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Action research on a teacher education programme

Mark Wyatt

Do teachers' overriding academic concerns limit the extent to which they can grow as action researchers during formal teacher education? And as a result, is it more productive to look for transformative growth in action researchers elsewhere? Borg (2013) suggests this, but much might depend on both the nature of the course and how the teachers' development is investigated. My qualitative study of four teachers of English on a University of Leeds BA TESOL programme in Oman (Wyatt, 2010a) drew longitudinally on observations, interviews and reflective writing to reveal transformative growth, which I have ascribed (e.g. in Wyatt, 2011) to the 'constructivist', context-sensitive nature of the programme (Mann, 2005). Borg's words prompt me to reflect further, though. Was there any wider evidence of other teachers on this programme growing as action researchers, and can additional insights be offered into how they grew? In addressing these questions, I start with a vignette focused on Mohammed (real name used with his written permission), who was not one of the teachers I was formally researching but was someone I mentored in my role as a regional tutor throughout the three-year BA programme.

It was early September, the beginning of the school year. Mohammed was trying out new ideas, gained from the in-service BA TESOL. There had been input in the first eight months on communicative tasks, grouping learners, adapting materials, language acquisition processes. At school, Mohammed taught large classes in narrow classrooms; the chairs and desks were organized in rows. Mohammed was working with a curriculum being phased out. Unfortunately, while this contained some practice speaking activities, these lacked communicative purpose, and there was very little pair work and no group work. Nearby, in newer schools, learners were benefiting from a more learner-centred curriculum. Unfortunately, the changes had not reached Mohammed's school yet.

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Nevertheless, Mohammed had fresh ideas, as was evident when I came to see him teach. My role on the BA TESOL included visiting the schools of the 35 teachers in my regional group. I observed them each once a semester, lessons that were not assessed. Feedback sessions were learning opportunities, to stimulate reflection and so encourage teachers to relate their classroom practices to theory.

For this observed lesson, Mohammed had adapted the curriculum materials to create an information gap, which was central to his communicative task, structured like Cameron's (2001) with a preparation activity and a follow-up either side of a communicative 'core'. This 'core' activity involved milling, with the Grade 6 learners (in their third year of learning English), equipped with either a picture or text, needing to find a partner on the other side of the room who had a match. Despite the constraints imposed by the classroom, the activity appeared to work well, although some used L1 rather than English. This lesson provided interesting evidence, I later told Mohammed, that milling activities can succeed if well set up, even with 45 students in a narrow classroom!

In the post-lesson discussion, we talked initially about the 'core' activity; Mohammed explained how it fulfilled various criteria. We then analysed the demands it made on learners, and discussed how support had been provided through preparation activities and classroom management strategies. Mohammed then reflected on the extent to which the task had stimulated learning and on his thinking processes in designing the lesson.

Mohammed was engaging, then, in reflective practice, which involves observing while teaching, reflecting, theorizing and planning (Ur, 1996). This differs from teacher research, if the latter is "systematic, rigorous enquiry by teachers into their own professional contexts, and which is made public" (Borg, 2009a, p. 377). However, there is clearly a degree of overlap, as amongst the qualities required of teacher researchers are reflective skills, such as noticing, listening, analysing, problem-solving, hypothesizing and evaluating outcomes against objectives (Malderez and Bodóczky, 1999). If teachers can develop these reflective skills, supported by a constructivist approach to teacher education, i.e. one focused on context-specific needs (Mann, 2005), then they are also being equipped to carry out research.

Reflecting on how Omani teachers developed into action researchers through the BA TESOL, Al-Sinani, Al-Senaidi and Etherton (2009) highlight first the encouragement of reflective skills that led into small-scale classroom research. The practical assignments of a range of taught methodology modules required these teachers to observe their learners, analyse learning/teaching materials used in their schools, adapt materials (e.g. to make them more communicative), trial them and then evaluate these innovations. Indeed, some of these skills were built into the very first methodology module and all were practised in the first year of the programme (Wyatt, 2009, 2011). Subsequently, in Year Two, the teachers received more formal input, on topics including action research, through a module on Researching TESOL, which

thus helped consolidate their growing practical knowledge as researchers. They then developed dissertations in their final year. Additional support was provided by mentoring in schools at a time of curriculum renewal when there was also greater encouragement amongst school supervisors of reflective practice (Wyatt and Arnold, 2012). Thus conditions were favourable for growth. As Mann (2005, p. 106) argues, discussing models of teacher education: "Where a teacher is able to stay in their teaching context, enriched by reading, reflective teaching and action research, the experience usually leads to sustained development".

