, 1997). Language teachers interacted with the researchers in different ways (Kuiper, 1996; Rounds, 1996; Spada&Lightbown, 1996); however, they rarely located and used research-based knowledge to inform their teaching practice (Grimmet& MacKinnon, 1992). As a result of a movement called teacher-as-researcher, teachers began to view themselves as producers of knowledge based on practice (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Lytle & Cochran-Smith, 1992). Language teachers involved themselves in practitioner research projects and a number of new publications addressed to language teacher-researchers started and continue to appear.

The nexus between teaching and research in foreign language education is starting to develop in Mexico, particularly in public state universities. Ramírez Romero, Reyes Cruz and CotaGrijalva (2010) maintain that the *habitus* of Mexican higher education language teachers has been largely dominated by teaching, relegating research to a marginal status. They attribute such situation to the precariousness of funding, facilities, and information resources in Latin American higher education; and to the multiple and changing duties in which university teachers have to engage. The authors recommend, among other things, the improvement of working and institutional conditions of language teaching researchers; the inclusion of research components in language teaching education programs; the conduction of more and better quality studies in language teaching; the conduction of collaborative projects; and a better dissemination of existing research. They finally assert that incorporating research into foreign language teaching in Mexico requires institutional support, the agency of the disciplinary community, and the will of its members to do so. The problem is that, as Sánchez (1990) has pointed out, research and its relationship with teaching can be understood in different ways, and the characteristics of the academic profession in Mexico is still under discussion (Galaz-Fontes& Gil-Antón, 2009).

Mexican language teachers can turn to the variety of dimensions of or meanings attributed to the teaching-research nexus (Healey, 2005; Robertson, 2007; Trowler& Wareham, 2008). As Visser-Wijnveen, Van Driel, Van der Rijst, Verloop, and Visser (2010) point out, there is not one best way of linking research to teaching. Teachers can teach research results, make research known, show what it means to be a researcher, help others conduct research, provide research experience and conduct their own research. All these ways of using research can contribute to building a culture of research in foreign language education in Mexico. Teachers conducting their own research, however, makes teachers produce rather than consume knowledge about language teaching and learning.

3. The nature of teacher research

Teacher research is often used interchangeably with *action research*. Not all teacher research, however, is action research (Meier & Henderson, 2007). While teacher research follows some type of action to improve teaching and learning, action research is inquiry conducted collaboratively among researchers (not necessarily teachers) and those who will benefit from the action. The aim of action research is to produce a change in behavior or in an organization as a whole. Action research is employed in many disciplines and organizations outside of language education.

It is broadly defined as a reflective process of progressive problem solving undertaken by individuals working with others, as part of a community of practice, to improve the way they address issues and solve problems. Teacher research takes many forms and serves different purposes. It is conducted by teachers, either individually or collaboratively. It is intentional and systematic, and it begins with teachers' own questions about and reflections on teaching and learning. In simplistic terms, teacher research may be qualitative or quantitative. In qualitative studies the information obtained in the form of text and the analysis is interpretive rather than numerical (for example, the language learning experiences written in L2 journals). Quantitative research, on the other hand, generally starts with a hypothesis, followed by a quantification of data and some sort of numerical analysis (for example, comparing students test results before and after an instructional treatment). Mixed studies use both, qualitative and quantitative data.

Teacher research projects follow specific procedures which are documented, step by step. First, a significant problem or interest is defined. To define the problem, teachers may draw upon a combination of things: theory, intuition, experience, observation, knowledge of students, reflection, and even the comments and opinions of valued colleagues. Second, the problem is formulated in terms of research questions. Research questions are not developed with the goal of finding quick solutions. Rather, formulating questions involves the desire to understand teaching and learning in profound ways. Third, data are collected through multiple means, which may include doing observation, asking students to complete questionnaires, conducting interviews, collecting artifacts, or examining journal entries. Finally, teachers analyze and give meanings to their findings to take appropriate actions (McLean 1995). Discoveries are used to further reflect on and address other problems and questions. Teacher inquiry may continue responding to and formulating new research questions with the purpose of creating new knowledge (*local knowledge*) about teaching and learning.

