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Research and Reflective Practice in the ESL Classroom: Voices from Sri Lanka

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Abstract: Modern language education favours the model of a reflective teacher-researcher who is engaged in both individual and collaborative curriculum revision and teaching-learning environment improvement. The present paper addresses the issue of classroom research and reflective practice in current ESL pedagogy and teacher professional development. The theoretical introduction is followed by research findings recently gathered from Sri Lankan ESL teachers. The study aimed at ascertaining the extent to which Sri Lankan ESL teachers are involved in classroom research and discussing various reasons why they assume or do not assume the role of a teacher-researcher. The study reports interesting findings, calling for a wide-ranging discussion on reflective inquiry in the language classroom as theory and practice seem to be marching to a different tune.

Introduction

It is the information age and it is vital that education keeps pace with the rapid changes taking place in the global economy. Simultaneously, the roles of teachers and teaching strategies are constantly being modified to deal with the increasing complex conditions of classrooms and the specific needs of learners. These changes have introduced new trends in teaching and have increased education costs. Such changes have also encouraged governments to come up with new strategies to ensure more productivity in the field of education. Privatization and a demand for the greater accountability of teachers and education administrators appear to be the two main practices employed in many countries today (Saha & Dworkin, 2009).

Historically, teachers were regarded as consumers and implementers of the research outcomes of university academics (e.g. Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999). More specifically, in the Sri Lankan teaching context, classroom-based research was mainly conducted by academic researchers. The research populations were the ESL teachers and learners. According to this paradigm, ESL teachers were not problem posers or solvers. They were expected to implement research findings and curricula designed by those who were alien to the everyday classroom processes. In this transmissive tradition, the voice of the classroom practitioner was missing.

With time, the Sri Lankan government began to promote productivity in the field of education by giving education administrators greater responsibility.

Consequently, the teacher's role was given a significant global transformation. In fact, teachers lost their autonomy to a large extent since it was the administrators that tended to make the important decisions. What occurred in the classroom was the outcome of "social and political decisions taken (...) by administrators, bureaucrats and politicians" (Raheem & Gunsekara, 1994: 1). In other words, the teacher was degraded to the position of a "technician" (Villegas & Lucas, 2002; Adey et al., 2004). In this role, teachers were expected to uncritically implement only what had been prescribed by the government and sometimes by course book publishers. There was not much room for teachers' personal vision of teaching nor room for resilience with regard to the changing circumstances.

A vacuum was created by the silence of the practitioners. The importance of teachers having a voice was recently given more attention and was thoroughly discussed by educational researchers (Kincheloe, 2003; Hopkins, 2008; Pappas et al., 2011). As a result, the liberating concepts of "teacher-researcher" and "reflective practitioner" came into existence. Teachers are now considered to be active agents that contribute immensely to the development of school curriculum, course and materials design as well as classroom-based research (Fichtman Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2009).

It is notable that the paradigm of the teacher-researcher was considerably supported by Schön's theory of a reflective practitioner. The latter perceives teacher-researchers as intentional, systematic, ethical and contextual in their classroom observation and reflection. More complex processes of data gathering, recording, analysing, discussing and, last but not least, classroom decision making are the result. Thus, the emergence of the teacher-researcher paradigm has turned out to be nothing less than seeing the above mentioned "technicians" transformed into "professionals". They have become professionals who are keen to probe the questions and answers in their own field of expertise, disseminate the significance of that exploration and introduce "positive and powerful educational change" (Gallo, 2012: 32).

While reflective teaching has been systematically promoted by teacher educators for some time now (e.g. Adey et al., 2004; Farrell, 2007), the old model still exists in many teaching contexts. With this in mind, the present study aims at:

1. observing whether Sri Lankan ESL teachers conduct research in their classrooms and consider themselves reflective practitioners;
2. ascertaining whether classroom research is a difficult task for Sri Lankan ESL teachers, and if so, what causes this difficulty;
3. investigating various reasons why/why not Sri Lankan ESL teachers conduct research in their classrooms and how they utilise the data they gather in their research.

Language Teachers as Reflective Inquirers

The concept of teachers as researchers is not new. Strong arguments in favour of teachers having research responsibilities was introduced by Stenhouse in the 1970s. Initially, this issue was discussed in theory only. It was made clear that "a research tradition which is accessible to teachers and which feeds teaching must be created if education is to be significantly improved" (Stenhouse, 1975: 165). However, it was not until 2000 that practitioner research began to flourish. At this time, very good research outputs became available in the literature. Also, it was then that teacher professionalism became inextricably linked to classroom-based research, defined by Anderson (1990: 4) as "a disciplined attempt to

address questions or solve problems through the collection and analysis of primary data for the purpose of description, explanation, generalization and prediction”.

The notion of teacher professionalism differentiates between *restricted* and *extended* professionals (Hoyle, 1980). The former subsumes teachers who are limited in their work to their classroom context only. They produce high-quality lessons, apply appropriate assessment procedures and are responsive to the needs and wants of their students. The latter have inquisitive personalities and engage in research, try to better understand their teaching practice and its impact on their students, link theory and practice, reflect and question their own practice, engage in professional development activities in order to learn from colleagues in the field. Hence, extended professionals continuously develop as teachers, always perceiving their teaching practice, student learning experiences and classroom research in a wider educational and social context (Zwozdiak-Myers, 2012).

Likewise, Hopkins (2008) emphasises the teacher’s ability to systematically reflect on their classroom experience and construct meaning out of it. Hopkins’ position clarifies that classroom-based research is not a spontaneous activity. Quite the contrary, it is a well-planned process of questioning existing procedures, gathering and recording information and producing new insights. In other words, it is classroom research that enables teacher-researchers to experience self-examination, professional development and continuing change.

