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Front Matter

Abstract

Classroom-based research is an umbrella term encompassing various forms of empirical work carried out by teachers to better understand and potentially improve teaching and learning practices in their context. This article discusses the characteristics typically associated with classroom-based research and exemplifies it through brief overviews of action research, exploratory practice and practice-based research. The article concludes with an appraisal of classroom-based research, and reflections on how to maximise synergy with academic work.

Keywords

- ✓ Action research
- ✓ Classroom-based research
- ✓ Exploratory practice
- ✓ Practice-based learning
- ✓ Teacher research

Key points

- Classroom-based research is empirical work that aims to produce practical, locally relevant understandings of language teaching and learning.
- Classroom-based research involves repositioning knowledge production from universities and research centres to the places where languages are taught.
- Classroom-based research is conducted by teachers, sometimes in collaboration with learners and academics.
- Multiple forms of classroom-based research exist, including Action Research, Exploratory Practice and Practice-Based Research.
- Classroom-based research is situated, reflective and transformative.

Classroom-Based Research in Language Education

Achilleas Kostoulas

Introduction

Classroom-based research refers to empirical work carried out by teachers, often in collaboration with learners and/or academics, which focuses on teaching and learning practices. It stands in contrast to university-based research, which uses controlled experimentation and similar methods to produce generalizable findings. Its methodological repertoire is shaped by the resources available to teachers and by their needs. Therefore, classroom-based research tends to be relatively limited in scope: it aims to produce insights that are practically relevant to teaching and learning, and specific to the context in which they were produced.

Defining classroom-based research

Although much discourse in teacher education assumes a rigid division of labour between people who teach and people who research teaching, recent years have seen growing awareness of the role teachers can play in knowledge construction in second language acquisition and language education. This potential is described in the literature going back to Dewey (1938/1997) and Stenhouse (1975), but the need for teachers to become more actively engaged in shaping the knowledge base of the profession has become more pronounced in recent decades. In part, this is due to the distancing of the informing disciplines of language education (i.e., applied linguistics, language earning psychology, etc.) from the immediate concerns of the classroom. Classroom-based research is also driven by the increased responsibility post-method pedagogy has placed on teachers, and it is ethically motivated by the imperative for inclusion, and giving voice to the people in the classroom.

Classroom-based research is an umbrella term that can include many different forms of empirical work carried out by (language) teachers and learners. It overlaps, though not always perfectly, with several other terms that appear in the literature, including action research, exploratory practice, practice-based research, reflective practice, teacher (or practitioner) research, language teacher research engagement, and more (see Hanks, 2017, p. 28 for a discussion of terminological diversity in classroom-based research). The conceptual nuances of each term aside, classroom-based research typically involves all (or most) of the following features:

(a) It is driven by professional curiosity to answer questions that arise from day-to-day language teaching and learning activity, and an aim to improve language education;
(b) It is conducted by teachers or other education professionals, and possibly learners, as part of their professional roles (as opposed to, e.g., academic coursework), and it often involves collaboration;
(c) It relies on empirical evidence that is generated through teaching and learning, and is often incidental to such activity;
(d) It entails systematic work and epistemological rigour, to the extent that is feasible with the means at teachers' disposal;

(e) It involves articulating a reflexive theorisation of practice, i.e., a statement or set of statements that represent the teachers' best understanding of 'why things in my professional context are the way they are' (Edge, 2011);
(f) It produces locally relevant understandings, rather than findings that can be readily generalised to broad populations;
(g) It is disseminated among the teachers' professional networks in a variety of appropriate formats.

Other features of classroom-based research may be derived from this list. For instance, it could be argued that classroom-based research is by necessity small-scale, since it is constrained by the limited resources teachers have at their disposal (including time); or that it is often qualitatively oriented and interpretivist, due to its focus on producing contextualised accounts of practice. Such inventories of characteristics are not meant to be exhaustive checklists that will enable us to determine whether an inquiry is best described as classroom-based research or not, but rather serve to highlight the features that make such work distinctive.

It bears noting that classroom-based research differs from mainstream research in several ways. The first, and most important one is that —the value of exploring one's practice notwithstanding— the primary role of language teachers is to facilitate the students' language learning. This means that that classroom-based research must operate non-disruptively in parallel with the normal operation of classrooms, and that the empirical data it uses are generally by-products of the learning process (e.g., a teacher who wants to conduct error analysis will likely have to use scripts produced for a pedagogical task, rather than scripts generated in response to a prompt designed to bring out the language phenomena of interest). Secondly, teachers are parts of the classes that they study, a fact that creates both ethical and methodological challenges. While mainstream research might endeavour to minimise power differentials between researchers and participants, such an approach is rarely feasible and not always desirable in the context of classroom-based research. What is needed, therefore, is a heightened sense of reflexivity, to leverage the teachers' insider status and ethical sensitivity.