What, then, were the outcomes in terms of action research on this BA TESOL? 60 of the best of the approximately 900 dissertations produced by teachers on the ten-year project were selected by Borg (the UK-based academic director), edited and then published in three volumes (2006, 2008, 2009b), all available online through the Omani Ministry of Education portal. Many of these dissertations, particularly in the latter half of the project, were 'action research', i.e. they involved the teachers in systematically evaluating learning, planning interventions and carrying these out, observing, reflecting, analysing the results of their interventions, theorizing and perhaps then initiating fresh cycles before writing up the research (Burns, 1999).

One of these dissertations was Mohammed's, submitted 27 months after the observation and post-lesson discussion described above. His action research (Al-Marzooqi, 2008) focused on promoting oral interaction in English through group work, a mode of interaction novel in his context. Therefore, he needed to design group work activities and manage them in a way that maximized benefits (e.g. increased opportunities for talk, support for learner autonomy) and minimized drawbacks (e.g. "noise, domination by individual learners, confusion caused by learners' unfamiliarity with group work, and excessive use of the L1") (p. 44). He kept a research diary and also asked a fellow teacher, equipped with a specially-designed observation tool, to focus watchfully on a particular group in a sequence of lessons. The research design featured action cycles, with modifications (e.g. reductions in group size and the provision of greater support for cooperative learning) made on the basis of observations and reflections. After several cycles, positive learning outcomes were noted, in terms of improved learner strategies and motivated English language use. Al-Marzooqi felt that engaging in such small-scale classroom research was very beneficial for teachers trying to gain a greater understanding of how to support learning.

The issues Al-Marzooqi (2008) was dealing with also preoccupied other action researchers in this rapidly-changing educational context. Some teachers, for example, working with the new curriculum in modern schools, were adjusting to group work for the first time and seeking to use it more effectively (e.g. Al-Maqbali, 2008), while a teacher in Wyatt (2010b) was focused on using group work to support low achievers. Others concentrated

on developing speaking skills. Al-Farsi (2008), for example, still working with the older curriculum, designed communicative speaking tasks and then observed and audio-recorded groups engaged in these, providing evidence of authentic motivated speech. Developing young learners' abilities to use communication strategies through input followed by oral game-like practice was the thrust of Al-Senaidi's (2009) research. Other skills received attention too. Maryam Al-Jardani (2008) focused on developing process writing, while Al-Sheedi (2008) developed an extensive reading programme.

Another theme running through this body of research is self-assessment, an innovative feature of the new curriculum. Khalid Al-Jardani (2006), for example, observed Grade 5 learners assessing themselves, held conferences with them to clear up misconceptions, and monitored their progress, comparing their self-assessments with his own judgements. Over time, he found the majority became more accurate. Adopting a similar approach with her Grade 4 learners, Al-Sinani (2008) adapted and re-introduced a self-assessment task her learners struggled with. She interviewed learners and engaged in awareness-raising, reporting, after several action cycles, a better degree of fit between her judgements and learners' self-assessments. Al-Asalam's (2009) intervention in an older school not yet following the new curriculum involved introducing self-assessment activities and analysing how these helped.

In short, there is evidence of teachers engaging deeply in action research to fulfil goals that seemed highly relevant to their teaching contexts in a way that seems intrinsically-motivated. While some of their colleagues would have perhaps been more 'instrumentally-motivated' (Borg, 2013), less interested in the process and possibly opting for research designs that minimized reflection on teaching/learning, those benefiting from action research included teachers conscious of personal growth and the rewarding experience of helping others (Al-Marzooqi, 2008; Wyatt, 2010a). Furthermore, there was self-awareness of how the 'constructivist' nature of the programme (Mann, 2005) was helping them develop as researchers (Al-Sinani, Al-Senaidi and Etherton, 2009). This all suggests that if, in formal teacher education, context-specific support is tailored to needs, if conditions are favourable and if teachers are intrinsically-motivated, growth identifiable through qualitative research methods (e.g. as in Wyatt, 2010a) can occur, in terms of both deeper practical understandings of research and more carefully-nuanced classroom practice.

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