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Teacher to Researcher: Reflections on a New Action Research Program for University EFL Teachers

Docente a investigador: reflexiones sobre un nuevo programa de investigación-acción para profesores universitarios

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One of the current challenges facing many universities is how to support teachers in becoming researchers. This article discusses the experiences at a small private Chilean university of a new action research programme that was developed as a vehicle for helping teachers to become involved in research and write a research publication for peer-reviewed journals. We present findings from research into similar programmes about relevant factors for their success, describe the programme developed at the university with five English as a Foreign Language teachers in 2016, and discuss some reflections on this first year of the programme.

Key words: Action research programme, university teachers.

Uno de los desafíos que deben enfrentar muchas universidades actualmente es cómo brindar apoyo a sus docentes para formarlos como investigadores. Este artículo analiza las experiencias en una pequeña universidad privada en Chile de un nuevo programa de investigación-acción que desarrollaron como medio para ayudar a sus docentes a realizar investigaciones y redactar publicaciones para una revista revisada por pares. En el presente se abordan evaluaciones de otros programas parecidos, especialmente sobre los factores relevantes para su éxito. También se detalla el programa desarrollado en la universidad en el 2016 con cinco profesores de inglés como lengua extranjera, y se presentan algunas reflexiones sobre este primer año del programa.

Palabras clave: docentes universitarios, programa de investigación-acción.

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Introduction

Across the world, there is increasing pressure on university teachers to become research active. In order to rise to the challenge, teachers may opt to earn a master's, or even doctorate. In order to drive up publications, universities may establish requirements and incentives for training (diplomas in research skills, master's degrees, and doctorates) and publications, and also try to foster a culture favourable to research, including presentations of research carried out, discussion groups, and so forth. Nonetheless, it is often still difficult to cross the bridge from university teacher to become a confident, motivated, publishing researcher (Archer, 2008; Bai & Hudson, 2011; Tran, Burns, & Ollerhead, 2017).

One of the reasons for which research activity from university teachers is being encouraged is the belief that it will lead to better undergraduate teaching, but evidence supporting this claim is scarce (Prince, Felder, & Brent, 2007). Classroom-based research, however, can lead to the improvement of practices at the undergraduate level. Several studies (e.g., Atay, 2008; Banegas, Pavese, Velázquez, & Vélez, 2013; Burns, 2014; Çelik & Dikilitaş, 2014) have shown that one type of classroom-based research, action research, can also help teachers to develop professionally in different ways, such as enhancing knowledge of their teaching practices, deepening their understanding of their students' needs, and improving their autonomy and motivation.

In 2015 at Universidad Chileno-Británica de Cultura (UCBC) in Santiago, very little research was being carried out. As a result of external policy pressures, and internal beliefs that more research would be beneficial to us as an institution, we resolved to develop a critical mass of researcher-teachers capable of producing research that would nourish our undergraduate teaching and would stand up to the scrutiny of peer review. Several of our teachers had professed interest in carrying out research, but, despite many holding master's degrees, they believed their skills for carrying it out and publishing the outcomes were inadequate. As part of our multi-faceted

plan to increase research activity, we developed a year-long Teachers Action Research Programme (TARP), piloted in 2016. We have previously reported on the first four months of implementing this programme (Burns, Westmacott, & Hidalgo, 2016); in this article, we reflect on the experiences of the whole first year in the hope that it may be of use for other higher education institutions considering how to develop teachers' research skills or implementing similar programmes.

Background

Action research offers a form of systematic inquiry that is usually appealing to teachers as it enables a focus on areas of their own practice that they consider worth investigating. This kind of research aims to make an impact on students' learning and to deepen teachers' understanding of issues in their classrooms that may be puzzling, problematic, or intriguing (Burns, 2010). Teachers may want to address classroom topics or questions that have perplexed them for some time, or understand more comprehensively what they need to change in their thinking and practices as they develop a new curriculum or course, or adopt new forms of assessment. Alternatively, they may wish to evaluate the outcomes of introducing new materials, resources, or technology to their students, or to experiment with different kinds of tasks to discover which lead to more effective learning. Action research, with its iterative cycles of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting (Burns, 2010; Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988) offers an empirical process, whereby teachers not only operate in the classroom but also observe systematically the practical effects of their actions and behaviours.

Despite the growing popularity and spread of action research in recent years, for teachers who have been used to considering themselves first and foremost as classroom practitioners, embarking on any kind of research is a challenging undertaking. This situation is all the more daunting if the institutional feasibility conditions for supporting teacher research are not

available to them. Borg and Sanchez (2014, p. 3) note 14 conditions, in the form of questions that could be used for auditing, to gauge the feasibility of teacher research. Among these conditions are questions such as: Will teachers have access to appropriate advice or mentoring?; Is the time required for teacher research available?; Will the teacher's school support their efforts to do teacher research?; Will the teachers have access to a community of teacher researchers?; Will they have opportunities to share their work?; Will they have access to appropriate resources?; Can teacher research be integrated into the teacher's routine practices? They also argue that since research requires additional commitments of time, intellect, and emotion, teacher research is likely to be more feasible "when teachers are able to use skills, knowledge and opportunities which already exist" (p. 2).