Forms of classroom-based research

As hinted in the previous section, classroom-based research might take many different forms, depending on the affordances and constraints of each particular setting, and the needs and expertise of the teachers involved. It therefore seems impracticable to capture this methodological diversity in any list. With this caveat in mind, this section looks into Action Research, Exploratory Practice and Practice-Based Research (Table 1), as representative examples of classroom-based research that showcase the rigour and flexibility of teacher-driven empirical work.

[INSERT TABLE 1 APPROXIMATELY HERE]

Action Research

In a seminal publication, Lewin (1948, p. 203, cited in Burns, 2005, p. 58) defines action research as 'research leading to social action'. Although action research traces its origins at least to the 1940s, it was not until several decades later that it appeared in language education (Burns, 1999; Wallace, 1998).

Action research involves an iterative process that, in broad terms, consists of identifying a problem or an opportunity to improve teaching practice (*problematisation*), a planned intervention that addresses this problem or opportunity (the *action* component), systematic observation of this process and the changes that it incurs (the *research* component), and an evaluation of the intervention outcome (*reflection*). The final phase of this process is also the beginning of the next action research cycle, as reflection is expected to help teachers identify further opportunities for development or highlight issues that remain to be solved. Several models have attempted to formalise this process for descriptive convenience, by identifying steps at varying levels of detail (e.g., Burns, 1999; Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988), although it should be noted that, in practice, this process is more iterative than the models might suggest.

The methodological procedures encountered in action research tend to be qualitatively oriented. Burns (2010) helpfully distinguishes between 'observational' and 'non-observational' methods that teachers can use to monitor the outcomes of their action research interventions. The former involve visual documentation of the intervention (e.g., video recordings of lessons, photographs of the class, transcripts of interactions, teacher notes etc.). Non-observational methods of data generation include interviews and focus groups, questionnaires and journal entries, as well as the use of class output such as student scripts. This typology hints at the flexibility of action research, but also at the inherently localised nature of such inquiries (Edge, 2001).

Action research is often associated with critical approaches to education. Although the problems or opportunities for change that lie at the centre of planned interventions could be technical or practical (Burns, 2005) (e.g., it could involve experimenting with different ways to teach vocabulary), *critical* action research has the potential to bring into focus "the interstices between people and organisations" (Kemmis, 2008, p. 123) from which practice emerges, as well as the power asymmetries that shape them. Furthermore, while action research projects can —and often are— carried out by individual teachers investigating their classrooms, collaborative action research (Mitchell et al. 2009), which takes place within communities of practice that may include academics and other stakeholders (e.g., Banegas et al., 2013; Yuan & Lee, 2015), suggest how action research can facilitate teacher-driven professional development.

Exploratory Practice

Exploratory practice, as a form of classroom-based research, is distinctive in that it allows for the active involvement of language learners in (co)constructing professionally relevant knowledge (Allwright, 2003; Allwright & Hanks, 2009, Dikilitaş, & Hanks, 2018). Implicit in the name of exploratory practice is the emphasis on answering 'why' questions about day-to-day practice, and the belief that answering such questions (or 'puzzles') produces profound understandings that ultimately empower teachers and learners (Hanks, 2017). It differs from action research, not in that it downplays the importance of change, but in its foundational assumption that 'attempting *change without understanding* is a lost cause' (Hanks, 2017, pp. 4–5, original emphasis).

While exploratory practice deliberately eschews a prescribed sequence of activities or a methodological proclivity, the empirical-pedagogical work in this mode of classroom-based research is framed by an 'organic and developing' (Hanks, 2024, p. 4)

set of principles, first set out in Allwright (2005). Firstly, a concern about the quality of life of teachers and learners (collectively referred to as 'practitioners') is integral to exploratory practice. Understanding how practitioners experience quality of life is a prerequisite to attempting improvement, even if such understandings ultimately defy verbal articulation. The development of such understandings must be collaborative ("practitioner research is a 'first person plural notion'", argues Allwright, 2005, p. 357), and —in fact— these shared explorations are intended to foster collaboration. Lastly, collaborative work in exploratory practice must focus on continuous mutual development, and from this it follows that exploratory practice should place minimal burden on practitioners in order to remain sustainable.

The starting point of exploratory practice is 'puzzlement' or 'puzzle enquiry' (Hanks 2009). In practical terms, this often involves brainstorming sessions where students and teachers identify aspects of their lived experience about which they want to learn more, and collaboratively refine them into researchable questions. Crucially, enacting this research agenda does not require empirical work additional to language learning. Instead, it relies on Potentially Exploitable Pedagogical Activities, which are "slightly adapted pedagogic activities that teachers and learners are familiar with" (Moraes Bezerra & Miller, 2015, p. 105). For instance, pairs of learners might engage in a discussion task, designed to develop speaking skills, in which the topic of discussion could be the reasons why they feel apprehensive when using the target language outside class (the 'puzzle'), or learners might work in groups produce poster displaying their reasons for learning a new language.

Practice-Based Research

Practice-Based Research (Sato & Leowen, 2022) is a synergistic approach to professional knowledge in language education that fuses elements of classroom-based and university-based research. The aim of these collaborative partnerships is the production of scientifically rigorous, yet ecologically valid and practically relevant insights.

