Researching Language Teacher Cognition and Practice

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Researching Language Teacher Cognition and Practice

International Case Studies

Edited by

Roger Barnard and Anne Burns

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Introduction

Roger Barnard and Anne Burns

This book emerged from our combined interest in, and experiences of, conducting or supervising research on language teacher cognition. We planned the contributions in such a way that we hope will be helpful to emergent researchers, particularly Masters and PhD students – and, perhaps, their supervisors – in understanding some of the practical implications of collecting qualitative data, with a focus on this particular field of research.

The book aims to fill the gap between conventional research methodology books and published reports of research such as are found in academic journals. While volumes on methodology may explain how and why a particular approach to data collection should be used, they tend not to give specific and detailed examples of the 'messiness' of research – what may go wrong and how to overcome the obstacles that invariably get in the way of a smooth research journey. The constraints of writing up a report of a research project for a journal in, usually, 5000 or 6000 words mean that all too often accounts of how data are collected are cursory and 'rough patches' may be smoothed over. It is an all too common experience of qualitative researchers that their best-laid plans and schedules, as Robert Burns said, 'gang aft aglay' and they have to improvise on the spot in order to make the best of what may sometimes be a bad lot. But sometimes, too, these ad hoc decisions lead to surprisingly interesting outcomes and may even turn the project into a much better one than was originally conceived.

It is worth starting this introduction by explaining why this collection of case studies focuses on language teacher cognition, a field of research that has expanded rapidly over the last two decades. As Simon Borg makes clear in the following chapter, it is evident that what teachers do in the conduct of their professional activities is shaped, though not entirely determined, by what they believe and know. Interestingly, while this phenomenon has been well understood in mainstream educational circles since at least the 1970s, it

is only relatively recently that the language teaching profession has started to investigate the implications. This recognition is largely due to Borg's seminal work in his many publications, and especially in the overview of empirical studies and the methodological framework he developed for further research (Borg, 2006). Without such an impetus, none of the studies reported in this volume – and indeed the book itself – might have been possible.

All the contributors to this book believe, and we anticipate our readers will agree, that teaching is more than merely transmitting information. Indeed, the management, motivation and sustainability of learning can be understood only by exploring what teachers believe and do in their specific working contexts. After all, teachers are the executive decision-makers of the curriculum: it is they who put into practice the principles and procedures devised or mandated by others, such as course-book writers, methodological experts and officials of ministries of education. Failure by such people to take into account what teachers believe and know about language teaching will lead to failure to realise the intended curriculum.

However, the exploration of language teacher cognition is an extremely complicated matter. In the first place, the goals of language teaching have expanded over the past few decades – for example, from understanding linguistic structures at sentence level to communicative competence at discourse level to intercultural communicative pragmatic competence, in a world where acronyms reflect the changing awareness of the English language itself, ESL and EFL transmogrify into EIL and ELF. So, it is essential, but far from easy, to find out what teachers know and believe about fundamental issues such as: the place of grammar in the language learning curriculum and, indeed, what is understood by the word 'grammar'; the most appropriate ways to teach the language skills and sub-skills; the respective roles of teachers and learners in innovatory approaches to language teaching, such as task-based language learning; the appropriate classroom use of the learners' first language; how language learning could and should be assessed or evaluated – and many other matters.

What teachers believe and what they know about any of these issues is a complex nexus of interacting factors. One of the most important initial influences on teachers' cognition is their experience (good or bad) of their own language learning at school, college or university. To a greater or lesser extent, professional training or development programmes, whether pre-service or in-service, also affect teachers' knowledge and beliefs. Many teachers also increase their awareness of their role by reading books and articles by influential authorities, and perhaps by attending conferences and seminars. Teachers also learn from their own past and present professional experiences as teachers, and by interacting with their learners,

their colleagues and other teachers in a wider community of practice. The influence of 'significant others' in their personal lives – spouses, partners, family, friends – cannot be discounted. Finally, the imposition of authority – whether by school principals, inspectors, examination boards or ministries of education – also shapes teachers' knowledge and beliefs.

Although teachers may have strongly held beliefs, they do not always put these into practice. The reasons need to be understood by exploring the specific contexts in which they work, each of which is itself a complex and dynamic system (Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008) in which physical, temporal, cognitive, social and cultural factors interact to provide affordances for, or constraints on, the practical application of beliefs about teaching and learning, which in turn influence what teachers believe and know. Teaching and learning occur within certain physical and temporal boundaries, which will tend to affect the teacher's ability or willingness to act in accordance with his or her beliefs; for example, fixed seating arrangements may hinder effective group work, or the wish to introduce a new topic may be inappropriate at a specific time. Understanding teachers' practices should be tempered by awareness of the nature of the cognitive and affective styles and strategies among their learners; a belief in co-operative learning may be thwarted by a realisation that – at this stage at least – the specific group of learners are unaccustomed to such practices and would resist its adoption. Indeed, because teaching and learning are quintessentially social activities, unpeeling the complexities of the interaction of cognition and classroom action requires deep engagement with the conditions operating in the environment.