Some of the early "how-to" literature on language teacher classroom action research appeared to assume, rather unproblematically, that if teachers were introduced to concepts, processes, and methods of doing research (e.g., Allwright & Bailey, 1991; Nunan, 1989) they would be able to conduct it. Work with teachers in Australia (by Burton, 1992, on the Languages Inservice Program for Teachers (LIPT), and Burns, 2000, on the Australian Adult Migrant English Program), and in Oman (by Borg, 2006, with teacher researchers) has shown that input about action research is undoubtedly important. However, analyses of different programmes have emphasised the importance of additional factors for effectively supporting teacher research. Burns (2000) and Borg (2006) have observed the positive impact of ensuring teachers' participation is voluntary and that they are able to select research areas they consider relevant to their own practices. Having institutional support and buy-in, as well as time allocated to carry out the research, have also been noted by these authors (Borg, 2006; Burns, 2000; Burton, 1992) and by facilitators of programmes in Turkey and Chile (Dikilitaş, 2014; Smith, Connelly, & Rebolledo, 2014).

On-going support, from working collaboratively with a partner; being part of a peer discussion group and experiencing individual mentoring, can also be key (Borg 2006; Burns, 2000; Burton 1992, Dikilitaş, 2014; Smith et al., 2014). Burns (2010) and Burton (2009) argue, too, that providing opportunities to present and publish work can be valuable for encouraging teacher research. Burns (2000) noted that flexible timeframes and processes were helpful. More recently, reflecting on a national action research program conducted with teachers in the Australian ELICOS (English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students) sector, Burns (2015) has outlined additional supportive factors that may need to be considered as teachers pursue their research: allowing sufficient time for teachers' reflection on and absorption of the initial information they receive about research; extending periods of time to complete the research; encouraging teachers to conduct research with partners for further support; considering research "themes" where teachers work on an "overarching" research area within which they select their own focus, which allows for comparing and contrasting outcomes; and using social media and technology to maintain opportunities for ongoing contact.

Against this overall background of the kinds of support required by teacher researchers, some recent studies have also started to look at teachers' sense of capacity or efficacy to carry out research and what contributes to how these attributes develop (or not) over time. Yuan and Lee (2014), noting the impact of facilitative teacher-university researcher partnerships in this process, found that the teachers they worked with in Hong Kong gradually changed their pre-conceptions about research as they learned more about action research and learned to cope with challenging contextual constraints, which led to professional learning and development. Wyatt and Dikilitaş (2015) found that the three teacher-researchers they studied in Turkey, who all began with low self-beliefs about their

abilities to do research, became more efficacious as they engaged in continuing professional development that involved doing research. Mentoring, encouraging, and supporting their autonomy, and providing opportunities for them to present their research all contributed to their development as researchers. Edwards and Burns (2016a) have observed that the development of a teacher researcher identity is or has been related to teachers' sense of agency to learn more about research, make choices, take control, and pursue their goals, all of which contributed to their development and self-identification as researchers. In achieving agency as researchers, however, teachers also needed to negotiate relationships within their workplaces with colleagues and managers, part of which was the extent to which they were given recognition as researchers within the workplace context. More recently, Tran et al. (2017) document the tensions and challenges felt by language teachers working at a Vietnamese university as they responded, without any structured institutional support and mentoring, to new demands from their institution to become teachers as well as researchers. While some teachers welcomed the institutional requirements that they become researchers as well as teachers and believed they had the capacity and interest to develop good research skills, others felt overwhelmed, pressured, and increasingly disheartened about their capacity to achieve these goals. The authors point out that for teachers to make the transition to researchers successfully it is important that their institutions provide clear guidelines about expectations, offer mentoring support, and provide teachers with expertise, time, and collaborative opportunities to learn from each other. In short, they reinforce the findings of other studies already mentioned in which institutional support for language teacher research is essential if teachers are to make the successful transition to research.

The UCBC Teacher Action Research Programme Pilot¹

The UCBC is a small, niche university that has existed for just over 10 years with the main purpose of training competent bilingual (Spanish-English) teachers and translators who can contribute to Chilean society. The second author of this article (hereafter the Local Mentor), who works at the UCBC, invited the first author (hereafter the Facilitator), who has considerable experience in action research but lives in a different country, to develop and facilitate the action research programme collaboratively. It was agreed that the Facilitator would provide an initial three-day workshop at UCBC for the teachers and would then, from her home country, liaise with the Local Mentor as the project proceeded across the year. The Facilitator would also be in contact as required with the teachers to guide the focus and progress of their research and the design of data tools, and to make suggestions about data analysis and resources from the literature. The Local Mentor would maintain close local contact with the teachers through regular meetings and discussions at UCBC. In short, one of the main aims of the programme was to provide teachers with on-going support from both the Facilitator and the Local Mentor to help them to develop and implement their projects, and to write them up for publication over a year.