The knowledge produced by teachers is of a very different kind than that produced by educational researchers. Teachers produce practitioner knowledge; a type of knowledge that develops in response to specific problems of practice, and is grounded in the context in which teachers work. In contrast to the knowledge produced by educational researchers which is more abstract, context independent and generalizable, the knowledge produced by teachers is concrete, contextual, and specific (Cochran-smith & Lytle, 1990). Furthermore, while educational researchers are interested in identifying different types of knowledge for teachers to use in the classroom (pedagogical knowledge, content knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge), teachers are interested in the integration of such knowledge types around a problem of practice.

However, not all knowledge produced by teachers is professional knowledge. Hiebert, Gallimore, and Stigler (2002) affirm that there are three prerequisites for practitioner knowledge to become professional knowledge. First, it must be made public; that is, teacher research must be represented in such a way that it can be *communicated* among colleagues. When knowledge is examined by others, it contributes to the profession's body of knowledge. Collaboration helps teachers to make their knowledge public and understood by colleagues. Second, practitioner knowledge becomes professional knowledge when it is represented in a form that enables it to be *accumulated* and *shared* with other members of the profession. Teachers must find ways to place their research where it can be accessed and used by other members of the profession. Research articles, conference papers, videos and Web pages are records that preserve ideas that can be used by other teachers. Storing knowledge in forms that can be visible to others gives that knowledge a professional status. Finally, to become professional knowledge, teacher research results have to be continually *verified* and *improved*. Although there is no certainty that the knowledge generated in classrooms is useful or correct, by trying and observing it in many different contexts, it has more chances to be modified and improved. Presenting thorough descriptions of research characteristics and procedures is absolutely imperative if other teachers are to replicate or repeat the studies they gain access to, using the same methods with different students.

4. Benefits of teacher research

Foreign language teacher educators from English speaking countries have different views on how research knowledge benefits teachers. Wallace (2006), for example, maintains that the incorporation of research activities into teaching is one of the most effective ways of developing and improving the professional practice of pre-service and in-service teachers and teacher educators. He claims that teachers who experience the process of doing research (isolating an area of inquiry, asking questions, collecting data, analyzing data, and reflecting on what is discovered), are more prepared to enhance their teaching.

Wallace (2006) gives two pragmatic reasons for including research activities in teacher education programs. First, teachers who have the necessary skills to analyze and improve their own teaching will be more prepared to independently continue their professional development for life. Second, teachers who want to improve their qualifications through further studies have better chances to succeed if they possess the knowledge and skills to perform the extended study required in graduate programs.

McDonough & McDonough (1997) also support the view that teachers benefit from research knowledge and skills as necessary tools to explore the huge number of questions and issues in their everyday professional life. They consider such knowledge is useful because "...no classroom and no group of people working together is without problems to solve, questions to resolve, gray areas to clarify, and development areas to pursue" (p. 7). Through observing, recording and analyzing classroom events teachers focus on their immediate concerns and sharpen their critical awareness.

Nunan (2003), on the other hand, considers that research knowledge is useful at a time when language learning and teaching have changed from a prescriptive to an empirical orientation. Teachers who used to rely on pedagogical recommendations on what and how to teach are now basing their decisions on empirical evidence about what their learners actually do with and through the language they are learning. Teachers with a prescriptive orientation also benefit from learning how to do research because they can replicate the findings of others, in the realities of their own classrooms. To do this, they not only need to be capable of reading reports by other researchers in an informed and critical way, but they also need to have the skills to plan, implement and evaluate their own studies.

For Burns (2009) research knowledge allows teachers to develop a critical perspective on their practice, and it also gives them the possibility of observing the various factors that operate in the classroom. By developing a greater understanding of what happens in the classroom, teachers can promote changes that enhance the learning outcomes of their students. Burns further asserts that teacher research is most successful when there is collaboration between teachers in the research process or when they engage periodically in study groups to discuss their findings.