There are various reasons why language teachers conduct research. For instance, *persuasive research* is carried out to persuade someone about something. *Purposive research* aims at producing solutions to problems. *Political research* is intended to introduce changes within a policy context. Another purpose of teacher research is to narrow the gap between theory and practice (Ary et al., 2010). In the language classroom, teacher-researchers make observations, and then make case studies available to academics so that theoretical assumptions do not remain unrelated to practice. By doing so, teacher-researchers demonstrate that they are capable of theorising about professional practice (Santa & Santa, 1995: 447). Stremmel et al. (2002), in turn, claim that the principal objective of classroom-orientated research is metamorphosis. Teachers are stimulated to foster a better understanding not only of themselves, their classrooms and schools, but also of their teaching practice via reflective scrutiny.

With this in mind, language practitioners can be involved, individually or collaboratively, in four types of inquiry: *basic research*, *applied research*, *action research* and *evaluation research* (Wallace & van Fleet, 2012; Abbott & McKinney, 2013). The first type seeks to develop theory so as to advance the frontiers of knowledge. The second type utilises new information for use with everyday problems. This second inquiry is more practical in nature. Action research is thoroughly discussed in the literature (Burns, 2009; Mertler, 2012). This third type aims to solve clearly identified issues in order to improve them. Finally, evaluation research is conducted in situations when teacher-researchers want to assess the effectiveness of a course, project or teaching materials to see whether or not the initial goal has been reached.

Ethical issues must be considered to succeed when conducting successful and professional classroom research. Also, triangulation (e.g. data triangulation, investigator triangulation, theory triangulation, methodological triangulation) should be employed to enhance the validity and reliability of the research outcomes. Since these concepts have been discussed by the first author elsewhere (e.g. Cirocki, 2010, 2013a), they will not be the focus of the current discussion. What will be presented is the notions of reflection and reflective practice. Both

concepts are critical to classroom-based research and a teacher's professional development.

What then is reflection? According to educational psychologists (e.g. O'Donnell et al., 2012), reflection is a complex phenomenon, and therefore is defined in various ways. Its complexity stems from the fact that experts in the field still have not come to an agreement as to whether reflection is an ability, activity or process. For example, Pisapia (2009: 67) defines reflection as an "ability to use perceptions, experience and information" to be able to form conclusions about what occurred in the past or is taking place now to assist in guiding future actions. According to Boud et al. (1985: 19), reflection is a cognitive activity in which people have a chance to relive, analyse and evaluate their experiences. Kemmis (1985) perceives reflection as a socio-political process, in which humans recreate social life through communication, decision-making and social action.

These different approaches have contributed to the emergence of different types of reflection. For instance, Schön (1983) discusses *reflection-in-action* and *reflection-on-action*. The former is embedded in the action itself and perceived as a response to an unanticipated event. In other words, reflection-in-action guides a particular experience as it unfolds. Reflection-on-action, on the other hand, happens after a particular event has taken place, either through verbalised or non-verbalised thought. Mezirow (1990), in turn, lists *content reflection*, *process reflection* and *premise reflection*. The first asks "what", the second "how" and the last one "why". Also, the discussion of different types of reflection would not be complete without mentioning Senge's (1990) typology presented in terms of three levels: *technical reflection*, *practical reflection* and *critical reflection*. In education, technical reflection is concerned with the effectiveness of teaching techniques, strategies and skills. It can be related to Schön's reflection-on-action above, in which teachers ask the following questions: *What did I do? How can I do it better?* Practical reflection concentrates on the why and the what of professional practice. Critical reflection combines the first two levels of reflection as well as places teaching in a broader context where social, political, financial and ethical implications are taken into account.

It can be deduced that reflective teaching is a dynamic and spiralling process (Pollard et al., 2005). Teacher-researchers systematically collect data, critically analyse and discuss the data and, finally, share the research outcomes with other colleagues. Subsequently, informed and evidence-based decisions with regard to language curriculum and pedagogy are made. Although teachers regularly reflect on their lessons and the best pedagogy available to use in the classroom, it must be emphasised that classroom-based inquiry requires intentional reflection. The latter differs from daily reflection in that it is planned, active, persistent, and heightens a teacher's focus on problem-posing in their classrooms. This observation is supported by Bullough and Gitlin (2001). They argue that issues explored by teacher-researchers are specific to their own classrooms, and thus enable teacher-researchers to relate them to theories of teaching and learning. Given this evidence it can be inferred that teacher research links theory with practice. It is important to note that teacher research fills the gap that existed between the theories developed by external researchers and the reality in the classroom.

The general conclusion of this section is that reflective inquiry shapes the profession of teaching by giving teacher-researchers the opportunity to contribute to educational reform and to grow professionally. Reflective inquiry makes teacher-researchers engage in reflection as a means of development and

adaptation by carefully studying their own professional practice. Through careful examination, teacher-researchers become more reflective, critical and analytical of their own teaching. The life-long activity of a commitment to professional development takes place (Keyes 2000; Zeichner, 2003; Rust 2007).

Method

The empirical part of the article presents a small-scale research project. The main aim of this part is to investigate to what extent classroom research and reflective practice, which are thoroughly discussed in the literature (e.g. Schön, 1983; Farrell, 2007), are reflected in practice. The discussion begins with the description of the research population, research tools and limitations and ends with data analysis and discussion as well as research implications.

Participants

The research population consisted of forty five ESL Sri Lankan teachers. There were nine males and thirty six females, whose ages ranged from twenty seven to fifty six, with the mean equal to forty years old. The teachers worked in three types of schools: primary (4 participants), middle (2 participants) and secondary (39 participants). Participant qualifications were as follows: PhD (1 participant), MA (5 participants), BA (9 participants), National Diploma in ELT (7 participants), Postgraduate Diploma in English (7 participants) and Professional In-Service English-Teacher Training (16 participants).