At the end of 2015, UCBC English language teachers were invited to participate in TARP, investigating a topic related to their teaching which was of interest to them. For the pilot, five UCBC teachers volunteered to participate. They comprised four female Chilean teachers and one male British teacher and had all taught English in Chilean schools and universities for at least ten years. Their academic backgrounds varied considerably: Three had master's degrees in related areas, one had a PhD in literature, and one had not studied at the postgraduate level. None had previously carried out an action research

¹ For a fuller account of the context and participants, please see Burns et al. (2016).

project, and only one had previously published a research article. Three of the teachers opted to work together as a group, while the other two decided to pursue individual projects. Thus, three projects were conducted during the TARP pilot.

The initial three-day workshop was held in January 2016. Its aims were to develop teachers' understanding of what action research involves (illustrated by case studies) and help teachers to define their research questions and plans. The implementation ("acting" and "observing" stages) of the projects was scheduled for March to July (first academic semester), followed by data analysis and reflection between August and September, and the participants presented their projects and findings in a general teachers meeting at the university at the end of September. The writing up of the research was scheduled to take place between October and December, but for different reasons (see Reflections below), this process continued until May 2017.

Following the workshop, the support provided to the teachers by the Local Mentor and Facilitator across the year included:

- Monthly group meetings during the first semester with the Local Mentor.
- A Skype conversation (and others as required) and email contact during the first semester with the Facilitator.
- Individual meetings on a needs-basis with the Local Mentor throughout the year.
- A group rehearsal of the September presentations by the teachers and Local Mentor.
- Feedback, in one case, on the presentation from the Local Mentor.
- Feedback on conference abstract submissions from the Facilitator and Local Mentor.
- Revision of drafts of teachers' articles via email by the Facilitator and Local Mentor.
- A personal feedback session on the projects and the articles with the Facilitator and the Local Mentor

before the January three-day workshop for the 2017 programme.

For logistical reasons, the teachers were paid for six hours per week from March to December for their participation, rather than being given systematic release time from their schedules.

Table 1 summarises the projects that were carried out and the outcomes in terms of presentations and publications to date.

Table 1. Projects and Outcomes of UCBC Teachers Action Research Programme 2016

Project	No. of teachers involved	Outcomes
Impact of integrated assessment on the linguistic competences of second year students	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Presentation at 2nd RICELT Biannual Conference, Santiago • Submission of an article to a peer-reviewed journal
Targeting and improving students' awareness of L1 transfer issues	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Publication of article in <i>Profile: Issues in Teachers' Professional Development</i>
Using verbal scaffolding to enhance oral production in a small group of low proficiency students	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poster presentation at 2nd RICELT Biannual Conference, Santiago

As can be seen, two of the projects have already resulted in presentations at a conference (the third project was not submitted, and will hopefully be presented at a different conference in 2017), and one is published

in this issue of *Profile: Issues in Teachers' Professional Development* (Dissington, 2018) and one has led to the generation of an article which is still under peer review in an academic journal.

In order to evaluate and reflect on the first year of the programme, we have collected data in a variety of ways, including observation notes, questionnaires, a reflective account, and recorded focus groups. Whilst we are yet to analyse some of this data in depth, we comment below on our reflections so far.

Reflections on the TARP Pilot

We are aware that the following comments are early impressions, and moreover, taken only from a pilot programme in a single institution. Nonetheless, we hope they may add to a wider variety of accounts of similar programmes that aim to develop teacher research in order to contribute to a more complex understanding of how such programmes can be developed effectively (Borg, 2013).

A number of positive aspects about the programme overall have emerged from this first year, reflecting findings from previous studies. As noted in Burns et al. (2016), the initial workshop, during which participants were given information about action research and discussed some case studies of teacher research, was valued by all the attendees and considered to be an important part of developing the necessary research skills to complete the project (see also Borg, 2006; Burns, 2000; Burton, 1992).

As we mentioned, previous authors have pointed out the benefits of working with others, whether through collaborating with a partner, a peer discussion group, or mentoring (Borg 2006; Burns, 2000; Burton 1992, Dikilitaş, 2014; Smith et al., 2014). On the TARP, we found that the teachers who opted to work as a group of three began with a clearer idea of their project design, partly because they could discuss their ideas amongst themselves. These three did observe at the end, however, that working as a group had been difficult logistically

due to their different timetables. For the two teachers who worked alone focusing the research seemed to be more challenging in the early stages. These teachers found that both the monthly group meetings during the first semester, when participants had shared progress and answer queries collaboratively, and on-going individual meetings with the Research Coordinator, were important.

