Trends in Classroom Resarch

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Recent approaches to research methodology for English as a foreign language (EFL) classes have become increasingly focussed on the classroom as the prime research context (Nunan, 1992). By emphasizing empirical output focus, this awareness of the context aims research towards producing immediate, practical goals as opposed to attempts to adhere to more traditionally academic standards of research and application to language learning theories. But some practitioners of classroom research may be limiting the potential for such research by confining themselves to a narrow, static definition of 'classroom', and by taking a prescriptive stand on what should be done instead of just taking an ethnographic look at the current state of affairs and describing community phenomena as it is. I suggest that this is where we should begin before assessing implications and prescribing suggestions.

Historical developments in classroom oriented research eventually came to focus on observable classroom behavior, but this revealed overwhelming complexity. And then when researchers focussed on how we organize that data, equally overwhelming complexity of the practitioner (teacher-researcher) was revealed. Out of this changing paradigm, Allwright (1988) noted three emergent practical questions that need to be answered: who should conduct classroom based (oriented) research, what model should be used, and why and how should practitioner research be sustainable?

There are strong reasons for suggesting research should be left to full-time academicians. First of all, they are well trained and well supported. Most EFL instructors in Japan have a level of professional development that allows them to effectively be an instructor, but the skill necessary to contribute new knowledge to the existing academic paradigm is quite a different skill. There are few, if any, full-time researchers in the EFL community who have been granted sufficient time and funds, apart from teaching duties. In other fields, the hard sciences for example, researchers and teachers are clearly distinguished

by the standards of research quality. This specialization of skills and content is often seen as an indication of the maturity of that academic field.

But the downside is the tendency for academic researchers to talk to each other, and not to their 'clients'. In other words, the ivory tower phenomena of academic communities tend to produce research that is not relevant to the EFL classroom. And the human animals that we are, inevitably assemble themselves into hierarchical power differentials. Ph.D.'s are largely research degrees, and the recipients are paid higher than mere practitioners, and accorded more respect and honor. Research is forced into divergent channels of academic quality or immediate, practical relevance.

If practitioners are to become classroom researchers, they should be aware of those models of research available. Aside from the traditional academic distinctions between quantitative and qualitative research, practitioners have access to any combination of methods lying along a continuum between the two. In fact, triangulation of methods to improve validity should be a standard practice. In addition, another distinction in research approaches is that between academic tradition and post modern, activist, action research. But this may lead to ethical dilemmas between the need to control confounding variables, and the students' immediate needs. Flinders (1992) pointed out three ethical orientations which researchers can assume. The choice may be determined by the research question, by practical considerations, or by the social context.

The traditional, hard science stance is termed 'Utilitarian' and justifies aloofness and a distant interpersonal stance with a claim for generalisability for the greater good. A somewhat more comfortable stance for teachers would be the Deontological stance which values ethics of duty, reciprocity and fairness to the students, and requires informed consent for their behavior to be made public for research purposes. And finally, relational ethics, which comes from feminist theory, values affection and mutual care, and is sensitive to the specific social context. This last stance, in particular, lends itself well to an action research paradigm in which students are collaborators with the instructor, and questions of reliability and validity are largely irrelevant because the post-modern approach does not admit to the necessity or possibility of a unified theory.

Is sustainability of practitioner research possible? At the very least, it is difficult. Even action research depends on techniques and procedures from the academic traditions. In our role as teachers, we depend on empathy, an awareness of emerging group dynamics and subtle individual clues. In other words, we have to be aware of so many clues, depend on as many assumptions, and adjust our behaviour accordingly. The skills for research are quite different. We tend to underestimate the intellectual rigor required for good research as defined by reliability, validity, and generalisability. We tend to be unaware of our

pre-existing assumptions for research model choice, tool choice, or research design.   The necessary time and training for good research is available through graduate school curriculums or training programs.   But this implies that most of the research will be novice research.   The research will not be part of continuing concerns.   And the intensity required to complete the requirements of a professional development program is usually not sustainable.

With these difficulties in mind, why bother pursuing the goal of sustainability?   The short answer is to improve the quality of research.   If we replace the idea of traditional academic quality as the standard of research with professional development of the practitioner, the purpose of sustainable research becomes quite clear to the researcher. So then we must ask, what is the goal of classroom oriented research?

Traditionally, research generates theory, which in turn, informs practice.   But especially in EFL, there is often a huge communication gap between research and practice. And when researcher and teacher are the same, process may inform more than product. The aims of classroom research, according to Allwright, are to further our theoretical understanding of the classroom environment, and to further our professional development as practitioners . . . in other words, contribute to the academic community and contribute to our professional identity.   He suggests, as an alternative aim, that self-dissatisfaction with our capacity to adhere to academic traditions may lead us to create new research paradigms and communities.   And in fact, this is what has happened with the formation of TESOL.

But these are NOT the only goals of classroom research.   What has happened to the students?   I would suggest that what research can contribute to the student involved is the central issue we should be considering.   Classroom based research provides a rich relationship between accountability and classroom assessment techniques. Professional Development Schools and Learning Research Projects places the students' needs at the core of the question as to why we should pursue classroom research.   In the final analysis, good research is simply a slowing-down and careful analysis of our own common sense, an attempt to weed out our biases in order to better serve our clients, our collaborators, and our colleagues.

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