Research Tools

Two types of instruments were used in this research project: hardcopy questionnaires and semi-structured interviews (see Appendix 1). The questionnaires consisted of 13 closed-ended questions. They allowed data to be collected from many respondents in a short period of time. Semi-structured interviews, on the other hand, provided an opportunity for the researchers to converse with the participants. Perspectives of the participants on issues linked to the current research project could then be considered (Patton, 2002). A set list of questions was used, yet extra questions were added when unexpected issues needed to be explored (Cirocki, 2013b).

Research Limitations

Before analysing and discussing the outcomes of the present study, it is important to state the two main limitations. The first limitation was that the research population was very small; it consisted of forty five Sri Lankan ESL teachers. Quantitative measures require large populations to be regarded as representations of groups of subjects to whom research outcomes can be transferred (Mackey & Gass, 2005). For this reason, the concept of the generalisability of the findings, that is, making inferences about the unobserved contingent on the observed, was cautiously handled. Since the population in this study was confined to a small number of Sri Lankan ESL teachers, the obtained

results may not be applicable to all ESL teachers from Sri Lanka. However, certain tendencies were observed and should be the subject matter of further inquiry. The second limitation was that the participants may have adopted different approaches to self-reports (Paulhus & Vazire, 2007). In interviews, researchers may take what their respondents say at face value. The researchers may make self-reported data replete with different sources of bias, including attribution (i.e. assigning positive results to one's own agency, whereas blaming negative events on external factors) and selective memory of the participants. With this in mind, all the interviewees were encouraged to think carefully to be able to provide detailed and honest answers to the given questions.

Data Analysis

The questionnaire revealed that the majority of the respondents believed that teachers should conduct research in the classroom. The respondents' opinions were as follows: 17 (38%) very important, 24 (53%) important and 4 (9%) moderately important. Likewise, the respondents considered that classroom research should be the duty of an ESL teacher. However, in this question, the distribution of opinions was more varied: 5 (11%) of the respondents strongly agreed, 33 (73%) agreed, 4 (9%) were undecided and 3 (7%) strongly disagreed. The results are presented in Figure 1 and Figure 2 below.

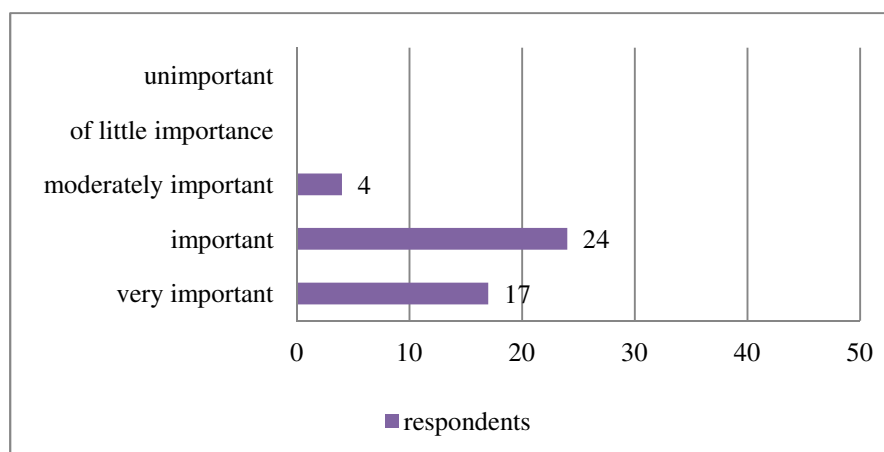


Figure 1. The importance of conducting research in the classroom

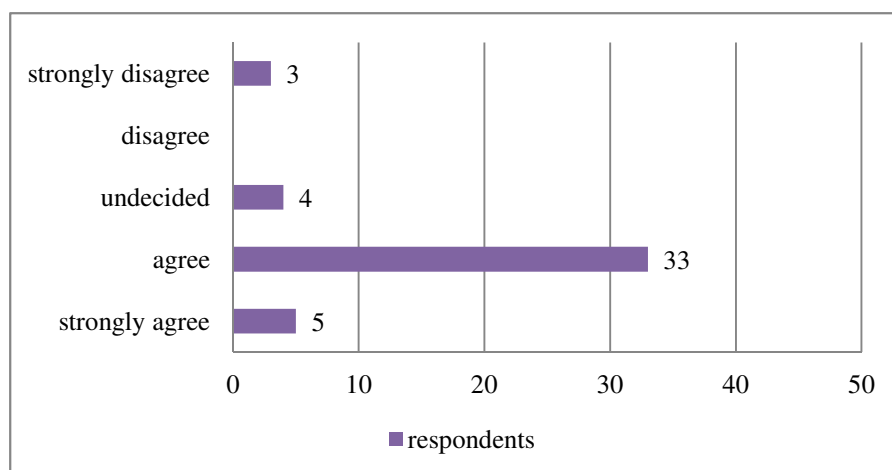


Figure 2. Classroom research should be the duty of an ESL teacher

In the third question, the respondents were asked whether or not they agreed that classroom research should be made compulsory for all ESL teachers. It should be noted that answers to the third question were not very different from those of the second question. A number of interviewees also stated that:

Yes, I do agree with this statement. However, what we should bear in mind is that classroom research should not obscure teaching. Teaching is the priority.

Well, I think it should be made compulsory, but this cannot mean that teachers are involved in it every day. One or two small studies a year should be sufficient.

The questionnaire subsequently showed that 26 (58%) respondents attended a research module/course while being trained to be a teacher. The rest of the population, that is 42%, stated that such a module was not part of their course of study or training. To be more precise, in the latter group (i.e. 19 respondents), 53% clarified that research methods were a small part of a different module. Only 6 (13%) participants strongly agreed that they were well prepared to carry out classroom research. In all the other cases, 8 (18%) participants agreed, 10 (22%) were undecided and 21 (47%) disagreed with this statement. The outcomes are presented in Figure 3.