Some of the TARP participants recognised that being paid during their participation was both a critical factor in motivating them to start and enabling them to give the research the necessary time as it freed them up to take fewer classes; other teachers felt it was difficult to complete the project and write up the findings in the time allotted. Both views point to the value of providing teachers with sufficient time to carry out their research, as has been underlined by other researchers (e.g., Borg 2006; Burton, 1992; Dikilitaş, 2014; Smith et al., 2014). Nonetheless, teachers made positive comments throughout the programme about how their participation gave them the time and impetus to reflect on their teaching, an experience which they all found enriching. For example:

[You] have the opportunity to look at the things you do in order to improve them, but also to realise...that sometimes, you could do better...things that you do not consider, you can include in your practice. (Teacher E, Focus group, January 2017)

I was more conscious [about my teaching]. In the past, I would just teach. It's not like we had to always have a meeting, informally I was thinking about it. This project has made me more aware... I was tuned. (Teacher C, Focus group, January 2017)

The participants' first presentations of their projects to the university community in September 2016 was a valuable experience for some of them: having the opportunity to reflect on their data as part of developing their presentations was helpful for the writing stage, and it was encouraging to hear other teachers comment on the importance of their topics. Other authors have also noted that in-house presentations can contribute to teacher researchers' sense of identity as researchers

(e.g., Edwards & Burns, 2016b; Wyatt & Dikilitaş, 2015). However, the feedback received by one of the participants from her colleagues was rather negative, and she felt that, despite the relatively underdeveloped research culture at the university, her colleagues would have given more credit to more academic, formal presentations.

The biggest challenges that emerged were connected to writing up the research, both for the participants who were new (or relatively new) to writing articles, and for us as facilitators in terms of how to support participants in this context. The writing process took considerably longer than anticipated, and the drafting and redrafting processes caused frustration. Completion required determination from the participants and encouragement from us; in fact, one teacher decided not to submit an article. A related challenge, as we noted in Burns et al. (2016), was the accessing and use of the academic literature. As work by Smith et al. (2014) suggests, these challenges may be less significant in programmes that have focused on supporting research by school teachers where there may be more emphasis on teachers having opportunities to explore good practices, and less on publishing their research in journals. Indeed, for these contexts it may be more important to find ways to share findings that do not place an unnecessary burden on the teacher, and that are easily accessible for the teacher's peers. It does seem therefore that there needs to be more research on how university teachers can best be supported to write up research for academic review. Although we were working with university teachers, most of whom had at least a master's degree, these challenges reminded us of Cárdenas' (2003) observations that school teachers writing up research papers also particularly need support in these writing and reading processes.

Due to the issues we experienced, we have implemented changes to the programme in 2017: for example, for the initial workshop in January, we requested that teachers find and bring two or three articles relevant to their area of interest and discuss them so as to introduce reflection on the academic literature from the

beginning. This year, we have asked teachers to submit partial drafts of articles during the first semester so as to provide them with feedback at earlier stages and to reduce the writing load at the busy end-of-year period. We have also included a mid-programme two-day writing workshop in July run by the Local Mentor during which the participants read examples of action research studies from fields similar to their own, analysed how they had been written, and had time to modify their own drafts and ask questions. Given that we had already revised early drafts from the participants, we were able to focus these genre-analysis activities on issues that seemed to cause particular difficulties, such as structuring the Introduction, the importance of topic sentences and coherent, focused paragraphs in the Literature Review, and the style and type of information to include in the Methodology section of an action-research article. We have emphasised from the start of the programme that the writing and revising can be challenging, but that ultimately, it can be a rewarding process that develops skills and understanding. In the words of one of the 2016 teachers: "If you write it, then you know where you are really going" (Teacher C, Focus group, January 2017).

Finally, as a university community, in 2017 we have become increasingly aware of how this programme has the potential to become a significant engine for the improvement of the undergraduate teaching in general, beyond those who participated in the programme. We have now a requirement that relevant subject coordinators create spaces in work meetings to discuss the findings of the researcher(s) and consider appropriate responses for curriculum development and teaching practices.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have offered some reflections on our experiences of initiating and sustaining a new professional development programme to support university EFL teachers in their transition to becoming teacher researchers. While not claiming that our own experiences are generalisable to other contexts, we believe

they might offer some suggestions and considerations for other institutions facing similar external and internal pressures for changes in the roles of teachers who have not traditionally been expected to produce research. We would argue that the form of research we selected—action research—has the potential to engage university teachers in projects that they consider to be relevant and worthwhile and can be a supportive introduction to developing as a researcher in the future.

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