5. Conditions to strengthen the teaching-research nexus in foreign language education

The relationship between teaching and research can only be strengthened by foreign language teachers if certain conditions prevail. The first and most important condition is that teachers must have sufficient research knowledge to accomplish a proposed study (Brindley, 1991; Brown, 1999; Burns, 1999; Day, 2000; Gebhard, Gaitan&Oprandy, 2000; McDonough & McDonough, 1997; Nunan, 2003; Perry, 2008; Richards, 2000; Wallace, 2006). It is well acknowledged that teachers need to know how to read, do and write research to evaluate the applicability of different approaches and techniques (Brown, 1999); to become more effective trying out and testing received knowledge (Day, 2000); to make decisions about what and how to teach (Gebhard, Gaitan&Oprandy, 2000); to become producers rather than consumers of knowledge (Nunan, 2003); to develop a critical perspective on practice (Burns, 1999); to improve and develop for life as teachers (Wallace, 2006); to increase their opportunities for research-based funding (Brindley, 1991); and to contribute to the continuous professionalization of the field (Richards, 2000). Research knowledge is thought to be particularly useful for those with teaching experience, language competence, and academic orientation (Crookes and Chandler, 2001).

However, research knowledge is not the only condition for language teachers to conduct research projects. Continued support from a more experienced person and opportunities to participate in a community of colleagues are also necessary (Borg, 2006). At least initially, teachers need to be *scaffolded*, especially when they feel isolated and where a research culture is incipient or non-existent. Opportunities to collaborate, to discuss research issues, and to develop a sense of community with others engaged in research are necessary forms of support to carry out inquiry (Nunan, 1992).

In addition to research knowledge and support, teachers need to manage time constructively and focus on the similarities between research and teaching. Research has shown that language teachers around the world have difficulties in engaging with research (Borg, 2003). The obstacles commonly reported are the heavy workloads that they have and the apparent difficulty of conducting research. There is no doubt that both teaching and research are complex, challenging and above all, time consuming. However, both endeavors have more similarities than differences.

Presenting at conferences and responding to questions from the audience requires the same skills as lecturing. Putting together a literature review demands some of the skills used in designing a course syllabus. Both research and teaching need the ability to select and organize content in meaningful ways; and to communicate effectively. Thus, the skills and the time invested in one activity draw from and enrich the other.

To begin doing research, teachers also need to adopt a critical view on conceptions of teaching that assume that it is a knowledge implementing activity rather than knowledge producing activity. Most teacher education programs, materials and educational policies, sometimes designed, produced, or influenced by “center” countries (Kumaravadivelu, 2012; Pennycook, 1994; Phillipson, 1992), reduce language teachers to the status of high-level technicians who carry out recommendations and objectives decided by experts, foreign to teachers’ everyday realities. This view ignores the intelligence, judgment and experience that teachers can use to bring about educational change.

An alternative position is the one defended by Giroux (2002, p. 46), who contends that teachers must be acknowledged as *transformative intellectuals*, who mix teaching practice with scholarly reflection to help educating students to be thoughtful and active. Teachers’ work, from this alternative perspective, is a form of intellectual labor that involves active responsibility in questioning what is being taught, how it is being taught, and the larger goals of foreign language education. Teaching, thus, is more than technique (Cochran-Smith & Lytle 1999; Schön 1983); it is a process that involves continual inquiry and renewal.

Conclusion

Teaching and research can be combined in many different ways. However, practitioner research that produces concrete, contextual, specific knowledge positions teachers as transformative intellectuals when such knowledge is communicated accumulated and improved to bring about educational change. Teacher research requires ample research knowledge on the part of the teacher, continued support from a more experienced person, opportunities to share findings with a community of colleagues and critical view on what is being taught, how it is being taught and the larger goals of foreign language education. Mexican language teachers need to advocate the conditions that strengthen the teacher research nexus to procure their own continuous professional development.

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