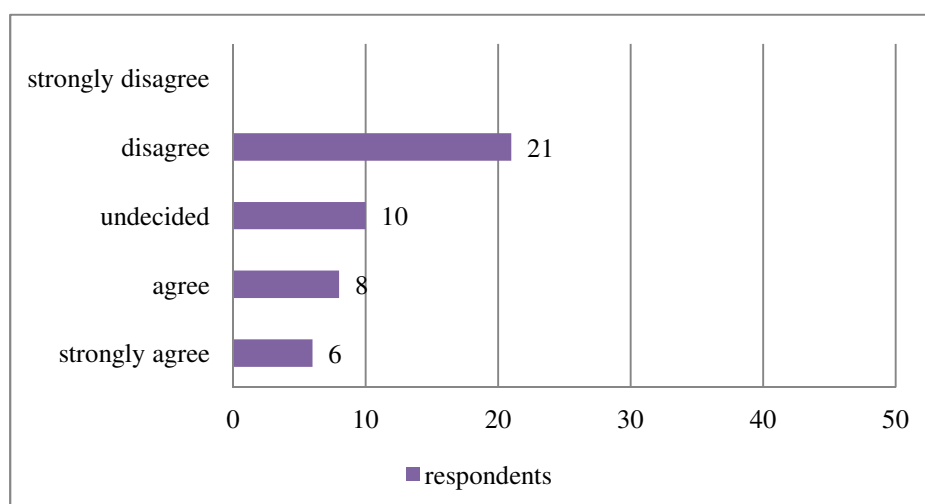


Figure 3. Good preparation for classroom research on the part of ESL teachers

In addition, a number of interviewees expressed regret that they had had no chance to attend a proper research methods module during their studies. They stated that:

My module called Research Methodology was very short. It was theory-based, which means I was asked to do a lot of reading, and then memorise facts. I would have preferred a combination of theory and practice, with appropriate examples for the ESL classroom.

I wish I had had an opportunity to attend such a module. I would know how to conduct research. Basics of research methods would have been sufficient, I think. In general, I must say my course was great, but reflective practice certainly was not one of its objectives.

Some interviewees reported that their modules did not discuss research aspects in considerable depth. Others confirmed that research methods were a small component part of a different module. The comments are as follows:

Although I enjoyed my course very much, the research methods module was its weakness. Well, the lack of the research methods I should have said. There were two or three theoretical sessions on classroom research; it was part of a different module. I am aware that teachers should do research on their own teaching, but I have no idea of how to go about it. Sorry.

In my course, the basics of research methods were presented in an interesting way. However, the problem was there was no proper research methods module. This topic was part of a different module, so we had no more than 3 sessions altogether. Tough.

In general, the respondents admitted that classroom research is difficult. Thirty four (75%) respondents agreed with this statement, whereas 3 (7%) were undecided and 8 (18%) disagreed. The respondents also listed various aspects that make classroom research difficult (see Figure 4). The most common issues were: designing research tools (28 respondents, 62%), analysing data (28 respondents, 62%), formulating proper research questions (26 respondents, 58%), collecting data (23 respondents, 51%) and handling ethical issues (8 respondents, 18%).

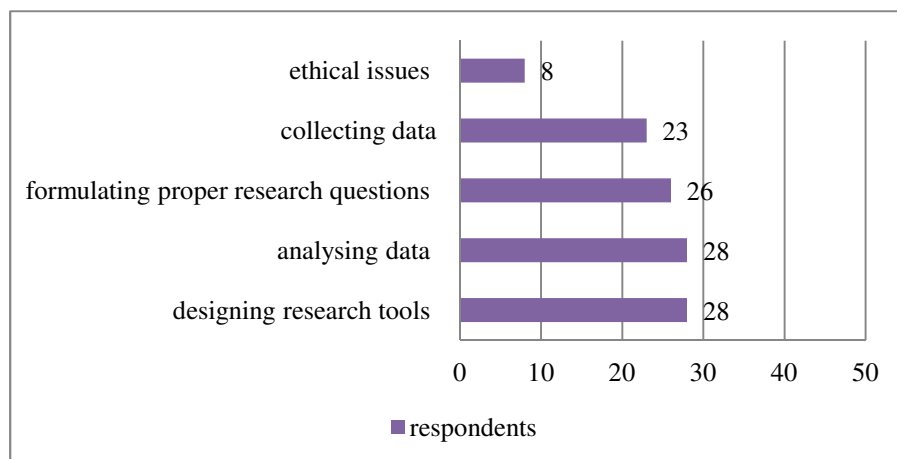


Figure 4. Areas that make classroom research a complex task

Similar observations were made by three interviewees. Their comments were as follows:

What I find difficult about classroom research is designing research instruments, for example, questionnaires. You need to ask very specific questions and use a sort of scale so that the questions look alike, and follow a sort of pattern. I would not mind doing research if I had professionally designed questionnaires. Otherwise, I do not know if my tools are adequate.

I have no idea how to do statistical analysis. I assume I should use specifically designed software, but my computer skills are lacking a little.

For me, although I know the weaknesses of my classroom, it is always difficult to formulate research questions. So, in the end, I usually give up. However, I can see in journals that they tend to be technical, especially the verbs used in them.

Questions eight (see Figure 5) and nine (see Figure 6) were related to the respondents' actual engagement in classroom research and their wish to be involved in this kind of professional activity. In the former question, 3 (7%) respondents were very often involved in classroom research and 7 (16%) respondents were sometimes involved. The other two options were: rarely (19 respondents, 42%) and never (16 respondents, 36%). According to the latter question, 12 (27%) respondents would like to be involved in research projects very often, 26 (58%) sometimes and 7 (16%) rarely.