Borg (2006, and in his methodological analysis in the subsequent chapter of this volume) points out that among researchers there is a wealth of, and perhaps some confusion about, terminology, and it may be worth indicating how some key terms are understood by the authors of the eight case studies in this book. *Assumptions* may be regarded as axioms which enable us to make pre-judgements about the world around us; for example, a teacher facing a new class of learners will assume that, in a number of respects, they will be similar to classes she or he has previously taught. After working for some time with these new learners, the teacher will *perceive* that there are similarities with, and differences between, this class and previous ones, and new, somewhat tentative *attitudes* will emerge. With further experience, these attitudes will tend to be refined, rejected or reformulated and then incorporated into a set of firmer and more stable *beliefs*. What distinguishes a belief about something from a *knowledge* of something is that respected members of one's community accept it as a fact. Thus, in pre-Copernican times, ordinarily people did not believe that the sun revolved around the

earth: they *knew* it. It is in this comprehensive sense that the authors regard cognition as being contextually situated and socially distributed.

The above discussion clearly points to the need for research into teacher cognition to be exploratory, in the sense made clear by Allwright (2006), who argues, among other things, that researchers should seek to describe and understand the complexity of classroom teaching, and to recognise that idiosyncrasy within a particular setting is a more important phenomenon than what is common across classrooms. Thus, classroom research should not be reductionist in the sense of looking for simplistic, generalisable findings that can apply beyond the specific context; rather, accounts of classroom research should be sufficiently transparent and honest to enable the reader to judge the trustworthiness of the reports and, where appropriate, relate the findings to his or her own context. Such research also needs be longitudinal, in order to account for the inevitably changing relationships over time between key issues, and participatory, so that meanings behind behaviour can be explained by the key actors. Finally, explorations of teachers' beliefs and classroom practices should adopt a judicious blend of methods of data collection in order that the information that emerges can be compared, contrasted and triangulated to provide thick descriptions of the context, which in turn can lead to rich interpretations (Geertz, 1973) of the extent of convergence and divergence between what teachers believe and what they actually do.

The authors of the case studies in Chapters 1–8 are themselves emergent researchers, in most cases having recently completed doctoral projects in various countries. All of them have employed multi-methods of data collection in their studies, but each has selected only one of these methods to report in this book. They recount 'tales from the field' (Van Maanen, 1988) by introducing the aims and context of their study, briefly reviewing relevant published studies on the topic and explaining the methodological issue they have decided to focus on. The next part of their account is more detailed information about their study and examples of the data they have collected. These descriptions are followed by a discussion of the methodological implications arising from their particular project, and their story is completed with a reflection on the lessons they have learned from the experience. The second author of each chapter is an internationally recognised researcher and scholar, with a particular interest in the methodological approach discussed in the case study. Each provides an insightful commentary on the tale from the field from the perspective of a well informed outsider.

The third part of each chapter throws the issues back to you, the reader, by providing discussion points and questions for you to consider, and if possible discuss with others, and activities to try out if you yourself are

planning to collect qualitative data using the approach described in the chapter. An ideal way to use these questions would be to join with other researchers, possibly colleagues conducting research for graduate dissertations and theses, and use them as starting points for exploring one of these methodological approaches. Equally, the ideas for small-scale action could be tried out among a supportive group of research colleagues, to gain insights into the pros and cons of using different methods.

The focus of all these chapters is on exploring the beliefs and practices of (language) teachers about various issues related to their profession. But the lessons the authors have learned are relevant to other qualitative research topics, whether of teaching and learning situations or of wider social issues.

In Chapter 1, Judy Ng discusses her use of questionnaires with lecturers in a private university in Malaysia. The survey was intended to be a scoping study for her main project by obtaining key biodata from her respondents, eliciting their attitudes and reported practices of giving feedback on their students' written assignments and – importantly – recruiting volunteers to participate in the subsequent phases of the project. As Judy reports, she encountered a number of unanticipated difficulties, which led her to make several ad hoc decisions in the field. Ultimately her project veered away from its original purpose, but this shift actually led to a more valuable study than was originally conceived. Her story is commented on by J.D. Brown, who has long enjoyed an international reputation for his interest and expertise in quantitative research designs, but who has also recently published an extremely useful chapter (Brown, 2009) that discusses how to devise qualitative questionnaires. In his commentary on Judy's case, he suggests that the data-gathering phase of any study, but especially in interview/questionnaire research, is likely to be the most difficult. This is because the researcher may have to rely on the goodwill of people who have generally critical attitudes towards questionnaires as a result of past experience. It is necessary to overcome these difficulties in order to get a good response rate and credible data. But this does not mean that research should be rigid and inflexible; rather, like Judy, he has found that anomalies in his own research often lead in interesting and useful directions.

The second chapter focuses on the adoption by Nguyen Gia Viet of narrative frames (Barkhuizen & Wette, 2008) with Vietnamese teachers attempting to apply task-based language teaching (TBLT) in their high-school classes. Viet reports that this form of guided composition scaffolded the participants to reflect on their classroom experiences and to give expression to their beliefs in their first language. The frames also enabled him to gather data which could reasonably easily be compared and analysed. In his discussion of the methodological implications, Viet reports his