This approach to knowledge production involves an iterative process with three steps. Initially, teachers and academic researchers collaborate to generate research questions. This process might be prompted by classroom visits, presentations in teacher conferences, or deliberate conversations with teachers, in which contexts practically relevant questions are proposed and negotiated until a research agenda emerges. The second step in the process involves the collaborative design and implementation of a study aimed at answering the research questions. To ensure ecological validity, practice-based research studies take place in actual classrooms in ways that respect the teachers' status as equals in the knowledge production process (e.g., "incorporating teachers' existing lesson plans, the intervention being given by the teacher" etc., Sato & Leowen, 2022, p. 518). The final step of practice-based research involves the re-examination of the study outcomes by practitioners in the context from which the research questions emerged.

While Practice-based research involves a degree of methodological sophistication that is not feasible in other types of classroom-based research, it should be noted that the process remains 'inherently messy' (Sato & Leowen, 2022, p. 518), and that findings —by virtue of being ecologically valid— do not lend themselves to easy

generalisation. To counter this limitation, detailed descriptions the context are recommended.

Appraisal of classroom-based research

Notwithstanding the diversity of classroom-based research, it is generally associated with desirable outcomes in language education. For the teachers involved, psychological outcomes associated with classroom-based research include increased confidence (Sharma & Phyak, 2017), an enhanced sense of agency (Larsen-Freeman, 2019) and a stronger professional identity (Dikilitaş & Yayli, 2018; Marsden & Kasprowicz, 2017). In a most practical sense, experimenting with novel teaching methods and assessing their effectiveness has been argued to help teachers expand their methodological repertoires (Winch et al., 2015). As a corollary, because professional growth is driven by the teachers, rather than imposed top-down, classroom-based research contributes towards greater teacher autonomy (Gao, 2019) and the professionalisation of language teaching. Reimagining the roles of teachers as agentic 'operatives' (Burns, 2009), whose role extends beyond the delivery of prespecified content is especially significant given the ongoing "aggressive and persistent efforts to regulate and control teacher education from the outside" (Zeichner, 2007, p. 37).

[INSERT TABLE 2 APPROXIMATELY HERE]

That said, not all engagement in classroom-based research will produce equal outcomes, and this creates a need for a set of criteria by which to appraise the latter. The diversity of classroom-based research, and the heterogeneity of epistemological premises complicates this task, but a set of useful criteria are presented in Table 2. The first of these criteria, theoretical validity, refers to how the outcome of the classroom-based research connects to existing conceptualisations of language teaching and learning, the history of the profession, the teachers' own experience and the empirical data that supports it. Ecological validity refers to the connection to the complex mesh of individual, small-group, institutional and sociocultural influences in which language education happens (Stelma & Kostoulas, 2021). Reflexive validity is the degree to which the emergent theorisation accounts for the role of the individual teacher in shaping it ('what difference does it make to the theorisation that it is *this* teacher who produced it?' and 'what difference does it make to the teacher that they produced *this* theorisation'? cf. Edge, 2011). Lastly, practical validity refers to the potential of the theorisation to inform teaching and future knowledge production.

Conclusions

Classroom-based research differs from research carried out in the academic world, in terms of aims, methods, and output. This suggests that it can fill an important niche in the knowledge-production ecosystem, by producing knowledge for language education, rather than knowledge about language education. Perhaps most importantly, classroom-based research has the potential to challenge the knowledge hierarchy in language education, including unjust power structures, such as linguistic hegemony (Phillipson, 2013), native-speakerism and racist practices (Javier, 2016). This 'decentering' (Banegas, et al., 2022) move, which foregrounds local needs and local expertise, "prioritize[s] the experiences of those who have often been overlooked —

teachers and learners themselves, with different heritages, coming from different backgrounds, in different contexts, with different, resonant, stories to tell" (Hanks, 2024, p. 4).

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Tables

Table 1

Examples of classroom-based research

	Action Research	*Exploratory Practice*	*Practice-Based Research*
Conducted by	Teachers	Teachers & learners	Teachers & academics
Aim	Change	Profound understanding	Practical impact
Prompt	Problematisation (identifying problems, opportunities for change)	Puzzles about positive or negative aspects of lived experience)	Questions relevant to practice
Methods	Mainly qualitative	Naturalistic (Potentially Exploitable Pedagogical Activities)	Qualitative, quantitative or mixed
Criteria of success	Degree of empowerment	Impact on quality of life	Ecological validity, practical relevance

Table 2

Quality criteria for classroom-based research

Criterion	*Definition*
Theoretical validity	Conceptual, historical, experiential and empirical grounding of theorisation
Ecological validity	Connections of the theorisation to individual beliefs and practices, group dynamics, institutional policies and practices and sociocultural influences
Reflexive validity	Prospective and retrospective reflexive connections to pedagogy and knowledge production
Practical validity	Implications for teaching and for knowledge production

Relevant Websites

Action Research: https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/professional-development/teachers/knowing-subject/c/action-research

Fully Inclusive Practitioner Research: https://www.fullyinclusivepr.com/