Figure 5. The level of involvement of ESL teachers in classroom research

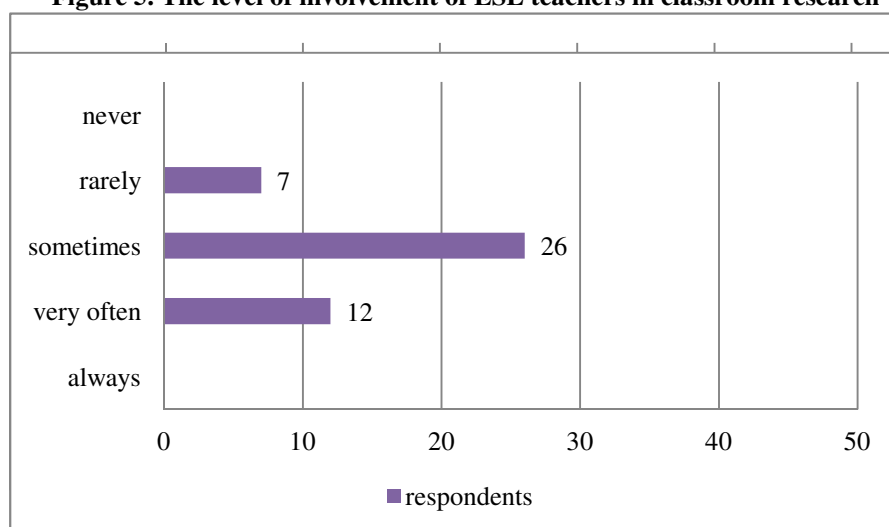
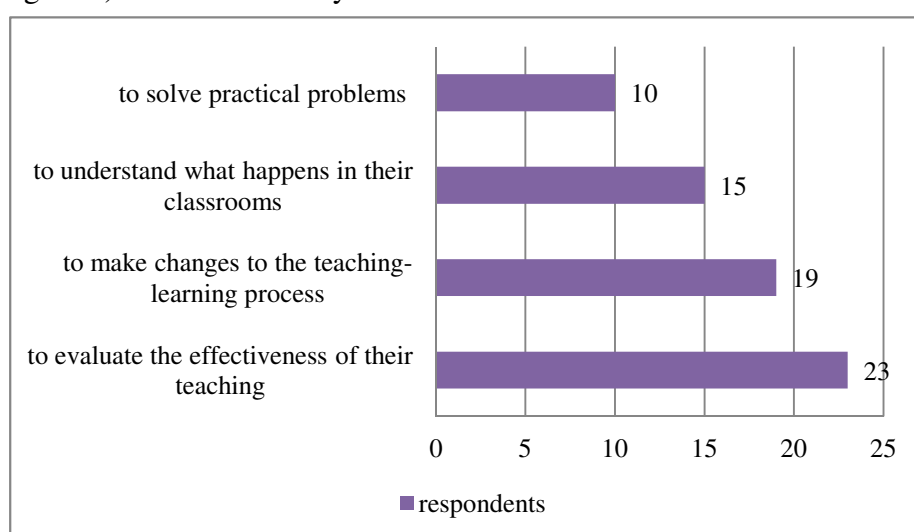


Figure 6. Ambition of ESL teachers to be involved in classroom research

The twenty nine respondents who do research in the classroom, at different levels of frequency, said they engaged in this activity for four reasons (see Figure 7). The reasons they stated were: to evaluate the effectiveness of their



teaching (23 respondents, 51%), to make changes in the teaching-learning process (19 respondents, 42%), to understand what happens in their classrooms (15 respondents, 33%) and to solve practical problems (10 respondents, 22%).

Figure 7. Reasons for doing research in the classroom

Correspondingly, some interviewees commented that:

I do research because I want to measure how effective I am in my teaching and to find out what else I can do to make my students successful.

I do research to find out about my weaknesses and classroom problems. The results help me to improve where I, something or somebody else is failing. Sometimes it is me, sometimes it is my students and sometimes it is the system.

Additionally, the respondents added that they conduct both quantitative and mixed methods studies in their classrooms. In their inquiries, the respondents utilised three research tools: questionnaires (23 respondents, 51%), observation sheets (10 respondents, 22%) and tests (8 respondents, 18%). Diaries/journals, portfolios, interviews and checklists were never used.

Another question in the present study referred to a research project’s final stage. The respondents were asked what happens to the research results when they finalise their data analysis. As the questionnaire showed, the research outcomes were utilised in three ways (see Figure 8): 27 (60%) respondents kept them for themselves to be used for improving their own teaching practice, 20 (44%) respondents shared them with the parents of their students, expecting parental involvement in the teaching-learning process and 11 (24%) respondents used them with their colleagues with a view to improving language education. None of the respondents published the results to distribute important information among other colleagues nor did any of the respondents present the results at workshops/conferences to enhance their own professional development.

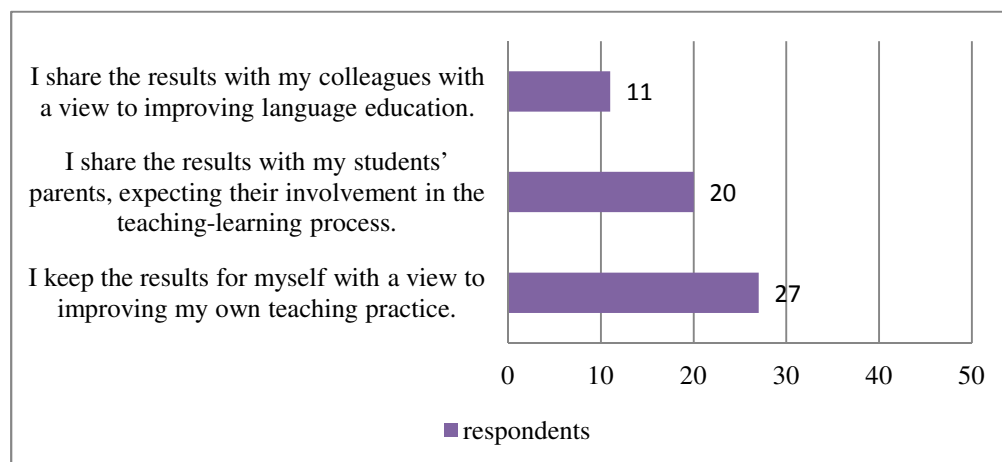


Figure 8. The fate of empirical results after research completion

The interviewees appeared to share a number of these points. Here are some of the comments:

I use the results whenever I meet my students' parents. If the results are good, it is OK. It is always nice to talk to parents about how good their kids are or how effective their learning is. However, if the situation is the opposite, I expect parents to take action and help me to solve a particular problem.

It is good to use such data while talking to colleagues at work. It helps to solve problems much more quickly. Different teachers use or are familiar with different strategies or techniques. Also, colleagues often have different teaching experiences.

I never thought of publishing the results. I am not an academic or a university researcher. They both publish their results; my job is different. I teach, and then test my students' progress.

As the questionnaire further reveals, 16 (35%) respondents had never conducted research in their teaching practice. The reasons varied and are presented in Figure 9. For example, 16 (35%) respondents said they have no time for classroom research. The same number of respondents report they have not been trained to conduct research. There were 12 (27%) respondents who believed they had insufficient knowledge of statistical measures, whereas 11 (24%) respondents reported difficulty designing research tools. There were 10 (22%) respondents who were not interested in this kind of professional activity. In addition, 9 (20%) respondents believed that teachers should teach and not be involved in research. Finally, 3 (7%) respondents blamed their superiors for not encouraging them to engage in classroom research.

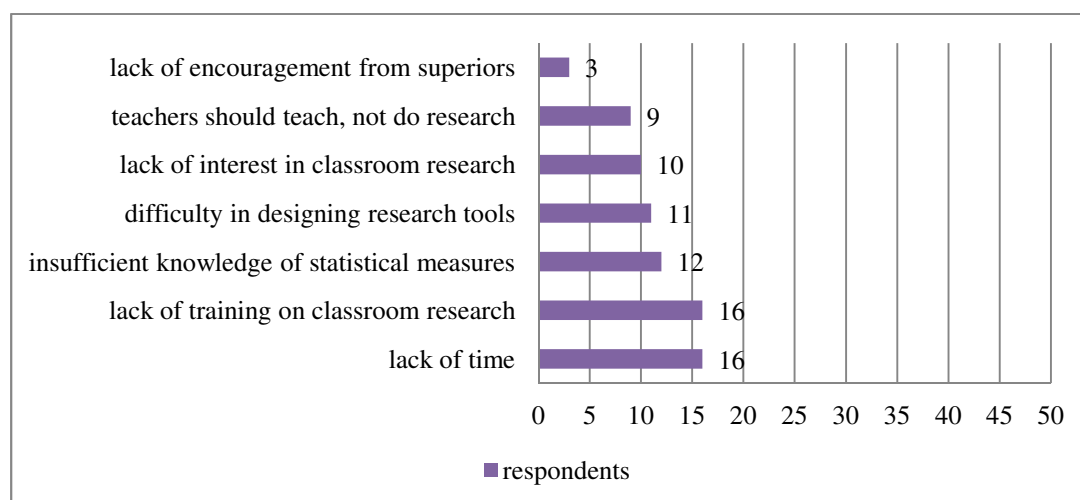


Figure 9. Reasons for not engaging in classroom research

The following reasons for not engaging in classroom research were given by two interviewees:

I never get involved in research as I have no time. Apart from teaching, I have a lot of paper work. Bureaucracy is getting worse and worse these days.

Much as I like my job and my students, classroom research and statistical analysis of data do not appeal to me. I am not good at calculus at all.

Data Discussion

The present study revealed that Sri Lankan ESL teachers consider classroom research and reflective practice as important and useful elements of a teacher’s career. The teachers emphasised that both elements have a positive impact on teaching performance and professional development. The same conviction is also thoroughly discussed in the literature. For instance, according to Lange (1990: 249-50) reflective practice assists teachers in developing their “latitude to experiment within a framework of growing knowledge and experience” and in developing an approach towards becoming an expert. It also enables teachers to probe their relations with students at different levels, analyse student skills, competences and learning strategies as well as discuss student achievements and failures in a realistic framework. Blank (2009: 42) affirms that

reflective practice guarantees the development of “greater levels of self-awareness about themselves as practitioners and as people”, which consequently leads to professional and personal growth.

As the outcomes of the present study further show, the respondents concur that classroom research should be both the duty of an ESL teacher and a compulsory element of teaching. This mature attitude is in agreement with Lyons’ (2010) perspective on reflective practice in the classroom. As Lyons (2010) notes, teachers must be systematically dedicated to reflection and reflective inquiry. In this way, teachers can attend to the crucial questions of their own practices to both reform and enhance education. This approach, however, does not seem to reflect the current state of affairs in the Sri Lankan context. The present project discloses that a large number of secondary school teachers admit that they have limited knowledge about research methods and about conducting classroom research. The respondents maintain that not all institutions that offer teaching qualifications provide research methods modules; those that do, on the other hand, do not always run well-designed and in-depth sessions. Such circumstances may contribute to problems connected with the actual process of doing classroom research in a professional way. Professionalism and competence in conducting classroom research are essential and related to such issues as confidentiality, anonymity, cultural sensitivity and the appropriate choice of research instruments (Gregory, 2003; Mackey & Gass, 2005; Cirocki, 2013a, 2013b). If these aspects are not skilfully handled by teacher-researchers or the behaviour of teacher-researchers happens to be improper during individual stages of a research project, the consequences may be disastrous. Results may be distorted, putting respondents at risk (e.g. a psychological trauma) or prompting hostility with regard to race, culture and gender issues (Cirocki, 2013a).

Insubstantial training in research methods and classroom research is probably the main reason why only a small number of teachers admit that they feel they are well-prepared for reflective inquiry. It also may be the main reason why so many respondents stated that classroom research is a complex task. As the respondents pointed out, they have difficulty in designing research tools (62%), analysing data (62%), formulating proper research questions (58%), collecting data (51%) and handling ethical issues (18%). Insufficient knowledge of research methods, as question 12 reveals, also appears to be the reason why ESL teachers refrain from conducting research in Sri Lankan classrooms.

Another interesting observation was that the respondents found it difficult to collect data in the classroom. Teachers do not really need to actively look for data. Classrooms are replete with data. Teachers must become aware that all the essays, portfolios and tests they store in their offices, be they part of formative or summative assessment, are research data that can be both qualitatively and quantitatively scrutinised and assessed. Of course, teachers need to decide what kind of data they intend to collect at a particular moment and what instruments will best fit in with their data collection procedure. The most important thing to remember, however, is that utilising student assignments as research data must not negatively influence student marks or the teacher-student relationship (Pinnegar & Hamilton, 2009). When properly implemented, the data collection procedure will enable teachers to assess both the academic and behavioural performance of their students. As Zepeda (2009) and Stahmer et al. (2011: 109) note, systematic data collection in the classroom performs a pivotal role in boosting learning and keeping track of student progress as well as in “identify[ing] patterns through which a holistic image of teaching can be created”.

Needless to say, all these aspects greatly contribute to improving language education.

As mentioned earlier, Sri Lankan ESL teachers acknowledge the significance of reflective inquiry. In addition, all respondents expressed a willingness to be involved in classroom research. The frequency of their engagement in this kind of professional development activity varied from “very frequent” to “seldom”. Currently, however, the situation does not look so promising. Only 10 (22%) respondents admitted that they are sometimes involved in classroom inquiry. They were involved in either quantitative or mixed-methods research. The instruments they used in their studies included questionnaires (23 respondents, 51%), observation sheets (10 respondents, 22%) and tests (8 respondents, 18%). It should also be added that the respondents preferred conducting quantitative research. As they stated, it is less complex and can be easily carried out because quantitative instruments allow teacher-researchers to collect a large pool of data in a short span of time. This is in agreement with Mackey and Gass’ (2005) and Bellini and Rumrill’s (2009) approaches to quantitative inquiry. These researchers additionally emphasised that one of the main advantages of quantitative research is hypotheses testing. As they further noted, hypotheses can be established a priori; their truthfulness can then be determined through various instruments and procedures.

Despite the fact that in most cases (78%), Sri Lankan ESL teachers do not consider themselves to be reflective practitioners, those teachers who are engaged in classroom research do so for a number of reasons. Firstly, 23 (51%) respondents admitted that they wanted to evaluate the effectiveness of their own teaching. Secondly, 19 (42%) respondents do research to make changes in the teaching-learning process. Thirdly, 15 (33%) respondents wanted to understand what happens in their classrooms. Last but not least, according to 10 (22%) respondents, research helped them to solve practical problems they encountered in the classroom. Given this evidence, it can be inferred that teachers who conducted research in their classrooms did so for specific purposes. The findings clarified that teachers got involved in research to improve classroom processes by setting new and challenging goals, and then established a plan for enhancing educational excellence (Burns, 2009; Norton, 2009).

An interesting observation, but at the same time one which is difficult to accept, is that only 3% of the research population conducted research to increase professionalism in their own careers. Despite the fact that Sri Lankan teachers are aware of the relationship between reflective inquiry and professional development, as the initial part of the present discussion reveals, practical implications seem to be a different matter. Such a situation opposes the key principles of professional development discussed in *Continuing Professional Development: An Entitlement for All* issued by the General Teaching Council for Wales in 2002. According to this document, teachers are required to systematically enhance their skills to make certain that the teaching they deliver continues to reflect the best practices. More specifically, continuing professional development should take many forms, undertaking action research being one of them. The latter, however, needs to be given special attention in Sri Lanka.

Finally, what needs to be discussed is what happens to research results once teacher-researchers have analysed their data. The present study showed that 27 (60%) respondents kept the results for themselves to be used to improve their own teaching practice, whereas 20 (44%) respondents shared them with the parents of their students, expecting parental involvement in the teaching-learning process. Also, a group of respondents, that is 24%, used the results to inform their

colleagues, who were then expected to contribute to improving language education in their own context. Oddly enough, none of the respondents published the results or presented them at workshops and conferences, not even at the local level. Anderson (2003), by contrast, underscores that both publishing and presenting results at conferences are perfect ways for teachers to enhance their professional development. Unfortunately, as noted earlier, in Sri Lanka, reflective inquiry is a concept that, to a large extent, exists in theory only. The use of reflective inquiry in practice still leaves a lot to be desired.

Conclusion with Implications for Teacher Education Included

The purpose of this article has been to shed light on reflective practice in the Sri Lankan ESL context. The theoretical part briefly describes what this kind of practice entails. The empirical part shows how theory is related to practice at the classroom level. The findings indicate that reflective practice still has not made an impact on the ESL context in Sri Lanka. In order to improve the current situation, a number of implications for ESL teacher education and professional development are offered below.

1. Proper compulsory research methods modules/sessions should be required in all ESL teacher education degrees as well as ESL training courses. Such sessions should equip students with the essential research skills so that teachers are able to independently undertake their future classroom-based research projects. More specifically, such modules/sessions should provide an introduction to the nature of research, and should provide extensive practice in identifying and defining research questions and hypotheses. Quantitative and qualitative research methods should be extensively discussed as well as data collection and analysis techniques. Sampling theory and survey methods should be thoroughly explored.
2. ESL teacher-trainees and qualified teachers should be systematically encouraged to attend conferences or professional development workshops. Teachers must realise that through conferences and workshops they will deepen their knowledge of key issues in the field (e.g. reflective practice). At the same time, teachers will be exposed to different presentation styles. Listening to other colleagues is likely to inspire the research ideas of individual teachers. Socialising with active researchers, which takes place during a conference or a workshop, will allow for building relationships, and possibly, for future research collaboration.
3. School authorities should also establish interest groups for ESL teachers. These groups can function within one educational institution or across institutions and at a regional or national level. The purpose of such groups should be classroom-based research projects, where teachers can be actively involved in reflective inquiry and its essentials. Research outcomes should be published so as to inform colleagues of the contributions.

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Appendix One

Conducting Classroom Research in Sri Lanka

ESL Teacher Questionnaire

I. Questions

1. How important, in your opinion, is conducting research in the ESL classroom? (Please circle one letter from **a** to **e**.)
 - a) very important
 - b) important
 - c) moderately important
 - d) of little importance
 - e) unimportant
2. To what extent do you agree that conducting research is a duty of an ESL teacher? (Please circle one letter from **a** to **e**.)
 - a) strongly agree
 - b) agree
 - c) undecided
 - d) disagree
 - e) strongly disagree
3. To what extent do you agree that conducting classroom research should be made compulsory to all ESL teachers? (Please circle one letter from **a** to **e**.)
 - a) strongly agree
 - b) agree
 - c) undecided
 - d) disagree
 - e) strongly disagree
4. Did you attend a Research Module/Course while being trained to be a teacher? (Please circle one letter from **a** to **d**.)
 - a) yes
 - b) no, because it was not on offer
 - c) no, as I decided to attend a different module
 - d) other

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5. To what extent do you agree that you are well prepared to do classroom research? (Please circle one letter from **a** to **e**.)
 - a) strongly agree
 - b) agree
 - c) undecided
 - d) disagree
 - e) strongly disagree
6. To what extent do you agree that conducting classroom research is difficult? (Please circle one letter from **a** to **e**.)
 - a) strongly agree
 - b) agree
 - c) undecided
 - d) disagree
 - e) strongly disagree
7. What makes classroom research difficult for you? (Please circle the appropriate letters below.)
 - a) formulating proper research questions

- b) designing research tools (e.g. questionnaires)
- c) collecting data
- d) analysing data
- e) ethical issues
- f) other

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8. How often are you involved in classroom research? (Please circle one letter from **a** to **e**.)

- a) always
- b) very often
- c) sometimes
- d) rarely
- e) never

9. How often would you like to be involved in classroom research? (Please circle one letter from **a** to **e**.)

- a) always
- b) very often
- c) sometimes
- d) rarely
- e) never

10. What type of research do you do? (Please circle the appropriate letters below.)

- a) quantitative (e.g. experiments, surveys, etc.)
- b) qualitative (e.g. case studies, diary studies, observations, etc.)
- c) mixed methods (quantitative + qualitative)

11. What type of research tools do you use in your research? (Please circle the appropriate letters below.)

- a) questionnaires
- b) observation sheets
- c) diaries/journals
- d) portfolios
- e) observation sheets/schedules
- f) interview guides/question lists
- g) checklists
- h) tests
- i) other

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12. Why do/don't you conduct classroom research? (Choose one option below, A or B, and circle the appropriate answers in the selected box.)

A. Why do you conduct classroom research?
a) to understand what happens in my classroom
b) to formulate problems that exist in my classroom
c) to evaluate the effectiveness of my teaching
d) to make changes to the teaching-learning process
e) to contribute to curriculum development
f) to increase professionalism
g) to introduce innovations in the teaching-learning process
h) to solve practical problems
i) to interconnect theory, practice and research
j) other (please specify)

B. Why don't you conduct classroom research?
a) I have no time.
b) I'm not interested in it.
c) I haven't been trained to conduct research.
d) Teachers should teach and not be involved in research.
e) I have insufficient knowledge of statistical measures.
f) I have insufficient knowledge of designing research tools.
g) There is no need to connect teaching with doing research.
h) I am not encouraged by my superiors.
i) I am not rewarded for doing research.
j) other (please specify)

13. On completion of your investigations, what happens to the research results when you have analysed them? (Please circle the appropriate letters from a to f.)

- a) I keep the results for myself with a view to improving my own teaching practice.
 - b) I share the results with my colleagues with a view to improving language education.
 - c) I share the results with my students' parents, expecting their involvement in the teaching-learning process.
 - d) I publish the results to share important information with other colleagues.
 - e) I present the results at workshops/conferences to enhance my professional development.
 - f) other
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II. Profile of the Respondent

1. How old are you? (Please put the number in the space provided below.)
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2. What is your gender? (Please circle one letter below.)
a) male b) female
3. What type of school do you teach in? (Please circle one letter below.)

a) primary school b) middle school c) secondary school

4. **What is your highest teaching qualification?** (Please put the name in the space provided below.)

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Thank you very much for completing this questionnaire!

Conducting Classroom Research in Sri Lanka

ESL Teacher Interview Questions

1. What is your opinion on conducting research in the classroom? Do you think it is important or unimportant? Why?
2. Have you been trained to be a teacher-researcher? Did you attend any courses/modules on classroom research/research methods? Describe them please.
3. Is conducting classroom research difficult for you? If so, what makes it difficult?
4. What is your involvement in classroom research? How often do you do it? Who with? What do/did you investigate? What instruments do/did you use?
5. Why do/don't you do research in your teaching practice?
6. If you are involved in classroom research, what do you do with the collected data?
7. Do you consider yourself a reflective practitioner? Why/Why not?